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WOLVERINE

**American Mutant Post-Romanticism,
Comic Books
and
The Echoes of Myths and Madness**

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Introduction

„Why superheroes? Why comics? These are not just entertaining fantasy figures. They are important to our history because their are symbols of the Canadian identity.“¹

As stated by Richard Slotkin, „the mythology of a nation is the intelligible mask of that enigma called the ‚national character“ [...] national mythologies are embodied in literature and begin with national epics in the manner of Homer“². The subject of this paper is the involvement of a special form of literature – a certain comic book series - in a special discourse concerning just these matters of nationality, mythology and literature, and its underlying special correspondence to early American Romanticism. Now, seemingly pretty far from being directly comparable to (and as acknowledged qualitatively as) the Homeric epics, comics and the analysis of comic books are a matter not necessarily too familiar with the university; the special knowledge accumulated by a nerdy comic lover does not quite fit in with the classical canon of the academy, and their hastily, but commonly alleged triviality – the focus on mere visual sensations, the emphasis on the images on cost of the story – serves to disqualify comic books for serious, scientific reception³.

Indeed, in most cases it would be futile to try and prove comic books' equality up to the likes of Homeric or Shakespearean works, in some cases it would at least be difficult. But first and foremost, it would simply be pointless: There is no use of comparing two different forms of literary narration in order to only point out the one's superiority to the other, be it the poem, the drama, the epic, or the „graphic novel“ (a term already intending to lift the comic book genre up to a certain degree of seriousness and respectability). As a matter of fact, the conventional form of the book as a medium of information and narration has unquestionably lost its monopoly; the written word today is rivalled by (or, to put it another, more positive way, complemented with) a vast variety of new media - of film, of television, of the world wide web etc. – compared to which the comic book again may be considered as a rather traditional form of literature. However, neither do I intend to prepare an apology for comic books within this paper, nor do I believe that to be necessary. Each specific literary form has its genuine possibilities as well as its genuine limitations. The general difference, or

¹ Foreword by Lilly Koltun in: John Bell: Guardians Of The North. The national superhero in Canadian comic-book art, Ottawa 1992.

² Richard Slotkin: Regeneration Through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860, Middleton / Conn. 1973, p. 3.

³ As a matter of fact, the Philipps-University's anglistic library contained but one single book on comics – which is written in German and was published before I was born. I regret that but for two exceptions I have to quote from works in German language exclusively, but these were the only ones available.

incommensurability between comics and traditionally written epics which I naturally do concede – I will give a brief overview of the history and theory of comics as a special literary genre later on - on the other hand does not affect their status as basically equal vehicles of literary narration.

Instead of counting up against each other the advantages and disadvantages certain forms of literature may or may not provide, or discussing their legitimacy or efficiency, or establishing any other competitive relation whatsoever between them, in this paper I will try to point out the *continuity* of certain, specific „American“ ideas throughout the history of American literature, and the transformations these ideas as well as the literary forms they are embodied in have undergone. To be more precise, the general subject is the „American myth“ as presented by Slotkin, the historical cornerstones are the era of Romanticism and the 1990s, the literary forms are the novel and the comic book, the novel is *Edgar Huntly*, and the comic book is *Wolverine*.

In the course of my examination, I firstly will briefly explain in an introductory excursion a bit of the theory and history of comics, not in order to justify its inclusion in academic review, but to call attention to some aspects of a subject that certainly is commonly overlooked.

Secondly, since I do not assume that the knowledge of even a relatively popular comic book character's biographical background has spread too far in academic circles, I believe it to be necessary to give an introduction to Wolvie and his past which then can give way to further reflections.

Thirdly, in the central part of my considerations, I will explain certain aspects of *Wolverine* - his inner conflict, his relation to his surroundings etc. - and their striking and hardly coincidental correspondence to *Edgar Huntly* as well as their accordance with certain ideas of romanticism and mythologism.

In the final part, with regard to the outcome of the preceding sections, I will try to draw a conclusion on America, myths, madness, and comics.

1. Comics: A Brief Account

„I hope that this is the first comic book you've read in a while. I hope you found it on a shelf in a real bookstore somewhere, and took a chance. I hope a lot of people are picking up comic books for the first time. You see, a lot of people think comic books are just for kids, like Saturday morning cartoons. And many of them are, though they're usually better drawn and written. That's great, but it's hardly the whole story.“⁴

„1964 prophezeite H.C. Artmann, man werde in einigen zwanzig Jahren über Comic Strips lange Abhandlungen schreiben ,und somit über das, was man eben noch ignoriert, aufs subtilste klugscheißen‘.“⁵

In his highly recommendable book „Understanding Comics“⁶, Scott McCloud sets himself the following aim: „Praktisch jedes wichtige Medium ist irgendwann als solches zum Gegenstand kritischer Untersuchung geworden. Aber dem Comic ist diese Aufmerksamkeit versagt geblieben. Wir wollen versuchen, dieses Manko zu beseitigen“⁷. Since, however, the comic book itself is not the central subject of this paper and a really thorough review would require a paper of its own, I will confine myself to rather rough and basic explanations relevant for our special case; for further information, the interested reader may refer to the bibliography at the end of the paper.

A Mass Medium Without a History

The first difficulty that occurs at the attempt of a historical overview on comics is the impossibility to clearly define a point in time that with one consent may be considered as the actual birth of comics; as a matter of fact, comics have been labelled as „a mass medium without a history“⁸ since, firstly, there has never been an archive that would thoroughly collect the totality of comic publications and, secondly, the sheer quantity of comics would defeat the hope of ever completing the collection. Thirdly, we may add, there is no final certainty of what and what not to include into the historical canon, or where to begin with: Can ancient cave paintings be considered as comics? Can Egyptian hieroglyphs be? While in fact there are profound arguments in favour of as well as against such inclusions (on one hand, for instance, the cave paintings are undoubtedly graphical representations of a certain narrative, on the other hand the hieroglyphs refer to sounds rather than to objects or events

⁴ Epilogue by Frank Miller in: Chris Claremont / Frank Miller: Wolverine 1-4, New York 1987.

⁵ Günter Metken: Comics, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 2.

⁶ Scott McCloud: Understanding Comics, New York 1993. Unfortunately, the American original was not available so I had to work with the German translation (Comics richtig lesen, Hamburg 1994).

⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

⁸ F. Knilli, C. Schwender, E. Gundelsheimer, E. Weisser: Comics and the Development of a Visual Culture, in: Friedrich Knilli / Siegfried Zielinski (ed.): Germanistische Medienwissenschaft: Comicforschung in der

and therefore may be considered as a system of letters rather than a sequence of images directly illustrating a notion of reality), we will leave this question unanswered and make do with the assumption that the genesis of comics reaches back into a time in which „erklären noch dasselbe war wie zeigen, und zeigen dasselbe wie erklären“⁹.

The comic is an art form based on the synthesis of the word and of the image, an art form „die zugleich beides [literature and painting] und keins von beiden ist: eine ganz neue Sprache“¹⁰. The comic’s specific potential is the ability to combine and complete the means of poetry and painting, the latter capturing „den Augenblick im Raum“ while the former’s „Allfähigkeit [...] dagegen mit dem Wirkungsdefizit fehlender Unmittelbarkeit bezahlt [ist]. Zwar kann das Buch beschreiben und vorschreiben, es fehlt ihm aber die Aktion, die lebendige Handlung und die Anschauung“¹¹. Thus, the comic, amalgamating and unifying the arts of word and image, may well be considered as a descendant from romantic *sympoesis* and the comic author as the „romantische Maler‘ als Poeten, als einen, der Raum literarisch erfahrbar macht“¹².

Though the word and the image are brought together in the comic, their semiotical difference, however, must be kept in mind: „Bilder sind Informationen, die sinnlich wahrgenommen werden. Wir brauchen keine besondere Ausbildung, um sie zu ‚verstehen‘. Die Botschaft ist unmittelbar verständlich“ whereas „Schrift ist Information, die bewußt erfaßt werden muß. Die abstrakten Symbole der Sprache zu entschlüsseln erfordert Zeit und spezielle Kenntnisse“¹³. Thus, due to the comic’s two main elements’ different receptional requirements, their alledged unity we just established is in constant danger of changing into divergence leaving them basically separated despite their coexistence on the printed page. This divergence, however, can already be found in the history of graphical signs, of letters and images: though the first characters were „nichts anderes als stilisierte Bilder“, in the course of time „das Schrifttum wurde immer abstrakter, immer differenzierter, immer kunstvoller und immer weniger bildhaft. Die Bildkunst entwickelte sich unterdessen in die entgegengesetzte Richtung: Weg von Abstraktion oder Stilisierung, hin zu Naturalismus und Konkretheit“¹⁴.

In order to avoid a fundamental discrimination between word and image and believing comics to be the medium to undo the historical disconnection of the signs, McCloud defines comics

Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1945-1984 (Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik Reihe C 4/3), Frankfurt am Main 1989, p. 46.

⁹ McCloud 1994, p. 169.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹ Helmut Schanze (ed.): Romantik-Handbuch, Stuttgart 1994, p. 4.

¹² Ibid., p. 5.

¹³ McCloud 1994., p. 57.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 152ff.

as „zu räumlichen Sequenzen angeordnete, bildliche oder andere Zeichen, die Informationen vermitteln und/oder eine ästhetische Wirkung beim Betrachter erzeugen sollen“¹⁵ which as a whole result in a form of „sequentielle Kunst“¹⁶. While this definition already implies the equality of word and image, McCloud argues that instead of stressing their difference which of course cannot be dissolved by just arranging them in one ensemble, their relation to one another should rather be regarded as a synenergetic correlation which eventually creates the special kind of tension that is so particular to comics.

This correlation can take on various forms up to an extent in which the word completely subordinates to the image, or vice versa (in fact, words are not *under all circumstances* required in comics). Regarding the possibilities of combination, McCloud suggests the following graduations of proportions¹⁷: 1. The *dominance of text* in which the images merely serve as illustrations of the text, but do not essentially contribute to it; 2. the *dominance of the image* in which the text rather is a supplement to a sequence of images that supplies the narration itself; 3. the *bilingual connection* in which the text and the image both have the same message; 3. the *additive connection* in which the image intensifies or comments on the text, or vice versa; 4. the *parallel connection* in which the text and image are considerably independent from each other, or take different directions; 5. the *montage* in which the text is integrated into the image as a visual element; 6. the *correlative connection* in which both text and image combined convey an idea that could not be articulated by scriptural or graphic means of expression alone. These definitions, however, are approximate approaches to orientation rather than strict and exact divisions, and often quite fluent to each other. With comics, the possibilities of composition are hardly limited, let alone by the imaginatory powers of the artist.

Regarding the composition of the individual image and the sequences of images, it might serve to refer to the categories of the theory of film (*montage, mise en scene, close up, total* etc.) to provide an efficient system of evaluation. In fact, film, or the *motion picture*, is another example of *sequential art* quite akin to the comic. Their main difference, however, is that the film presents its sequences of images in a dimension of *time* whereas the comic resorts to the dimension of *space*. In comics, „only a similarity with regard to the visible place of action exists; time and acoustic information are communicated by typographical or graphic symbols (bubble, zig-zag lines denoting sound, changes in size of type-face for changes in volume of sound) or are communicated through the dialogue or the caption. Thus, the comic

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 161ff.

reader must necessarily use more powers of imagination than a cinema audience or television viewer¹⁸.

As to the history of comics, to come back to the subject, McCloud justifiably argues that „von biblischen Szenen der Glasmalerei über Monets Bildfolgen bis zur Gebrauchsanweisung für dein Auto: Wenn wir sequentielle Kunst als Definition nehmen, tauchen plötzlich überall Comics auf¹⁹, but here, we will start our historical overview (with special regard to the evolution of the superheroes) with the prototype of the modern comic, that is, a sequence of drawn images, in printed form.

Stone Age

The modern comic finds its direct roots in caricatures consisting of one image only and published in journals of the 18th and 19th centuries. These caricatures usually were intended as a mockery of the person thus satirically depicted. Then, in the late 19th century, American journals such as *Puck* (est. 1877), *Judge* (1881), or *Life* (1883) began to establish short comic strips as contributions apart from a direct connection to a text. These strips were still without words and, despite their beginning emancipation from the written articles, funny little by-plays rather than integral parts of the publication.

The breakthrough came along with the emergence of the mass medium of the daily newspaper and the so-called sensational press in particular. In their rivalry for the highest circulation, the two biggest newspapers, Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, found out that next to sensational headlines, it is the comic strip supplement that attracts readers to the steady purchase of their publications. Thus, comic strips were included as a profitable bait for a possibly widest audience. Intended as a vehicle for commercial purposes right from the start, the likeable comic strip characters were soon used in advertisement campaigns for bubble gum, cigars etc.

But still, however, the comic strips - the term „comic“ derives from the fact that all of the strips had, more or less, humorous contents, which is also the reason why up until today, newspaper comic strips are referred to as „funnies“, a term which in the early 20th century was still synonymous with „comics“ – were completely bound up with the newspaper in which they were published. The first step towards an independent publication took place in 1911 when the *Chicago American* newspaper edited a collection of its *Mutt and Jeff* series which turned out to be a considerable success. Though this edition consisted of strips previously published in the newspaper, it must be considered as the very first example of a new kind of

¹⁸ Knilli / Zielinski 1989, p. 43.

publication – the comic book was born. Fast forward: In 1929, *The Funnies* was the first comic book that was not based on newspaper strips but consisted of strips originally written for this form of publication; in 1938, *Superman* was born, followed by *Batman* in 1939; in 1940, sixty comic book series were in circulation, and in 1954, they already summed up to a total of 650 titles. It should be kept in mind that all these events took place in the United States Of America and that no comparable development can elsewhere be established. The modern comic, as a matter of fact, is an American invention.

Golden Age

The late 1930s saw a milestone in the history of comics: the rise of the superheroes, the *Golden Age of Comics*. As a matter of fact, the superheroes' date of birth is anything but accidental, but directly linked to the political situation at that time and the beginning of the Second World War in particular: „Der zweite Weltkrieg war der wahre Vater der Superhelden. Denn erst als sich die Achsenmächte als Gegner für Superman & Co. anboten, konnten sie so richtig loslegen. 1941 fing der patriotische Kampf der nun zu charismatischen Führern gewandelten Superhelden an“²⁰. The function of comics changed dramatically: while formerly, the comic strip character simply had to be the protagonist of a short and entertaining a nation at war. Comic books were infiltrated by nationalistic agitation and became propaganda material within which it was the superheroes' task to give prove to America's superiority to the enemy in terms of morality as well as at warfare. Innumerable superheroes were created originally in order to represent the virtues of warring America; the most famous example of these heroes (and, as far as I know, the only one who has managed to survive until today) certainly is *Captain America* - whose very first action was „auf der Titelseite seines ersten Heftes im März 1941 Hitler höchstpersönlich einen krachenden Schlag ins Gesicht zu versetzen“²¹.

But the first great hausse of the superheroes did not last very long. After the war was over, the interest in superhuman patriots quickly ceased, and by the 1950s, at the latest, the heroes were literally out of work (a lot they shared with the actual veterans): „Das patriotische Feuer, an dem sich die Helden gewärmt hatten, brannte nur noch auf Sparflamme“²². Most comic book series about warfaring superheroes were cancelled simply because the reason for which they were created did no longer exist, and the few survivors like *Superman* or *Batman* sought

¹⁹ McCloud 1994, p. 28.

²⁰ Wolfgang J. Fuchs / Reinhold C. Reitberger: Comics. Anatomie eines Massenmediums, München 1971, p. 104.

²¹ Ibid., p. 114.

²² Ibid., p. 106.

refuge in fighting obscure extraterrestrials or ordinary criminals. The superheroes did not entirely die out, but after all they did lose their former degree of presence and their distinct cultural significance as national figureheads.



Left: *Johnny Canuck, Canada's Answer to Nazi Oppression* (Dime Comics #2, March 1942).
Right: *Logan confronting some Nazi bloke, paying tribute to the tradition of American superheroes* (*X-Men/WildC.A.T.s* #1: *Golden Age* (sic!), 1997).

Marvel Age

It took until 1962 before the superheroes should enjoy a great revivification with the beginning of the „*Marvel Age of Comics*“. With the creation of the likes of the *Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, the *Hulk* or the *Silver Surfer*, authors Stan Lee and Jack Kirby invented a whole new model of superhero. Other than their predecessors, those rather one-dimensional, invincible living war machines, the new superhuman protagonists now were granted an individual personality and eventually turned out to be surprisingly human. These characters were only too familiar with personal weaknesses even up to a tragical extent, they had to confront with ethical scruples as well as everyday problems, and, before all, they had to live a life apart from their occupation as a superhero and to face a world authentically reflecting a social reality (while *Superman* dwells in an urban ideal called *Metropolis*, *Spider-Man* lives in New York) beyond the reducing simplicity of a mere division between good and evil.

Whilst, for an instance, the main worry of an average Golden Age hero was how to do as much damage to the enemy's war machinery, *Peter Parker* a.k.a. *Spider-Man* must take great pains in order to somehow cope with the various troubles caused by his superheroic alter ego's permanent interference with his private life: on one hand, his superhuman powers enable him to do the most incredible things and to defeat the most dangerous villains, but on the other hand his double identity leaves him socially crippled. When *Spider-Man* must fight the *Hobgoblin*, *Peter Parker* cannot keep his date with *Gwen Stacy*. When *Spider-Man* is trapped by *Doctor Octopus*, *Peter Parker* cannot pay his overdue visit to his elderly *Aunt May*. Because *Spider-Man* always has to save the world, *Peter Parker* is forced to leave university etc. pp. (eventually, this permanent conflict culminates in a psychotic identity crisis). In short, a new level of complexity and the authenticity has been achieved in the *Marvel Age of Comics*; „die jungfräuliche Naiveté der Comics des ‚Golden Age‘ ist verloren, die Gestalt des Superhelden in Frage gestellt, da sich immer mehr Gegenwartsbezug in die Comics einschleicht“²³ (for an instance, the present X-Men story „Operation Zero Tolerance“ obviously is a direct comment on and condemnation of New York's controversial recent anti-crime policy).

Modern Age

At present, finally, there is an incredibly vast variety of comics. The classical form of the newspaper strip, of course, still exists, and apart from the superhero comics, there are educational comics, art comics, the so-called graphic novels, Manga comics, adult comics, special interest comics, comics labelled as mainstream, independent, underground, or even postmodern, there are film versions of comics (the most recent consisting of *Batman*, *Spawn*, or *Blade*) along with extensive merchandise.

I am aware of the fact that, in order to not completely lose touch with the actual subject of this paper, I necessarily had to leave out quite a lot of things and to restrictively focus on others. Hopefully, however, this brief account may serve to give the reader a notion of a wider context which also is part of this examination, and to give way to move on from comics in general to *Wolverine* in particular.

²³ Ibid., p. 118.

2. The Wolverine Profile

„But you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.“²⁴

In the further analysis of *Wolverine* and its connection to the „American myth“, we will step by step assemble a notion of the general nature of myths and mythology. To begin with, we will take a look at the basic criteria that qualify a piece of literature for mythological consideration. According to Slotkin, „a mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors“ and basically consisting of „a protagonist or hero, with whom the audience is presumed to identify in some way; a universe in which the hero may act, which is presumably a reflection of the audience’s conception of the world and the gods; and a narrative, in which the interaction of the hero and universe is described“²⁵. In the following, we will examine if *Wolverine* can meet with these requirements.

Introduction To The X-Universe

If it is true that „at the source of the American myth there lies the fatal opposition, the hostility between two worlds, two races, two realms of thought and feeling“²⁶, then in *Wolverine*, a truly American mythology unfolds. The world of *Wolverine* is part of the *universe* of the *X-Men*, the setting is today’s United States Of America as we know it (the *world*) - except for the recent arrival of a new kind of genetically advanced species of man, videlicet the mutant, or homo superior (the *gods*). Considered as the next step of evolution by some, as dangerous and detestable abnormalities by others, the emergence of the homo superior has brought the extents of racial conflicts to a new dimension.

Worldwide, a small but growing number of human beings has been affected by a change in their genetic structure. These - quite individual and differently developed - mutations on the one hand provide special superhuman powers (increased strength, speed or senses, telepathic or telekinetic abilities, the ability to fly etc.), on the other hand these powers often are very difficult to control and sometimes come along with strange or even repulsive physical disfigurement. Frightened by their appearance and the sometimes disastrous consequences of

²⁴ D.H. Lawrence: *Studies in Classic American Literature*, as quoted in Slotkin 1973, p. 2.

²⁵ Slotkin 1973, p. 3ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

their untrained powers' outbursts, most of the „normal“ humans look upon the mutants as freaks and a menace to their society. The homo superior is the minority most hated and discriminated against on earth, and harsh political measures against the „mutant threat“ have become the central issues for election campaigns.

In this explosive situation, Professor Charles Francis Xavier, one of the first mutants to discover his special abilities and earth's most powerful telepath, has recently founded the „Xavier Institute For Higher Learning“, an institution obliged to Xavier's dream of peaceful coexistence of homo sapiens and homo superior in which mutants are granted the possibility to learn how to control their powers as well as to cope with the hostility with which the world meets them. Xavier himself holds the office of the mutants' mentor and teacher, and his pupils are called the „X-Men“, the „X“ signifying the mutants' alien nature as well as their relation to Xavier and his belief of equality and social harmony. Intended as a refuge, an educational or even therapeutic center, the Institute has eventually become the headquarter of the X-Men as a strikeforce against anyone who threatens the life of humans, mutants, or the hope of their harmonic relationship, be the aggressor of an origin human, mutant, or extraterrestrial.

The one thing that is still missing in our examination of the X-Men regarding the disposition of the mythological narration is the *protagonist*, the *hero*. All of the X-Men are heroes, and additionally, they are *superheroes*. In our special case, for our special cause, we will concentrate on only one member of the team. Our protagonist is the homo superior called *Wolverine*.

For a basic, but possibly comprehensive knowledge of this character that cannot really be expected from a reader not too familiar with the world of comics, or Marvel Comics in particular, I have prepared a dossier on *Wolverine* – which, of course, can under no circumstances thoroughly substitute the lecture of the dozens and dozens of the comics themselves.



Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Well no... it's Wolvie!

Wolverine's Biographical Data²⁷

First appearance:	<i>Hulk</i> #181, 1974.
„Real name:	Logan (last name unrevealed)
Other aliases:	Weapon X, Patch
Identity:	Secret
Occupation:	(current) Adventurer, member of the X-Men (possible former) Samurai (former) CIA operative, member of Canada's Weapon X program, leader of Alpha Flight, bartender on Madripoor
Place of birth:	Unknown, presumably in Canada
Marital status:	Single
Known relatives:	Windsong (wife, deceased)
Base of operations:	(current) Xavier Institute for Higher Learning (former) the Clan Yashida compound in Japan, Department H in Canada.
Group affiliation:	(current) X-Men,

²⁷ quoted from: <http://www.marvel.com/x-men/profiles/wolverine.html> (the official Marvel Comics website – visitation is highly recommended, especially to have a look at the *cerebro files!*)

	(former) Clan Yashida, the Weapon X Program, Alpha Flight
Height:	5'3"
Weight:	(without adamantium skeleton) 200 lbs. (with adamantium skeleton) 300 lbs.
Eyes:	Blue
Hair:	Black
Strength level:	While Wolverine may be of an advanced age, he possesses the normal human strength of a man in his prime with his height and build who engages in intensive regular exercise. While possessing the adamantium skeleton, Wolverine's strength was increased to the human maximum, making him capable of lifting (pressing) 800 lbs.
Known superhuman powers:	<p>Wolverine is a mutant with a number of enhancements to his physiology. Wolverine possesses heightened senses, making him capable of seeing things at a maximum distance greater than that of a normal human. His hearing is enhanced in a similar manner, and he is able to recognize people and objects by scent, even if that person or object is hidden. Logan can use these enhanced senses to track anyone, with an impressive degree of success.</p> <p>Wolverine possesses retractable bone claws that are housed in his forearms. At will Wolverine can release these claws through his skin between the knuckles on each hand. The skin between the knuckles tears and bleeds, but bleeding is quickly halted by his healing factor. The claws are naturally sharp and tougher than that of normal human bone structure. This allows Wolverine to be able to cut through most types of flesh and natural materials. (Note: While Wolverine possessed his adamantium skeleton, his claws were able to cut through almost any material without any fear of damage to the claws.)</p>

Lastly, Wolverine possesses an accelerated healing factor based on his physiology. While most normal humans heal injuries over a long period of time, Wolverine's healing factor speeds up that natural process. Wolverine's natural healing has been advanced to the point where he can heal extensive injuries (such as broken limbs) in a matter of hours to days. This factor gives him a higher resistance to poisons and toxins, and he can recover from almost any injury. The more extensive the injury, the longer the healing time will be.

Wolverine is not immortal, however. If the injuries are extensive enough, especially if they result in the loss of vital organs, large amounts of blood, and/or loss of physical form (such as having flesh burned away by fire or acid), Logan can die.

Wolverine, again due to his healing factor, has an enhanced resistance to disease, as well as an extended life span. Despite Wolverine's chronological age, he is still as healthy and physically fit as a man in his prime.

Abilities:

Due to his extensive training as a CIA operative, a Samurai, and as a member of the Weapon X program, Wolverine is a master of multiple forms of martial arts, weapons, and vehicles. He is also a trained expert in computers, explosives, and assassination techniques.“

Wolverine's Historical Background²⁸

„The first fact that we have almost sure about *Logan's* past is the time that he was in World War II. At that time, he fought side by side with *Captain America* and saved *Natasha Romanofa*, who would be the *Black Widow*, from Ninja's of the *Hand*. *Logan* looked a lot like he looks now (before the feral transgression), which means that his healing factor could have maintained him alive for many years before that point. He was already trained in combat arts and had a vast experience in strategy. Another old memory takes place in the Spanish Civil

²⁸ quoted from: <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/2871/wolverine.html> .

War, where he fought along *Puck* of *Alpha Flight* against *Lady Deathstrike*. Unless all of them had memory implants, this time was for sure.

Logan was also a member of CIA, working with *Maverick* and *Sabretooth*. We know that *Creed* and *North* also had memory implants, but *Carol Danvers* also knew *Logan* in this time, and so did *Omega Red*, his greatest enemy then. It seems that in that time, he did not have the adamantium implants, and didn't use his bone claws either.

Now for the most strange part, the *Weapon X* program. This organization took some mutants, such as *Wolverine* and *Sabretooth*, so they could make experiences with them. They laced adamantium – the hardest and most enduring metal on earth - to *Logan's* skeleton and put memory implants inside his head. The *Weapon X* saga, that was written by Barry Windsor-Smith, shows three scientists "working" on *Logan*, after kidnapping him.

After the *Weapon X* program, *Logan* started to run through Canada until he met *Heather* and *James Hudson*. They took care of him, and *Logan* even came to love *Heather*. The Hudsons were the leaders of the *Department H*, an organization that would unite many Canadian super-heroes. *Logan* joined the team and in one of his first missions, he took the *Hulk*, who was rampaging in Canada. He lost that battle, but there were rematches.

Years later, *Logan* left the *Weapon X* program when *Professor Charles Xavier* invited him to join his *New X-Men*. *Logan* left the *Department H* and some time later was attacked by his former team mates of *Alpha Flight* and defended by the *X-Men*.

Logan also had tales in Japan, where it seems that he was trained in Martial Arts by *Ogun*, saved *Mariko Yashida* and fell in love with her and adopted little *Amiko*. His past with *Ogun* is unclear, but he killed his sensei to save *Kitty Pryde*, years after his training. *Logan* almost married *Mariko*, but the Clan did not accept him and he gained the Clan Sword, forged with alien metal by a demon instead of *Mariko's* love. He saved *Amiko* from a dragon when this monster attacked her village and killed his mother. *Logan* adopted the girl and gave her to *Yukio*, a former love of his. He also had many adventures in Madri Poor, when he left the *X-Men* for solo adventures as *Patch*.

Years later, *Logan* "killed" his love *Mariko Yashida* when she was poisoned and asked him to end her suffering.

In the *X-Men*, *Logan* met *Jean Grey* and had his greatest passion: but the flame was reduced when he got more human and understood that she belonged to *Scott Summers*. He developed the Fast Ball Special with *Colossus*, an attack that he used inverted against the *Dark Phoenix*. At this time his rage for *Sabretooth* was great and he had many other enemies, like *Bloodscream*. When the *X-Men* crossed the Siege Perilous in Australia, *Logan* was left

behind, and *Pierce* and his *Reavers* put him in a cross, almost killing him. *Logan* was saved by *Jubilee*, who was hiding in the Australian Complex. Both of them then went to Madri Poor and saved *Psylocke* from the *Hand*. Later they joined the *X-Men* again and stayed there since now.

Back in the *X-Men*, *Logan* fought *Magneto* and lost his adamantium revealing his bone claws, that not even him knew about. His healing factor could not sustain all of the damage and started to fail. Some time after *Logan* recovered his healing factor and returned to the *X-Men*. Some time later, *Genesis* killed *Cyber* and took the adamantium in his skin to forge a new skeleton to *Wolverine*. He tried to place it inside *Logan*, but he rejected it to save *Cannonball*. He went into a more feral state and killed *Tyler*, and that only made worse his relation with *Cable* (the villain's father). He slowly returned to his humanity with the help of *Elektra*. Now, *Logan* is back in the *X-Men* with a much faster healing power.

Many of *Logan's* memories may come from the memory implants in the *Weapon X* project. It seems that he was abandoned by his tribe in Canada for being weak, and was raised by wolverines in Canada. He took the name *Wolverine* after a battle against a demon when he saved an Indian tribe in Canada.“

This collection of facts and reproduction of his background should be sufficient for a further reflection on *Wolverine* as a mythological protagonist. In the following, I will try to point out *Logan's* distinct similarity to romantic character *Edgar Huntly*, a similarity which in my opinion comes to an extent that allows *Wolverine* to be considered as *Huntly's* modern counterpart, or his equivalent in the universe of comics at the end of the 20th century.

3. Madness: The Animal Within

„Finally, wounded unto death, the warrior drags himself into the castle’s courtyard, and there, at last, beholds the face of his beloved. ‘Why?’ he asks. ‘My love is for a man’, she replies, ‘not a beast clad in human form who knows nothing of honor, or duty, or any of the beliefs I hold most dear’.“²⁹

*„Ich sah seine Augen ... ich sah seine Wut ... den Hass ... war es die Mordlust eines wilden Tieres oder das Grauen vor sich selbst?“*³⁰

Logan and Edgar

There is a striking kinship between the two characters of Wolverine and Edgar Huntly (and, of course, Huntly’s double Clithero). While „Wolvie had been portrayed as a terminal psychotic, akin to human nitroglycerin, ready to explode into a berserker fury without warning“³¹, correspondingly „Brown’s elemental man is nothing but a hairy machine [...] unshaved, undressed, dirtied, and wounded, a creature of instinct and uncommon physical strength, a proverbial loose cannon“³², a description that again would be perfectly adequate for Logan; moreover, both fundamentally suffer from the conflict of „how to harness the passionate and irrational aspects of human nature without destroying human nature itself; how to check and balance their destructive antisocial impulses and convert them to sociable and cultivated virtue without simply expunging them“³³.

Now, before taking a closer look at the inner conflict Wolverine and Huntly/Clithero have in common, there is yet another thing shared between them, namely the mysterious uncertainty about their past. While Huntly continuously suffers from temporal amnesia due to physical exhaustion and his case of insomnia, Wolverine’s memory has been distorted by mnemonic implants. Whereas Clithero enters as „a stranger, whose adventures and character, previously to his coming hither, were unknown to us“³⁴ and who „communicated [...] no part of his early history“³⁵, Wolverine, even when integrated into the team of the *X-Men*, still suppresses parts of his few residual memories or at least will not relate them to his comrades, and thus partly voluntarily holds onto his status as an outsider and a loner.

²⁹ Chris Claremont / Frank Miller: *Wolverine*, New York 1987.

³⁰ *Waffe X*, p. 28.

³¹ *Wolverine*, preface by Chris Claremont.

³² Norman S. Gabo: Introduction to *Edgar Huntly*, in: Charles Brockden Brown: *Edgar Huntly Or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, Middlesex 1988, p. xvii.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

³⁴ p. 14.

³⁵ p. 89.

Huntly's adventures, by the way, in certain regards have a quite strong resemblance with those of a superhero. „Where was this series of hardships and perils to end?“, he wonders: „No sooner was one calamity eluded, than I was beset by another“³⁶, a portion which corresponds to „the surges of countless climaxes“ the superhero finds himself involved in, chasing him „from one battle scene to the next [...] in an endless chain“³⁷ of adventures „overleaping the bars of time and space, reversal of the laws of inanimate and intelligent existence“³⁸.

The Transition

For Wolverine as well as for Huntly, the problem is the outburst of a dark and menacing predisposition in their very nature. But though the ground for the escalation is already laid in their character, in both cases it is a crucial turning point which directly causes their dark side to break free.

As to Huntly, this turning point is his awakening in the night of the cavernal pit he has fallen into during a phase of insomnia. At first, with his memory nearly extinguished, he is in a state of total disorientation and confusion: „I emerged from oblivion by degrees so slow and so faint, that their succession cannot be marked. [...] I was conscious, for a time, of nothing but existence. [...] I endeavoured to recall the past, but the past was too much in contradiction to the present, and my intellect was too much shattered by external violence, to allow me accurately to review it [...] all remembrance of my journey hither was lost“³⁹. In the following, Huntly, formerly always having objected to any form of violence, meets a situation in which he is thrown back upon just the primal instincts of survival - through the death of others. It turns out that in spite of his ever-alleged fundamental rejection of violence and bloodshed, he actually is capable of killing animals as well as human beings due to resident ancient „powers that are latent in his constitution“⁴⁰. Of course, Huntly's acts of violence are caused by the extremity of the situation and are a nightmare to himself; but, however, a portion of his personality has surfaced that he did not believe to exist at all, and afterwards, this existence can never be denied.

As to Wolverine, there are but two turning points: Firstly, the abduction to the *Weapon X* project (when against his will he received the adamantium) and, secondly, the battle against

³⁶ p. 214.

³⁷ Knilli / Zielinski 1989, p. 37.

³⁸ Edgar Huntly, p. 229.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 152ff.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 159.

Magneto (when, against his will, again, the adamantium was extracted from his skeleton in the most painful way).

The *Weapon X* project – which may be considered as the equivalent to Huntly's awakening in the cave – was planned to create the perfect soldier, the „hairy machine“ whose formerly free will would be reduced to a mere and all-prevailing killer instinct. Just as it was intended, the cruel process of the attachment of the adamantium and the mnemonic implants caused a total breakdown of Logan's psyche. Like Huntly, by the time he regains conscience Logan's cognitive condition is in a state of complete disorder, but additionally, Logan's awakening also corresponds to Huntly's later finding himself amidst the corpses of the Indians he has killed: „Mein Kopf ... was war hier los? [...] Da. Eine Leiche? Alles zerstört. Was war hier los? [...] An mir ... Blut. Mein Blut? Keine Wunden ... ich habe ihn also ...? Wieso?“⁴¹. Other than Huntly, however, neither did Logan object to violence before, nor was he strange to homicide – indeed, his unscrupulousness based on his specific genetical avatarism made him the perfect candidate for his former occupation as a CIA hitman as well as for the *Weapon X* project. The difference is that the savage part of Huntly's personality was only latent before it finally was called upon, whereas Logan's wild side was already rather predominant, but eventually totally unleashed by nearly eliminating his intellect.

Paradoxically, the removal of the adamantium had about the same consequences as the process of its attachment, though at an even higher level. After *Magneto*, by use of his power to control the forces of magnetism, had violently extracted the adamantium from his skeleton, Logan fell into a state of mental and physical regression. It turned out that the adamantium, while laced to Logan's bones, had served to prevent further development of his natural mutation which now inobstructedly caused a sudden change in Logan's physiology. While his outward appearance increasingly resembled that of a wild animal, correspondingly his already enhanced instincts gained supremacy over his intellect. The *Weapon X* project had turned Logan into a berserk killer machine by shattering his intellect, and now, Logan's humanity which he slowly and laboriously had to regain again was endangered by the unhindered rise of his animal nature.

Again, this development finds an approximate equivalent in the *Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* when Huntly, deprived of proper clothing and worn-out by the passed troubles, is mistaken for an Indian by his fellow settlers in search of him. As well as with Logan (though, of course, in a totally different way), Huntly's wild inheritance now has extended to visible evidence – while the former looks like an animal, the latter looks like a „savage“.

⁴¹ Waffe X, p. 103.

It can be summarized that with *Wolverine* as well as with *Edgar Huntly*, „a strange change between man and animal takes place“⁴² in which mysteriously „beasts and men interchange shapes and qualities“⁴³. „The transition I had undergone“, Huntly says, „was so wild and inexplicable“⁴⁴; at any rate, the statement applies to *Wolverine* just as well..

The Internal Abyss

The very thing both Logan and Huntly have to confront with is the abyss lurking in their constitution. Both of them inevitably find themselves under the „obedience to an impulse which [they] could not controul, nor resist“⁴⁵, an impulse which is ancient, archaic, anti-social, animal, dark, destructive and dangerous: the call of the wild, the killer instinct, the survival of the strongest, the relapse into savageness. „Das Wilde ist in mir“, Logan admits, „im finstersten Abgrund meiner Seele [...] wieso soll ich nicht nachgeben?“⁴⁶ And, giving in then to his wild side, „my heart overflowed with cruelty“, confesses Huntly, „and I pondered on the delight I should experience in rending some living animal to pieces“⁴⁷.

An analysis of that internal abyss would be a kind of theodizée. If „by putting somnambulism at the center of *Edgar Huntly*, Brown suggests that moral and social disorder is a medical problem“⁴⁸, this suggestion is adopted and extended in *Wolverine* where the protagonist's psychological distortion still is preceded by his genetic constitution. And if again the problem lies in the structure of the DNA, it lies in the very core of life itself. Logan's adamantium skeleton, however, as a symbol of the possibly greatest horror to violently invade one's body as well as one's soul, metaphorically depicts the impossibility to isolate and exterminate the dark parts of our nature: „Ich kann nicht schreien ... oder es töten. Denn es ist in mir! Unter meiner Haut. So tief ...“⁴⁹. In Logan's case, „it“, the horror, literally *is* under his skin; to be more precise, „it“ is laced to his bones, „it“ runs through his veins, „it“ is part of every single cell of his body. Correspondingly, since it is impossible „to exclude from my bosom, all sanguinary or vengeful impulses“⁵⁰, Huntly justifiably „might see reason to embrace the assassin as my best friend“⁵¹, because the savage, the assassin, is part of him.

⁴² Slotkin 1973, p. 384.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 385.

⁴⁴ Edgar Huntly, p. 187.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁶ *Wolverine* 22

⁴⁷ Edgar Huntly p. 157.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. xix.

⁴⁹ Waffe X, p. 106.

⁵⁰ Edgar Huntly, p. 29.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 31.

Finally, if, due to the inevitability of one's own personal darkness and its predisposition in the human soul, „consciousness itself is the malady; the pest; of which he only is cured who ceases to think“⁵², there seem to be but two possibilities of recovery: either to die, or to totally dismiss conscience and give in to one's dark desires, to drown each articulate thought in a rush of blood. Or, as Logan puts it after having slaughtered six enemies: „I lost control. I feel sick. I feel great.“⁵³

The Physician

Luckily for them, neither Logan nor Huntly are completely alone in the struggle against the demons lurking in their nature. In both cases, appropriate to the „medical“ nature of the conflict, „the physician [is offered as] a possible major figure of hope [...] models of maturity and wisdom, virtuosi of many talents, practical idealists perhaps who looked at the world with even heads. Admirably learned, they were not mere technicians [...] because their curiosity and social responsibility were so vast, their experience so deep, their sense of duty so steadfast“⁵⁴, they are the ones capable of helping their patient to gain control over the sinister „powers that are latent in his constitution“⁵⁵.

In Huntly's case, the „figure of hope“, or even „agent of amelioration“⁵⁶, is represented in the character of *Sarsefield*. Sarsefield comes to Huntly as „a worldly-wise and fatherly man, a teacher as well as a skilled surgeon“ from whom he learns „the art of sophisticated concealment [...], how to bury in socially acceptable forms what [one] do[es] not want to see others“⁵⁷, or how to control and to be safe from one's baser passions by locking them away. The seemingly unopenable box containing Clithero's surrogate mother's letters serves as a metaphor for that art of concealment.



Professor X.

⁵² Edgar Huntly, p. 267.

⁵³ Wolverine

⁵⁴ Edgar Huntly, p. xix.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. xx.

Sarsefield's counterpart on Logan's side is *Charles Francis Xavier* a.k.a. *Professor X*, founder of the *X-Men* and the world's most powerful telepath. In his self-established „Institute For Higher Learning“, an institution obliged to Xavier's dream of peaceful coexistence of homo sapiens and homo superior, mutants are granted the possibility to learn about the nature of their powers and how to control them. As the founder and head of the *X-Men* and due to his constant presence at the Institute, Xavier still surpasses *Sarsefield* as a guiding figure, and moreover, he is even more aware of his therapeutic function than *Sarsefield* is. The following dialogue with the psychopathic mutant *Sabretooth* (Wolverine's evil double and the approximate equivalent to *Clithero*) demonstrates Xavier's estimation of himself as a therapist: „Ich wollte dich befreien – von diesen Trieben, die dich zur Bestie machen.“ - `Was bist du naiv, Charlie. Hast nie daran gedacht, daß ich genau so sein will!?' - `Was du willst, ist irrelevant. Deine Wünsche stehen im Konflikt zur übrigen Gesellschaft – Unschuldige, die man vor dir beschützen muß“⁵⁸. In spite of their position as a paternal and reliable guide, neither *Sarsefield* nor Xavier is completely above failure. As to *Sarsefield*, he cannot bring himself to forgive *Clithero*, nay does even refuse to treat his wounds; and „once [he] becomes the enemy, his curative powers are gone“⁵⁹. Xavier's failure is of a similar kind, but extends to comparatively astronomical proportions. Ironically, he of all people turned out to be incapable of keeping his own dark side under complete control. Eventually, his baser emotions of anger, hate and disappointment which he so far had constantly suppressed gave birth to the entity called *Onslaught*, whose aim, contrary to Xavier's dream, was the rule of the homo superior and the extinction of the homo sapiens. *Onslaught* was the most powerful foe the *X-Men* ever fought, and his final defeat was on the cost of the lives of the superhero teams of the *Fantastic Four* and the *Avengers*. After *Onslaught*, a peaceful coexistence of homo sapiens and homo superior is more unlikely than ever.

It has shown that both „physicians“ represent a reference to a possible solution, but in the end must fail to relieve their protégées from their sufferings.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. xx.

⁵⁸ X-Men Special 2

⁵⁹ Edgar Huntly, p. xxi.

4. Frontiers: A Walk On The Wild Side

„Had some mysterious power snatched me from the earth, and cast me, in a moment, into the heart of the wilderness?“⁶⁰

Given that, typically, „an American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness“⁶¹, it should be examined then how Logan and Huntly as American heroes do relate to the wilderness, or what role it does play in the respective narratives, and in American mythologies in general. If the fundamental experience of the American colonists was that of being „caught between [...] hostile worlds“⁶², these worlds would consist of the Old World of Europe and the New World of the American continent, of Whites and Indians, of Christianity and „heathenism“, or, paradigmatically, of „culture“ and „savageness“. Now, as Foucault⁶³ suggests, the relation between a thing such as „culture“ and its alledged opposite „savageness“ is less a mere opposition than a field „wo es eher um die Grenzen als um die Wesenseinheit einer Kultur geht. [...] Man könnte eine Geschichte der Grenzen schreiben [...] mit denen eine Kultur etwas zurückweist, was für sie außerhalb liegt; und während ihrer ganzen Geschichte sagt diese geschaffene Leere, dieser freie Raum, durch den sie sich isoliert, ganz genau soviel über sie wie über ihre Werte aus“⁶⁴. In that history of frontiers, the American concept of the frontier must be granted an extra chapter. Savageness seems to be an integral part of the American culture – as its contradiction in itself, as a rejection both internal and external, as a non-culture only from which a culture can be constituted.

The colonists of European descent entered a primeval land to which European standards were not applicable and that was not easy to settle. The forming American „national identity“ was strongly associated „with the effort of [...] conquering the wilderness“⁶⁵, a conquest which aimed at making the hostile surroundings inhabitable. Thus, the colonists were deeply „preoccupied with defining [...] the precise nature of their [...] relationship to the wilderness“⁶⁶. Since the colonies, the embryonic cells of a coming civilization, were enclosed by the wilderness, the savage adversary of civilization was always present. The constant threat of an uncultivated, hostile surrounding may be considered as the source of the „special

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 164.

⁶¹ Slotkin 1973, p. 22.

⁶² Ibid., p. 229.

⁶³ Michel Foucault: Wahnsinn und Gesellschaft. Eine Geschichte des Wahns im Zeitalter der Vernunft, Frankfurt am Main 1989.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁵ Slotkin 1973, p.230

⁶⁶ 15

demonic personification of the American wilderness⁶⁷ in American literature. Wilderness and civilization, however, are discriminated from one another by the *frontier*, and is the frontier which determines their relationship. Ultimately, the significance of the colonists' experience of being caught between two antagonistic principles manifested itself in the original American „myth of the frontier“⁶⁸.

The frontier is not alone a geographical line of demarcation. According to Slotkin, American writers used „frontier types as masks for philosophic principles and social values“. Analogous to the colonists' civilizational struggle against the wilderness, the hero of a novel must face the antagonisms of „the symbolic drama of a Romantic novel pitting reason against passion, savagery against civilization, rebellious anarchism against respect for order and precedence“⁶⁹: the frontier becomes the general metaphor for the clash of adversarial principles. And not only is the hero drawn into this clash by *external* circumstances; the battle is as well *internal*, and his own psyche is the battlefield. The outward frontier between civilization and wilderness is accompanied by the metaphysical inward frontier of good and evil, and finally these two types of frontiers amalgamate in the mythological narrative.

The Suppression of Violence

In *Edgar Huntly*, the landscape directly illustrates the inner conflict of the hero. His „search in the physical wilderness is likewise a mask for his inquisition into his own mind and soul“⁷⁰, and the exploration of the alien physical nature is as well the exploration of his own psychical nature. While the Inglefield settlement represents civilizational standards of reason and social conventions, or the safety of reasonable humanity, the wilderness stands for the irrational, untamed, primal instincts of Edgar's psyche, and corresponding to his whereabouts, one side of his nature overlays the other. As soon as he passes the torrent into the wilderness, the frontier between civilization and savagery, his formerly civilizational suppressed wild side is free to surface and to „exhibit [its] genuine effects“⁷¹. Huntly's expedition becomes „a hunt for his identity from among the choices offered him by the American wilderness – that symbolic equivalent of the tangled mind of man“⁷². Though the emergence of Huntly's dark side is frightening and disastrous, it is still *natural* after all. The powers that make him kill and turn into a „savage“ are no alien elements, but „latent in his constitution“. Huntly simply

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 4

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 5

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 371ff.

⁷⁰ Slotkin 1973, p. 389.

⁷¹ Edgar Huntly, p. 13.

⁷² Slotkin 1973, p. 390.

has passed a frontier within his own psyche and entered parts formerly unknown, but parts that always have existed. The influence of his wild side is a question of degree, and as a matter of fact, Huntly had always in some measure been attracted by the wild since already at the beginning of the novel he admits that „a nocturnal journey in districts so romantic and wild as these [...] was more congenial to my temper than a noon-day ramble“⁷³.

The Violent Suppression

In the case of *Wolverine*, the relation between civilization and wilderness is still a bit different. Here, the idea of „wilderness“ has shifted from „savagery“ (as opposed by „civilized behaviour“) towards „naturalness“ (as opposed by „civilizational corruption“) in a certain way of cultural criticism. Whereas Huntly, who was born in the civilization and enjoyed scholarly education, is forced to tackle the wild side of his soul, Logan supposedly was born in the wilderness and finds it more difficult to adapt to the world of civilization. While *Edgar Huntly* rather shows the horror of the outbreak of the primal instincts resident in the human psyche, *Wolverine* stresses the unnaturalness of certain civilizational restrictions, and thus „civilization“ acquires a connotation of unhealthy artificiality. The dichotomy of cultural reason versus savage madness shifts to that of over-civilized anaemia versus unspoilt natural vitality.

Logan definitively sees his origin in the wilderness: „This is home to me – the Canadian Rockies – land as stark an’ elemental as my soul. I’m here on business. To hunt. To kill“⁷⁴. With regard to the ever-increasing complexity and complicatedness of today’s stage of civilization, the vital elementarity of life (which formerly under the etiquette of „savagery“ was believed to endanger all sorts of social and cultural values) now is shown to be in need of protection. Modern civilization, in its attempt to subsume every aspect of the human being under its rather inhuman logic of economy and technology, increasingly disables the individual from certain vital experiences only a „natural“ way of living could allegedly provide: „In der Wildnis zu jagen ... frei zu sein ... ein wunderbares Gefühl“⁷⁵. In this concept of the relation between civilization and wilderness, the former is depicted as a possible imprisonment, the latter as a last resort granting personal freedom and the possibility to satisfy one’s natural needs: „Wie soll ich es erklären? Es ist, als ob ich verreise ... in irgendein Land, wo es Zivilisation und Gesetze nicht gibt. Aber leuchtende Farben gibt es dort ... ganz neue Gerüche [...] neuartige Gefühle brauen sich in mir zusammen wie ein Unwetter. Das heißt

⁷³ Edgar Huntly, p. 6f.

⁷⁴ *Wolverine*

⁷⁵ *Wolverine* 5

nicht, daß ich meinen Verstand verliere. Wild sein bedeutet nicht, dumm zu werden. Es ist nur so, daß ich die Menschen anders sehe ... manche sehe ich ... als Beute“⁷⁶.

It must be added that apart from the frontier between culture and savageness, Logan in his affinity to Japan also crosses the frontier between different kinds of culture. But immediately, there is the same problem: While western civilization sees in him savage animal, in the Japanese civilization Logan is a „gaijin“ without honour.

The frontier determines the relationship between the discriminated principles in a way that is conjunctive rather than disjunctive, and the frontier itself is a connection rather than a division. The frontier links culture and savageness, reason and madness, and establishes a whole, a complementary relation between elements of total mutual negation which yet cannot exist without each other. But not only determines the frontier the relationship of the elements, it determines the elements themselves in dependence on its shifting, on one field's expansion and the other's diminution. „Diese Struktur ist konstitutiv für das, was Sinn und Nicht-Sinn ist, oder vielmehr für jene Reziprozität, durch die sie miteinander verbunden sind. Diese Struktur allein kann über jene allgemeine Tatsache berichten, daß es in unserer Kultur keine Vernunft ohne Wahnsinn geben kann [...] die Freiheit des Wahnsinns versteht sich nur von der Höhe der Festung her, die ihn gefangenhält“⁷⁷, and vice versa.



The inseparable opponents in their eternal battle:
Culture vs. Savagery, Reason vs. Madness, Man vs. Beast.

⁷⁶ Wolverine 9

⁷⁷ Foucault 1989, p. 12f.

5. Myths: American Archaism

„Stan Lee, der gern Campus-Vorträge hält und mit Studenten diskutiert, hat erklärt, seine Superhelden erfüllen für die heutige Welt die gleiche Funktion wie Märchen, Legenden und Sagen für frühere Generationen. Sie seien die Mythologie des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts.“⁷⁸

So far, we have examined the protagonist, the universe and the narrative of the myth, i.e. the realization of the myth or the „myth-artifact“⁷⁹, as Slotkin calls it. However, in order to come to a better understanding of the artifact, it will now be necessary to transcend it and to supply a theoretical framework of the nature of the myth itself. This framework then should provide for further insights into the American Myth and its manifestations.

Theory of the Myth

We have already mentioned the „national character“ being portrayed in the myth, and a people’s certain experience being the source of the myth; now, the former is the effect of the latter just as the latter is the cause for the former and between these two, there is the myth canalizing life into literature, or experience into mythology. Of all people of one social or cultural community, this translation is accomplished by the poet who, using his special talent of a „mythopoeic mode of consciousness“⁸⁰, generates the mythologic tale from „the historical experience of a people [that] constitute[s] part of that inner reality which the work of the artist draws on, illuminates, and explains“⁸¹.

A myth can be regarded as a partly conscious, partly unconscious construction of the reception of reality, moral values and social conventions embodied and reflected in one culture’s literature. Myths, emerging from the collective and being canalized by the individual, derive from needs and experiences real and imaginary, individual and collective, personal and historical. For the community concerned, a myth functions as:

- individual and collective memory
- canon of imperatives for belief and action
- a means of constructing a cultural identity.

⁷⁸ Metken 1970, p. 96.

⁷⁹ Slotkin 1973, p. 8.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 4.

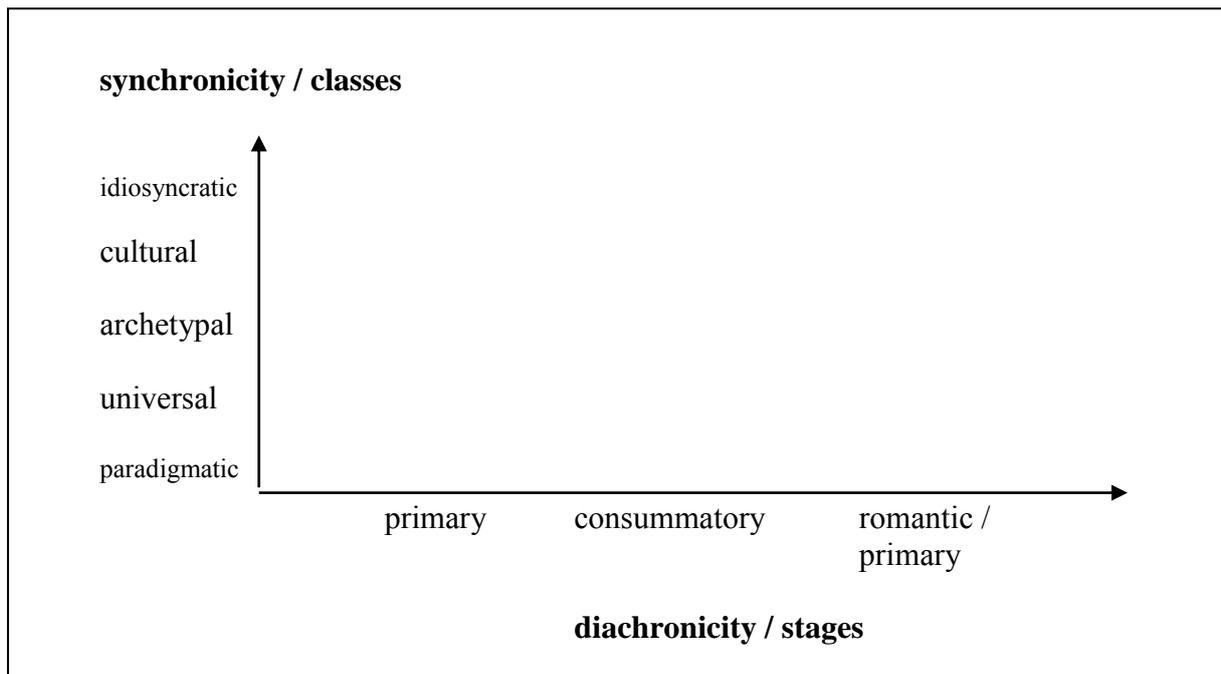
Furthermore, certain qualities of the myth can be measured on synchronic and diachronic parameters. On the synchronic axis, myths can be divided into *classes*, on the diachronic axis, the division is into *stages*.

Regarding their range of significance, myths can be divided into three different classes from paradigmatic universality to idiosyncratic specificity:

- The *universal class* containing myths concerning the fundamental conditions of human existence common to all mankind (birth, youth, age, death etc.)
- The *archetypal class* containing myths concerning conditional principles common to all cultures (gods, mythic kings and heroes etc.)
- The *cultural class* containing myths concerning one cultural community's specific conditional status (e.g. the American myth of the frontier).

Though fundamental to one culture's conditions, myths are not completely fixed or absolutely defined but undergo an evolutionary process. In this process, a myth subsequently and repeatedly passes three main stages of development.

- The *primary stage*: in the mythopoeic mode of consciousness of the poet, the myth is established in a transformation of perception and experience into literary metaphors. Through constant repetition, the myth consolidates into a cultural convention.
- The *romantic stage*: the mythic convention becomes a ritual. While the myth suffers a loss in its essence, its literary surface is being refined to an extent at which it becomes overelaborated. In this stage, a tension arises due to the antagonistic relationship between the neglectance or even corruption of the myth's contents and the increasing sophistication of its formal aspects.
- The *consummatory stage*: in order to recapture its original strength and meaning, the romantically faded myth is treated with revision and reenvision. Aiming to renew the myth's contents, they are modified as well. The re-modelled myth is now at a primary stage again.



a scheme of mythogenesis

Slotkin considers man as the „myth-making animal. He naturally seeks to understand his world in order to control it, and his first act in compassing this end is an act of the mind or imagination“⁸² because he fundamentally is in „need for myth as myth – that is, as a construction of symbols and values, derived from real and imaginary experience and ordered by the imagination according to the deepest needs of the psyche“⁸³. According to this theory, myths are as old as – if not identical with - the ability of conscious perception, or the human mind itself, and the Homeric epic is only the first national mythology we know of.

A New Mythology

In the case of this examination, the synchronic dimension of the myth is of less importance than the diachronic one – for it is plain to see that the American Myth belongs to the cultural class of myths. Here, the interest is focussed on the transformations myths undergo in historical terms and their consummatory reenvisioning in particular. This kind of romantic reenvisioning, anyhow, is historically recurrent and not limited on the literary epoch labelled with the same term.

Romantic writers were aware of the fact that „die antike Mythologie nur im Kontext der Lebenswelt der klassischen Antike ihre historische Heimat haben konnte, aber immerhin [halten sie] ihren ‚heuristischen Gebrauch‘ dergestalt für möglich, daß ihre produktive

⁸² Ibid., p. 7.

Adaption – nicht Nachahmung – unter den Bedingungen der zeitgenössischen Gegenwart eine ‚ganz neue Mythologie‘ heraufführen könne⁸⁴. The resumption of mythology was considered productive in so far as it would enable the poet to use means of articulation powerful and mysterious and delimiting from the dry rationalism of the enlightenment; ‚nicht ‚der Wahrheit wegen‘, sondern ‚ihrer Poetischen Bestandheit‘ und der ‚sinnlichen Anschauung‘ wegen sei die Verwendung mythischer Bilder legitim⁸⁵. The fascination for mythology was based in its evaluation as the ‚substantielle Totalität‘ der geistig-religiösen und politisch-sozialen Lebensverhältnisse in der Antike, der in der Moderne durch das destruktive Walten einer autonom und mythenlos gewordenen analytischen Vernunft und durch die Atomisierung und Desintegration der menschlichen Gesellschaft ihre Grundlagen entzogen sind. In ihrer eigenen Gegenwart, die sie unter der Signatur einer umfassenden, nicht nur politisch akzentuierten Revolution begreifen, erkennen die Frühromatiker nun erste Anzeichen einer ‚Remythologisierung des gesellschaftlichen Ideenhorizonts‘ einer künftigen Wiederherstellung kollektiver Identität⁸⁶ – a prior interest especially for the young nation of the United States.

Now it is my claim that with the emergence of the superheroes, a new circulation of the diachronic subsequence of the stages of the myth had been initiated in unprecedented dimensions, a wide and strong recourse back to antiquity and the invention and the breakthrough of a whole new medium.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁸⁴ Schanze 1994, p. 380.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 380.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 381f.

6. American Mutant Post-Romanticism

„Die Comics spiegeln eine Pionierzeit. In dem Maße wie Amerika zusammenwuchs, wurde diese Art Literatur soziologisch umfunktioniert [...] die neuen Übermenschen, im Grunde weltfern, setzten Wirklichkeit. Ganz selbstverständlich schlüpfen sie in die Haut der alten Heroen.“⁸⁷

The superheroes are the heirs of the mythological heroes and half-gods of ancient Greece. They are their legitimate descendants regardless of the millenia between them, and they are the next step in their evolution: „Uralte ist der Stoff, aus dem Superman und seine Mitstreiter geschaffen wurden. Achill, der strahlende Pelide, und Siegfried der Hörnerne standen bei Superman Pate, alle drei unverwundbar bis auf Achillesferse, Lindenblattstelle und Anfälligkeit gegen Kryptonit. Diese neuen ‚characters‘ der Comics [...] wurden von ihren Verfassern in starker Anlehnung an die Gestalten der alten Mythen und Legenden ‚erfunden‘. Joe Siegel beschrieb seinen Mann aus Stahl [...] als ‚a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I ever heard telled of rolled into one‘⁸⁸. The universe of the superheroes is „eine archaische welt der prinzipiellen entscheidungen, ein olymp der normen“⁸⁹ in which „die ältesten mythen am werk sind, von der geburt der athene und dem kraftspendenden nicht ganz selbstlosen wohlwollen der götter bis hin zu den wahllosen gnaden der volksmärchen [...] der super-held ist siegfried, achilles [...] alle symbole einer primitiven, fabulierenden abstraktion finden sich wieder: herakles, artemis, apollon, sogar die spezialisten werden aus homer bezogen“⁹⁰. The recourse to and resumption of ancient mythology, however, must not be considered as mere plagiarism or, even worse, a desacrating debasement of the classical and therefore culturally valuable Greek original. It is true that „die meisten der Superhelden beziehen [...] ihre besonderen Fähigkeiten aus den traditionellen Denkschemata der alten Mythen, verwandeln diese aber derart, daß sie schon wieder als ursprünglich, das heißt, neuartig im modernen Sinn anzusehen sind“⁹¹ – the romantic myth has again become primary.

⁸⁷ Metken 1970, p. 170f.

⁸⁸ Fuchs / Reitberger 1971, p. 101.

⁸⁹ Oswald Wiener: der geist der superhelden, in: Hans Dieter Zimmermann (Hg.): Vom Geist der Superhelden. Comic Strips. Zur Theorie der Bildgeschichte, Berlin 1973, p. 127.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 131f.

⁹¹ Fuchs / Reitberger 1971, p. 102.

Mythological Inheritance

In the line of Greek mythology, the mythology of Romanticism and the modern mythology of the superhero comic, the comic as the youngest form adopts certain aspects of its predecessors, combines them and adds something new. The ancient myth contributes the god-like powers of the protagonists and their olympic principles, the romantic myth brings the narrative closer to the present reality, supplies the deeper psychological aspect and offers a number of specific motifs and topoi:



„I'm just like him. [...] I'm the dark reflection in the mirror
[...] y'know Logan an' me we're two sides o' the same coin.“⁹²
The doppelgänger motif: Wolverine and Sabretooth

⁹² X-Men 28, New York 1993.



The motif of nature and landscape: Logan in the Rockies



The nocturnal motif

Given the possibility of virtually inexhaustable recourse to the history of myths, the superhero myth is even capable of transcending that history and playing with it. The superhero is able to teleport himself (using time machines, space ships etc.) into any other mythological universe next to his own and to convert its mythological contents (in Logan's case, preferentially Japan and the myth of the samurai). The mythological narrative then presents itself as the metaphor of the metaphor, and thus generates self-critical meta-myths. This criticism is not limited to the myths of ancient Greece and Romanticism, but the superhero myth does even comment on itself having already performed the circulation from a primary to a consummatory stage, from the Golden Age to Marvel Age of comics.

The return to mythology in Romanticism and superhero comics follows similar patterns. While Romanticism turned against the rationalism of the enlightenment, analogously the modern comic followed from the „Erfahrung, mit der überhaupt erst die Moderne als Epoche beginnt: daß der Einzelne einer undurchschaubar gewordenen, durch erfindende und organisierende technische Ratio heillos verfremdeten und also un-menschlichen Welt ratlos gegenübersteht“⁹³. In both cases, the experience of a predominance of rationality and technology over passion and naturalness had to be compensated in an approach of poetic world vision and by a reference to magical mysteries opposing the rationalistic devivification of facticity.

Both types of myths emerged from a certain political background and contained certain political claims. While Romanticism received strong impulses from the French Revolution and American romanticists from the Declaration of Independence especially, for the Golden Age superheroes „auslösendes Moment waren, wie auch in den sechziger Jahren, soziale Spannungen. Superman und Batman erblickten kurz vor einem internationalen Konflikt das Licht der Welt. Sie entsprachen in ihrem Sinngehalt den Zeitströmungen und der Einstellung Amerikas zu politischen Fragen“⁹⁴.

Finally, both mythological concepts aimed at a (re)unification of their cultural communities. While Romanticism took recourse to folkloristic devices (hence the term „romantic“), comics continued this development and took part in founding what today is labelled under the term of „popular culture“. The oral tradition of the myth has been substituted by literary publication, and „printed literature has been from the first the most important vehicle of the myth in America, which sets it apart from myths of the past“⁹⁵. The idea of the „audience“ was changed as well as the means of purveying the myth. In the history of the myth, the medium

⁹³ P. Dormagen (Hg.): *Moderne Erzähler IV*, Paderborn 1959, p. 73.

⁹⁴ Fuchs / Reitberger 1971., p. 117.

⁹⁵ Slotkin 1973, p. 19.

of communication plays a most important role as does the myth in the history of communication.

Mythological Representation

Conclusively, the myth lives on. The cultural myth lives on, and the American Myth lives on. The forms of its articulation have changed, the narratives have changed, the heroes have changed, the mythological contents themselves have changed, and the further development of the myth is not clearly foreseeable.

But the legends are still there. Logan is only one among many American heroes, and *Wolverine* is only one vehicle for the American myth. *Wolverine* deals with exactly the same conflict as did *Edgar Huntly* a century before. Then, that „fatal opposition, the hostility between two worlds, two races, two realms of thought and feeling“⁹⁶, between civilization and savagery and reason and madness was the problem of a young nation whose foundation still had to be completed; now, in a civilization whose technological feasibility contradicts its social condition and its racial problems in particular, the theme is more topical than ever. Logan is one of its symbols.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

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