ABSTRACT


This thesis examines *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic series as a means to explore historical events and social anxieties during the 1960s and 1970s. Recently, superheroes have reclaimed a prominent place in American culture as superhero films are surging in popularity. Using *The Amazing Spider-Man*, I hope to highlight how superhero comic books are a valuable source for American cultural history and warrant serious scholarly research. To conduct my research, I looked at the scholarship on superhero comics, which has expanded greatly over the last few years, and conducted a close examination of *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962), which first introduces Spider-Man, and nearly 200 issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* published from 1963 until 1979. I found that *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic series offers insight into American society and American values during the time period. I examine how *The Amazing Spider-Man* advocates the responsible use of science during the new Nuclear Age while also reflecting the dangers of new and unconstrained science. I study how the main character, Peter Parker, deals with social acceptance, general social anxieties, and finding his place in the world. I look at how the hero struggles with Cold War tensions, losing loved ones, seeing friends shipped off to war, social unrest, civil rights issues, student protests, political corruption, and much more. Finally, I look at how the perception of gender changes during the 1960s and 1970s by examining the evolution of both male and female gender values portrayed in the comic and how those values evolve over time.

by

Mathew Todd Shaeffer

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

History

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APPROVED BY:

_______________________________  ________________________________
Dr. David Zonderman  Dr. Nancy Mitchell
Committee Chair

________________________________
Dr. Jonathan Ocko
DEDICATION

For all those who love to dream and whose lives have been shaped in some way by comic books and superheroes.
BIOGRAPHY

Mathew T. Shaeffer graduated from Southeast Raleigh High School in 2004 and then earned his BA in History and minors in Film Studies and Political Science from North Carolina State University. He continued his education at North Carolina State University and earned a MA in History focusing on American cultural history and superhero comic books in the twentieth century with a minor in communist studies. He also worked at the John Locke Foundation where he wrote numerous articles centered on North Carolina History for the North Carolina History Project under the direction of Dr. Troy Kickler. Mathew Shaeffer looks forward to continuing his studies in American history, cultural history, and comic books.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents John and Carole Shaeffer for believing in me all these years. I would like to thank Dr. Nancy Mitchell for her help early in my graduate studies, for sparking a greater interest in American history, and for encouraging me to write my thesis on the role of comic books in American culture. I would like to thank Dr. David Zonderman for agreeing to be my thesis chair and for having patience with me over these last few years while writing this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Jonathan Ocko for agreeing to be on my thesis committee.
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INTRODUCTION

Why Spider-Man and Superheroes Matter as Cultural History

As children, stories play an important role helping us understand our world. For me, hero stories and superhero comics played an important role in establishing my personal beliefs and values. Characters like Luke Skywalker, Spider-Man, Superman, Batman, and many others were significant in shaping who I am today. These fictional characters had a very real and profound impact on my life and the lives of many others in America today. Heroes teach us the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, morality and immorality, and violence and justice. While in the past superhero comics were seen as low culture, these comics also played an important role in both reflecting and perpetuating cultural values and influencing children and society. While originally targeted at male children and teenagers, superhero comic books are actually a sophisticated form of entertainment that operates on multiple levels. On the surface these comics present an entertaining (and sometimes ridiculous) children’s story. However, on a deeper level superhero comics are also an American attempt at telling morality tales and creating mythological heroes. When reviewed critically, superhero comics additionally serve as complex metaphors of the real world. Unlike novels and movies, which serve a similar function in culture, comics are serial stories (usually released monthly) and act like a cultural newspaper or journal constantly updating its content. As a result, comics are a source of cultural history because they are self-reflexive and critique societal problems by reflecting current events, real world attitudes, and social anxieties.
The Amazing Spider-Man in particular offers a fascinating glimpse into American Cold War culture. Created in 1962 by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, Spider-Man was part of Marvel Comics' new wave of heroes who focused heavily on the person behind the superhero mask. Spider-Man, or Peter Parker, was an ordinary lower-middle class white teenager who lived with his aunt and uncle in Queens, New York. When bitten by a radioactive spider he was granted extraordinary powers. Spider-Man/Peter Parker is a unique comic character for many reasons. First of all, Peter Parker is the driving force in the comic. Before this, generally the superhero was more important than the man behind the mask (for example, Superman was a more significant character than Clark Kent).\(^1\) However, with Spider-Man, the struggles of Peter Parker are often more important than those of his superhero alter ego. Also, like Marvel’s other heroes, Spider-Man exists as part of a fictionalized “real” America instead of in a metaphorical fictional American city, like Metropolis or Gotham. By placing Peter Parker in New York City and filling the comics full of real world landmarks, Marvel Comics facilitated a greater sense of realism for its readers.

Perhaps the most significant and unique aspect of Spider-Man was that he was the first stand-alone teenaged superhero to be introduced into the comic world. Prior to the emergence of Spider-Man, all previous teenage heroes were sidekicks of other, more significant heroes. Furthermore, even after obtaining his powers, Peter Parker continued to be an average teenager/young adult who was forced to deal with the same problems of social

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\(^1\) Spider-Man (August 1962) was not the first hero to focus heavily on the man behind the mask. The Fantastic Four (June 1961) and the Incredible Hulk (May 1962) also focused more heavily on the people behind the masks. Spider-Man stood out because the character was so young and relatively ordinary in comparison to some of the other heroes.
acceptance and doubt like others his age. The character struggled with earning money, supporting his family, going to school, and being accepted by his peers. Bradford Wright describes how, “Peter Parker furnished readers with an instant point of identification. All but the most emotionally secure adolescents could relate to Peter’s self-absorbed obsessions with rejection, inadequacy, and loneliness.”

The character’s broad appeal to the youth audience led to instant success; *The Amazing Spider-Man* quickly became Marvel Comics highest selling series, and Spider-Man himself became a cultural icon and Marvel Comic's flagship superhero.

However, Spider-Man's readership was not limited to just preteens and teenagers. In 1965, Spider-Man was listed in *Esquire* magazine's list favorite college campus icons (other members of the list included John F. Kennedy, Bob Dylan, and Che Guevara).

Also, due to Spider-Man and Marvel's success, more than fifty thousand American college students joined Marvel's official fan club

According to historian Bradford W. Wright, "The outsider hero had arrived as the most celebrated figure in youth culture." Spider-Man became a cultural icon, and his role as a member of the upper echelon of comic superheroes makes him an important character to study.

Another interesting aspect of the Spider-Man, and something that contributed to the character's popularity, was that the hero ages with his youthful audience. When first introduced in 1962, the character is a sixteen years old high school student. In issue #28 of

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3 Ibid., 211.
4 Ibid., 4.
5 Ibid., 223.
6 Ibid.
The Amazing Spider-Man (1965), about two and a half years after Spider-Man was given his own comic, Peter Parker graduates from high school. Afterwards he becomes a college student and in 1978 he also graduates from college. During his high school and college years, Peter Parker experiences America similarly to real world high school and college students of the day. He sees friends leave for Vietnam, struggles with his place in the protest culture of the 1960s and 1970s, combats political corruption, watches friends fall victim to drugs, and is forced to deal with the same feelings of loss and disenchantment as other young Americans. As a result, The Amazing Spider-Man provides an entertaining and insightful look at 1960s and 1970s history and culture.

Spider-Man’s popularity stems from his shared experience with high school and college students, his struggle to understand his place in the world, and the character’s strong message of power and responsibility. Spider-Man is given exceptional power but is also forced to come to terms with how to use his power responsibly. At first, Peter Parker becomes self-absorbed and cares only about the financial success of himself and his family. Unlike other heroes, Spider-Man’s powers do not give him an instant sense of altruism, and he does not try to use his powers for the betterment of others. However, one night after finishing a show at a television studio, a robber runs past the teenager and evades the police. When the cop confronts the teenaged performer, Spider-Man responds, “Sorry Pal! That’s your job! I’m thru being pushed around—by anyone! From now on I look out for number

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one—that means—me!” Later, Peter’s uncle Ben Parker is shot and killed by the same robber Spider-Man earlier let escape. Peter Parker is forced to learn the lesson that becomes the primary motif for The Amazing Spider-Man, “with great power – there must also come great responsibility.”

The theme of power and responsibility is central in The Amazing Spider-Man. Peter Parker is gifted with extraordinary power but constantly struggles with how to use his powers to help society. Spider-Man is a self-reflexive hero who tries to do good deeds while at the same time being extremely unsure of himself and his actions. Furthermore, the newspapers attack Spider-Man for being a menace, which contributes further to the hero’s self doubt and general uncertainty. On an even deeper level, Spider-Man's struggle with power and responsibility is a metaphor for post-World War II America. After World War II, America, with the help of its new nuclear technology, became a world superpower. Like the teenaged superhero, the country struggled with understanding its new power and its new place in the world. Psychologist Sharon Packer writes, "Like many other superhero stories, the Spider-Man story is not just a family story about children and their parents and potential loss of protectors (especially during wartime), but it also acts as a powerful pro-war metaphor and political statement. It speaks out against American isolationism and advocates on behalf of interventionism." Spider-Man and his struggles do not just represent the uncertainty of

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10 Ibid., 11.
11 Sharon Packer, Superheroes and Superegoes: Analyzing the Minds Behind the Mask, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 65.
young white teenagers and college students, the hero also embodies America itself during the 1960s and 1970s.

Until recently, superhero comic books have been a relatively unstudied part of American cultural history. As of 2001, historian Bradford W. Wright noted how "Scholars, and historians especially, will find much of the published work on comic books frustrating. Few books on the subject can truly claim to be scholarly, and fewer still pay much attention to the historical context."\textsuperscript{12} Furthermore, "Most of the books published on comic books are nonscholarly works written by fans and collectors or authors contracted by the comic book publishers."\textsuperscript{13} The lack of scholarship can be attributed to the fact that comics were originally seen as a form of low culture meant to entertain children. Some early work was done in the late 1960s and 1970s specifically on newspaper comic strips. In 1969, William H. Young Jr. wrote the article "The Serious Funnies: Adventure Comics during the Depression, 1929-38" that focused on the "funnies" or newspaper comic strips of the Great Depression era.\textsuperscript{14} In 1974, Arthur Asa Berger published \textit{The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us About Ourselves}, which further examined the messaging of various newspaper comic strips.\textsuperscript{15} While some superheroes bled into the realm of newspaper comic strips, the genre of superhero comics would remain relatively untouched until much later.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 326.
Perceptions began to change when Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar began using comics as a means of "serious" artistic expression. Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (1989) was one of the earlier works that focused on the study of "high art" comics and graphic novels. William W. Savage Jr.'s *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (1990) focuses specifically on comic books in the 1940s and 1950s and acts as a good starting point for comic related studies. Richard Reynolds's *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992) is a significant work because it examined superhero stories and the symbols, motifs, and mythological worlds created by comics. Reynolds opened the door for superheroes to be recognized as modern incarnations of myths and legends like Gilgamesh, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Beowulf.

Following Reynold's work, more scholarly work was devoted to superhero comics but most tended to focus on very specific aspects of comics and not the broad historical significance of the characters and the stories. Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001) and Sean Howe's *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (2012) provide histories of the comic industry and touch on the significance of characters with regard to their impact on the industry. Wright's work in particular attempts to place superhero comics within their broad historical context. Following Wright's work in 2001, the field of comic book scholarship has steadily expanded. Douglas Wolk's *Reading...*
Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean (2007) focuses on the impact of particular comic authors/illustrators but not as much on the significance of the heroes within their historical context. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's book Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism (2003) uses the symbols and ideology set forth by the superhero Captain America as a way to explain American interventionism and foreign policy. Sharon Packer's Superheroes and Superegos: Analyzing the Minds Behind the Masks (2010) examines the psychology of superheroes and with regard to Spider-Man specifically the trauma he suffers and the way the character copes. Ben Saunders's Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes (2011) expands the field of comic research by examining the symbolic nature of superheroes from a Judeo-Christian religious context. Nathan Vernon Madison's Anti-Foreign Imagery in American Pulps and Comic Books, 1920-1960 (2012), examines comics as a means to create nationalism and spread anti-foreign sentiment during World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. However, while scholarship has expanded recently, few have drawn distinct historical parallels between specific stories and representations in the comics and the real world events they symbolize. Furthermore, while some of the works mention the general importance of various characters, none of the research focuses specifically on the historical

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significance of Spider-Man and how the hero can be used as a lens to examine events in American history.

Comic books are a highly symbolic medium that highlights mainstream American values and promotes the classic concept of the “American Dream.” However, while promoting the “American Dream,” comics also recognize societal problems and inequalities that make achieving that dream difficult. My study aims to expand the scholarship of cultural history as it relates to superhero comic books by providing an in depth study of the symbols, values, and real world events portrayed in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. I chose Spider-Man because he is a revolutionary character in the comic world who also represents an average teenager struggling with the rapidly changing world of the 1960s and 1970s. *The Amazing Spider-Man* was used by Marvel Comics to test boundaries and push the limits of comic book story telling by examining a wide variety of values and historical events. Specifically I want to highlight how *The Amazing Spider-Man* reflects the general feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and disillusionment in the 1960s and 1970s America.

To truly understand significance of Spider-Man, I first had to understand how he fit into America’s culture and values. Because the study of comics relies heavily on symbolism, Clifford Geertz and Robert Darnton’s works were used as a basis for understanding the historical significance of symbolic representations.\(^{25}\) Furthermore, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* was useful for understanding how culture and comic books could

help create and sustain a unified sense of Americanism across the vast country.\textsuperscript{26} Michael Hunt's \textit{Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy} (1987) and Andrew Levine's \textit{The American Ideology: A Critique} were used to build an understanding of the core components of American values and ideology.\textsuperscript{27} Max Weber’s \textit{Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism} was used to help unify America’s values and ideology with America’s strong belief in its own righteousness and morality.\textsuperscript{28} The mainstream American culture's sense of moral righteousness is very important in understanding the morality tales that comics create for consumption by the American youth.

\textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} is a rich resource for cultural history and provides valuable insights into American values and culture during the 1960s and 1970s. This study aims to expand scholarship by examining \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man}'s message of responsibility as a part of the history of the 1960s and 1970s. The examination of Spider-Man's role in the Nuclear Age, his message of responsibility, and the way the comic reflects history is necessary for further understanding the significance of Spider-Man and the role of other fictional superheroes. Heroes shape society by providing paragons of values, morals, and abilities. People look up to and hope to emulate these idealized champions. As a result, superheroes play an important role in cultural history and deserve serious examination and study.

\textsuperscript{26} Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities} (London: Verso, 2006).
CHAPTER 1

With Great Power: Spider-Man in the Nuclear Age

Since the Industrial Revolution, American society has placed increased faith in science and technology to solve problems. The emergence of the Nuclear Age once again thrust scientific achievement into the spotlight. Following World War II, nuclear weapons turned America into an international superpower. Nuclear weapons and technology became entwined in the American identity as a symbol of power, the triumph of science, and unbridled possibilities for the future. In the 1940s and early 1950s, nuclear technology was new and exciting but very little was known about the long-term negative side effects of radiation. Excitement mixed with fear as scientists discovered more information about radiation and nuclear weapons. When the Soviet Union developed its own atomic bomb in 1949, it threatened American superiority and sparked fear of nuclear war. Science was the hope for the future but also the potential destroyer of humanity. The Amazing Spider-Man embodies America’s Cold War/Nuclear Age mindset by providing the possibility of great power through nuclear technology, glorifying science and technology for solving problems, and reflecting fear of the unknown dangers associated with unchecked scientific advancement.

The Amazing Spider-Man continues the post-World War II trend of using fiction to express confidence in science and mitigate fears of the dangerous new technology. Shortly after the emergence of nuclear power, America’s mainstream culture portrayed the new innovation as “hot” or fashionable. Comic books jumped on the atomic bandwagon. Comics
like *Dagwood Splits the Atom* (1949) provided young Americans with positive nuclear propaganda by portraying science as the profession of the future.²⁹ Ferenc M. Szasz states, “The more established comic book superheroes, such as Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Marvel family, discovered that the atomic bomb matched even their powers.”³⁰ Superman, for example, could withstand a nuclear blast and often benefited from nuclear power and nuclear imagery. In the October 1946 issue of *Action Comics*, Superman was forced to take a drug that makes him lose control of his mind. He is cured when he is hit by a nuclear blast while wandering across a test site in the Bikini Atoll.³¹ In 1952, Superman’s support of the bomb continued as he attempted to reassure soldiers by participating in atomic bomb testing.³² Nuclear imagery was so prevalent in comic books that “throughout the 1950s, nuclear explosions appeared on over twenty-six comic book covers and in scores of large interior ‘splash panels.’”³³

Spider-Man fits neatly into pro-nuclear America culture between the 1940s and 1960s. Spider-Man emerges as part of the New Age of comic heroes in the 1960s who were granted exceptional powers through the use of science and radiation. By the 1960s, radiation became a convenient tool for storytellers to explain fantastical science. Research showed radiation could cause mutation, and comic writers used it as a catalyst for its characters to

achieve greatness. Comics presented people with the attractive fantasy that nuclear power might not kill them, but could instead make them exceptional. Spider-Man was just one of many heroes created by Stan Lee and Marvel Comics during the 1960s who gained amazing powers through freak occurrences involving nuclear technology.

Nuclear power and radiation are essential for Spider-Man’s powers. While attending a science demonstration, a spider passes through a radioactive beam, lands on Peter Parker’s hand, and bites him. The spider bite makes Peter Parker's blood radioactive, and the radioactive blood is the source of Peter’s extraordinary powers. Nuclear power alters the weak teenager's physiology and makes him exceptional. As a result, Peter Parker becomes Spider-Man. Spider-Man has the proportional speed, strength, and agility of a spider, he is able to climb walls, and has an extrasensory “spider-sense” that alerts him to imminent danger. The combination of these powers allows the character to display classical fantasy tropes about strength, power, and freedom. Furthermore, by promoting the positive benefits of nuclear power, The Amazing Spider-Man reinforced America’s nuclear propaganda from the 1940s and 1950s.

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Figure 1.1. The radioactive spider bites Peter Parker. Source: “Spider-Man!” Amazing Fantasy #15 (Marvel Comics: August 1962), page 3.

Peter Parker's transformation into Spider-Man also reflects how nuclear weapons transformed America into a superpower following World War II. Nuclear technology enhanced Peter Parker from a small and weak teenager into a strong and powerful crime fighter. Similarly, nuclear weapons made America the ultimate scientific and military force on the planet. America was catapulted into a position of international importance because of its monopoly on nuclear weapons. In America, the end of World War II and the defeat of
Japan led to the initial acceptance of atomic power. The atomic bombs preserved American lives by ending the war quickly and decisively. Public opinion polls immediately after the bombs dropped showed eighty-five percent of Americans supporting the decision. By ending the war, atomic power reinforced America’s faith in science to solve problems. Nuclear science also showed great promise for the future. Rick Eckstein describes how “nuclear power fit beautifully within the ‘progress package’ which claimed science and technology as the panacea that would solve any problem.” Nuclear weapons had forever altered the United States and scientific study in the world.

America’s media of the late 1940s and the 1950s reinforced the idea of a future nuclear utopia. News reports in the 1940s and 1950s were generally positive regarding nuclear technology and took pride in the fact that America was the first to have it. Eckstein describes how “Popular periodicals after World War II abound with articles and advertisements unanimously heralding nuclear power as the foundation for unlimited economic growth in the United States and throughout the world.” The atomic bomb demonstrated human understanding and control of nature and held promises for peaceful applications. Scientists saw the potential for nuclear power to provide a cheap and limitless

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38 Ibid., 10.
supply of civilian electricity and heat. Scott Zeman and Michael Amundson describe how “Early atomic culture also focused on the potential benefits of the fissioned atom: a vast new source of energy, a potential panacea for disease, a world that would forever be free of war---under the protection of America Pax atomica.” Atomic energy displayed man’s dominance over nature and was seen as a cure to all the world’s problems. After World War II, science reigned supreme and nuclear power was the poster child for progress.

However, starting in 1949 the Soviet Union attacked America’s claim of scientific superiority. In 1949, the Soviet Union successfully tested their first atomic bomb. America lost its monopoly over nuclear power and Americans faced the potential threat of nuclear annihilation. Tensions rose further as a result of the arms race between United States and Soviet Union. Both countries tried to demonstrate their technological superiority by building larger, more destructive nuclear weapons than their adversary. However, the struggle for scientific dominance was not isolated to military applications. In October 1957, space became a new battleground when the Soviet Union successfully launched Sputnik, the world’s first artificial satellite. A month later, the Soviets launched the first animal into orbit with Sputnik 2. The Sputnik launches started the space race and America found itself lagging behind. The Soviet Union’s success continued in 1961 when they launched the first manned space flight. As anxieties and fears of the Soviet Union’s scientific dominance grew, America scrambled to reclaim its place as the world’s leader scientific achievement.

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45 On April 12, 1961, Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was the first human to travel to space.
By 1962, when Spider-Man is introduced, America’s battle with the Soviet Union for scientific and technological superiority was in full swing.

*The Amazing Spider-Man’s* pro-science stance reflects the multifaceted scientific struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. While nuclear power is fundamental to the character, Spider-Man also promotes general scientific and technological achievement. During the 1960s, technology and intelligence are important to both America and *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Following World War II, America took great pride in having the best scientists and best technological innovation in the world. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, America’s scientific struggle with the Soviet Union placed greater pressure on America to prove it was still superior. Spider-Man reflects America’s desire for intellectual and technological superiority by relying on his intelligence and engineering skills to solve problems and defeat enemies. He exemplifies the idea of heroism through technological superiority. Peter Parker is portrayed as a genius who excels in school; he graduates with a degree in science and attends college on a full scholarship. And even though Spider-Man has exceptional physical powers, he uses science to further augment his capabilities so he can fight villains who possess greater physical power and those who use science irresponsibly.

The most obvious display of Peter Parker's technical skill is the creation of Spider-Man’s web shooters and the chemical compound used to make webs. Unlike Sam Raimi’s movie version of the hero, the spider bite never gave Spider-Man the ability to shoot webs. Instead the hero created web shooters; little gadgets he attaches to his wrists. By applying the right amount of pressure to a gauge resting in his palm, he can shoot out an adhesive
web-like compound. The web shooters allow Spider-Man to travel through the city, incapacitate bad guys, and formulate useful tools for survival. He can create backpacks, parachutes, ropes, walls, shields, nets, clubs, and many other useful tools. Spider-Man also alters the chemical compound to make his webs fire resistant or imbue them with other useful properties. Spider-Man’s web shooters are versatile and are one of Spider-Man’s powers granted through technology. Another frequently used gadget is Spider-Man’s spider-tracers. The spider-tracers are small adhesive devices that emit a homing signal. Originally Spider-Man uses a handheld device to trace the signal, but eventually he tunes the tracers to interact with his spider-sense, allowing him to track enemies easily.

Figure 1.2. Spider-Man’s web shooters. Source: “Duel to the Death with the Vulture,” The Amazing Spider-Man #2 (Marvel Comics: May 1963), page 25.

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47 “Turning Point” The Amazing Spider-Man #11 (Marvel Comics: April 1964), 3-5.
Figure 1.3. The versatility of Spider-Man's webs. *Source:* "Spider-Man!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (Marvel Comics: March 1963), page 25.
Spider-Man’s reliance on gadgets and science is a constant theme in *The Amazing Spider-Man* but it is especially pronounced between 1963 and 1964. The prevalence of science at this time reflects America’s battle with the Soviet Union for technological supremacy during the space race. Spider-Man (and his use of science to overcome villains) metaphorically resembles the United States and its battle for scientific superiority. In issue number two (1963), the hero discovers that the bank robbing Vulture flies using a device that manipulates magnetic fields, and Spider-Man creates a small device that interferes with the Vulture’s flight mechanism. The device disables the Vulture’s ability to fly and allows Spider-Man to easily defeat his aerial foe. In his first encounter with the infamous Dr. Octopus (1963), Spider-Man concocts a chemical compound that fuses the villain’s metal arms together. In the first encounter with the Lizard (1963), Spider-Man develops a formula that turns the monster back into Dr. Connors. In issue nine (1964) when fighting the electrically powered villain Electro, Spider-Man fashions himself a pair of rubber boots and gloves to protect him from the electric attacks. To finish the fight, Spider-Man uses a nearby fire hose to douse Electro with water, which makes the bad guy shock himself unconscious. Similar to America’s desire to showcase its supremacy over the Soviet Union, Spider-Man overcomes his foes by displaying his intellectual and scientific superiority.

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49 “Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus,” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #3 (Marvel Comics: July 1963), 16-17.
50 “Face-to-Face with… The LIZARD!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #6 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1963), 13-19.
Figure 1.4. Spider-Man creates a device to defeat the Vulture. *Source:* “Duel to the Death with the Vulture,” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #2 (Marvel Comics: May 1963), page 7.


The global scientific struggle persisted into the later part of the 1960s and into the 1970s, and Spider-Man continued to rely on science to solve problems. At the end of 1966,
Spider-Man is forced to battle the Rhino, a large juggernaut with an impenetrable carapace. However, Spider-Man and Dr. Connors develop a special webbing solution that dissolves the villain’s thick outer skin allowing easy capture.\(^{52}\) In his 1967 encounter with the Lizard, Spider-Man once again creates a serum to transform the Lizard back into Dr. Connors.\(^{53}\) Spider-Man continues to use gadgetry to his benefit when battling the Kingpin in 1968, by creating a gasmask to protect himself from one of the Kingpin’s tricks.\(^{54}\) During his 1970 brawl with Dr. Octopus, Spider-Man alters the chemical compound of his web fluid to disrupt the neural connection between Dr. Octopus and his mechanical arms.\(^{55}\) When the mad scientist Spencer Smythe creates a spider-slayer to hunt down and destroy Spider-Man in 1972, the hero uses his mechanical skills to rewire and reprogram the metallic monster forcing a short-circuit.\(^{56}\) In 1979, Spider-Man uses his scientific knowledge to free himself and J. Jonah Jameson from a bomb attached to their wrists.\(^{57}\) Spider-Man utilizes his superior intellect and his resourceful technological skills on many occasions to devise clever solutions to defeat his enemies. Spider-Man exemplifies the Nuclear Age and Cold War theme of technological and intellectual superiority and promotes the importance of science and education to its youthful readers.

\(^{54}\) “What a Tangled Web We Weave..!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #61 (Marvel Comics: June 1968), 12-18.
\(^{57}\) “24 Hours Till Doomsday!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #192 (Marvel Comics: May 1979), 27.
Figure 1.6. Spider-Man creates a compound to fuse Dr. Octopus's arms. Source: "Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus," *The Amazing Spider-Man* #3 (Marvel Comics: July 1963), page 16.

Figure 1.7. Spider-Man describes his love of science. Source: "Rhino on the Rampage!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #43 (Marvel Comics: Dec. 1966), page 15.
While *The Amazing Spider-Man* strongly supports the positive use of science, it also reflects fear of nuclear technology and dangerous science. Initial anxieties about nuclear power were sparked in the late 1940s when atomic testing, coupled with an increased understanding of radiation, created concern regarding the dangers of fallout and residual radiation. The American people were initially unaware of the long-term negative consequences of nuclear weapons and the dangers of prolonged radiation exposure.\(^5\)\(^8\)

Following the Soviet Union’s acquisition of the atomic bomb in 1949, fear of nuclear war became prevalent. During the 1940s and 1950s, the American government instituted a propaganda campaign to reassure the public that there was nothing to fear.

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58 John Hersey’s book *Hiroshima* (1946) points out how high exposure to radiation from the nuclear blast could lead to extreme sickness and death. However, it was believed that only direct exposure to a blast could cause enough radiation to be dangerous. Hersey points out that scientists of the time believed the residual radiation left by the bombs was not in high enough concentration to harm anyone and “the scientists announced that people could enter Hiroshima without any peril at all.” John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Penguin Books, 1946), 92, 98-99.
The American government’s public relations campaign between 1951 and 1963 supported its plans for atmospheric testing. The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) wanted to assure people that atomic testing and radiation posed little threat to the American people. The government began to develop safety procedures and displays to appease the public, but still did not address radiation or other harsh realities. Jon Hunner describes how “Civil defense was a response to a grim reality, but after the Soviets detonated their hydrogen bomb in November 1955, the drills acted more like a placebo, given to citizens in a target area to help them deal with their fears.” The Government attempted to placate the public through programs and propaganda, like the Civil Defense film “Duck and Cover” (1951), which described how daily life could be dangerous but procedures and institutions help protect the public from danger. The Federal Civil Defense Administration reassured citizens that the government was adequately prepared for an atomic attack. However, the American public remained skeptical and fearful of nuclear weapons even as the American Government promoted the myth that it could protect its people.

As anxieties mounted, fiction also reflected and expressed society’s fear of nuclear technology. The popularity of science fiction increased during 1950s and 1960s because the genre played on the hopes and fears of the Nuclear Age. Monster movies grew in popularity and films like _Godzilla (Gojira) 1954_, _Them! (1954)_, and many other horror movies of the

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60 Ibid., 206.
62 Ibid., 43.
63 “Duck and Cover,” Archer Productions Inc., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2kdpAGDu8s
day explored the dangers and unintended consequences of nuclear power and radiation. Another popular set of films involved mad scientists whose experiments went wrong causing chaos in society. Furthermore, the fear bled into the comic consciousness. In a 1948 issue of *Action Comics*, Superman is caught in a nuclear blast, becoming so radioactive that his presence kills anything nearby, and he is forced to wear a lead suit until the radiation is absorbed. However, new censorship guidelines limited the extent to which comics could express fears. While nuclear imagery was shown constantly, comic artists never depicted scenes of death or mentioned fallout or radiation sickness.

The lack of death and destruction in comics was due to the Comics Code Authority (1954); a set of self-regulations established by the comic book industry in response to Frederic Wertham’s book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and the Congressional hearings that followed. Wertham argued comic books were corrupting children with scenes of grotesque violence, sex, and other provocative images. In order to prevent government intervention and censorship, the comic book industry established its own set of self-regulations that prevented the depiction of horror stories, gore, sex, disrespect of authority, and other controversial imagery. The Comics Code Authority drastically changed the comic book industry and even eliminated a number of popular comic genres (previously horror comics and crime dramas were widely popular). As a result of the Comics Code,

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64 “A Superman of Doom!” *Action Comics* #124 (DC Comics: September 1948).
comics often showed the power of nuclear weapons but not the actual death involved with the blasts. Furthermore, the censorship restrictions steered comic book storytelling in a direction that resembled the American Government’s propaganda regarding nuclear technology. The Comics Code Authority remained firmly in place until 1971 when an anti-drug issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, published without the Comics Code Authority seal of approval, led to a revision of the rules.\(^{67}\)

As a result, comics like *The Amazing Spider-Man* were forced to subtly express scientific and nuclear fears; fears that were rekindled in 1962 as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis.\(^{68}\) *The Amazing Spider-Man*, like the general public, on the surface heralded the power of nuclear technology while at the same time it subtly expressed concerns of potential dangers associated with scientific progress. *The Amazing Spider-Man* explores the dangers of science using its theme of power and responsibility and with its villains. Spider-Man himself remains a positive symbol of scientific achievement but the comic also explores the Nuclear Age fear of technology, the moral conundrums of unchecked science, and the need to ethically and responsibly use science. Spider-Man’s villains thematically represent numerous dangers associated with science. Many of Spider-Man’s bad guys are evil and dangerous super powered criminals who are either enhanced with technology or transformed.

\(^{67}\) The anti-drug issue and its role in revolutionizing the comic book industry are discussed more in chapter 2.

\(^{68}\) The Cuban Missile Crisis was an international incident during October 1962 where the Soviet Union attempted to place nuclear weapons in Cuba. The incident inflamed relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and pushed the two countries to the brink of nuclear war.
through science. In many cases, the villains were not initially evil but their scientific transformations turn them into both literal and figurative monsters.⁶⁹

One of the first villains Spider-Man faces is directly created through nuclear experiments. Flint Marko, a common criminal, escaped from prison and hid at a nuclear testing site. As a result, Marko was caught in a nuclear blast that turned his body into sand and gave him superhuman powers⁷⁰. The accident allows Marko to transform his body into a number of shapes, harden his body by condensing the sand, and gives him the ability to squeeze his way into small places.⁷¹ Using his new superpowers Marko assumes the identity of the Sandman and commits crimes across the city. The Sandman looks like a stereotypical gangster enforcer from the American film industry or Dick Tracy comics.⁷² Sandman is not a smart villain, but he is mean and tough.

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⁶⁹ Most of the villains transformed by technology become evil after gaining power. The Sandman was already a criminal before he gained powers. The Scorpion, Doctor Octopus, and the Green Goblin are driven insane by their technological/chemical alterations and are further corrupted by their desire for power or wealth. Curt Connors, who becomes the Lizard, is not evil. However, the experiment transforms him into an evil monster, similar to the classic story of Jekyll and Hyde. Like the classic story, when he transforms back into Connors he once again becomes good.


⁷¹ Ibid., 4-6.

⁷² Ibid., 4.
Figure 1.9. The Sandman fights Spider-Man. *Source:* "Nothing can Stop... The Sandman!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #4 (Marvel Comics: Sept. 1963), page 4.

Figure 1.10. A nuclear accident gives the Sandman powers. *Source:* "Nothing can Stop... The Sandman!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #4 (Marvel Comics: Sept. 1963), page 7.
Sandman is an example of the unknown affects of nuclear power and the dangers that even beneficial nuclear applications, like the granting of super powers, can have if abused by the morally corrupt. In the case of Sandman, Marko was a criminal before he gained super powers. The freak accident simply enhanced the criminal’s ability to harm society. However, Spider-Man demonstrates that the positive use of intelligence and science can still prevail. Even though the Sandman is physically more powerful than the hero, Spider-Man overcomes the villain by outsmarting him. The Sandman runs into Peter Parker’s school while trying to escape from the cops. After a brief altercation, Spider-Man uses an industrial vacuum cleaner to suck the Sandman into a bag that he presents to the police. Spider-Man was no match for the Sandman through sheer physical strength but prevailed through his intelligence and the tools at hand.

The Scorpion is another super-powered thug in Spider-Man’s rogues gallery who bridges the gap between man and monster. Mac Gargan was a private investigator hired by Peter Parker’s boss John Jonah Jameson to discover how Peter takes his Spider-Man pictures. Jameson, obsessed with destroying Spider-Man, offers Gargan the opportunity to take part in an experimental procedure to give him the powers of a Scorpion so that he can fight Spider-Man. To give him an even greater edge, the Scorpion is provided a special green suit equipped with a long tail capable of delivering powerful physical attacks and spraying acid. Visually, the Scorpion looks more like monster than man and the villain’s actions reinforce the perception. An unintended consequence of the experimental procedure was the removal

of Gargan’s sense of morality. Gargan becomes drunk on his new power and embraces the Scorpion persona. The scientist who performed the experiment dies trying to cure Gargan, but the new villain refuses to be cured. The Scorpion then attempts to kill Jameson because he is the only other person who knows the villain’s true identity, but he is defeated by Spider-Man.

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74 Alteration of the human body and the risk of uncertain experimental science to a subject’s sense of morality and self-control is a common science fiction theme which is explored in films like *The Fly* (1958).


Similar to the Scorpion, the Lizard is a product of experimental science gone awry. The Lizard is a scientist named Curtis Connors who experiments on himself in an attempt to create a better life for humanity. Connors is a good person and throughout The Amazing Spider-Man often helps Spider-Man develop scientific solutions to defeat enemies. However, they first meet after Connors accidentally turned himself into a dangerous reptilian monstrosity. Connors was conducting experiments using reptilian DNA in an attempt to allow mankind to re-grow lost limbs in the same way that a lizard can re-grow body parts. Connors, who is missing one of his arms, tests his experiment on himself. He initially re-grows his arm but the test backfires and turns him into a half-man, half-lizard creature.  

The Lizard is a literal monster created by science. Visually he looks like a dinosaur and is similar to 1950s monster movie’s Godzilla (Gojira, 1954) or the The Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954). When first introduced in 1963, the Lizard hates humanity and wants to breed an army of super-reptiles to take over the world. The Lizard’s goal persists but the transformation hinders Connors’ intelligence and prevents the Lizard from being able to create the serum necessary to create the super-reptiles. As the Lizard, Connors becomes a primitive being guided by base emotions. After Spider-Man restores Connors back to normal, the Lizard persona is not entirely removed and lurks at the edges of Connors’ mind. Connors must vigilantly maintain control of his anger and other base emotions or he risks turning back into the Lizard. Curtis Connors’s story shows how untested science can have

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76 “Face-to-Face with… The LIZARD!” The Amazing Spider-Man #6 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1963), 10-13.
77 Ibid., 2.
78 Ibid., 15.
dangerous repercussions and is a metaphor for science transforming humanity into an evil monstrosity. When Connors loses to the Lizard, he loses his humanity and is stripped of his sense of self and morality.

Figure 1.14. The Lizard terrorizes the swamp. Source: "Face-to-Face with... The Lizard!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #6 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1963), page 2.
Along with the villains who are physically transformed by science, *The Amazing Spider-Man* also presents a number of mad scientists and evil geniuses. The evil geniuses are morally corrupt and seek power, money, fame, or to satisfy their own egos. Spider-Man’s arch nemesis Norman Osborn, or the Green Goblin, bridges the gap between monster and scientist. He continues the trend of negative transformation through science but also represents the danger of scientific superiority in the hands of the morally corrupt. Osborn is
a brilliant scientist and the owner of the multimillion-dollar technology corporation Oscorp. After an experiment goes awry, Osborn gains super strength but also suffers brain damage and becomes psychotic. Osborn becomes the Green Goblin and uses his scientific knowledge and his company's resources to build devastating weapons in an effort to become the leader of a worldwide crime syndicate.


While still a monster created from dangerous science, the Green Goblin is distinct from the other monsters. Unlike the Scorpion and the Lizard, Norman Osborn was always immoral and the accident does not impede his intellectual or scientific abilities. Even before the goblin transformation, Osborn was a ruthless businessman who stole his business partner's research and framed his partner for embezzlement. 82 However, the goblin transformation makes Osborn more psychotic and power hungry. He ruthlessly attacks anything in his way and starts by murdering his old business partner. The Green Goblin also sees Spider-Man as a threat to his ability to establish a crime syndicate and he attempts to destroy Spider-Man. 83 The villain discovers Spider-Man's true identity and continues his murderous streak by killing Peter Parker's girlfriend. 84 The Green Goblin is finally stopped when he accidentally kills himself using one of his own gadgets in an encounter with Spider-Man. 85 In the end, Norman Osborn’s own technology and irresponsibility are his downfall.

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85 Norman Osborn initially dies in The Amazing Spider-Man #122 (1973) following the death of Gwen Stacy. However, like most characters in comics he does not stay dead. In the 1990s, about 33 years after his original death, Osborn returns to plague Spider-Man’s life.
Even though the Green Goblin is Spider-Man’s archenemy, the villain who best embodies the Nuclear Age fear of science is Doctor Otto Octavious or Dr. Octopus. Dr. Octopus instills Nuclear Age and Cold War fears in Americans because he primarily deals with atomic research. Furthermore, Dr. Octopus explores the theme of combining man with machine and the potential loss of humanity that results from the merger. Octavious is an atomic scientist who suffers brain damage and has four mechanical arms fused to his body after an accident during a nuclear experiment. The accident leads Octavious to believe that everyone is jealous of him and wants to prevent his experiments. He proceeds to take over
the atomic research facility so he can gain access to America’s atomic capabilities.\textsuperscript{86} Doctor Octopus is introduced in 1963 at the height of the Cold War and less than a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis. The threat and dangers of nuclear war were prevalent in the minds of Americans. Having Octavious capture the atomic research center presents a real danger because nuclear research was the cornerstone of America’s supremacy in the Cold War. In January 1966, Dr. Octopus attempts to gain control of radiation so he can grant himself and others superpowers.\textsuperscript{87} In October 1967, Octavious tries to steal a prototype missile defense system called the Nullifier that is capable of rendering any mechanical device inert.\textsuperscript{88} By stealing the Nullifier, the mad scientist threatens to turn the device against the American people and leave America vulnerable to potential nuclear attacks. In 1974, Dr. Octopus attempts to gain possession of one of the world’s richest uranium deposits and a breeding reactor so he can make devastating nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{89} He is one of Spider-Man’s most dangerous scientist villains because the character primarily desires to gain power and wealth for the sole purpose of conducting dangerous experiments.

\textsuperscript{86} “Spider-Man Versus Doctor Octopus,” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #3 (Marvel Comics: July 1963), 3-11.

\textsuperscript{87} “Man on a Rampage!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #32 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1966), 2.


\textsuperscript{89} “My Uncle…My Enemy?” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #131 (Marvel Comics: April 1974), 10.

Figure 1.19. Doctor Octopus takes over the nuclear facility. *Source:* "Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus," *The Amazing Spider-Man #3* (Marvel Comics: July 1963), page 12.
While Dr. Octopus is an extreme case of dangerous science involving destructive atomic research, the villain known as the Jackal explores morally questionable science. The Jackal (1975) is Peter Parker’s college professor Miles Warren. Warren was obsessed with Peter Parker’s girlfriend Gwen Stacy. After Gwen’s death, Warren becomes the Jackal and begins cloning experiments in order to bring Gwen back to life.\(^{90}\) As part of an elaborate plot to get back at Peter Parker, who he blames for Gwen’s death, the Jackal clones Peter Parker and convinces the clone that it is the real Spider-Man. Warren then kidnaps and straps a bomb to Peter’s friend, Daily Bugle reporter Ned Leeds, and pits the Spider-Men in a fight to

the death. Furthermore, the bomb has a proximity trigger set to go off if the fake Spider-Man attempts to free Ned Leeds. The Jackal takes delight as the Spider-Men battle, both thinking they are the real Spider-Man. The Jackal’s scheme attacks the hero’s sense of individualism and identity; and externalizes Spider-Man’s internal conflict with uncertainty, doubt, and his personal struggle with accepting the mantle of Spider-Man.91 Gwen’s clone eventually convinces Warren to save Leeds, but in the ensuing bomb blast, Warren and one of the Spider-Men are killed.92 However, the comic leaves Spider-Man, and the readers, unsure if the real Peter Parker/Spider-Man survived.

Figure 1.21. The Jackal describes cloning Gwen. Source: "Even If I Live I Die!” The Amazing Spider-Man #149 (Marvel Comics: Oct. 1975), page 15.

91 Peter Parker’s personal anxieties will be discussed further in Chapter 2.
As science allowed humans to alter nature, people wondered whether humans played God experimenting with things that should not be explored. The Jackal is an example of a scientist who conducts a series of morally questionable experiments for completely selfish reasons. He wants to revive the dead, and by doing so through cloning, causes confusion and more grief for all the people who loved Gwen. The clone herself is faced with an identity crisis when she realizes she is not the real Gwen. Furthermore, the Jackal uses science and cloning as a means of attacking Spider-Man’s sense of identity and reality.

Figure 1.22. The Jackal oversees the battle between Spider-Man and his clone. Source: "Even If I Live I Die!" The Amazing Spider-Man #149 (Marvel Comics: Oct. 1975), page 18.
The villains serve a very specific purpose in comic books and *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Villains serve as a foil to the hero, a counter to the hero's strong sense of morality and justice. Spider-Man is glorified for his intelligence, abilities, and sense of morality and responsibility. In contrast, the villains are vilified for being the opposite of the hero. Of all the villains, the mad scientists are the most dangerous. The mad scientists have ambition and manipulate science in a way that can be catastrophic for both individuals (like in the case of the Jackal) and society (like Dr. Octopus's dangerous nuclear experimentation). The scientists are intelligent and their intelligence makes their lack of morality scarier. They are either insane or are simply devoid or morality (each presenting its own set of dangers). The monsters and super powered thugs may pose more danger to an individual but their impact on society is usually localized and without focus. Furthermore, the monsters and mobsters usually lack intelligence and care most about personal power or wealth. As a result, the hero is able to defeat the thugs by using superior intelligence and science. Both sets of villains provide a different set of struggles for the hero to overcome and reinforce the belief that the hero can overcome any obstacle. By triumphing over the villains, Spider-Man proves that the responsible use of science and technology will prevail and that good will overcome evil.

The Nuclear Age brought both great promise and great uncertainty for the future. Science boasted solutions to all the world’s problems and new technologies seemed to make everything possible. Nuclear power promised a cheap source of limitless power, but the benefits came with potentially destructive consequences. Atomic weapons scared people around the world, and nuclear annihilation became a very real possibility. *The Amazing*
Spider-Man is a product of the Nuclear Age and American notions of technological and intellectual superiority. Spider-Man is born from atomic energy, and radiation grants the character superhuman strength, speed, and supernatural senses. Peter Parker is also an extremely intelligent teenager who focuses his education and career on the pursuit of scientific advancement. Furthermore, Spider-Man’s use of science and engineering to fight crime reflects America’s Cold War scientific struggle with the Soviet Union. The Amazing Spider-Man also recognizes and embraces the fears society had regarding the dangerous implications of scientific power. Spider-Man is in essence a paragon of the positive tropes of a nuclear America while his villains represent the dangers of science. The Amazing Spider-Man represents the positive and negative aspects of America’s scientific and nuclear culture during the 1960s and 1970s, and, through the triumphs of the hero, shows that responsible and positive use of intelligence and technology overcomes evil.
CHAPTER 2

Spider-Man No More!

*The Amazing Spider-Man and Social Anxieties of the 1960s and 1970s*

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of great social change and uncertainty in the United States. Americans were forced to deal with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the draft, student movements, civil rights protests, scandals like Watergate, and many other events that shook their faith in the government. *The Amazing Spider-Man* reflects the decline in America’s confidence in the 1960s and 1970s by alluding to numerous real-world struggles including race relations, discrimination, student activism, the War on Drugs, Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal. The comic captures the feeling of uncertainty as people struggled to maintain faith in themselves and the world. Peter Parker, a typical white middle class teenager and college student, struggles with the social anxieties of growing up, fitting in, and finding his place in the world. He is gifted with extraordinary powers but struggles with the increased power and responsibility of being Spider-Man. Furthermore, being a hero often degrades or destroys aspects of Peter’s personal life.

*The Amazing Spider-Man* also reflects Marvel Comics’ uncertainty with how to handle social issues. Stan Lee gave a speech at the 1968 Comic Art Convention where he said, “Our thinking is that the pages of our comics magazines may not be the right place for getting too heavy handed with social messages of any sort. We may be wrong. Maybe we should come out more forcibly and maybe we will.”93 Marvel Comics remained cautious with how outwardly political their comics appeared, but even before 1968 there existed many

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subtle allusions to the real world. Afterward the comic became more overt while still maintaining a moderate position on most social issues. Regardless of Marvel’s intent, *The Amazing Spider-Man* addresses issues facing American society during the 1960s and 1970s by subtly or overtly portraying current events and by developing a thematic trend that expresses the dissatisfaction, anxieties, feelings of loss, and uncertainty prevalent in American society at the time.

Even though they are not a major presence in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, communism and communist agents make an appearance. Publication of *The Amazing Spider-Man* began well after the initial anticommunist fear campaigns, like the one launched by Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. However, *The Amazing Spider-Man* began publication at the peak of the Cold War when tensions with the Soviet Union were highest. Spider-Man was introduced in August 1962 (*Amazing Fantasy* #15) just a few months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the first issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* came out in March 1963, not long after the Cuban Missile Crisis and the end of the Cuban blockade. In the comic, communists are portrayed as corrupters, infiltrators and potential destroyers of America. The first major villain in *The Amazing-Spider-Man* #1 is a communist spy called the Chameleon. The Chameleon personifies the negative traits given to communist infiltrators during the 1950s and reinforces the evil stereotype of Soviet espionage against the United States. The Chameleon infiltrates a government building, steals United States missile defense plans, and frames Spider-Man for the crime.94 The plotline reflects Cold War fears of the Soviet Union and nuclear weapons only months after the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Chameleon’s

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association with the Soviet Union is made explicit when the villain tries to escape aboard a submarine with the red Soviet hammer and sickle insignia.95 The Chameleon wears a robotic white mask. He is faceless and steals the faces of others. The spy represents the American fear that communists or communist sympathizers are hiding among the general population. He disguises himself as janitors, police officers, scientists, and even heroes exemplifying the fear that communist agents could be anywhere: disguised as friends, coworkers, and authority figures.96 The Chameleon is a direct manifestation of America’s Cold War fears following the conclusion of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Figure 2.1. The Chameleon tries to escape on a Soviet submarine. Source: “Spider-Man vs. the Chameleon,” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (Marvel Comics: March 1963), page 8.

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96 Ibid., 5-10.
While the Cold War played an important role in the social landscape of America in the 1960s and 1970s, domestically the Civil Rights Movement and race relations were just as important. Race relations were a source of social anxiety as America struggled with the idea of social equality and discrimination in a historically segregated environment. *The Amazing Spider-Man* thematically explores ideas of discrimination and sympathizes with those being oppressed. Both Peter Parker and Spider-Man are targets of societal discrimination. Peter Parker is targeted because he is different from his peer group. Before gaining powers, Peter is a nerdy kid with glasses who dresses differently from most of his classmates. Aside from looking physically different, Peter intimidates others by excelling in school. Flash Thompson, the popular football player, ridicules Peter, turns other classmates against the
wallflower, and makes Peter an outsider. The discrimination Peter faces stems from physical differences regarding misconceptions of Peter’s inferior masculinity and cowardice, and makes Peter Parker a popular character with readers because anyone subjected to bullying can easily identify with and understand Peter’s difficulties. Faced with discrimination, Peter Parker struggles with social acceptance, confidence, and his responsibility to help society.

Figure 2.3. Peter’s classmates are glad he is unable to attend a social event. Source: “Spider-Man!” The Amazing Spider-Man #1 (Marvel Comics: March 1963), Page 3.

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Figure 2.4. High school students shun Peter Parker. *Source:* “Spider-Man!” Amazing Fantasy #15 (Marvel Comics: August 1962), page 1.

Peter Parker also deals with discrimination as Spider-Man. Due to his vigilante status, the citizens of New York are unsure if Spider-Man is truly a hero or a villain. The media, led by J. Jonah Jameson and his newspaper, attacks the hero and turns society against the wall-crawler. Jameson calls Spider-Man a menace to society and tells people Spider-Man
needs to be hated and feared. The newspaperman portrays Spider-Man as an enemy of the people. Jameson’s attacks reflect the extremism of Joseph McCarthy’s inquisition against suspected communists and the House Un-American Activities Committee’s trials during the 1950s. The persecution of Spider-Man creates sympathy for the character among those unjustly attacked in society.

Figure 2.5. Spider-Man wishes he never gained superpowers. Source: “Spider-Man vs. the Chameleon,” The Amazing Spider-Man #1 (Marvel Comics March 1963), page 10.


*The Amazing Spider-Man* reflects ideas of discrimination thematically, but it is also important to note that the comic book was written and illustrated by white, middle class men. The comic maintained a relatively progressive stance toward race for the mainstream comic book industry but also refrained from advocating radical change. In fact, a common trend in...
The Amazing Spider-Man is its attempt to maintain a moderate position that criticizes the extremism of both the far right and the far left. The Amazing Spider-Man supported peace and equality if it conformed to traditional middle-class society and values. The primary way the comic book promotes ideas of racial equality is through the use of its supporting characters. The comic encourages combating racism by leading through example and succeeding in society. Joseph “Robbie” Robertson, introduced in August 1967 less than a month after major race riots in Newark and Detroit, is a positive black influence who exemplifies Martin Luther King’s dream of equality. Robertson is city editor at J. Jonah Jameson’s Daily Bugle. He is in charge of the newspaper’s operation and is second in command behind publisher and owner J. Jonah Jameson. Robertson is kind, understanding, sympathetic, educated, well spoken, well mannered, and successful. He stands up against the extremism of Jameson and becomes a friend to both Peter Parker and Spider-Man. He defends Spider-Man against Jameson’s attacks and even assists Spider-Man’s crime fighting efforts. He is a clean-cut black man who wears suits and ties and smokes a pipe. Robbie Robertson is one of the most likeable and supportive people at the Daily Bugle.

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99 Joseph “Robbie” Robertson’s first appearance is in “In the Clutches of the Kingpin!” The Amazing Spider-Man #51 (August 1967). Robertson is the first major black character introduced into The Amazing Spider-Man and one of the first major black supporting characters in comics. However, he is not the first black character in comics. While other black characters existed, the Black Panther was the first mainstream black superhero. The Black Panther was introduced in Marvel Comic’s The Fantastic Four #52 (July 1966). The Black Panther character predates the formation of the Black Panther Party (October 15, 1966).

Figure 2.7. Joseph “Robbie” Robertson makes time for his son. *Source:* “To Squash a Spider!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #67 (Marvel Comics: Dec. 1968), page 16.

Robbie Robertson also displays heroic characteristics and reinforces positive values. He is a loyal friend who is willing to put himself in danger to save others. In September 1968, not long after the assassination of Martin Luther King (April 1968), Robertson is injured when he heroically saves J. Jonah Jameson from falling debris during Spider-Man’s fight with the Vulture. Unlike Jameson, Robbie does not exploit the Daily Bugle’s employees, and he pays Peter Parker the full value for his photos. Robertson also exhibits the qualities of a good and supportive father. He displays great concern for his son, Randolph or Randy, and is an attentive and understanding father. He also acts as a positive father figure for Peter Parker. When Randy is falsely accused of robbery and arrested during a student protest, Robbie supports his son by hiring a lawyer to defend the students. Robertson is positively portrayed as a boss, friend, and father.

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 20.
Robbie Robertson is an intelligent and successful black man who thrives in American society and provides a positive and peaceful example of success. Robertson is accepted, liked, and treated as an equal by everyone working at the Daily Bugle, and *The Amazing Spider-Man* makes no reference to his race until a black student protester in the comics refers to him as an “Uncle Tom,” a black man who accepts white values and goals in order to succeed in white society.\(^{106}\) The black protester expresses his disapproval of Robbie Robertson and targets Randy by saying, “Who wants the son of an **Uncle Tom** marchin’ here with us?”\(^{107}\) *The Amazing Spider-Man* recognizes that the newspaper editor represents a conventional image of a successful black male conforming to established societal standards.

\(^{106}\) “Crisis on Campus!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), 11.

\(^{107}\) Ibid.
The comic book embraces and supports Robertson’s values, but it also recognizes how Robbie's image is rejected among factions of the black community. By having Robbie rejected by the young protester, *The Amazing Spider-Man* highlights the disparity between the methods of some of the older and younger members of the rights movements.

Figure 2.10. Robbie Robertson stands up to J. Jonah Jameson and defends Peter. *Source:* “Crisis on Campus!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), page 8.
By the mid to late 1960s, the emergence of more radical rights groups, like the Black Panther Party, created a methodological divide among people seeking equality. Robbie Robertson displays the fears and concerns of older rights activists regarding the militant methods used by some of the newer groups. Robertson loves and supports his son but worries how the anger and uncertainty will shape the boy. He shares his son’s dream of making a better world. However, unlike his son and the more militant members of the Civil Rights Movement, Robbie Robertson attempts to work within the established rules to change attitudes and society. He adheres to the belief that militant actions create negativity and hamper the progress of the equality movement.

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The Amazing Spider-Man further reinforces its support of Robertson’s values and his commitment to his son by having Robbie’s actions earn the respect of some of the more militant members of the movement. When the Kingpin uses the chaos from the student protest to steal an artifact and frame the protesters, Robertson provides support and defends his son and the other arrested protesters. Through his actions he wins the trust and respect of those who, in the comic, previously shunned him for his conventional methods. Given The Amazing Spider-Man's popularity among the college crowd, Josh's (the protest leader) display of respect for Robbie is an attempt by the comic book to reinforce its support for Robertson's moderate methodology to the college protest crowd. Furthermore, the comic attempts to show younger, more militant activists that those working to improve society from within are also important contributors to the Civil Rights Movement. Using Robbie Robertson as an example, The Amazing Spider-Man promotes the nonviolent image of an older black man with positive values, and it encouraged younger, more militant members of the protest movements to understand and embrace the efforts of those who contribute through less radical and less visible ways.

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110 Ibid.

The Amazing Spider-Man’s representation of militant protesters is much less positive. The comic supports the goal of racial equality but is very critical of militant methods. The Amazing Spider-Man uses Josh, the black student protest leader, to examine militant protest. Josh is introduced in January 1969, as student protests increased across the country. Josh leads a protest for a new student dorm, not racial equality, but displays militant and confrontational methods like bullying and breaking laws. When Peter Parker asks about the protest, Josh calls Peter “whitey” and tries to bully him into joining the movement.\(^{111}\) Josh’s confrontational attitude, as it is portrayed in The Amazing Spider-Man, is a negative reflection of more militant protesters. Josh leads the takeover of a school building; he advocates stealing an ancient artifact on display in the building, and then using the artifact as leverage to force the school’s hand.\(^{112}\) The comic portrays Josh’s actions as extreme and unlawful. Furthermore, The Amazing Spider-Man argues that crossing certain lines through militant means hinders a cause, even if the cause itself is just. Josh embodies some negative qualities of a militant and extreme black youth who is willing to use whatever methods he can to further his cause, even if those methods may actually hurt the movement instead.

However, while Josh’s methods are presented negatively, Josh also displays some positive qualities, including acceptance and the ability to change his perspective. First of all, Josh supports positive and constructive change. By protesting, he hopes to make conditions better for the students on campus. Furthermore, Josh defends Randy Robertson when one of

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\(^{112}\) Ibid., 10-20.
the other black protesters attacks him for being the son of an Uncle Tom. Finally, Josh recognizes his follies and is able to show respect for those he originally shunned. The comic tries to redeem Josh by having him show respect for Robbie Robertson, who is a symbol for parents and older people who support or guide the activism of younger protesters. Ultimately, *The Amazing Spider-Man* sides with Josh’s ideals but criticizes his methods.

Figure 2.14: Josh tries to bully Peter into joining the dorm protest. *Source: "Crisis on Campus!" The Amazing Spider-Man* #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), page 10.

Robbie Robertson’s son Randy represents the young black male trapped in between traditional values and the more militant times. When first introduced in December 1968,
Randy is a very nice, clean-cut boy with youthful and innocent features. He is educated and attends the same college as Peter Parker. Randy wants to improve society and becomes engaged in activism on campus. He participates in demonstrations advocating positive causes, like the rights of students on campus, and later he stands up against drugs. However, Randy toes the line between moderate and militant activism. He provides a voice of reason, presents coherent arguments, and tries to prevent the protesters from engaging in violent or criminal activity. Even after being attacked by other protesters for being the son of an “Uncle Tom,” he is not deterred and continues to fight for the greater cause.

Figure 2.15. Robbie Robertson listens to his son’s problems. Source: "To Squash a Spider!" The Amazing Spider-Man #67 (Marvel Comics: Dec. 1968), page 16.

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Figure 2.16. Peter Parker meets Randy Robertson. Source: "Crisis on Campus!" The Amazing Spider-Man #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), page 6.

Figure 2.17. Randy opposes stealing the ancient tablet. Source: "Crisis on Campus!" The Amazing Spider-Man #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), page 12.
Randy embraces the sweeping social change of the 1960s, but he also adheres to the lawful and nonviolent model of protesting embraced by *The Amazing Spider-Man*. However, Randy’s visual representation evolves throughout the course of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. By 1971 Randy develops a much more intimidating and militant visual appearance more closely akin to images of members of the Black Panther Party. His youthful innocence is lost and instead of being drawn with affable smiles he dons angry scowls and has a more threatening physique. The new image of Randy embraces the anger, resentment, and uncertainty that many black youth faced in the wake of years of abuse and the assassinations of prominent African American leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968). Randy Robertson continues to have strong messages of positive societal change, but his new look reinforces the anger and dissatisfaction associated with the persistent inequality in America.

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118 “…And Now the Goblin!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96 (Marvel Comics: May 1971), 15.
119 The change in Randy’s appearance contains a strong political message, and his new image reflects the more militant members of the Civil Rights Movement. The change in appearance could have been specifically planned but also might have simply been the result of changing artists. John Romita Sr. was the artist in *The Amazing Spider-Man* # 67 and #68 when Randy was first introduced. In issue #96, when Randy’s features drastically changed, Gil Kane was the artist. However, even with changing artists, most of the characters maintained a large amount of consistency in their presentation. Randy, however, underwent drastic changes.
The Amazing Spider-Man continued its attempt to be racially progressive in 1971 when it introduced a black costumed vigilante called the Prowler. The Prowler, or Hobie Brown, is a character who is a reflection of Spider-Man. Hobie is a smart young man with advanced engineering skills. Like Peter, he is intelligent, capable, and achieves power through technology. The Amazing Spider-Man embraces ideas of racial equality by having Hobie Brown, a young black window washer, mirror the intellectual and scientific ability of the comic’s white hero. The parallel is reinforced when Hobie is introduced. Peter looks up, sees a window washer, and says “I’ll bet even that window cleaner hasn’t half the worries I do! Wonder if he knows how lucky he is?” However, it is revealed that Hobie and Peter face the same struggles of trying to make their way in the world.

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When first introduced, Hobie Brown is a window washer who develops a series of inventions to improve efficiency and safety for window washers. However, his boss, who does not even look at the blueprints, rejects Hobie’s designs. Unjustly, Hobie is assumed to be uneducated and unskilled. While it is not explicitly stated, it can be conjectured that Hobie’s boss assumes the young man is uneducated because of either his race or his menial job. Later, Hobie becomes a scapegoat when he is unfairly blamed for an accident and fired from his job. Afterwards, his girlfriend, believing Hobie is destined for failure, leaves him. Angry and dissatisfied, the young window washer builds a series of gadgets and becomes the
To increase his fame and fortune, Hobie plans to steal something as the Prowler and then become a hero when he recovers the valuables as Hobie Brown. The Prowler is not a villain; instead he is a sympathetic anti-hero. The reader understands and identifies with Hobie’s anger and dissatisfaction. Hobie Brown wants to use his inventions to help people, but after being disrespected and persecuted he starts down a dark path before being saved by Spider-Man.

Figure 2.20. The Prowler. Source: "The Night of the Prowler!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #78 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1969), page 16.

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The Prowler is a misguided version of Spider-Man. He does not want to be a thief; he simply desires respect from society for his abilities. When his attempt at thievery fails, and he thinks he is responsible for accidentally killing Peter Parker, Hobie seeks redemption. Paralleling Spider-Man’s own struggle with the death of his uncle, the Prowler tries to atone for his sins. He attempts to capture Spider-Man, who he believes is a criminal, and turn the hero over to the police. The Prowler loses the fight against Spider-Man but is given a second chance. Not wanting to create a true criminal, Spider-Man lets Hobie go after listening to his story.\textsuperscript{122} Spider-Man understands Hobie’s pain and warns the young man of the additional problems that come with costumed alter egos. Spider-Man tries to convince Hobie to stop being the Prowler and says, “I mean maybe we were both in the same boat…both of us riding a rocket to nowhere…only you were the lucky one…’cause you just got off!”\textsuperscript{123} Peter acknowledges his own similarities to Hobie and his self-reflexive lament acts as a warning against obtaining power.\textsuperscript{124} Peter tries to spare his African American counterpart from the extra complications tied to being a superhero. Afterward, Spider-Man and Hobie become friends, and the Prowler becomes an African-American version of Spider-Man.\textsuperscript{125}

*The Amazing Spider-Man’s* message of peace is reinforced again in August 1971 when the wall-crawler helps quell a prison uprising. Interestingly enough, the story of the prison riot occurs one month before the Attica Prison Riot in New York (September 1971).

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\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 20.

\textsuperscript{124} The speech further reflects America’s struggle with accepting its role as an international superpower and warns others of the increased responsibility that comes with achieving power.

In the story, a prison riot erupts and the prisoners capture the warden. The one black prisoner is the only prisoner who displays a desire for peace and nonviolent protest. The black prisoner thought the riot was simply a way to complain to the warden about bad conditions in the jail, and he stands up to the other prisoners, who really just wanted to escape using the warden as a hostage. After Spider-Man defeats the prisoners and frees the warden, the black prisoner convinces the rioting prisoners to cease violence and return to their cells. The black prisoner negotiates for the prisoners and even wins the support of the warden. Afterwards, the warden raises awareness of the poor prison conditions by appealing to New York’s citizens.

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127 Ibid., 11-12.
Figure 2.21. The black prisoner negotiates a peaceful end to the prison riot. *Source: "A Day in the Life of..." The Amazing Spider-Man #99 (Marvel Comics: August 1971), page 11.*

*The Amazing Spider-Man* also directly targets racism and hate crimes through a series of stories involving the corrupt white politician Sam Bullit (December 1970 to January...
Bullit is a fascistic and criminal candidate for district attorney of New York City. He is also a racist who is supported by extremist hate groups. When Robbie Robertson discovers that Bullit’s support comes from hate groups, Bullit and his supporters kidnap and attempt to murder the black newspaper editor. However, Robertson is saved by Spider-Man, and Bullit is exposed as a hatemonger. By having Bullit target Robertson, who is a well-liked, sympathetic, and arguably The Amazing Spider-Man’s most idealized black character, the comic vilifies racism and hate groups. However, while the comic book attacks racism, hate, and discrimination it does so toward the tail end of Civil Rights Movement.

Previously, The Amazing Spider-Man displayed ideas of racial equality using characters like Robbie Robertson, Randy Robertson, and Hobie Brown, but it refrained from directly tackling the issue of racial discrimination and hate. The comic book advocated equality through the inclusion of African American characters and with the absence of racial discussions. White characters simply accepted and embraced the black characters as equals. However, The Amazing Spider-Man’s method of supporting equality was subtle and avoided some of the greater racial issues of the time. Following the Bullit story line, The Amazing Spider-Man begins to address racial issues a little more directly.

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128 Bullit will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter during the discussion of Watergate and government corruption.
130 Ibid.
131 A few months after the Bullit story line, Randy Robertson directly confronts the belief that drugs are a "black" problem in The Amazing Spider-Man’s anti-drug issue.
Figure 2.22. Robbie Robertson exposes Sam Bullit's bigotry. *Source: "When Iceman Attacks!" The Amazing Spider-Man #92* (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1971), page 9.

While *The Amazing Spider-Man* endorses ideas of racial equality and peace, it mostly does so through a middle-class conformist perspective. Robbie Robertson is seen positively because he exemplifies equality by working hard and succeeding within the traditional
structures in society. All of Robertson’s white coworkers accept his position of power without question, and Robertson is treated inherently equal. However, Josh is seen less ideally because he displays the dangers of unchecked militant action. Furthermore, *The Amazing Spider-Man* portrays Josh more positively when he defends Randy and shows respect for Robbie Robertson. The comic book warns against the younger generation’s more militant methods and embraces more conventional and conformist methods of achieving equality. Randy represents the youth torn between the different methods of creating change. However, Randy sides more with the law-abiding conformists and acts as a voice of reason against militant action. Even after Randy's image changes and the character embraces the anger held by some younger blacks, he does not embrace the more militant methods of attaining social change. Finally, Hobie Brown, who is a reflection of the comic’s primary hero, reinforces ideas of equality but in the same unspoken way as Robbie Robertson. Hobie, like Peter, struggles with earning a living, achieving the respect of his peers, and using his power responsibly. The comparisons between Peter Parker and Hobie Brown show that young people are the same regardless of skin color. To white teenagers and young college students, Hobie Brown encourages the reader to recognize and understand their similarities to others regardless of race.

Like its representation of race relations, *The Amazing Spider-Man* provides a similar message of moderation regarding the student protest movement. In the comic there is a lot of overlap between civil rights and the student protests, and the comic consistently encourages peaceful and moderate methods of protest while discouraging radical extremism. *The*
Amazing Spider-Man provides a complex and evolving view of the protest movement. Peter’s first reaction to student protests is in July of 1966 as real life protesting increased over the United States’ involvement in Vietnam (1965) and the draft. During this first encounter, Peter and The Amazing Spider-Man criticize student protests. The comic marginalizes the unnamed cause and characterizes the protesters as fickle. When Peter first sees the protest, he comments “Another student protest! What are they after this time?” criticizing the ubiquitousness of protests at the time.\(^{132}\) One of the students responds, “Didn’t you hear, they’re protesting tonight’s protest meeting.”\(^{133}\) The comic uses absurdity to highlight the writer/illustrator’s belief that protesting had gotten out of hand. The negativity continues as protesters try to use peer pressure to conscript Peter and verbally attack him for rejecting the offer.\(^{134}\) The attack on Peter negatively portrays the use of peer pressure as a form of coercion.

The Amazing Spider-Man also criticizes the protesters’ motivations. When Peter tells them “Besides I’ve nothing to protest about!” a student tell Peter if he joins they will join one of his protests (highlighting the comic’s belief that protesting itself was more important than the cause). They further say that protesting is an excuse to get out of class and to get your picture in the paper; indicating the protesters are more interested in fame or cutting class than in the cause.\(^{135}\) The actual cause the students are protesting is never explicitly stated, and the entire protest seems to be a tool for the writer or illustrator of The Amazing Spider-Man to

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\(^{132}\) "Just a Guy Named Joe!" The Amazing Spider-Man #38 (Marvel Comics: July 1966), 10.  
\(^{133}\) Ibid.  
\(^{134}\) Ibid.  
\(^{135}\) Ibid.
express dissatisfaction with the general protest movement. The initial portrayal of student
protests is negative and questions the motivations of the students and the methods they use to
recruit others.

Figure 2.23. Peter Parker refuses to join a student protest.  Source: "Just a Guy Named Joe!"
The Amazing Spider-Man #38 (Marvel Comics: July 1966), page 10.
The Amazing Spider-Man addresses student protests again in 1969 and this time its stance is more sympathetic to the students’ cause. The second protest in the comic occurs not long after the end of real life militant protests at Columbia University in 1968. The change in tone likely resulted from angry letters written by college fans, one of which was written by a member of the Students for a Democratic Society, complaining about the comic’s portrayal of protests in 1966. Lee responded by writing, “We never in a million years thought anyone was gonna take our silly protest-marchers seriously!” Lee underestimated Spider-Man’s appeal to the college audience and how students searched for deeper meanings in comic books. While the second portrayal of protests is more sympathetic, the comic is still critical of radical methods and militant student action. The Amazing Spider-Man creates a fictional cause for the students to protest, instead of using a real life one, but the protest represents aspects of the Columbia University protests.

In the comic, the school plans to turn a building into a private alumni dorm rather than low cost student dorms, sparking student protests. The student leaders, Josh and Randy, try to convince Peter to join the rally. However, Peter tries to understand both sides of the issue before picking a side. The students attempt to coerce Peter into joining but fail. The protest leader says, “Look whitey… How much do you haveta know? The school’s turning the Ex Hall over to the ESTABLISHMENT… But it belongs to US… and we WANT it!”

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138 Ibid.
139 The Columbia University protests in 1968 led to the student occupation of multiple buildings and their violent removal by police officers.
Peter responds by saying “Okay, that’s YOUR side of the story! What does the Dean say?” Josh replies, “We ain’t buyin’ what he says! From now on, we do the talking!” Peter leaves and states, “Anyone can paint a sign mister! That doesn’t make you right!” In this case, *The Amazing Spider-Man* is critical of the unwillingness of the protesters to listen or compromise. Peter is portrayed positively by trying to understand the situation and by refusing pressure to join a cause he does not fully understand. Even though Peter supports the position of the students, he disagrees with their methods. The students attempt to use protest as a means to bully the dean and the school into a specific course of action. Peter sympathizes with the students and even thinks their goal is noble but still questions why the Dean resists. Peter represents an attempt at understanding and compromise rather than forcing change through collective protest.

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141 Ibid.
In its 1969 issue, *The Amazing Spider-Man* also reflects the violent removal of students at the Columbia University protests (1968) and foreshadows future tragedies in the student movement, like the Kent State shooting in 1970. The comic shows the conviction of students fighting for a cause but also shows the fear and danger associated with extreme actions. The protest escalates and the students storm the building screaming, “We gotta shake up the whole establishment! That means we gotta take over the hall!” and “Nobody leaves till we got ourselves a dorm!”142 As the protest becomes less peaceful, tensions rise. Once the dorm is taken, the students contemplate stealing an ancient clay tablet on display in the

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building to force the school to listen to the students’ demands. The peaceful assembly instead becomes an attempt to use collective power to bully the school into action. Both Peter and Randy protest stealing the tablet believing it is morally wrong and harmful to the cause. After a brief altercation with the armed guards protecting the tablet, the students retreat and Peter observes how “everyone’s too up-tight! In a spot like this, anything can happen! It’ll be a miracle if nobody gets hurt before it’s over! But, what can I…what can anybody… do about it now?” Peter expresses the concern in society regarding the student movements and the dangers of extremism. Extreme actions lead to extreme reactions where people are more likely to get hurt. The Amazing Spider-Man sympathizes with the students but disagrees with the students’ actions. The comic book identifies the dangers of increased radical action, the fear instability creates, and how fear increases the likelihood of violence by either the protesters or the authorities. In The Amazing Spider-Man, peaceful and lawful protest is accepted and encouraged while militant or violent protests and bullying are discouraged.

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143 “Crisis on Campus!” The Amazing Spider-Man #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), 12.
144 Ibid.

The Amazing Spider-Man highlights the dangers of unrestrained action and how individuals can manipulate groups. In the comic, the Kingpin and his agents utilize the students’ unrest and trigger the escalation of violent action. The Kingpin’s actions show another danger regarding unruly protests, their ability to be manipulated by those with unsavory motivations. The Kingpin sets off an explosion, which is blamed on the students.
He then sneaks into the building, and after an altercation with Spider-Man, steals the ancient tablet. \footnote{145} Because of their militant actions, the students are blamed for the incident and arrested by the police. The students learn that trying to force change through militant means creates further problems for themselves and their cause. The comic further reflects the increased use of violence to suppress protests in the late 1960s and 1970s. More specifically, \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} reflects the end of the Columbia University Protests in 1968 when police stormed the buildings and violently arrested the protesters. \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} reinforces the idea of moderate and responsible action where protesting is positive when practiced with restraint and negative when volatile and out of control.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Police arrest the student protesters. \textit{Source: "Crisis on Campus!" The Amazing Spider-Man #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), page 20.}}
\end{figure}

\footnote{145}{"Crisis on Campus!" \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #68 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1969), 13-19.}
While *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s stance on protests evolves, it also remains consistent with the overall moderate message of the comic. At first, student protests are trivialized, and the comic uses absurdity to criticize protesting. After being called out by the comic’s college audience for negatively portraying protests and its unwillingness to make social stands, *The Amazing Spider-Man* revisits protests. The comic continues to reflect Lee’s desire to have limited social messaging in his comics and refrains from tying its protests to any real world causes. However, the comic once again takes a cautionary stance regarding protests. The comic sympathizes with the students and their cause, but it is extremely critical of militant methods and predicts how militant action leads to an escalation in violence. *The Amazing Spider-Man* even punishes the students for using militant actions by having them arrested for crimes they did not commit. After the initial trivialization of protests, *The Amazing Spider-Man* tries to promote lawful and nonviolent protest while negatively portraying militant action.

Aside from civil rights and the student protest movements, *The Amazing Spider-Man* also reflects numerous current events during the 1960s and 1970s including the Vietnam War, the War on Drugs, and the Watergate scandal. With regard to Vietnam, *The Amazing Spider-Man* shows support and sympathy for the soldiers at war but also addresses the horrors of war and the civilian deaths prevalent in Vietnam. Peter Parker’s long time rival and bully, Flash Thompson, is drafted into the United States Army at the end of 1966 and is eventually deployed to Vietnam. Before his deployment, Flash’s relationship with Peter evolves and the two become friends. Peter and his friends throw Flash a going away party

before the soldier is deployed and support him when he returns from the war. Peter believes Flash will make a great soldier because Flash displays confidence and acts like everything is all right. As Flash departs, Peter contemplates. “He was probably my greatest fan! If only I could have told him who I really am… Just once! But, why am I thinking of him in the past tense!? He’ll come back! He’ll Make it… Somehow! The good guys always win… Don’t they?”

Peter initially refers to Flash in the past tense, as if he was already dead, before correcting himself. Peter’s thoughts reflect the uncertainty among the younger generations during the 1960s and 1970s regarding the Vietnam War as friends left to fight and in many cases did not come home. Peter tries to remain hopeful that Flash will survive but also expresses doubt. By talking about Flash in the past tense, Peter expresses the concern that many young soldiers would not and did not return from Vietnam. The lament also questions the standard comic book belief that good prevails. In this moment, *The Amazing Spider-Man* expresses doubt and uncertainty regarding the outcome of the war, the fate of the soldiers, and its own conventions.

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148 Ibid., 10.
149 Ibid., 20.
Figure 2.27. Peter learns Flash was drafted. *Source: "Rhino on the Rampage!" The Amazing Spider-Man #43 (Marvel Comics: Dec. 1966), page 20.*

Figure 2.28. Peter and his friends throw Flash a pre-deployment party. *Source: "In the Hands of the Hunter!" The Amazing Spider-Man #47 (Marvel Comics: April 1967), page 10.*
Flash’s story continues in 1972, five years after Flash’s initial send off, when he returns home from the war. When he returns, it is revealed Flash is being hunted by a fanatical group of Vietnamese who think he was responsible for the destruction of a sacred temple. In Vietnam, Flash was wounded and cared for by the group of Vietnamese who lived in the Hidden Temple. These Vietnamese were pacifists who helped anyone in need. After his recovery, Flash returned to the military and learned the army planned to use artillery to suppress resistance in the area near the Hidden Temple. Flash warned the military not to attack, but his commanders, who thought Flash was delusional from his injuries, went ahead with the assault. Flash raced back to warn his saviors and evacuate the temple, but

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151 Ibid., 10.
he was too late and the temple was destroyed. The destruction of the temple created negative backlash for the military. The locals, who believed Flash was responsible for marking the temple as a target, began hunting Flash for revenge. Spider-Man helps Flash resolve his issues with the religious group, but Flash’s story reflects the dangers of civilian deaths, collateral damage, and misunderstandings caused by the war.

Figure 2.30. Peaceful Vietnamese nurse Flash back to health. Source: "Vengeance from Vietnam!" The Amazing Spider-Man #108 (Marvel Comics: May 1972), page 8.

The Amazing Spider-Man’s Vietnam story occurs in May 1972, a little over a year after William Laws Calley, Jr. was tried and convicted of massacring Vietnamese civilians at...
the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968. Calley was convicted on March 29, 1971.\textsuperscript{153} The Vietnam story further reflects Marvel Comics emboldened stance on social issues after 1968. \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} sympathizes with the Vietnamese. By having members of the religious group help Flash, the comic showed not all Vietnamese were bad guys. It also showed how many Vietnamese did not want war but were pushed into it after experiencing atrocities. Furthermore, the comic criticizes the United States military for disregarding Flash’s protests and for the indiscriminate damage caused by its artillery. The comic showed that the military’s actions caused undo suffering and created new enemies. The comic is critical of the military’s bureaucratic control and those who ordered the artillery strike in the comic later display regret after the destruction of the temple.\textsuperscript{154} \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} highlights the dangers of waging war from a distance by those removed from the direct consequences of actions. However, \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} is sympathetic and understanding to the common soldier. The comic is pro-soldier and against violence directed at civilians, but it also remained neutral regarding the political goals of the Vietnam War.

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\textsuperscript{154} “Vengeance from Vietnam!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #108 (Marvel Comics: May 1972), 11.
\end{flushright}
Figure 2.31. Flash protests bombing the Hidden Temple. Source: "Vengeance from Vietnam!" The Amazing Spider-Man #108 (Marvel Comics: May 1972), page 9.
Another event directly covered by *The Amazing Spider-Man* is Nixon’s War on Drugs. At the time, the Comics Code Authority (1954) banned the portrayal of drugs. However, in 1970 the Nixon administration’s Department of Health, Education, and Welfare sent Stan Lee a letter asking for him to incorporate an anti-drug message into one of his
Lee continued Marvel's shift toward stronger social messaging and obliged. As a result, *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96 was published in May 1971 without the Comics Code Authority's seal of approval. The issue presents a strong message about the dangers of drugs, and tactfully also transitions into the topic of racism and how the drug problem affects all youths. It starts by highlighting the potential physical dangers associated with drug use when Spider-Man saves a drug-addled African-American who jumped off a building thinking that he could fly. Spider-Man comments that drugs that powerful must mess up the brain and that he would “rather face a hundred super-villains then toss it [his life] away by getting hooked on hard drugs” because “that’s one fight you can't win.” Spider-Man’s warning characterizes drugs as vicious and deadly and provides a powerful message to the young.

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157 Ibid., 14.
The initial warning about drugs is reinforced when Randy Robertson gives a speech about the dangers of drugs. He combats the idea that the drug problem in America only affects black people and minorities, and he argues that drugs are a major societal problem that transcends race. Randy argues with Norman Osborn and says, “Everyone figures it’s a black man’s bag—but it aint! We’re the ones who hate it the most! It hurts us more than anyone else—’cause too many of us got no hope—so we’re easier pickin’s for the pushers! But it aint just our problem! It’s yours, too!” Osborn responds by saying “Look! I’m just

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158 “...And Now, the Goblin!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96 (Marvel Comics: May 1971), 15.
One man! It’s not My responsibility!” and Randy replies, “You’re rich! You got influence! That makes it your responsibility!”

Randy’s speech places the blame for drugs on all of America and calls for people to open their eyes and use what influence they have to combat America's social problems, like drugs.

Figure 2.34. Randy Robertson argues with Norman Osborn about drugs. Source: “…And Now the Goblin!” The Amazing Spider-Man #96 (Marvel Comics: May 1971), page 15.

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159 “…And Now, the Goblin!” The Amazing Spider-Man #96 (Marvel Comics: May 1971), 15.
Randy’s position is reinforced in the following issue when Harry Osborn, Peter’s close friend and roommate, turns to drugs to escape from his relationship problems with Mary Jane and his long term issues with his father.\textsuperscript{160} Harry Osborn is the son of Spider-Man’s rich and powerful enemy Norman Osborn (Green Goblin) who in the previous issue argued with Randy that drugs were a lower-class problem. Norman Osborn is a member of the city’s wealthy elite and by choosing Harry to struggle with drugs, \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} illustrates that the drug problem is far reaching and affects all levels of society. The drugs alter Harry’s mood, and he becomes disoriented and violent before being rendered unconscious from the trip.\textsuperscript{161} In the final issue of the anti-drug arc, Harry is taken to the hospital and Spider-Man ends his fight with the Green Goblin by showing the villain his

\textsuperscript{160} “In the Grip of the Goblin!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #97 (Marvel Comics: June 1971), 8-15.

\textsuperscript{161} “In the Grip of the Goblin!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #97 (Marvel Comics: June 1971).
son’s perilous state.\textsuperscript{162} The Goblin, so distraught from seeing his son in the hospital, returns to his non-criminal state of mind and looks after his son.

Figure 2.36. Harry Osborn takes drugs. \textit{Source:} “In the Grip of the Goblin!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #97 (Marvel Comics: June 1971), page 17.

Furthermore, Peter Parker begins his own personal war against the drug dealers. Angry about the negative effects the drugs had on Harry, Peter (not Spider-Man) confronts the drug dealer who sold Harry the drugs. The drug peddler and his thugs threaten and attack Peter, but the super powered student defeats the criminals and says “but, before you go sleepy-by remember one thing—and remember it good— If I ever see you pushing that

\textsuperscript{162} “The Goblin’s Last Gasp!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #98 (Marvel Comics: July 1971).
\textsuperscript{163} “In the Grip of the Goblin,” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #97 (Marvel Comics: June 1971), 17.
stuff—anywhere again—you’ll think this was just a playful picnic.”

Harry’s drug addiction reinforces the dangers of drugs and the diversity of the drug problem in America. Harry is a rich white college student who is unable to avoid the dangers and addiction associated with drug use. *The Amazing Spider-Man* presents America’s drug problem as a disease affecting all social groups and tries to break the misconception that only minorities or the poor suffer from its affects.

Figure 2.37. Harry Osborn’s bad drug trip. *Source:* “In the Grip of the Goblin!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #97 (Marvel Comics: June 1971), page 19.

Similar to the end of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1968, *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s drug issues forever altered the Comic Code due to its popular success, strong positive messaging, and almost universal support from newspapers. Comic book publishers and members of the Comic Code Authority were upset by Lee’s bold move to

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release the antidrug issue, but they also realized changes to the censorship restrictions were necessary to keep up with the changing times.\footnote{Bradford W. Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America}, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 239-240, and Sean Howe, \textit{Marvel Comics: The Untold Story} (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 112.} As a result, the Comics Code restrictions were revised and many were removed, including the portrayal of “corrupt police, judges, government officials, and similar respected institutions.”\footnote{Bradford W. Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America}, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 240.} The relaxation permitted greater latitude in the presentation of moral ambiguity, drug and alcohol use, and dress” and even allowed for the portrayal of horror monsters.\footnote{Ibid.} By changing the Comics Code, \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} paved the way for comics to cover more social issues in the 1970s including government corruption and the Watergate scandal.

During the early 1970s there were numerous cases involving government corruption in America. During 1971, the Knapp Commission in New York City (the location of Marvel Comics Headquarters) investigated a scandal involving police corruption where police officers took money from the Mafia. Shortly after in June of 1972, agents with ties to President Nixon broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex. The Watergate incident eventually led to the resignation of President Nixon but also shook the American people’s faith in authority. Young people in America, already unhappy with the establishment because of the Vietnam War, the draft, and the brutal treatment of student protests, lost faith in the government. The exposure of police
corruption and the Watergate scandal created a further wave of distrust and dissent among a wider array of the American populace.

The first instance of government corruption to appear in *The Amazing Spider-Man* is between December 1970 and January 1971 when Sam Bullit is introduced. Bullit runs for district attorney on the platform of bringing Spider-Man to justice.\(^{169}\) As a result, Bullit receives the support of J. Jonah Jameson in the crusade against Spider-Man.\(^{170}\) However, it is revealed that Bullit is a fascistic extremist and racist who abuses his power to enforce law and order by any means necessary. He approaches Peter Parker to obtain the location of Spider-Man and when Peter refuses to help, Bullit’s hired thugs attempt to beat the information out of Peter.\(^{171}\) As a result, J. Jonah Jameson withdraws the Daily Bugle’s support of Bullit because of the politician's shady dealings and mistreatment of Peter Parker, whom Jameson defends as an employee of the Daily Bugle.\(^{172}\) However, it does not stop Bullit’s bullying tactics. When, Robbie Robertson discovers that Bullit’s main support came from racist hate groups, Bullit kidnaps and almost murders the black newspaperman before he is stopped by Spider-Man.\(^{173}\)

Through Sam Bullit, *The Amazing Spider-Man* reinforces its anti-extremist philosophy, denounces hate groups, and condemns government corruption. The Bullit story arc reinforces the anti-extremist stance highlighted earlier in the discussion of protest movements. In this case, however, the comic targets extremism among members of the

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\(^{170}\) Ibid., 7-10.

\(^{171}\) Ibid., 13-15.

\(^{172}\) "When Iceman Attacks!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #92 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1971), 7-10.

\(^{173}\) Ibid., 15-20.
establishment rather than in grassroots organizations. The Bullit storyline (1971) tackles the
concepts of hate and corruption prior to the public hearings of the Knapp commission in New
York (late 1971) and the Watergate scandal (1972-1974). Following the revelation of real
world governmental misdeeds, The Amazing Spider-Man revisits the idea of dangerous
politicians.

Between January and March of 1973, The Amazing Spider-Man ran a series of issues
where the fictional Richard Raleigh, a candidate for the Mayor of New York City, was
actually a costumed villain. In the comics, Raleigh was extremely popular with the people of
New York and was seen by many as the savior of the city. However, Raleigh suffers from
split personalities. One personality is dedicated to fighting crime and saving the city; the
other is a criminal mastermind called the Disruptor. Raleigh is a symbol of justice who tries
to put an end to crime. Raleigh states, “Will we stand idly by while the crime rate rises? I say
NO! Will we surrender this fair city to those who would destroy us? I say NO! We will not
bow to threats… We will not bow to fear… we will battle the forces of evil… and we shall
win!”174 He refuses Mafia bribes and earnestly wants to save the city. On the surface,
Raleigh represents honesty, sincerity, and salvation for New York City. However, the
Disruptor personality represents the danger of corruption and greed.

Unlike the Raleigh persona, the Disruptor is a psychopath who aspires to command a criminal empire and destroy Raleigh. The Disruptor, with the help of the scientist Thaxton, develops a bioengineered, remote controlled, Frankenstein-esque creature (the Smasher) whom the Disruptor sends out to eliminate his enemies and cause destruction and fear.\footnote{“Countdown to Chaos!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #118 (Marvel Comics: March 1973), 1-14.} He attacks fundraisers and rallies, terrorizes civilians, and threatens the lives of Raleigh’s
supporters. The attacks in turn generate more support for the mayoral candidate who refuses to back down. Harry Osborn tells Peter that Raleigh is not a normal politician and that he is sincere and honest, a belief held by the citizens of New York. However, Peter Parker is not convinced and thinks to himself, “but I wish I could believe it. Nobody’s that perfect… or am I just being cynical?” Here Peter displays the distrust of politicians prevalent at the time. However, Raleigh is earnest because his different personalities were unaware they were in fact the same person. It is an intriguing critique because by running for mayor Raleigh is in fact a danger to himself and society even though he has good intentions.


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178 Ibid., 28.
Through the Raleigh storyline, *The Amazing Spider-Man* provides an interesting, albeit fantastical, critique of politics and politicians. By creating a candidate with a split personality, the writers embrace both the positive ideals of an honest politician and the belief that politicians are corrupt and untrustworthy. However the most important aspect of *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s messaging comes from Peter’s reaction when he finds out the truth. In the final confrontation, the Disruptor loses control of the Smasher and is killed when the rampaging creature causes part of the building to fall on the villain/politician.\(^{179}\) Spider-Man, who suspected that Raleigh was the Disruptor, removes the crazed politician’s Disruptor costume before the police arrive.\(^{180}\) As Spider-Man disposes of the evidence linking Raleigh to the Disruptor he thinks, “I’ll be burning the only evidence of Raleigh’s real identity—maybe because we need myths – and heroes – and yeah – martyrs! Something twisted inside Raleigh made him what he was – but whatever else he was, he’s still a symbol! Isn’t that all that really counts—in the end?”\(^{181}\) Due to Spider-Man’s actions, the corrupt and insane politician becomes a martyr for justice and decency.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 25-27.
\(^{181}\) Ibid., 28.
Figure 2.40. Spider-Man learns Raleigh is the Disruptor. *Source:* “Countdown to Chaos!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #118 (Marvel Comics: March 1973), page 27.

Figure 2.41. Spider-Man destroys evidence that proved Raleigh was the Disruptor. *Source:* “Countdown to Chaos!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #118 (Marvel Comics: March 1973), page 28.
Spider-Man’s actions at the end of the Disruptor story take place during the Watergate scandal in America. After the exposure of government corruption, Americans looked for a symbol of hope or a hero to restore their faith. In the fictional world, Raleigh was the symbol of hope, but revealing he was the Disruptor would shatter the belief in the political savior. By covering up the truth, Spider-Man provides the public with a positive symbol, and the villain is made into a martyr for justice. Spider-Man recognizes people need something good to believe in, even if the truth behind the belief is flawed. Spider-Man fights corruption and criminals for the betterment of society, and opposes governmental corruption. However, he refused to expose the truth because he believed it would harm society. The Disruptor storyline in The Amazing Spider-Man occurred between January and March 1973, following the initial reporting of the Watergate scandal and during the beginning months of the Congressional investigation. The Amazing Spider-Man takes a cautionary approach to its message. After the villain is defeated, Spider-Man covered up the truth for what he believed was for the greater good of society. However, The Amazing Spider-Man’s critique takes place before the Watergate scandal blows open and leads to Nixon’s resignation. In many ways, the comic is conflicted with the events that unfolded in the real world. The Amazing Spider-Man advocates against corruption and villainy but also believes the public's faith should not be shattered in the process of finding the truth.

Reflections of real world events are just one way The Amazing Spider-Man echoes American society of the 1960s and 1970s. The attitude of uncertainty and demoralization that stemmed from incidents like the Cuban Missile Crisis, Watergate, Vietnam, and the draft
are also prevalent throughout *The Amazing Spider-Man* during this time. Spider-Man struggles with being a superhero because it interferes with his life as Peter Parker, and his actions are largely unappreciated (and sometimes vilified) by the public. Jameson uses the Daily Bugle in an anti-Spider-Man campaign and makes the citizens of New York wary or outright hostile towards the hero.\(^{182}\) Spider-Man reflects “The Public! The more I help them… The more they hate me!”\(^{183}\) During this time his Aunt May is also suffering from chronic illness and Peter’s life as Spider-Man prevents him from being there and taking care of his sick aunt.\(^{184}\) Furthermore his grades in school, something that has always been important to the character, decline, and he becomes more distanced from his friends. Worst of all, he must turn down employment opportunities that would interfere with his life as Spider-Man.\(^{185}\) For all the good he does as Spider-Man, being Spider-Man proves to be a detriment to Peter Parker.

Spider-Man’s conviction is shaken and he must make the choice between being a hero and helping others, or being happy and helping himself. In the classic issue “Spider-Man No More!” Peter Parker temporarily rejects being Spider-Man to focus on his own life. Peter thinks, “I was just a young, unthinking teenager… when I first became… Spider-Man… but, the years have a way of slipping by.. of changing the world about us… and, every boy… sooner or later… must put away his toys.. and become.. a man!”\(^{186}\) Much like

\(^{183}\) Ibid.
\(^{184}\) Ibid.
\(^{185}\) Ibid., 5-6.
\(^{186}\) Ibid., 8.
the youth of the time, Peter must grow up and determine what responsibilities are most important.

Figure 2.42. People Spider-Man helped are still afraid of him. Source: “Spider-Man No More!” The Amazing Spider-Man #50 (Marvel Comics: July 1967), page 3.
The “Spider-Man No More!” (1967) story functions on multiple levels. For one, it reflects America's struggle between an isolationist and interventionist foreign policy. Spider-Man, like America, must decide how to use his powers in a rapidly changing world. The story also foreshadows the intensification of uncertainty and disillusionment in the late 1960s. With the draft, the death of friends in Vietnam, the push against authority, and questions of equality, the late 1960s left the youth in America questioning their future and the future of their nation. Life became increasingly complicated for many American youth, and their understanding of the American identity was in many cases shaken or shattered. Like his fellow teenagers in the real world, Peter Parker struggles with a crisis of identity and understanding his place in the world. He must determine the person he wants to be, make hard decisions (often at the cost of himself), and accept responsibility. Peter Parker’s
struggle with being a hero reflects the struggle that faced the American youth in the 1960s and 1970s when so many were disillusioned by the events in the world. Idealists who believed they could fix the world were forced to realize the limits of their power. Like Peter, the young people had to decide to try to be the “hero” or to give up.

The villain that best represents the spirit of this time in America is Mysterio. Mysterio is a special effects expert who uses those special effects to create fear, confusion, and uncertainty in his targets. Mysterio looks like a science fiction robot or alien with a mirrored dome covering his head. He is a faceless enemy that manipulates people and his surroundings to obtain power, wealth, or fame. Mysterio upsets the balance between good and evil by confusing people’s perceptions. In their first encounter, Mysterio frames Spider-Man by dressing up as the hero and committing a series of crimes. Similar to the Chameleon, he attacks Spider-Man’s sense of individuality and the hero’s public identity. The villain then becomes a hero in the eyes of the public by trying to take down Spider-Man. Spider-Man eventually defeats the villain, but Mysterio leaves lasting damage to the perception of Spider-Man.

In their next encounter, the villain once again attacks Spider-Man but this time he targets the hero’s personal sense of identity. Posing as a therapist named Dr. Rinehart, Mysterio prints a newspaper article claiming that Spider-Man has serious mental issues and will suffer a mental breakdown.\textsuperscript{189} When the hero goes to see the faux-therapist, the villain creates a number of illusions to make Spider-Man think he is going crazy.\textsuperscript{190} Mysterio tries to make Spider-Man think he is a danger to himself and society. J. Jonah Jameson, who exposes Dr. Rinehart as a fraud, eventually thwarts Mysterio’s plans.\textsuperscript{191} However, Mysterio

\textsuperscript{189} “Spider-Man Goes MAD!” The Amazing Spider-Man #24 (Marvel Comics: May 1965), 7-9.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 10-11.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 17-19
once again makes Spider-Man question his sense of self, his sense of control, and his role in the world.

Aside from the uncertainty, disillusionment, and the identity problems prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, *The Amazing Spider-Man* also reflects the era’s sense of tragedy and loss. Peter Parker is an orphan who lost his parents in a plane crash when he was very young. Later, due to his own irresponsibility, a criminal guns down his surrogate father, Uncle Ben. The death of Ben Parker in 1962 is the first of many tragedies the hero faces during the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1970s in particular, Peter Parker is faced with the death of his girlfriend's father, George Stacy, and later his girlfriend, Gwen Stacy. The tragedy Spider-Man faces is a reflection of the tragic events of the 1960s and early 1970s. Vietnam brought tragedy to numerous families who lost loved ones. Those who returned from the war continued to face trauma from the war. People in the United States also dealt with loss brought on by the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy (1963), Martin Luther King Jr, (1968), and Robert Kennedy (1968). Peter Parker, like his real-world teenage counterparts, was unable to avoid the tragedies facing the nation during the time.

The first instance of loss after the death of Uncle Ben was the death of Bennett Brant (April 1964), the brother of Betty Brant (Peter’s girlfriend at the time). Bennett himself was not a particularly likeable character but his death still had a profound impact on Spider-Man. Brant was indebted to the mob and to pay it back got his sister Betty involved. He was later shot and killed in a conflict between Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus.\(^{192}\) Betty Brant in particular is devastated by the loss and blames Spider-Man for her brother’s death. She

eventually comes to terms with what happened but seeing Spider-Man reminds her of Bennett’s death. The rift between Betty and Spider-Man eventually leads to Peter and Betty’s breakup. For Spider-Man himself, Bennett’s death becomes a reminder of his limitations as a superhero and that, even when he is present, he is unable to save everyone (including important people like his girlfriend’s brother.) It is also significant because it establishes the trend of continued loss in *The Amazing Spider-Man* after Spider-Man’s origin story.

The death of Captain George Stacy (November 1970) is the next major tragedy/loss to affect the hero. George Stacy was a retired captain in the New York Police Department and the father of Peter’s long time girlfriend Gwen Stacy. Aside from being his girlfriend’s father, Captain Stacy played an important role as a father figure and mentor for Peter Parker. George Stacy is killed during a confrontation between Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus on the rooftops of New York City. During the conflict, Spider-Man uses a chemical he developed to disrupt Doctor Octopus’ control of his mechanical arms.193 Doctor Octopus loses control and collateral damage from the flailing arms falls to the streets below.194 George Stacy saves a child from the falling debris but is crushed in the process.195 Spider-Man pulls Captain Stacy out of the rubble but is unable to save his life. Before dying, Captain Stacy reveals he knows Peter Parker is Spider-Man and his last request is for the hero to take care of Gwen.196 Spider-Man laments, “Why must it happen? Why? Why? Why?

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194 Ibid., 16-18.
195 Ibid., 18.
196 Ibid., 20.
First.. I lost Uncle Ben.. Those long years ago! And now.. the second best friend.. I’ve ever had!” He promises to look after Gwen but is also concerned stating “but, what if she ever learns… That you died.. because of.. ME?”

Similar to the death of Uncle Ben, Spider-Man shares some of the responsibility in George Stacy’s demise because he was responsible for Doctor Octopus losing control. Spider-Man once again blames himself and assumes responsibility, although it was not entirely his fault. Not only does Spider-Man blame himself, but his girlfriend does too. Gwen, unaware that her boyfriend Peter is also Spider-Man, states, “Whether he meant to or not he killed my father! He killed my father! Spider-Man! Spider-Man! I’ll hate him forever!” Not only is the hero faced with the pain of loss, his secret becomes the source of more tension and pain. Peter’s dual identity isolates him and he is forced to endure the hardship without the support of others.

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199 Ibid., 3-4.
Figure 2.45. George Stacy saves a child from falling debris. *Source:* “And Death Shall Come!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #90 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1970), page 18.
Figure 2.46. George Stacy dies in Spider-Man’s arms. Source: “And Death Shall Come!” The Amazing Spider-Man #90 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1970), page 20.
Perhaps the biggest tragedy in Spider-Man’s life, and arguably in the entirety of superhero comic books, is the death of Gwen Stacy in 1973. Norman Osborn once again becomes the Green Goblin following his son Harry’s drug relapse. The Green Goblin kidnaps Gwen and takes her to the George Washington Bridge. During the ensuing battle between Spider-Man and his foe, the Green Goblin knocks Gwen off the bridge. Spider-Man successfully catches the falling girl with his web, but the whiplash from the fall snaps her neck. The hero fails to save his girlfriend and his attempt to save her might have inadvertently killed her. As a result, Spider-Man is traumatized by his failure. He blames himself for Gwen’s death, even going as far as telling the police “She’s dead and Spider-Man killed her.”

Seeking revenge, Spider-Man then tracks down the Green Goblin with the intent of killing the super villain. In the end the hero refuses to kill the Goblin. Spider-Man states, “In another moment I might have killed him! I would have become like him... a murderer!” However, the Goblin ends up accidentally killing himself in the encounter.

Following Gwen’s death, Spider-Man is forced to deal with grief, anger, and hate and even the villain’s death just creates more uncertainty. Spider-Man says, “When a man dies -- even a man like the Goblin -- it should mean something. It shouldn't just be an accident... A stupid

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201 Controversy and confusion exists over which bridge is actually portrayed. The comic’s text says the George Washington Bridge however the artwork depicts the Brooklyn Bridge. The confusion over the bridge adds even greater confusion to the circumstances of Gwen's death.
204 Ibid., 11-20.
205 Ibid., 23.
206 Ibid., 26-27.
senseless accident. It's got to have a point... so it doesn't just mean... we live in vain." The Goblin's death does not satisfy Spider-Man, it simply leaves him feeling more loss and emptiness.

Figure 2.47. The death of Gwen Stacy. Source: “The Night Gwen Stacy Died!” The Amazing Spider-Man #121 (Marvel Comics: June 1973), page 26.

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207 "The Goblin’s Last Stand!” The Amazing Spider-Man #122 (Marvel Comics: July 1973), 27.
Figure 2.48. Spider-Man has trouble accepting Gwen’s death. Source: “The Night Gwen Stacy Died!” The Amazing Spider-Man #121 (Marvel Comics: June 1973), page 27.
The death of Gwen Stacy had long lasting repercussions in both the fictional and real worlds. According to Ben Saunders, "The Night Gwen Stacy Died" was "an assault upon the traditional form of the superhero comic itself - a hitherto unprecedented act of self-reflexive
violence. The comic is considered to be the end of the optimistic and carefree Silver Age of comics and the beginning of the more uncertain, cynical, and pessimistic Bronze Age. Gwen Stacy's death was a shocking reminder that even superheroes are incapable of saving everyone, and it upset the presumed status quo in fiction where the hero always emerges victorious and saves the day. Gwen’s death highlights the uncertainty and the pessimism in America at the time. It also demonstrates that those fighting for good do not always win.

Gwen's death signifies a lack of control. Ben Saunders writes, "But Gwen Stacy's death was apparently too traumatic for even the most powerful people in Spider-Man's universe - his writers - to take responsibility for it." Gerry Conway, the writer of "The Night Gwen Stacy Died," claims he did not consciously make the decision to include the SNAP sound effect and claims, "I'd sure like to believe that she was already dead." Stan Lee claims he was not consulted about Gwen's death, although others say he approved the story. Ben Saunders even cites Gwen Stacy's death as the single most traumatic event in superhero history because the trauma was experienced not only by Peter Parker, but also by the numerous fans who read the story. Writer Jonathan Lethem described the event as "the first romantic loss for a lot of guys my age," and the event continues to haunt comic book and Spider-Man fans to this day. The death of Gwen Stacy created a shared traumatic event

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209 Ibid.
210 Ibid., 89.
211 Ibid., 88.
212 Ibid.
213 Ibid. 96.
214 Ibid.
for comic writers and readers alike, led to the beginning of a new, darker age in comic book history, and highlighted that even superpowers are incapable of solving all problems.

Gwen dies shortly before the end of the Vietnam War as some American youth struggled with the collapse of the optimistic viewpoints of the counter-culture movements. Large numbers of young people died in a war outside their control. Domestic movements that sought to change the landscape in America were met with violent resistance. Returning soldiers were met with hostility. The hope for significant change toward a more peaceful and generous society was never realized. All Spider-Man's previous failures and Gwen’s death in particular embraced the feeling of failure and loss felt by some Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. America, which perpetuates the idea of exceptionalism, was forced to realize that even those who are considered super, whether individuals or a country, are sometimes unable to save the world.

*The Amazing Spider-Man* embodies the 1960s and 1970s. It reflects major current events and captures the emotions of the time. Feelings of the youth, including idealism to change the world, desire for acceptance, and the despair felt by failure and loss, are prevalent throughout the comic and are shared by its principal hero. Spider-Man portrays traditional positive human values and his struggles symbolically represent the struggles of Americans at the time. The comic promotes ideas of morality, justice, and peace while rejecting extremism and hate.

With regard to race relations and student protests, *The Amazing Spider-Man* idealizes moderation and attempts to reconcile the concerns of the more militant youth with the
moderate tactics of the older generations. The comic tackles numerous social issues like the War on Drugs, the effects of the Vietnam War, and government and police corruption. Outside of the stories, *The Amazing Spider-Man* was responsible for revising the Comics Code and allowing more controversial and pertinent current events to be covered in comics.

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of great change and *The Amazing Spider-Man* is a reflection of that change. *The Amazing Spider-Man* reflects the shift, in society and in comics, from hopeful idealism to a harsher reality. Fictional heroes, who traditionally defeat the bad guys and save the day, now feel the same sense of failure and loss present in the real world. Spider-Man, like the American youth, must cope with the changing world. As idealism fades, the hero is forced to decide whether to continue to fight and struggle to change the world or to give up. “With great power there must also come great responsibility” is the primary lesson in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, but perhaps the most important lesson Spider-Man provides is to do what is right and always continue to fight to change the world no matter how bleak things look.
CHAPTER 3

Becoming a Hero: Gender in The Amazing Spider-Man

Similar to race relations, American gender relations changed during the 1960s and 1970s. The Amazing Spider-Man provides a complex and evolving study of gender. The masculine representation of Peter Parker shifts from a skinny, nerdy, social outcast to the idealized image of strength that embraces America’s frontier tradition. Female representations in The Amazing Spider-Man also transform greatly over time. At first, female characters are classic damsels in distress who reinforce gender stereotypes of weakness and subordination. However, over time female characters become stronger, more intelligent, and embrace the independence heralded during the 1960s and 1970s. Even as gender representations evolved, the comic continued to embrace and promote some aspects of traditional gender roles. As a result, The Amazing Spider-Man represents and attempts to combine traditional and evolving gender ideas during the 1960s and 1970s. For the masculine identity, the comic glorifies physical strength but also the scientific and intellectual superiority often associated with weaker physical characteristics. It accomplishes both by melding the intelligent, but weak, Peter Parker with the physical prowess of Spider-Man. With regard to the feminine identity, over time The Amazing Spider-Man merges the kindness and compassion of traditional female stereotypes with the strength, independence, and willfulness of feminism from the 1960s and 1970s.

America’s masculine identity is tied to the belief in exceptionalism created by America’s frontier past. Physical superiority and masculinity define many American heroes.
and stem from America’s frontier culture where Darwinian ideas of conquering and surviving reigned supreme. Darwinian ideas of natural selection are important in America’s conceptualization of greatness.\textsuperscript{215} Overcoming the frontier became part of America’s sense of identity and individuality.\textsuperscript{216} On the frontier, American men were expected to overcome physical hardships and conquer their surroundings. The use of violence is another key component in understanding America’s masculine construction.\textsuperscript{217} Frontiersmen used violence to reinforce strength and justice. Superheroes, like Spider-Man, evolve out of America’s frontier experience and often use violence to reinforce justice and solve problems. While Americans eventually conquered the frontier, many values established in the West are still glorified in America.

Ideas of masculinity and superiority derived from the frontier were perpetuated in American culture since the eighteenth century. Daniel Boone was glorified for his embellished tales about the frontier.\textsuperscript{218} Similarly James Fenimore Cooper wrote numerous fictional tales based on figures like Boone and Davy Crocket.\textsuperscript{219} In the early Twentieth Century, Theodore Roosevelt glorified masculine strength, and in an effort to recapture frontier values, he promoted the National Parks system and the Scouting movements.

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Norman Rockwell’s art also furthered traditional ideas of masculinity. Masculinity became closely tied to America’s exceptionalist identity. Between the 1930s and the 1970s, Americans embraced the “cowboy culture,” perpetuated by Hollywood, which glorified America’s frontier past. Cowboys became symbols of freedom, the individualistic spirit, manliness, and a romanticized violent American past. More importantly, American values were inscribed on cowboys to create the “hero.” Garry Wills describes how a “hero must articulate some altruistic motive for persistence” and the fictionalized heroes of the West fulfilled that goal. Cowboy Westerns, starring important icons like John Wayne, displayed powerful men who are set apart from local communities, fight injustice, and are celebrated as heroes. Cowboy culture became so prevalent that John Wayne came to define America and was even called the American. Gary Willis describes how “[Wayne] stood for an America people felt was disappearing or had disappeared, for a time ‘when men were men.’” Cowboys and Westerns highlighted the role of individuality and reinforced American conceptualizations of masculinity.

Comic book superheroes are an extension of the American values glorified by “cowboy culture.” Early heroes, like Superman, truly embraced John Wayne’s vision of

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223 Gary Wills, John Wayne’s America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 51.
America. However, Spider-Man is a little more complicated. *The Amazing Spider-Man* provides an interesting critique on the idea of a “cowboy hero.” The dualistic nature of Peter Parker and Spider-Man embraces but also questions cowboy values. In this sense, Spider-Man and Peter Parker should be viewed as two separate characters. Spider-Man is the highly individualistic paragon of masculinity represented by Wayne. Even so, Spider-Man is more similar to John Wayne’s character from *The Searchers* (1954). The hero embraces the values of justice and good but also has difficulty finding his place in the world. He strives for justice but is often unsure what constitutes proper justice.

Peter Parker, on the other hand, starts out unlike traditional cowboy heroes and is very self-reflexive and uncertain. While Parker’s confidence builds over time, he begins unconfident, self absorbed, and physically inferior. He constantly questions his own existence and struggles with whether or not he should be Spider-Man. Still, Parker exemplifies the desire to embrace classical heroic values and the difficulty of living up to those values. Peter Parker is compelled to don his superhero identity and relies on Spider-Man to feel complete. He displays an addictive need to be heroic and embrace cowboy values. Similar to the relationship between Spider-Man and Peter Parker, *The Amazing Spider-Man* portrays the desire to uphold traditional heroic values but remains skeptical and cannot unquestionably devote itself to those values.

Another way comics reinforce frontier values is through the use of violence. Comic heroes generally embrace America’s frontier values of masculinity and the belief in justified

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226 The most famous instance is the “Spider-Man No More!” story (*The Amazing Spider-Man* #50, July 1967) but the theme continues in *The Amazing Spider-Man* even into the present day.
vigilante violence. Most comic heroes (including Spider-Man) are vigilantes acting outside the law to help society. Still, comic heroes reinforce Gary Willis’s idea of the “cowboy hero” and embrace the idea of altruism. Spider-Man has a strong sense of morality and uses his power to compensate for the inadequacies of traditional law enforcement. Violence is a traditional masculine attribute, and when it is combined with a sense of morality, it helps define America's idealized vision of masculinity. By fighting crime, Spider-Man carries out the fantasy of violently reinforcing justice. However, the degree of violence is also limited. While Spider-Man and other heroes defeat villains through physical confrontations, comics negatively portray the excessive use of violence. Violence is a tool to protect people and stop criminals, not a form of punishment. Most comic heroes (including Spider-Man) created before 1980 have strong moral codes that forbid killing or permanently injuring criminals. The moderation of violence results from a combination of beliefs in justice, proper punishment, and restrictions enforced by the Comics Code Authority. Therefore, in comics, moderate violence to combat evil was glorified while excessive violence remained criminal. As a comic, *The Amazing Spider-Man* embraces the superhero ideals of moderate and justified violence.

*The Amazing Spider-Man* reinforces American beliefs in masculinity, justified violence, and exceptionalism by using Peter Parker’s alter ego Spider-Man. Aided by his super-powers, he uses his strength to fight criminals for the greater good. Spider-Man is

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228 It is important to note that the idealized and moralistic way that America sees itself is often inaccurate. There is a disparity between hyperbolic ideals and the reality actions. America, even today, likes to promote the myth that its violent actions across the world are selfless and heroic.
muscular and exudes power. The spider-bite gives him extraordinary powers, and he gains the proportional strength, speed, and agility of a spider. The hyper-masculine portrayal of Spider-Man remains constant throughout *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and the costumed hero is a paragon of strength.

Figure 3.2. Steve Ditko draws Spider-Man fighting criminals (1964). Source: “Kraven the Hunter!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #15 (Marvel Comics: August 1964), page 7.

Figure 3.3. John Romita’s muscular Spider-Man (1966). Source: “How Green was My Goblin!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #39 (Marvel Comics: August 1966), page 12.
However, even though Peter Parker and Spider-Man are the same person, the masculine portrayal of Peter Parker initially varies greatly from that of Spider-Man. Still, Peter Parker undergoes significant changes to his appearance throughout the 1960s and his presentation evolves to conform to his superhero alter ego. Initially he is a thin, weak, social outcast who wears large glasses, dresses differently, and is picked on by his classmates; anything but the ideal physical specimen portrayed by Spider-Man. Even so, Peter Parker’s appearance of weakness made him identifiable to a wider range of readers and alluded to the concept of hidden greatness. Peter represents average to below average physicality in male adolescents. By donning the costume and transforming into Spider-Man, the comic provides youths with the fantasy of shedding their weak and ostracized reality and embracing traditional American masculinity.

While in 1962 Peter Parker was initially portrayed with inferior masculine traits, by the mid 1960s he evolves to fit the traditional American masculine mold. By doing so, The Amazing Spider-Man reinforces traditional masculine values and encourages the youth to embrace “frontier masculinity.” The biggest change in appearance came after illustrator Steve Ditko left the comic (1966) and was replaced by John Romita Sr., who previously worked on teen romance comics. Romita makes Peter Parker and The Amazing Spider-Man’s supporting cast much more physically attractive. However, even before Romita took over as illustrator, Peter Parker already started transforming into a more desirable physical specimen. As early as issue number eight (January 1964), Parker’s high school bully Flash

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Thompson breaks the hero’s glasses. After this incident, Peter no longer wears giant circular glasses, and it is revealed he no longer needs eyesight correction. Ditko also began drawing Peter with a stronger and bulkier body type. During Ditko’s run, Peter Parker started to dress more casually and adopted an appearance similar to James Dean’s youthful rebel. John Romita continued the trend and by the late 1960s, Peter Parker was portrayed as an attractive and physically fit teenager. He was no longer drawn with a thin, weak frame instead fell more in line with the idealized physically fit male. The Peter Parker presented by John Romita in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #39 (August 1966) is the predominant version of Peter that has remained relatively constant even until today. The character’s evolution from the weak intellectual to a stronger, physically fit youth encourages comic readers to embrace America’s traditional view of masculinity.

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Figure 3.4. Peter Parker in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962). *Source: “Spider-Man!” Amazing Fantasy* #15 (Marvel Comics: August 1962), page 2.
Figure 3.5. Peter Parker in 1963. Source: “Spider-Man!” The Amazing Spider-Man #1 (Marvel Comics: May 1963), page 2.

Figure 3.7. John Romita’s Peter Parker (1966). Source: “How Green was My Goblin!” The Amazing Spider-Man #39 (Marvel Comics: August 1966), page 16.

Even as Peter Parker undergoes a physical transformation during the 1960s, *The Amazing Spider-Man* still promotes and values intelligence. Peter no longer looks like a nerd but he is still top of his class and a scholarship student in science. Furthermore, as Spider-Man, he relies heavily on his incredible intellect to solve problems and defeat enemies. By making the hero highly intelligent, *The Amazing Spider-Man* follows America's trend during the 1960s of glorifying intellectual and scientific exceptionalism. The evolution of Peter Parker made him the complete American man. The hero personified both physical and intellectual superiority thus embodying multiple aspects of American exceptionalism. *The Amazing Spider-Man* represents images of the athlete and the intellectual and encourages the youth to achieve both.

Even though Peter Parker grows to embody positive athletic-masculine imagery, *The Amazing Spider-Man* does not glorify all forms of physical superiority and rejects using strength to bully. The comic’s glorification of physical strength is coupled with the altruism of the cowboy hero from the 1930s through 1950s. Brutishness is presented negatively using Peter Parker’s school bully Flash Thompson and the numerous villains. When first introduced, Flash is the star football player at Midtown High School, and he has a strong masculine physique similar to Spider-Man. However, the football star is cruel to the hero and constantly ridicules and victimizes Peter Parker. While physically superior, Flash is not glorified like Spider-Man because he lacks the altruistic values of protecting the weak and innocent. He preys upon the weak and unjustly leads social attacks against Peter Parker to bolster his own popularity. Furthermore, Flash and many of the hyper-masculine villains are
not idealized because they display a low level of intelligence. They are intellectually and morally incomplete.

Similar to Peter Parker, Flash Thompson undergoes a transformation over the course of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. While Peter Parker’s evolution is physical, Flash’s transformation is moral. He softens, becomes less cruel, and eventually likeable. Especially after Flash is drafted into the army and goes to Vietnam, he displays heroic and altruistic characteristics. During his trials in Vietnam, Flash becomes a hero in his own right by fighting to protect the innocent. When he returns from the war, he reconciles with Peter Parker and the two become friends. *The Amazing Spider-Man* uses Flash Thompson to express reformation and reconciliation. While initially portrayed as a minor villain in Peter Parker’s life, Flash becomes a hero once he embraces America’s glorified sense of morality and justice.

*The Amazing Spider-Man’s* positive masculine image combines values of strength, intelligence, and morality, but the way the comic represents women is much more complicated. It is important to note that during the 1960s and 1970s the audience for superhero comic books was overwhelmingly male. Even in the 1970s when Marvel Comics attempted to write to the female audience, those comics did not sell and were often discontinued. As a result, *The Amazing Spider-Man* primarily wrote to its young male audience and adhered to the traditional comic book stereotype, which persists even today, of making young women physically attractive. By making the young women attractive, the

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comic reinforces the desirability of beauty. Furthermore, at the start of *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s publication in 1963, women in the comic were simplistic objects of affection and damsels in distress. In fact, *The Amazing Spider-Man* primarily used women to reinforce masculine values like bravery and protecting women. Bradford Wright comments "Meanwhile, despite Lee's later claims to the contrary, Marvel's comic books did little to advance feminism. Although each Marvel superhero team had at least one integral female member, they were always subordinate to the male superheroes." However, during the mid 1960s, American gender relations were challenged and *The Amazing Spider-Man* reflects changes by altering its perception of women. Over time, the women in the comic stand up for themselves, become stronger, and embrace independence.

The individual female characters represent various characteristics and values. The women portrayed beginning in 1963 start out simplistic. However, over time as the comic matured, the female characters either evolved or were replaced by stronger female leads. Spider-Man’s first love interest was Liz Allan (1962). Liz Allan was the popular high school girl and the object of Peter’s affection. In the comic, Liz desired a man who was strong, brave, and willing to protect women from danger. Peter’s next love interest, Betty Brant (1963), J. Jonah Jameson’s secretary, was meek and reliant on men. Furthermore, Aunt May was initially a frail old woman who needed constant care and support. However, over time

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stronger, more independent women were added and May in particular becomes more multidimensional.\textsuperscript{237}

Gwen Stacy, Peter Parker’s primary love interest between 1965 and 1973, was a beautiful, strong willed, and intelligent college student studying science. Mary Jane Watson represents freedom and women’s liberation.\textsuperscript{238} Even some minor female supporting characters (some of whom became more prominent later) supported new and sometimes radical ideas. Glory Grant (1975), \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man}’s first reoccurring black female supporting character, is affable, generous, and alludes to the possibility of interracial couples.\textsuperscript{239} Last of all, Felicia Hardy (1979), the Black Cat, is a femme fatal and the first true female foil to Spider-Man. She displays moral ambiguity and embodies female liberation by combining sexiness, athleticism, and guile.\textsuperscript{240} All these women played important roles in the evolution of feminism in \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} between 1962 and 1979.

During the 1960s and 1970s, numerous women came in and out of Spider-Man’s life. The first major female between 1962 and 1965 is Liz Allan, the popular high school girl and the object of Peter Parker’s affection. Early on, Liz serves as the focal point for Peter Parker’s struggle with social acceptance. However, during this time Liz primarily reinforces

\textsuperscript{237} Liz Allan and Betty Brant also undergo changes between the 1980s and 2000s and become strong independent women. Liz Allan becomes the owner and CEO of the multi-million dollar corporation Oscorp and Betty Brant becomes an investigative journalist for the Daily Bugle.

\textsuperscript{238} Mary Jane Watson is first mentioned and partially shown in 1965. However, her full appearance does not occur until 1966. Mary Jane undergoes the greatest evolution over time. She becomes Peter’s love interest after Gwen dies in 1973 and the two eventually marry in 1987. Their marriage lasts until 2008 when the “One More Day” story arc rewrote Spider-Man’s history so that the two never got married.

\textsuperscript{239} Robbie Robertson’s wife Martha Robertson was the first black female in \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} but she only appears in three issues before 1980.

\textsuperscript{240} The Black Cat appears in one story arc (July-August 1979) during the scope of this study but takes on a more prominent role in \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} starting in the 1980s.
traditional gender stereotyping. In the comic, Liz judges Peter by his perceived faults as a male, but also displays kindness, tempers the harassment Peter receives from classmates, and shows legitimate concern for the hero’s wellbeing.\textsuperscript{241} She accepts Peter as a person and invites him to social functions.\textsuperscript{242} However Liz is also fickle and quick to judge. She criticizes Peter’s perceived lack of courage because he often disappears during superhuman conflicts and avoids fights with Flash.\textsuperscript{243} She develops a crush on Spider-Man after he saves her by displaying physical superiority and bravery.\textsuperscript{244} In order to win Liz’s affections, Peter Parker must adhere to the traditional gender stereotype of the strong, courageous male. After Peter is unmasked while battling the flu and trying save his then girlfriend Betty from Doctor Octopus, Liz shows even greater interest in him.\textsuperscript{245} Everyone assumed Peter pretended to be Spider-Man to save his girlfriend, an act that displayed great courage to Liz. Afterwards she starts defending Peter in front of their peers and instead of ridiculing him for being a “bookworm,” she glorifies his intelligence.\textsuperscript{246}

Liz Allan disappears from \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} after Peter graduates from high school in 1965 and does not return until 1974. When she returns, Liz becomes a minor supporting character and the love interest of Peter’s friend Harry Osborn. However, between

\textsuperscript{242} “Duel to the Death with the Vulture!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #2 (Marvel Comics: May 1963), 8.
\textsuperscript{243} “Nothing Can Stop... The Sandman!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #4 (Marvel Comics: Sept. 1963), 20-21.
\textsuperscript{244} “Face-to-Face with... The Lizard!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #6 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1963).
\textsuperscript{245} “Unmasked by Dr. Octopus!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #12 (Marvel Comics: May 1964), 10.
1963 and 1965 Liz was a prominent character who reinforced traditional gender tropes and the belief that men, above all else, should be courageous and willing to fight for their women.

Figure 3.9. Liz Allan rejects Peter because she thinks he lacks courage. Source: “Nothing Can Stop… The Sandman!” The Amazing Spider-Man #4 (Marvel Comics: Sept. 1963), page 21.
Figure 3.10. Liz defends Peter after he was unmasked trying to save Betty. Source: “Unmasked by Dr. Octopus!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #12 (Marvel Comics: May 1964), page 10.

*The Amazing Spider-Man’s* other major female between 1963 and 1968 is Betty Brant. Betty is the mild mannered secretary of J. Jonah Jameson, and like Liz, she reinforces traditional gender stereotyping. However, unlike Liz, Betty primarily reinforces the tropes of
meekness and dependence on men. At the time, Betty serves as J. Jonah Jameson’s personal secretary, further reinforcing occupational stereotyping of the 1960s. Betty is cowardly and often hides from dangerous situations. Furthermore, Betty is frequently a damsel in distress and needs constant saving or protecting. Betty is also the most emotional of Peter Parker’s love interests between 1962 and 1979. She is melodramatic regarding her relationship to Peter and potential competition with other women in Peter’s life. Betty reinforces the negative stereotype of an emotional, melodramatic, timid, weak, and dependent woman. However, she also displays many positive traditional female values, including kindness and compassion. In the comic, Betty is nurturing and supportive and visits Aunt May in the hospital on her own accord. She is concerned that Peter’s job as Spider-Man’s photographer is dangerous and does not want Peter to be in dangerous situations. Even though she is dependent, Betty displays compassion, maternal tendencies, and a willingness to help others. During the 1960s and 1970s, Betty is one of the sweetest and kindest characters in The Amazing Spider-Man.

251 Ibid., 14.

The most consistently influential woman in Peter Parker’s life, and the one who undergoes the largest transformation, is his aunt May Parker. When first introduced in 1962, Aunt May is a frail old woman who becomes a single parent after the death of Uncle Ben. Aunt May personifies the role of a sweet old lady. She is a caring and nurturing mother but her age makes her dependent on others to survive. Without Ben around, May struggles to pay bills and Peter must find a job to support his aunt. However, as a dutiful motherly woman, May cooks for Peter and takes care of the teenager when he is sick. Even when May is incapacitated from sickness or age, her motherly instincts are active and she worries about taking care of Peter. May is protective of Peter and worries for his safety. Between 1962 and 1970, Aunt May increases tension by worrying about Peter and reinforcing his sense of duty and responsibility. He constantly has to find money to help pay the bills or to take care of his aunt when she gets sick or over-excited. May’s frailty becomes a common plot device to motivate Peter into action. During this time, her primary purpose is to encourage Peter and The Amazing Spider-Man’s young male readers to be dutiful and responsible to their parents. May remains a frail motherly character during the 1960s but during the 1970s becomes stronger and more independent.

Figure 3.13. Aunt May struggles to pay the bills. *Source:* “Spider-Man!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (March 1963), page 2.

Figure 3.14. Aunt May takes care of Peter when she thinks he is sick. *Source:* “Nothing Can Stop... The Sandman!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #4 (Marvel Comics: Sept. 1963), page 7.
After 1972, May grows into a more complex character who displays strength and resolve. She is no longer simply a frail and weak motherly figure, and she begins to stand up and fight, both figuratively and literally. Between November and December 1972, May becomes friendly with Dr. Octopus and physically attacks Spider-Man when he breaks into the villain’s mansion. May smashes a vase over Spider-Man’s head and shoots a gun at the hero to protect Dr. Octopus. In 1975, when Gwen Stacy’s clone threatens Peter and Mary Jane’s relationship, May tells Mary Jane to fight for Peter and reveals that she pursed Uncle Ben when they were younger. In 1977 May joins the Gray Panthers elderly rights

257 “Gang War, Schmang War! What I Want to know is... who the Heck is Hammerhead?” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #114 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1972), 28, and “The Last Battle!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #115 (Marvel Comics: Dec. 1972), 23.

258 „The Tarantula is a Very Deadly Beast!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #147 (Marvel Comics: Aug. 1975), 10.
advocacy group and protests the mistreatment of the elderly. May even assaults a police officer with a protest sign before succumbing to a heart attack due to over-exertion. During this sequence, May has an angry, fierce, and almost dangerous intensity that is far removed from the weak, frail, and kind old women depicted at The Amazing Spider-Man's inception. Although May is unable to completely overcome her frailty during the 1970s, over the entire course of The Amazing Spider-Man she becomes “younger,” more strong willed, and independent.

Figure 3.16. Aunt May smashes a vase over Spider-Man’s head. Source: “Hammerhead?” The Amazing Spider-Man #114 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1972), page 28.

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259 “Stalked By the Spider-Slayer!” The Amazing Spider-Man #167 (Marvel Comics: April 1977), 10.
Figure 3.18. Aunt May protests with the Grey Panthers. Source: “...Stalked By the Spider-Slayer,” The Amazing Spider-Man #167 (Marvel Comics: April 1977), page 10.

Gwen Stacy is *The Amazing Spider-Man’s* first female character to provide a more complex view of the female gender. Gwen Stacy is an extremely influential character in *The Amazing Spider-Man* between her introduction in 1965 and her death in 1973. She is very intelligent and first meets Peter at Empire State College where, like Peter, she is majoring in science. Similar to the other women, Gwen upholds the female values of kindness and compassion but also displays more strength. Gwen is strong willed, confident, and somewhat aggressive but maintains the image of the idealized “girl next door.” When Peter is initially oblivious to her interest, she actively pursues the young hero.261 She is attractive, popular, and influential in getting Peter accepted by his peers.262 Gwen encourages other members of the social group to be nicer to and include Peter. Similar to Liz Allan, Gwen also promotes courageous action. Courage is an important value in *The Amazing Spider-Man* and Peter’s apparent lack of courage initially causes problems for his relationship with Gwen. She reacts negatively and thinks Peter is a coward when he disappears during confrontations to become Spider-Man.263 Gwen’s attitude toward Peter improves when he flippantly avoids confrontations with Flash Thompson.264 She realizes Peter is not afraid, but she has difficulty proving it to others.265

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261 “If this be my Destiny…!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #31 (Marvel Comics: Dec. 1965), 8-16.
263 “When Falls the Meteor!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36 (Marvel Comics: May 1966), 5-20.
264 “Once Upon a Time there was a Robot..!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #37 (Marvel Comics: June 1966), 5-6.
Figure 3.20. Gwen Stacy agrees to attend a science expo with Peter. Source: “Enter Dr. Octopus!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #53 (Marvel Comics: Oct. 1967), page 5.

While Gwen promotes a desire for courage in men, she also embodies and promotes courage in women. In 1968 when concerned about Peter’s safety, Gwen attacks Spider-Man (who is portrayed as a dangerous criminal by the newspapers) and demands information about her missing boyfriend.\textsuperscript{266} In 1970 and 1971 she continues to stand up to and confront Spider-Man, at first to protect Peter Parker and later to retaliate against the hero for her father’s death.\textsuperscript{267} During the dorm room protests, Gwen holds her ground against the mob and insults their flawed and potentially destructive methods.\textsuperscript{268} She even slaps a protester who insults Peter. Gwen also confronts Flash Thompson when he attempts to make fun of Peter.\textsuperscript{269} She stands for what she believes in and will not back down when faced with overwhelming pressure. Along with courage, Gwen Stacy is also adventurous. She even volunteers to go on an expedition to the Savage Land, a prehistoric jungle in Antarctica filled with dinosaurs and monsters.\textsuperscript{270} Gwen is a strong willed young woman who embodies beauty, intelligence, kindness, and courage. She is the most idealized woman in \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man}, which makes her death in 1973 even more tragic.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{266}“The Coming of Ka-zar!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #57 (Marvel Comics: Feb. 1968), 8.
\item \textsuperscript{268}“Mission: Crush the Kingpin!” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #69 (Marvel Comics: Feb. 1969), 10.
\item \textsuperscript{269}“Gang War, Schmang War! What I want to know is... who the Heck is Hammerhead?” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #114 (Marvel Comics: Nov. 1972), 18-19.
\item \textsuperscript{270}“Walk the Savage Land,” \textit{The Amazing Spider-Man} #103 (Marvel Comics: Dec. 1971), 8.
\end{itemize}

If Gwen Stacy represents courage, then Mary Jane Watson represents freedom and independence. Mary Jane is mentioned as early as 1964 but does not make a full appearance until 1966. When first introduced, Mary Jane is popular, extremely confident, jovial, flirty, positive, and very physically attractive. She possesses a love for life and excitement. In her pursuit of fun, Mary Jane even goes with Peter to the scene of superhuman crime or conflicts. She is a party girl who is current with popular fashions, constantly jokes, talks in rhyme, and uses slang. Unlike the other girls in Peter’s life, Mary Jane is unfazed when Peter cancels a date or disappears during a conflict. She does not want to be tied down and in turn does not want to tie down others. However, Mary Jane’s extreme independence and freedom is not always portrayed positively. Her persona makes her seem flighty and shallow and Peter often wonders if Mary Jane is really that scatterbrained. Furthermore, in order to maintain her sense of freedom, and her freedom from attachment, she keeps others at a distance. She is friendly and wants to have fun but does not want anything to be too serious. Mary Jane’s unwillingness to be tied down is a primary factor in Harry Osborn’s descent into drugs. Mary Jane initially represents both the good and the bad of complete liberation and freedom.

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271 In the 1980s, Mary Jane earns a living as a supermodel in New York City.
275 “In the Grip of the Goblin” The Amazing Spider-Man #97 (Marvel Comics: June 1971), 9-17.

Figure 3.25. Mary Jane refuses to be tied down and desires independence. Source: “In the Grip of the Goblin!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #97 (Marvel Comics: June 1971), page 16.
However, over time Mary Jane becomes one of the most complex characters in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. She maintains her strong sense of fun and freedom but also becomes less one-dimensional. Following the death of Gwen Stacy, Mary Jane becomes more empathetic, supportive, and contemplative. With the removal of Gwen Stacy, the idealized love interest, *The Amazing Spider-Man* expanded Mary Jane’s character to provide Peter with a suitable new love interest. She no longer avoids the pain and unhappiness of others, and she supports her friends. She comforts Peter in the aftermath of Gwen’s death and is even seen crying for the first time. However, even though she is briefly seen with tears on her face, Mary Jane remains stoic. Instead of being a sign of weakness, crying humanizes Mary Jane. Previously her extreme freedom also included freedom from many emotions. She becomes less fickle, more nurturing, and more supportive. Mary Jane balances traditional empathetic qualities with the freedom and independence pushed for by feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

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Mary Jane is a fascinating and complex character from 1973 until present day. Mary Jane is flawed and carries a large amount of emotional baggage. She wears metaphorical masks to hide her emotions from others and to avoid problems in her own life. As a result, Mary Jane is multidimensional and her flaws make her more “real” and less idealized than Gwen Stacy. However, Mary Jane also evolves intellectually and emotionally to become more heroic. While she initially avoids problems, over time she learns to face and overcome them with courage and resolve. At the end of 1973, Mary Jane witnesses a murder and confides in Peter. After being threatened by the killer, she denies seeing the crime and acts normally; fearing the killer will come after her. However, with the help of Peter, Mary Jane garners the courage to report the crime to police even after the perpetrator attempted to kill her.

In 1974, Mary Jane continues to show strength after she is almost blown up in an explosion intended for Peter/Spider-Man. When in the hospital, she tells everyone not to worry about her and acts jovial and carefree. At the same time, she begins showing more concern and compassion for others. Instead of running away, she helps Peter Parker with his personal problems. She takes care of Aunt May when she winds up in the hospital, and she searches New York City to find Peter and inform him of May’s condition. As Mary Jane becomes more complex, she becomes closer to Peter Parker. However, she does not relinquish her sense of freedom and independence. When Peter proposes to Mary Jane in

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1978, she refuses because she does not want to be tied down. Mary Jane continues to grow in strength and complexity during the 1970s and 1980s and becomes one of the most popular characters in *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

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*Figure 3.27. Mary Jane rejects Peter’s marriage proposal. Source: “Where the Big Wheel Stops, Nobody Knows!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #183 (Marvel Comics: Aug. 1978), page 29.*

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284 Mary Jane continues to grow as a character and becomes more courageous and decisive over the course of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson eventually get married in 1987. Their marriage is one of the most iconic marriages in comics. During the 1980s and 1990s, Mary Jane also bucks another gender convention by making more money than Peter and becoming the primary source of income source for their household.
Another significant character is Gloria Grant (January 1975), the first reoccurring black female peer of Peter Parker in *The Amazing Spider-Man.*

Glory (her preferred nickname) plays a minor role during the late 1970s, but she continues *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s trend of diversification. Like with Robbie Robertson, Peter and his friends never mention Glory’s race and unquestioningly accept her as a friend. The scene where she is first introduced also includes some interesting progressive messaging. Glory is an aspiring model who lives down the hall from Peter Parker’s new apartment. Flash Thompson accompanies Peter when he first moves in and initially disproves of the new place. However, after Glory stops in to welcome Peter to the building, Flash says, “I take it back, Parker. This is the greatest apartment I’ve ever seen.”

Flash, the white jock, displays interest in the black model, and the comic presents the possibility of an interracial couple. However, while *The Amazing Spider-Man* displays a progressive attitude toward interracial relationships, it never actually follows through with establishing a black/white interracial couple during the 1970s.

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285 Other black females, like Joseph “Robbie” Robertson’s wife Martha (1968) and Hobie Brown’s girlfriend Mindy McPherson (1969) were very minor characters during the 1960s and 1970s.

286 “...And One Will Fall” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #140 (Marvel Comics: Jan. 1975), 10.

287 While a black and white interracial couple does not occur, Flash Thompson is involved in a relationship with a Vietnamese woman during the 1970s. Even though *The Amazing Spider-Man* does not explore the topic, Marvel Comics maintains its progressive stance towards race in the late 1970s and explores interracial relationships in other comic books. One of the most notable of the time was the relationship between Iron Fist and Misty Knight.
Glory Grant continues to appear in *The Amazing Spider-Man* during the later part of the 1970s, and with Peter’s help, she becomes J. Jonah Jameson’s new secretary at the Daily Bugle. Aside from the Glory's social significance, the character also displays great friendliness and generosity. Her thoughtfulness is best demonstrated when she helps Peter furnish his new apartment. At the time, Peter was unable to afford furniture for his new place. Thanks to Glory, one day Peter comes home and finds his apartment fully furnished. Glory coordinated a party to help Peter, and all his friends brought old furniture or household items.  

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items they no longer needed. While her role is relatively minor during the late 1970s, Glory continues to appear in *The Amazing Spider-Man* up to present publications (2014).

The last major female character introduced during the 1970s is Felicia Hardy, The Black Cat (1979). Felicia Hardy only appears in one story arc during the scope of this study but she becomes a prominent part of Spider-Man’s world beginning in the 1980s. The Black Cat is a femme fatal and the first true female foil to Spider-Man. She is also *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s first major reoccurring costumed female hero/adversary.\(^{289}\) However, while the Black Cat is an antagonist, she is not truly a villain. In her 1979 debut, the Black Cat orchestrates a prison break to free her terminal father, a famous cat burglar, so that he can die at home.\(^{290}\) However, while Felicia is a devoted daughter, she is not entirely altruistic and hopes to continue her father’s thieving legacy. The Black Cat is athletic and displays superior gymnastic skills. Like Spider-Man, she swings across the rooftops of New York City and demonstrates superior combat skills.\(^{291}\) Felicia is intelligent, mischievous, playful, and talented.

\(^{289}\) Other costumed heroines, like the Fantastic Four’s Susan Storm (Invisible Woman), sometimes appeared in *The Amazing Spider-Man* but their roles were usually minor and often just cameos. The Black Cat was the first major reoccurring female hero/adversary in the comic. The Black Cat plays the part of both hero and adversary and often switches between the two. With the help of Spider-Man, she often temporarily reforms and fights crime. The Black Cat’s role in the Marvel Universe expands over time but she is still tied closely to Spider-Man and *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic.

\(^{290}\) “Never Let the Black Cat Cross Your Path!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #194 (Marvel Comics: July 1979), and "Nine Lives Has the Black Cat!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #195 (Marvel Comics: August 1979).

\(^{291}\) “Never Let the Black Cat Cross Your Path!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* #194 (Marvel Comics: July 1979), 1-2, 15-16.
Felicia Hardy is the major first female character in *The Amazing Spider-Man* to operate outside the rules of traditional society. She represents freedom and passion. As the Black Cat, Felicia Hardy wears a skintight black outfit and is very sexualized. She is unafraid to use her womanhood as a weapon and befuddles Spider-Man with a kiss to enable
her escape. While the Black Cat is a criminal, she is also portrayed as desirable. Spider-Man and the Black Cat have a flirtatious relationship, and Spider-Man displays genuine interest in the thief. She makes the hero struggle between desire and duty. In the end, Spider-Man attempts to use his own moral code and their mutual attraction as tools to set her on a better path. He is unsuccessful at their first meeting but the hero achieves some success in the 1980s. While the Black Cat is not a damsel in distress, Spider-Man still tries to save/reform her morals and ethics. She is not evil or nefarious but Spider-Man wants her to become law abiding. The Black Cat is the first costumed female foil in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and as a result, her relationship with Spider-Man is unique, although not really explored until the 1980s.

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292 Never Let the Black Cat Cross Your Path!" *The Amazing Spider-Man* #194 (Marvel Comics: July 1979), 17-19.

293 In the 1980s, Spider-Man and the Black Cat develop a romantic relationship.

294 In their first meetings Spider-Man tells the Black Cat that she should not break the law. However it is not until the 1980s until their relationship is explored in greater detail. Felicia Hardy continues to break rules but Spider-Man also convinces her to be good. As a result, the Black Cat bounces back and forth between being a thief and a hero.
The evolution of women throughout *The Amazing Spider-Man* parallels the evolution of gender relations during the 1960s and 1970s. Still, *The Amazing Spider-Man* examines gender through a male lens. Early in the comic, the women are objects of affection who reinforce male values of courage and strength. As a result, Peter Parker’s perceived cowardice creates problems for most of his relationships at the time. Reinforcing another stereotype, the comic glorifies female beauty. Having many highly attractive women interested in Peter, who at the beginning is an undesirable social outcast, can be seen as a
form of wish fulfillment for the writers and young male readers. Even as the perception of women evolves, the comic still displays the desire for women to exhibit common female characteristics, like compassion and empathy. *The Amazing Spider-Man* consistently promotes the caring and motherly values of women in American society prior to the 1960s.

However, the female representation in *The Amazing Spider-Man* grows, and in the late 1960s and 1970s the comic embraces many feminist values. The presentation of women evolves and females become strong, more intelligent, and courageous. Betty’s cowardice and May’s frailty give way to Gwen’s intelligence and courage, Mary Jane’s freedom and independence, and Felicia Hardy’s strength and rebelliousness. Eventually even Aunt May, initially a weak old lady, gains strength and courage of her own. As a result, women in *The Amazing Spider-Man* become more complete characters.

Even with all its strides towards stronger female characters, women in *The Amazing Spider-Man* are still examined from a male point of view and represent the set of values that men want in women. The values actually evolve as Peter Parker grows and his desires change. At first women are idealized objects of affection, but as the hero grows, he seeks a more complete woman. When Peter is young, Aunt May is the kind and nurturing mother. As a young teenager, Liz is the pretty face he desires. Betty Brant is the first woman interested in Peter Parker, and her kindness, meekness, and dependence comfort the teenaged hero who was socially abused by his peers. Gwen Stacy is Peter Parker’s idealized girl, but she is killed. The reason Mary Jane is one of the most complex female characters in *The Amazing Spider-Man* is because she was never intended to be Peter’s primary love interest.
At first she was the sassy party girl. However, when Gwen died, Mary Jane had to evolve to encompass numerous characteristics she was never originally intended to have. Last of all, Felicia Hardy is the “bad girl” rebound for Peter after Mary Jane rejects his marriage proposal. In the end, all of Peter’s relationships reflect the young male (not female) struggle to find love.

The women are also important because they strengthen *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s message of male values. Aunt May reinforces Peter’s duty as a son. Liz Allan and Betty Brant encourage Peter to be courageous and protect women. Gwen and specifically Gwen’s death further reinforce the need to be courageous and protect women. Mary Jane teaches Peter to reciprocate emotional support. Glory Grant highlights acceptance and Peter Parker’s racial progressivism. Finally, the Black Cat shows an attempt at change, but also Spider-Man’s adherence to classical male values. While she is arguably Spider-Man’s only female peer, Spider-Man is still chivalrous and tries to protect her. The hero tries to reform Felicia from her criminal path to protect her from the repercussions. Also, in a world of violent costumed superhero conflict, Spider-Man goes to great lengths to avoid hurting the Black Cat, even when she attacks him. The hero willingly clings to his desire to protect women.

While the condition of women improves in *The Amazing Spider-Man* during the 1960s and 1970s, it never achieves a large female audience. During this time, the women in the comic present an idealized male version of women. That is not to say that all the female qualities presented are negative, but during this time the comic does not cater to the female escapist fantasies in the same way it does the male. However, as *The Amazing Spider-Man*
continues into the 1980s and 1990s it, like the comic industry, does a better job understanding the female audience.

_The Amazing Spider-Man_ both adheres to and alters traditional American gender values and creates a more complete and complex representation of gender. Traditional masculine gender traits passed down from the frontier, including strength, independence, and courage, are glorified in the comic when combined with a strong sense of morality and justice. Superhero comics are an extension of the masculine and heroic qualities portrayed by the fictional cowboy heroes of the twentieth century. _The Amazing Spider-Man_ further glorifies intelligence to create a well-rounded set of heroic values. Courage is the common value highly prized in the comic for both genders. Courage provides the strength and resolve necessary to stand up to and overcome problems. Furthermore, the representation of women evolves significantly. Women start out as frail and meek objects of affection who need male protection. However over the course of the comic they become free, independent, intelligent, and strong. The women exhibit and embrace certain elements of traditional gender stereotyping but also adopt some feminist values, like courage and independence, to create a more complete and complex gender representations. Even so, women are still written from a male perspective and the evolution of gender remains incomplete by the end of 1979. Still, _The Amazing Spider-Man_ provides a dynamic examination of gender representations in the 1960s and 1970s. Both men and women start in traditional and stereotypical gender constructions and evolve into a more complete, complex, and idealized representation of each gender.
CONCLUSION

An Optimistic Future

*The Amazing Spider-Man* and other superhero comic books are important pieces of literature and warrant further academic scholarship. Fiction is an important tool used to understand culture and history. Hero stories like Gilgamesh, Beowulf, and Homer’s epics provide glimpses into historical societies and often showcase important values. Superhero comic books are important because they are America’s attempt at telling traditional hero stories. On the surface, superhero comics are morality tales made to entertain America’s young male children and teenagers. However, superhero comics are also filled with symbols and idealized American values. Spider-Man is a combination of America’s idealized cowboy values, Cold War anxieties, and America’s Cold War belief in technological and intellectual superiority. Spider-Man also has a strong set of moral values and guidelines. In the final page of Spider-Man’s debut in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, the comic declares: “And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come—great responsibility.” Spider-Man’s lesson was relevant to America in the 1960s and 1970s and is still important today.

While *The Amazing Spider-Man* attempts to remain relatively neutral on social issues, it still addresses historical events and social problems, and it does a remarkable job capturing the feeling of 1960s and 1970s America. The reason *The Amazing Spider-Man* succeeds is because in many ways Spider-Man is a metaphor for America. Spider-Man is given amazing power but is at first reluctant to use it for the greater good of society. However, a mix of

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tragedy and the hero's strong sense of responsibility force him into action. Like post-World War II America, Spider-Man attempts to use his incredible power to help the world, but his struggles often end in violent conflict. He constantly tries to help others but is incapable of solving all problems perfectly. Spider-Man is flawed, often makes mistakes, and is attacked for his failures. However, at the same time, society relies on the hero to combat powerful enemies who would otherwise use their strength with impunity. Spider-Man then questions his role in the world and whether or not the decisions he makes are correct. Even so, he continues to use his power to exert his own sense of morality, righteousness, and justice. When examined in these terms, Spider-Man resembles the reluctant and “moral” interventionism of post-World War II and Cold War America.296

Spider-Man’s metaphorical relationship to America makes the character ideal for studying Nuclear Age and Cold War America. Similar to the way America struggled with understanding and using nuclear power, Spider-Man struggles with properly using his spider-powers. Spider-Man is also highly saturated in nuclear and Cold War messaging. The character idolizes science as a means to overcome problems and is granted amazing powers through science. Spider-Man taps into America’s faith in science to solve problems and make the world a better place. The comic also addresses the fear and danger of unrestricted scientific exploration and argues for the righteous or moralistic use of science. Between 1962 and 1979, The Amazing Spider-Man promotes many American Cold War values, like faith in science and interventionism.

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296 Moral is relative and in this sense “moral” refers to America’s general belief in its own righteousness and morality. The historical reality is that America does not always act morally, but moral and just action is a constant American myth and historical narrative.
However, it is also important to note that comics and *The Amazing Spider-Man* represent a very specific set of American values. Comics during the 1960s and 1970s were highly sensationalized morality tales that drew upon idealized values to create the fictionalized perfect American man. Heroes like Superman stood for “truth, justice, and the American way!” Superman in particular represents the perfect American man and stands for America’s belief in its own righteousness. Therefore, when this study references “American values” it really refers to the hyper-perfect, hyperbolized, and fictional values of the flawless, righteous, and moral hero. While the reality of American values is much less glamorous, superhero comics are sensationalized attempts at encouraging people to strive for idealized values and morals.

While Superman represents the perfect and idealized America, Spider-Man represents a more realistic America. *The Amazing Spider-Man* recognizes and embraces its hero’s imperfections. Spider-Man is flawed but still attempts to live up to the unrealistic version of “perfection” highlighted by Superman. However, because Spider-Man is presented as a normal and flawed man, no matter how hard he tries, he can never perfectly embody the idealized values. The hero constantly sacrifices himself in an attempt to live up to the hero propaganda but always comes up short. Spider-Man’s shortcomings and his humanity make him more relatable. Still, Spider-Man’s self sacrifice and tenacity reinforce the pursuit of "perfect" and moral values regardless of the cost.

Another important and guiding element of *The Amazing Spider-Man* is the comic’s white middle class male point of view. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, *The
“Amazing Spider-Man” became increasingly progressive but maintained a white male perspective. Peter Parker himself is a white middle class male, and Peter’s voice drives “The Amazing Spider-Man.” Illustrator Keith Pollard was the only African-American to work on “The Amazing Spider-Man” during this time (1978-1979) and is important because he co-created the Black Cat, one of the most progressive female characters in “The Amazing Spider-Man” between 1963 and 1979. Even so, “The Amazing Spider-Man's” white male tone remained largely consistent at the end of the 1970s.

“The Amazing Spider-Man” believes in equality but does not completely understand the struggle. As a result, the comic strictly supports lawful and moderate rights protests and warns against unlawful and radical action. The comic supports Martin Luther King’s dream but is wary of civil disobedience and unlawful action. Furthermore, the comic seems to fear the radicalization of militant black youths. The lawful and moderate approach of “The Amazing Spider-Man” extends far beyond race and is a pervading theme throughout the comic, which is somewhat odd considering Spider-Man’s violent vigilantism to reinforce law and justice is inherently unlawful. Still, even though the comic has a white Northern perspective on race, it is also progressive. A black man is Peter Parker’s boss, black characters are unquestionably and matter-of-factly treated as equals, hate crimes are vilified, and the comic even alludes to (but does not explore) black/white interracial relationships.

During the 1960s and 1970s “The Amazing Spider-Man” shows a white male attempt at racial progressivism during a turbulent period in American history.
The male-centric perspective is most noticeable with regard to gender. Between 1962 and 1979, women in *The Amazing Spider-Man* are stereotypical or idealized. All relationships are addressed primarily through Peter Parker’s point of view, and highlight Peter’s desired qualities in women. Between 1962 and 1966, women are pretty faces who mostly reinforce male values of courage and protecting women. The women are most idealized when they display kindness, compassion, and understanding. However, they are also stereotypical, weak, dependent, and emotional. Between 1966 and 1979, the comic’s view of women improves significantly but is still constrained by its male perspective. Women become stronger, more intelligent, and more courageous, but are still secondary characters who fulfill Peter Parker’s desire to have women in his life. Gwen Stacy is the idealized woman, but in the end, Gwen’s death is her most significant contribution to Peter Parker’s story. After Gwen's death, Mary Jane evolves significantly, but she does not really break barriers until the 1980s when she makes more money than Peter and becomes a proactive participant in some of Spider-Man's adventures. The Black Cat (July-August 1979) is the first true female peer for Spider-Man, but she is on the wrong side of the law. Yet, Spider-Man still feels the need to protect her. Between 1962 and 1979, women are examined from a male point of view and represent the set of values that men want in women.

In reality, Peter Parker is somewhat narcissistic and needs women in his life. He is a character who struggles with social acceptance and needs someone to love him. He continues to seek out relationships even though almost all are negatively affected by Spider-Man. Aunt May winds up in the hospital because of Spider-Man, Betty Brant's brother dies,
Gwen Stacy's father dies, Gwen Stacy dies, and Mary Jane is blown up and hospitalized. Peter Parker constantly faces tragedy, and still he continues to include women in his life fully knowing the cost. While it is subtle, at least during the 1960s and 1970s, Peter Parker relies on women for emotional support. Peter's emotional reliance on women is likely the reason kindness and compassion are so highly valued in the comic's females. *The Amazing Spider-Man* includes women in Peter's life to add social tension and to fulfill Peter Parker's need to be accepted and loved. Therefore while women in *The Amazing Spider-Man* become more well rounded characters during the 1960s and 1970s, their primary role is to love and support the comic's emotionally unstable hero.

Even with all its shortcomings, *The Amazing Spider-Man* resonated with its young male target audience. The comic created a super-powered fantasy where altruistic young males could fight to save the world. It encouraged kids to strive to attain the unrealistic values presented by superhero comics. However, through its flawed hero, the comic also showed that the world was becoming increasingly complicated. The understanding of good/evil, right/wrong, and justice/injustice became less black and white. *The Amazing Spider-Man* reflected growing social anxiety and uncertainty in Cold War America. The comic also reflected numerous real world events during the 1960s through the lens of popular youth fiction. The Cold War, civil rights, student protests, Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, America's drug use, and many more real world events and topics were explored in the pages of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. The comic is an important piece of cultural history because,

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297 Between the 1980s and present day Peter's reliance on women becomes more explicit.
like a newspaper, it has examined real world events and attitudes every month from 1962 until present.

_The Amazing Spider-Man_ is also important because it broke boundaries within the comic industry. Its antidrug issue addressed an important social issue and changed The Comics Code Authority's restrictions. _The Amazing Spider-Man_ also upended traditional superhero story tropes and led to a tonal shift in the genre of superhero comics. Spider-Man did not always win and could not always save everyone. Still, the tragedy and pain that Spider-Man experienced during the 1960s and 1970s made him sympathetic, and helped him resonate with people who tried hard but also experienced failure. Spider-Man’s story is arguably one of the most tragic and dark in comic books. However, despite all the negativity facing the hero, Spider-Man faces his problems with humor and an uncrushable optimism. No matter how bad things get, Spider-Man never gives up and continues hoping and fighting to make the world a better place.

While the scope of this study covers 1962 to 1979, Spider-Man continues evolving and remains relevant even today. _The Amazing Spider-Man_ persistently addresses important topics, values, and historical events (like 9/11). This particular study only covers seventeen out of over fifty years of _The Amazing Spider-Man_’s publication. Furthermore, _The Amazing Spider-Man_ is just one of many Spider-Man comics published. Over the years there has been _The Sensational Spider-Man, The Spectacular Spider-Man, Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man, Web of Spider-Man, Peter Parker: Spider-Man_, and many more. Those are just the Spider-Man comics. Further examination of Spider-Man during different periods of
American history will yield greater insight into why Spider-Man and the values he represents are popular among Americans. Furthermore, Spider-Man is just one of many heroes. Every hero provides their own set of values and insights. By examining the thousands of mainstream superhero comics spanning over seventy-five years, scholars can gain a greater understanding of twentieth century American values.

I hope that this study has been an entertaining and informative glimpse into the importance of comic books in American cultural history. Comics provide an almost endless field of study that incorporates history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, symbology, and literature. America has always been a country that worships great men and heroes. Comic book superheroes are just a modern day extension of traditional American values. By understanding heroes and what they represent, we can better understand American values as they evolve over time. I look forward to seeing the cultural history of comic books expand. Superhero stories have become a staple of America’s modern mythology and this mythology is worth exploring for both entertainment and scholarship.
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