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## Holocaust Avengers: From "The Master Race" to Magneto

Kathrin Bower

In the classic genealogy of the superhero, trauma is often the explanation or motivation for the hero's pursuit of justice or revenge. Origin stories for superheroes and supervillains frequently appear in the plots of comic books long after the characters were created and with the shift in the stable of artists involved, different and sometimes competing events in the characters' biographies are revealed. This is particularly true of series that have enjoyed long periods of popularity or those that were phased out and then later revived. The stimulus for this article was the origin story conceived for the *X-Men* supervillain Magneto under Chris Claremont's plotting, after the series was resurrected in 1975 and by the foregrounding of Magneto's Holocaust past in the opening sequence to Bryan Singer's 2000 film *X-Men*. I was fascinated by the explanation of Magneto's hatred for humankind and how the Holocaust was used to justify his desire for revenge. This fascination led to a further investigation of how and where the Holocaust has been appropriated as a device to legitimize or complicate the quest for vengeance and retribution in American comic books.

In the discussion to follow, I briefly discuss the social context of American Jews preceding World War II and their prominence in the creation of Golden Age superheroes, and then trace the evolution in the representation of the Holocaust and its link to vengeance, from Bernard Krigstein's "The Master Race" to the various incarnations of Magneto in the *X-Men*. My concern here is not only with the depiction and justification of revenge through references to the Holocaust, but also with the ethnic dimension of the victim-turned-avenger, i.e. the degree to which the avenger's identity as a Jew is made explicit. In the world of comics, the emphasis on the Jewishness of the victim turned superhero/supervillain was accompanied by a shift away from the moral clarity that had been the hallmark of the Golden Age superheroes to a condition of moral ambiguity. In the real world, expectations that the law would or could mete out appropriate punishment to the perpetrators of the Holocaust were greatly diminished in the aftermath of the Nuremberg trials of 1945-1946 and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt from 1963 to 1965. The failure of the law to deal adequately with crimes against humanity led to a moral dilemma of how to approach questions of justice and revenge regarding the Holocaust. The comic book genre with its serialized format and proclivity for alternative outcomes serves as an ideal medium and resource for the illustration and analysis of the

multiple layers and moral vicissitudes of an historical event that continues to absorb and occupy our imagination.

The atmosphere in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s was hardly favorable to Jews. Antisemitism was on the rise and although restrictive immigration laws in 1924 severely reduced the number of Jewish and other immigrants to the U.S., the Great Depression fueled anti-Jewish sentiment and conspiracy theories that world Jewry was responsible for the economic crisis (Zielonka and Wechman, 1972:76-77).<sup>1</sup> In this hostile environment, many Jewish Americans saw assimilation as a means of gaining acceptance and attempted to downplay their Jewish identity. It was this tendency that was a motivating factor in Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's creation of Superman in 1934, a superhero that Jules Feiffer in a 1996 *New York Times* magazine article labeled, "the ultimate assimilationist fantasy" (Feiffer: 1996:15). As two Jewish teenagers, Jerry Siegel as writer and Joe Shuster as artist had difficulty marketing their "American dream" until 1938, when *Action Comics* bought the rights to Superman and the hero almost immediately became a blockbuster hit. The rise of Nazism and Hitler's military successes in Europe spurred two other Jewish Americans, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, to produce the all-American patriot and freedom fighter Captain America in 1941. Captain America's *raison d'être* was to battle Nazism -- the first issue shows him punching Hitler in the face -- but he also exemplifies the assimilationist desires prevalent among American Jews at the time. Jack Kirby had changed his name from Jakob Kurtzberg in order to appear more American and his hero, bearing the bland moniker of Steve Rogers, is a weakling turned superman via the chemical genius of Dr. Reinstein (a thinly veiled reference to Albert Einstein). In a 1968 essay, Mordechai Richler even went so far as to assert that Golden Age superheroes were "golems" for their youthful Jewish readers: "They were invulnerable, all-conquering, whereas we were puny, miserable, and defeated" (Richler, 1968:80). This association between Golden Age superheroes and golems did not go unnoticed by later writers and artists involved in the myriad Superman series. Two 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary issues of *Superman: Man of Steel* published by DC in 1998 (No. 81 and No. 82) directly portray the Holocaust and show Superman's arrival at an Eastern European shtetl, where he discovers that two youths have conceived a superhero that is a cross between a golem and an avenging angel (No. 81:10).

Although the concentration camps and rather fantastical images of the Nazi machinery of death did appear in American comics of the 1940s (Fig. 1<sup>2</sup>, cover of *Captain America*, April 1945, Vol. 2, no. 46, "Invitation to Murder"), it was not until several decades after the war that it became an acceptable subject of representation. In the 1940s and 1950s, the focus of the American public was on America's victory over Nazism and her status as a liberator of Europe. The Jewish victims of the Holocaust were categorized as refugees and were regarded with a mixture of shame and contempt by their American

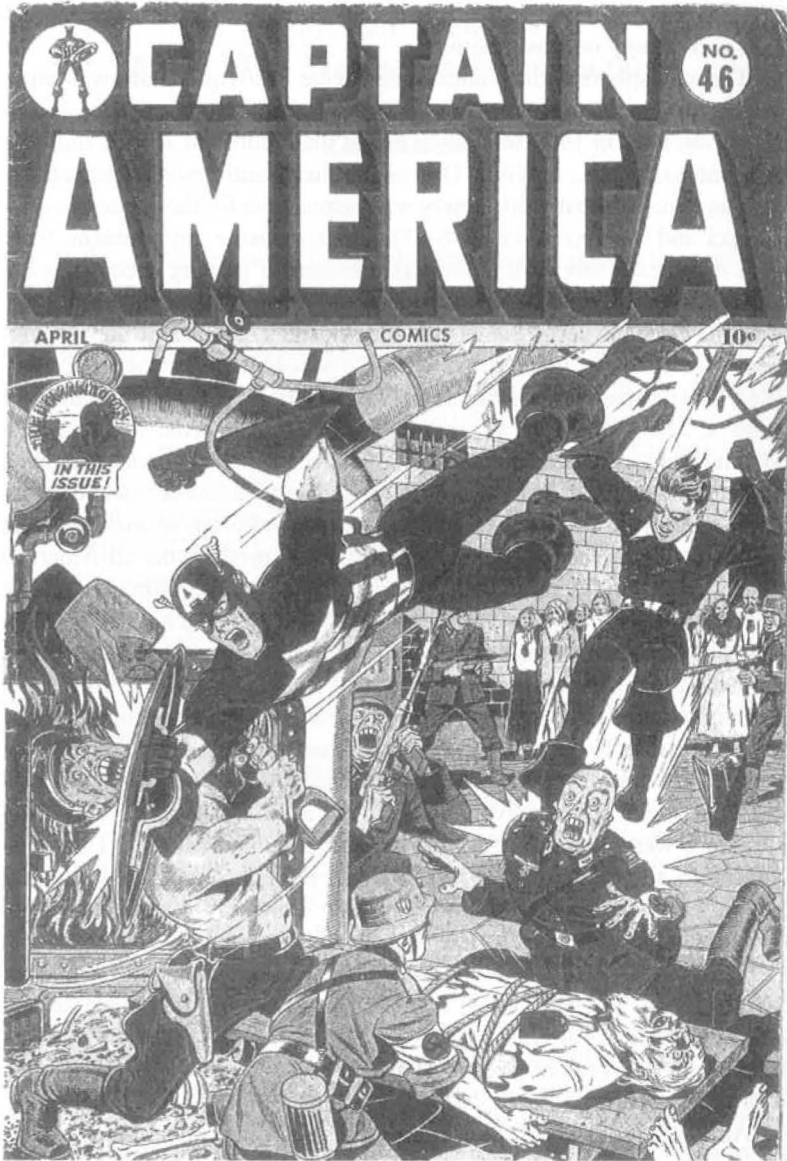


Fig. 1

co-religionists intent upon taking advantage of new possibilities for upward mobility in post-war American society (Mintz, 2001:7-9).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, awareness of the genocide did have a substantial impact on the mentality of the American public and one could argue that the widespread cynicism and the increase in violence and unpunished crime in the comics of the 1950s were

an outgrowth of revelations about the mass murder of the Jews and other horrors of the war. This cynicism was also because, by the 1950s, the enemy was no longer fascism, but communism, and West Germany was hastily rehabilitated as a bulwark against the Soviet Union. American Jews were hesitant to push for more sincere and sustained punishment of Germany for fear of being viewed as unpatriotic, or worse, as Communist sympathizers, or as promoters of Jewish special interests thirsting for vengeance (Novick, 1999: 91-96).<sup>4</sup>

1954 was not a good year for Communists or comics. The McCarthy hearings followed on the heels of Fredric Wertham's successful assault on the comic book industry that culminated in the restrictive Comics Code, a response to the crime and violence that had become standard fare in the comic books of the day. In the face of the backlash against comics, particularly William Gaines's Entertaining Comics empire, Bernard Krigstein could not have wished for a worse time to find an attentive audience for his most important work. Published in the April 1955 issue of *Impact*, "The Master Race" written by Al Feldstein and designed and drawn in a revolutionary style by Krigstein was a morality tale about the guilt of the Nazi perpetrators and the smoldering desire for revenge among the survivors. In a mere eight pages (he was originally allotted only six), Krigstein manages a depth of character development, tension, and drama that is truly remarkable. Part of the tension results from the blurring of the boundaries between victim and perpetrator. We are introduced to the character of Carl Reissman as he innocuously buys tokens for the subway, yet the text and images reveal that he is haunted by memories of Nazi Germany and time spent in a concentration camp. His anxiety escalates when he recognizes a stranger who enters the subway car he is on. Reissman at first appears to be a guiltless pawn of the totalitarian system or perhaps even one of its victims, until we learn on the second to last page, that he was a concentration camp commander, and the sinister-looking man who entered the train was one of the inmates he had tormented.

Playing with readers' expectations up to the last minute, Krigstein reverses the roles of pursuer and pursued by rendering the perpetrator as a man hounded by his own bad conscience, embodied in the figure of the gaunt survivor dressed all in black. Reissman rushes from the subway car in fear of the other's revenge and in his frantic attempt to flee, trips and falls to his death under the wheels of an oncoming train (**Fig. 2**; reprinted in Sadowski:225). In a sense, this was the perfect story for Krigstein, who was Jewish and had served as a soldier in World War II and possessed a strong sense of ethics that ran counter to the fashion of most EC plot lines (Sadowski, 2002:198). In the "Master Race," he was able to represent the guilt of the Nazis and convey the lesson that crime does not pay. Unfortunately, neither the medium nor the message was to have a great impact, despite the issue title, until decades later.

When the story appeared in 1955, EC was suffering a severe slump due to bad press and the restrictions of the Code, so few copies were sold (Sadowski, 2002:191). The significance of Krigstein's masterpiece and its reputation today far outweigh its influence at the time of its original publication.

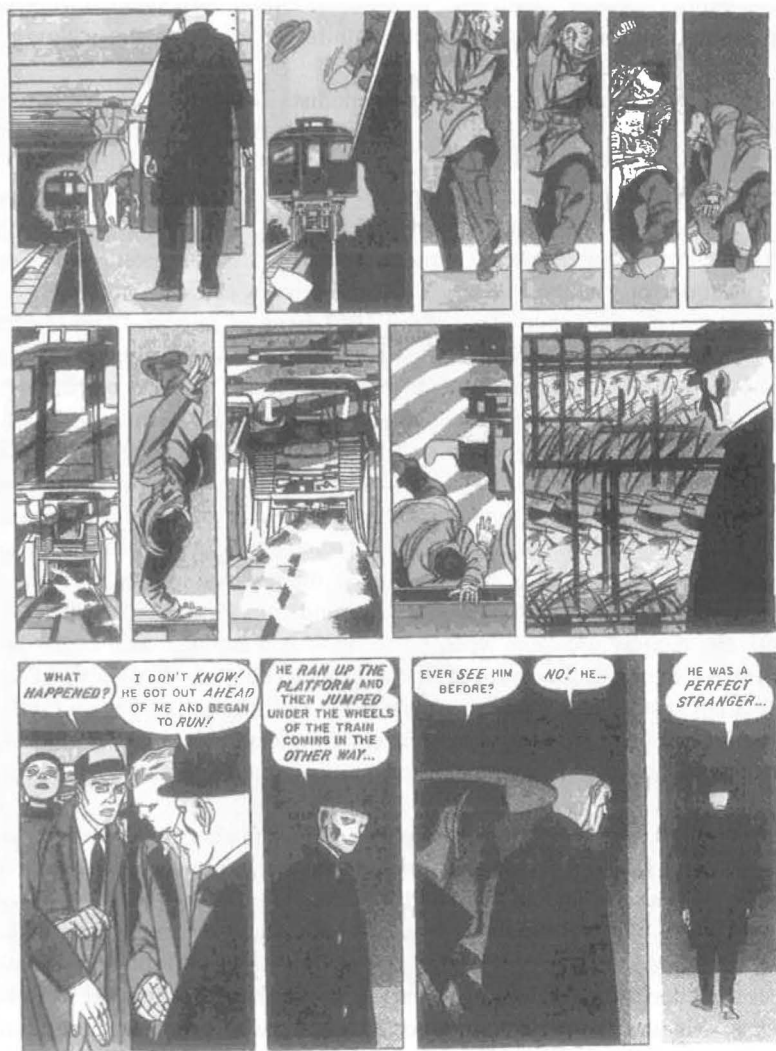


Fig. 2

The Holocaust would not become a topic of popular discourse in the U.S. until the late 1970s, largely sparked by the broadcast of the NBC television *Holocaust* mini-series (written by Gerald Green) in 1978. Comics responded to

the trend with plots featuring the concentration camps and the trauma of the survivors as prominent elements of the story. Under the direction of Chris Claremont, several issues of the revived *Captain America* (thawed out of the Arctic ice in 1964 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby) employ the concentration camp experience of one of the characters as a screen for projecting concerns about Neo-Nazism. In the September 1979 issue entitled "From the Ashes," we are introduced to Steve Rogers' Jewish landlady, Anna Kappelbaum, who has a number tattooed on her arm and is a survivor of the fictitious camp Diebenwald. While the story is marred by several glaring historical inaccuracies, it introduces a narrative that questions where the line can be drawn between justice and revenge. In the May 1980 issue, Anna Kappelbaum meets her former tormentor, Dr. Mendelhaus (an allusion to the infamous Joseph Mengele seems intended), who had murdered her family and tortured her in Diebenwald. Assailed by horrific memories, Anna suffers a nervous collapse and is rushed to the hospital. In a story propelled by paranoia that fascist groups are plotting to establish a Fourth Reich, both Anna and her nemesis are then kidnapped by a neo-Nazi organization. Anna, whose strength has meanwhile recovered, is filled with hatred and the desire for revenge. When she sees the opportunity to kill Mendelhaus and avenge her family, however, she is prevented from doing so by Captain America, who dissuades her with the words "it will never be over...not until we learn to temper justice...with mercy" (Vol. 1, No. 245, "The Calypso Connection!":30). But Captain America's high-minded preaching does not save Mendelhaus, who is dispatched by Marie Heller, daughter of a famed Nazi hunter, and the reader is left wondering whether Mendelhaus got what he deserved.

Captain America's plea for temperance and his concept of justice contrast drastically with Renegade Press's *Manimal*, designed and produced by Robin Snyder and published in an ironically black and white edition in 1985. Here the theme of revenge is taken to a bestial extreme, where the victim is literally transformed into a monster by the actions of the perpetrators. While the protagonist Noel Black is not ethnically marked as Jewish, the fact that his father's name was Abraham and both his parents were in a concentration camp imply his Jewish origins. His parents were subjected to horrible medical experiments in Dachau and his mother was injected with a mutant strain of rabies. Although his parents survived the ordeal, the experiments affected their son's genetic make-up, turning him into a kind of werewolf when his anger or anxiety was aroused. As a grown man, Black is a research scientist working in a lab directed by the very same doctor who had conducted the Dachau experiments, Dr. Otto Hoffer, but only Black knows of Hoffer's depraved past. The story opens with Hoffer's mangled body and the search for his beast-like murderer. After an outburst of rage during an interview with Detective Donahue and revelations of what Hoffer (formerly Oberscharführer [Sergeant First-Class] Hoffstadter) had done to his parents, Black is arrested



Fig. 3

and eventually incarcerated. The scene in the courtroom illustrates the moral complexity of victim vengeance and the limitations of conventional justice in dealing with such cases (Fig. 3). While the judge insists on the need for



clarity in the administration of the law and convicts Black of Hoffstadter's murder, sentencing him to 99 years, Black pointedly questions the justice of a system that would allow Hoffstadter to live a comfortable life as a respected scientist despite the terrible crimes he had committed. In the concluding panels of the story, however, we see that Black has managed to escape from prison and the laws that cannot assuage his suffering and has embarked on a Punisher-like quest, systematically hunting down and killing surviving Nazis. *Manimal* is a remarkable testament to a growing recognition of the moral intricacies involved in representing the Holocaust, and in an unusual act of self-interpretation, Snyder offers an "Afterthought," explaining his motivation for creating the character and the plot:

As it stands, it is inadequate and obvious. It is simplistic and panders to the kind of catharsis all revenge-motivated fiction achieves: plenty of gore and little substance. But then, perhaps the subject is too big for all of us. The numbers are too big. Millions killed, displaced, maimed, tormented. Here, at least, I chose the numbers, the place. Here, at least, I chose the fate. (...) In my world, Black blows their Goddamned brains out. I felt better for that. But the victims, the ghostly shadows, the backdrops for all this popular junk, deserve something more than *Manimal*. I dearly wish I could have given it. (Snyder, 1985:n.p.)

*Manimal* uses the notorious medical experiments in the concentration camps as the basis for a story that combines genetic mutation and revenge. The first mainstream comic book series to capitalize on this combination was the tremendously popular *X-Men*. In the original series created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963, the character of Magneto is portrayed as an unambiguous villain bent on enslaving humanity and taking over the world. The series lapsed in 1970, but after it was resuscitated in 1975, and with the direction of Chris Claremont, Magneto became a far more complex character. In the October 1981 issue of *The Uncanny X-Men*, we learn of Magneto's childhood in Auschwitz and the death of his family in the gas chambers. Reflecting on how his past has affected his attitude toward humans, Magneto explains: "As our lives were nothing to them, so human lives became nothing for me" (*Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1, No. 150, Oct. 1981, "I, Magneto"). This origin story inserts the Holocaust into the conventional comic book formula whereby the superhero or supervillain is transformed by a traumatic childhood experience, exemplified in the backgrounds of Batman (whose quest is catalyzed by the brutal murder of his parents) and Superman (who becomes the selfless hero through the loss of his homeland). But the appeal to the Holocaust complicates this convention, rendering Magneto's rage and mistrust toward humanity more comprehensible to the reader while destabilizing his categorization as a supervillain. Magneto's character and his own recognition that he has become "much like those [he had] always hated and despised" (Vol. 1, No. 150, Oct. 1981) upsets any clear distinction between victim and

# THE TRIAL OF MAGNETO!

"THIS WEEK-- IN PARIS, FRANCE-- A MOST EXTRAORDINARY MAN GOES ON TRIAL BEFORE A SPECIAL TRIBUNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE, CHARGED WITH CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY.

"TO MANY, HE IS THE EPITOME OF EVIL, THE GREATEST FIEND SINCE ADOLF HITLER.

"OTHERS, THOUGH, CONSIDER HIM BOTH LIBERATOR AND HERO.

"HE IS THE SELF-STYLED MASTER OF MAGNETISM.

"HIS NAME IS MAGNETO.



A STAN LEE PRESENTATION--  
STARRING THE UNCANNY X-MEN

CHRIS CLAREMONT, WRITER  
JOHN DAN ROMITA, Jr. & GREEN, ARTISTS  
GLYNIS OLIVER, colorist  
TOM ORZECZOWSKI, letterer  
ANN NOCENTI, EDITOR  
JIM SHOTER, EDITOR IN CHIEF

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Fig. 4

victimizer and highlights the continuity of prejudice and persecution.

Les Daniels has argued that the increased crime rate in the 1980s and the

inability of the criminal justice system to combat it, is mirrored in the representation of the law as lacking in credibility in comics of the same period (Daniels, 1991: 203). The inadequacy of the law and the murkiness of what constitutes good and evil is dramatically displayed on the splash page of the December 1985 issue of *The Uncanny X-Men*, "The Trial of Magneto," where the master of magnetism is shown with his powerful hands encased in protective shields in a medieval dungeon-like setting (Fig. 4). The accompanying text attests to the extremes of Magneto's persona: "To many, he is the epitome of evil, the greatest fiend since Adolf Hitler. Others, though, consider him both liberator and hero. (...) His name is Magneto." The uncertainty about which side of the moral continuum Magneto's character falls on is intensified by his various incarnations as a reformed supervillain in subsequent issues and parallel series. In the November 1986 issue, Claremont portrays Magneto as the benign and almost avuncular headmaster of Professor X's school who insists on the need to protect the mutants from the same kind of persecution the Jews faced (Vol. 1, No. 211, Nov. 1986 "Massacre," here p.9): "The horrors of my childhood, born again -- only this time, mutants are the victims, instead of Jews." In the March 1991 issue, Magneto is haunted by the memories of Auschwitz and his work as a member of the special commando that disposed of the bodies of the victims. In this issue, Magneto seems troubled less by the desire for vengeance than by survivor guilt: "I should have died myself, with those I loved. Instead I carted the bodies by the hundreds by the thousands...from the death house to the crematorium...and the ashes to the burial ground. Asking now what I could not then -- why was I spared?!" (Vol. 1, No. 274, March 1991:11). Even the extreme make-over Scott Lobdell gives Magneto in his reincarnation as Joseph in "Whispers on the Wind" (*Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1, No. 327, Dec. 1995) and subsequent installments of the Joseph saga where Magneto is again a young man and appears to have lost his memory, cannot erase the traces of his trauma at the hands of the Nazis.

With Joe Pruett's *Magneto* issue of the Movie Prequel to Bryan Singer's 2000 *X-Men*, the merging of victim and avenger in Magneto's character reaches its zenith. For the first time, we actually see the boy Erik Lehnsherr in Auschwitz, his yellow star prominently displayed; we watch as he watches his parents' bodies go up in smoke through the chimney of the crematorium (Fig. 5), and as witnesses to these scenes, we are both voyeurs and accomplices to what follows. As the images from Auschwitz merge with images of violent persecution of mutants, the link between the past and the present can hardly be overlooked, and Magneto's hatred of humanity and desire for revenge is rendered in overtly sympathetic terms, while Professor X's belief in his ability to save mankind appears absurdly idealistic. Pruett's *Magneto* is in effect a revisionist history of the *X-Men* series. Charles, Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr meet in Israel in 1992 and experience the violence of the intifada and persecution of mutants first-hand. Charles persuades Erik to return with him to the U.S. but

his attempts to transform Erik/Magneto into a crusader for reconciliation are doomed. While Xavier preaches tolerance, Erik points to human history and sees little to hope for. So when Magneto learns that Hans von Shank, the Nazi commander who wiped out his family, has been imprisoned, his desire for revenge is the logical outgrowth of his biography. Although Xavier once again intervenes, von Shank is later brutally murdered by Sabretooth, one of Magneto's henchmen, in a manner reminiscent of *Manimal*. In the outsourcing spirit of the new millennium, the victim-avenger enlists the services of a hitman.



Fig. 5

The serialized nature of the comic book genre as well as its capacity and propensity for parallel stories and shifting outcomes makes it an appropriate barometer for measuring the fluctuations in popular, public attitudes toward the Holocaust. While some might argue that the representation of the Holocaust in the pages of mainstream comics illustrates the extreme of commodification and trivialization, the trend toward appropriating the Holocaust in popular culture is undeniable and the critic's task is to probe the implications as well as the repercussions of such representations. While the representations in comics demonstrate how entrenched the Holocaust is in American public

consciousness as a measure of evil and suffering, the evolution of these representations from the "Master Race" to Magneto is striking. The shift from a human to a superhuman desire for revenge renders the Holocaust somehow less real, and the transformation of the victim into a supervillain obscures the distinction between victim and perpetrator and displaces the burden of guilt. This, in turn, leads to a moral vacuum, where neither conventional justice nor personal vengeance can distinguish between right and wrong. And the underlying premise of the entire *X-Men* series, i.e. that the central characters are all mutants, muddies the issue even more. Progressing beyond human -- have we progressed beyond good and evil?

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The authors note the rise of Antisemitism during this period and attribute it in part to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan as well as to the impact of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the outspoken Antisemitic stance of Henry Ford.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Randy Scott and the Russell B. Nye Popular Culture Collection at the Michigan State University Library in East Lansing, Michigan for Figures 1, 3, and 4.

<sup>3</sup> In *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory*, Alan Mintz argues that American Jews initially regarded the victims of the Holocaust with shame and contempt, largely due to the popular perception that the European Jews "went like sheep to slaughter." The perception of the victims as survivors developed over time and in response to a series of transformative events, most importantly the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, Israel's Six-Day War in 1967, and the American broadcast of the *Holocaust* mini-series by NBC in 1978 (10-13).

<sup>4</sup> Novick acknowledges that while anti-German sentiment was widespread, official policy was geared toward rehabilitation. In the environment of the Cold War, Bolshevism was a greater danger than Nazism. Novick also points out the fear within the American Jewish leadership of being associated with Old Testament style vengeance in any single-minded pursuit of punishment for the Germans, which could be regarded as confirmation of the negative stereotype of the vengeful Jew (91). As for the association between the Holocaust and Communists, Novick argues that Jewish Communists and sympathizers were very vocal in invoking the Holocaust, rendering the Holocaust a tainted subject for conservative Jewish organizations (93-96).

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