

Superheroes and Mortal Beings

W1

GRW

Erin Asman

Freshman

easman2@washcoll.edu

Heroism has become increasingly romanticized. While heroes were once the strongest and bravest of warriors, the person with the most kills on the battlefield, this is no longer true. The word hero now invokes the image of a person being helpful, being brave, of someone sacrificing themselves for the good of others. Väinämöinen, from the Finnish epic *The Kalevala*, and Captain America, from Marvel Comics, both feature a type of heroism that exemplifies the ideals of their original time period, but the morals still stand today. This paper expands on the similarities and distinctions of each hero in regards to purpose of story, origin of character, and various iterations. These pieces all tie together to create a picture of heroism in Finland and America, in present day and in historical context.

At first glance, *The Kalevala* and the Captain America comic books might seem so different that a comparison would be impossible. However, many parallels appear when evaluating purpose and audience. Back before *The Kalevala* was recorded, the function of the epic was straightforward. One of the main purposes was to entertain the listeners, but the stories were also used to inform the audience of important life lessons. A blatant example of this is in response to the question “‘Oak, would you become the hull of a hunting-boat or a war-craft’s keel?’ [to which t]he oak tree ... answers, ‘Indeed there is wood in me for one small boat’s hull for I am no gnarled bean-pole nor am I hollow inside’” (Lönnrot trans. Bosley 189). In this passage, the trees instruct Väinämöinen on which wood makes the best boats. This was information that the community needed to remember. Placing this information within the popular folk story aided greatly in its remembrance. *The Kalevala* is derived from stories told through the oral tradition and, up until the point of Lönnrot collecting the stories to publish together, there were many different variations on the same pieces. Many scholars criticize Lönnrot with selecting certain stories with the intent of Christianizing the tale, as he himself was a devout

worshipper. Alphonso-Karkala states that, “[i]t is argued that Lönnrot added or grafted, modified or re-arranged, or in other ways altered the folk songs after they were recorded, and thus projected a text of his own, distinct from the primary material he gathered from oral reciters” (13). However, these claims have been refuted by other scholarly sources who argue that “Lönnrot's aim was to leave out Christian motifs from the epic,” although the text is distinctly a narrative written by Lönnrot (Vento 83). In present day, *The Kalevala* is read by all students in secondary school and was particularly important during Finland’s struggle for independence in the early twentieth century. This patriotic attitude continued well into modern day, as “[b]y the time independence had been won in 1917, every schoolchild had been taught again and again that Finnish folk poetry was a mirror for all that was one hundred percent Finnish” (Wilson 132). Consequently, it can be concluded that Väinämöinen provided a framework for the one hundred percent Finnish hero.

Captain America Comics also strove to provide an outline of a true American hero. When Captain America was first created in 1940, it was roughly a year before the United States would join World War II. The first cover featured Captain America punching Adolf Hitler across the face. Subsequently, Captain America was quickly established as a patriot and an anti-Nazi crusader. Similarly to *The Kalevala*, comic books and Captain America specifically were used to inform an audience, but the information was different. Where *The Kalevala* was used in order to remember important life skills, comic books helped guide a younger generation of readers into acceptable adulthood expressions. Captain America was an attempt to show readers—mostly teenagers and children—how to feel about the Nazis and Hitler. The purpose of the *Captain America Comics* in the words of Richard Stevens:

Was not merely to entertain or even to simply inform, for presented in each of Cap’s early comics was an invitation to join the Sentinels of Liberty, a fan club that encouraged

readers to actively engage in Cap's struggle. To join, readers had to submit a dime and sign a document that proclaimed, 'I solemnly pledge to uphold the principles of the Sentinels of Liberty and assist Captain America in his war against spies in the U.S.A.' In return, members of the fan club received a membership card and a metal badge. (26)

This type of club was a call to action for the younger fans to take part in the war effort before the country they lived in was even a part of the war. Later in Captain America's story, particularly during the seventies and the Vietnam War, Captain America was a liberal patriot, reflecting the views of college students, and in turn educating a younger generation on the ideals of heroism outside of the military. While vastly different, both *The Kalevala* and *Captain America Comics* strove to entertain and inform, though with different kinds of information.

The origins of our heroes shed light into the opinions of heroism in their respective cultures. Väinämöinen is a noteworthy character to study because he is not actually human. The woman who bore him is an "Air-daughter," and he was fathered by a force of nature, the sea (Bosley 4). As Brugman states, "he is the product of nature intertwining with deity...and lacks any biological linkage to mankind" (10). On the contrary, the stories of old presented Väinämöinen as an almost universal character that in every village that told his story; there was a sense of claim to his origin. Brugman also expresses this idea when she writes that, "[o]ne could argue that Väinämöinen is not playing the traditional role of a hero in myth, but rather, is exemplification of human nature" (10). His origins are supernatural in Lönnrot's tale, but he is still accessible as a heroic ideal. Captain America's origin story is varied, not necessarily in context but in execution. The first version of Steve Rogers's transformation features him drinking an elixir created by a Jewish scientist who is then killed by an undercover Nazi agent. Rogers immediately attacks the man and in the fight, the agent stumbles backwards into machinery that electrocutes him. While looking at the body, Rogers proclaims, "Nothing left of him but charred ashes...a fate he well deserved." (qtd. in Stevens 25). This is the only version of

Captain America's origin that features him boasting the death of the Nazi agent as "deserved." However, "Captain America was created in 1940, prior to the entry of the United States into World War II, but after the war had been ongoing in Europe and East Asia for some time" and so he was a product of an America that wanted to fight (Dittmer 629). Dittmer states in agreement,

A product of his time, Captain America's image and origin mirror the American identity/dream of 1941. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed Steve Rogers (with his almost obsessively Anglo-American name) overcomes his own physical weaknesses to become a proud soldier for his country. (629)

That drive to take part in the war was being felt by the younger generations and this comic only reinforced those beliefs. Later origin stories feature slight changes to the narrative but the basic plot stays the same. Steve Rogers always struggles with strength and health before being granted a chance to serve by being subject to an experiment. This scenario leaves the comics approachable to the everyman in a way similar to *The Kalevala*'s portrayal of Väinämöinen.

An interesting difference between *The Kalevala* and the Captain America comic books is that *The Kalevala* was originally an oral tradition and when it was finally compiled; it was a jumble of poetry from different areas of the country and was unified by one man, Elias Lönnrot. In contrast, Captain America was created by two men, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, and then written and even recreated by upwards of ten confirmed authors, and possibly upwards of forty. The amount of alteration in *The Kalevala* has almost completely stopped because in its current form of print there is no room to grow. Before it was written down, however, Lönnrot himself struggled with what to accept as truth in the way of plot. From the preface of *The Kalevala*:

Nowadays one can always sing about Väinämöinen what formerly was sung in the name of others, and who can stop that? What is attributed to him concerning the moon, the sun and stars, one could of old have told of any of the gods, and then when the proper names were forgotten, pass the credit over to Väinämöinen. If in these songs Väinämöinen has here been reduced from his former reputation as a god, I can of course do nothing about it. (trans. Magoun 371)

Lönnrot chooses to write about the hero as a supernatural figure, similar to that of a shaman in Finnish culture. There are scholars who believe Lönnrot imposed onto the original stories to far and left out important details. Juha Pentikäinen is currently writing an alternative to Lönnrot's epic that will focus more on bear cults and shamanism in the Finnish myths (Weaver). Captain America is an extremely versatile character that has been rebuilt and reformed into many different versions. Starting as an anti-Nazi hero, Captain America was very briefly a "Commie-smasher" (Stevens 60). The failure of that plot within the audience was so great that the writers struggled to find a villain for Captain America during the Vietnam war. Because Marvel comics was attempting to bring in an older audience of college students, Captain America, decidedly a man out of his own time, became a liberal patriot for the young American against fighting. One of the plots during this run featured Captain America going to Vietnam during a cease fire and striving for peace (Moser). Both Väinämöinen and Captain America survived many different iterations and currently still provide insight into their cultures beliefs.

As heroes, Väinämöinen is considered the national icon. The enemies of Finland would strive to destroy the fictional personage most dear to them. During the communist reign in Finland, before Finland became a free country, Wilson writes that:

a Leningrad paper published an intriguing cartoon which showed the old Kalevala hero Väinämöinen sitting with a bewildered look on his face while two uniformed Nazis pinned a swastika arm band on him. A third Nazi, arm raised in a *sieg heil* gesture, was handing him an automatic pistol. The caption read: 'One or two more strokes and the old boy will be ours.' (149)

Väinämöinen, a legendary figure, "is shown in a...positive light, framed as encompassing traditional heroic qualities of valor, strength, and wisdom" (Brugman 4). He is a representation of the people themselves. Captain America was always written to encompass the everyman. Many argue that he is too militaristic and others contend that his aggression is too close to one

political party and therefore does not represent all Americans. However, “Stan Lee, comic book icon and former writer for Captain America, argues that Captain America represents the best aspects of America: courage and honesty” (Dittmer 629). While Väinämöinen and Captain America were written a century apart and represent two different cultures, their styles of heroism are quite similar. Captain America values teamwork, honesty, and trust. Väinämöinen exhibits knowledge, humble power, and he is not afraid to ask for help. Both strive to preserve ideals that are being forgotten in modern society.

Works Cited

- Alphonso-Karkala, John B. "Transformation of Folk Narratives into Epic Composition in Elias Lönnrot's 'Kalevala.'" *Jahrbuch Für Volksliedforschung*, no. 31, 1986, pp. 13–28. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/848271.
- Bosley, Keith. *The Kalevala*. Oxford, Oxford Paperbacks, 1999.
- Bonser, Wilfrid. "Kalevala. The National Epic of Finland." *Folklore*, vol. 76, no. 4, 1965, pp. 241–253. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1258294.
- Brugman, Carolyn S. "The Problematic Epic of Finland: An Explanation of Tricky Heroes, Silent Women and Absent Fathers in The Kalevala." *University of Iowa*, 9 Sept. 2016, ir.uiowa.edu/honors_theses/6.
- Dittmer, Jason. "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 95, no. 3, 2005, pp. 626–643. www.jstor.org/stable/3693960.
- DuBois, Thomas A. "Narrative Expectations and The Sampo Song." *Scandinavian Studies* 73.3 (2001): 457-474. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 5 Dec. 2016.
- Lönnrot, Elias, and Francis Peabody Magoun. *The Kalevala; or, Poems of the Kaleva District*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Moser, John. "Captain America and the Dilemma of Liberal Patriotism." Colloquium, Carthage College. February 21, 2013.
- Stevens, J. Richard. *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon*. Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2015.
- Weaver, Fran. "Alternative Kalevala in the Making." *ThisisFINLAND*, Finland Promotion Board, 25 Aug, 2015, finlanf.fi/arts-culture/alternative-kalevala-in-the-making/.