The Masculinity of Superheroes

Comic books and superhero films have a long history of portraying males as bulky and muscular human beings. Superman, Batman, and Captain America are all examples of muscular male superheroes. It has now become the model for all male superheroes. This masculinity found in superheroes is characterized with toughness and intimidation as a result of their bodies. In Phil Abraham’s “Into the Night” from the series Marvel’s Daredevil, Daredevil is just beginning his new career as a superhero in the streets of Hell’s Kitchen. He fights off sex traffickers and saves a women from being murdered— all while handling his daytime job as defense attorney Matt Murdock. Daredevil’s masculinity and lack of a super muscular body in this episode alters the viewers’ perception of superheroes. Marvel’s Daredevil branches away from the prototypical model of bulky and unstoppable superheroes, by depicting Daredevil with an average sized body, and is often susceptible to pain.

Towards the end of the episode “Into the Night” of Marvel’s Daredevil, Karen Page, Murdoch’s first client, is being attacked by a man who is sent to kill her because she knows information pertaining to an unnamed organization’s illegal activity, when Daredevil comes to her aid. He is wearing his superhero costume which consists of black jeans, black long sleeve shirt, and a black cloth covering his eyes. This simple costume makes him seem like a regular person, which makes him less intimidating, yet more relatable to the viewers. The dark lighting in the room makes the viewer focus mostly on the outlines of the bodies. As Daredevil and the
assassin are fighting both seem to have similar body types, and as they trade punches it appears that no one has the upper hand. As they tumble out of the window and fall several stories to the ground, Daredevil looks exhausted. His fatigue can be expressed with the slow motion editing used as Daredevil is trying to pick himself back up from the ground, along with his moans and groans. The dim lighting during the scene makes the rain and his blood and sweat blend together, showing that he is becoming wounded and exhausted from the fight. From this scene the viewer can see that Daredevil is not very intimidating, with his simple costume and average body type, yet this makes him more understandable because he seems like an average human being and not an overpowering bulky superhero.

Before arguing the masculinity of Daredevil and other superheroes, one must first establish that Daredevil is a superhero. According to Coogan, a superhero must consist of three main characteristics; a “selfless or pro-social” mission, some kind of power or ability, and an identity that consists of a costume and name (Coogan 30). In the episode of Marvel’s Daredevil, it is clearly evident that Daredevil has a “pro-social” mission when he saves Karen from the assassin and the women from the bad guys. Daredevil does not do this to benefit himself, but to stop crime and prevent others from causing harm to others.

Daredevil also has an ability that makes him stand out. Along with his martial arts skills, Daredevil also has heightened senses after an accident left him completely blind as a child. This skill can be seen during his fight with the assassin as there are occasions where he uses his lack of sight to his advantage. In the episode these skills are exaggerated for the viewers to see, like when the assassin is trying to stab him everything slows down and goes silent except for the sound of the assassin’s movement. Daredevil also has a double identity to complete Coogan’s “definition of a superhero” (Coogan 30). During the day Daredevil is Matt Murdock, an up-and-
coming defense attorney; and at night he is a man dressed up in all black who fights crime. Although he does not exhibit the physique of typical male superheroes, he is a superhero nonetheless.

This idea of masculinity among superheroes can date back to the start of comics, which showed big and bulky men as superheroes. However, Ayers claims that this masculinity among superheroes in film in particular can be attributed to the rise of 90’s action movies or “hardbody films,” often starring bodybuilders like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone (Ayers 57). Ayers states that “as with the hardbody hero, the superhero is a liminal figure, struggling to fit in with ‘normal’ society while at the same time moving through a world of violence and death” (Ayers 57). To be able to fit in society, superheroes tend to have a double identity. In this case, Daredevil has a second identity, Matt Murdock. The only difference between Daredevil and these “hardbody” superheroes is that his lack of size makes him seem like a regular person. This helps Daredevil conceal his identity more easily than most superheroes, since no one would suspect an average-sized male to be a superhero fighting crime in the middle of the night. Daredevil is more charismatic to viewers because his appearance comes off as that off just another regular person, unlike the superheroes and action stars who “struggle to fit into society,” because of their “hardbodies.”

This idea of male superheroes being perfect beings with “hardbodies” stems from the fact that “within the past decade, there has been a general increased theoretical interest surrounding the lived body and popular representations of the body” (Taylor 344). Taylor also claims that “superheroes are the ultimate paragons for the late twentieth-century cult of fitness” (Taylor 351). As societal interest in the beauty of the human body increases, these superheroes are constantly depicted with perfect and glorified bodies as an example to give viewers hope that
they could achieve the same. Daredevil keeps the value of fitness, but deviates away from these ideal perfect bodies. This can be seen in the scene where Daredevil is training in the boxing gym. Daredevil needs to stay healthy and fit to be able to fight the bad guys, but in this scene he appears like a regular human being exercising in the gym. The fact that he uses a gym in the neighborhood and not a home gym with the best equipment helps him blend in with society. Many superheroes “embody a correspondingly exaggerated and kinky form of macho sex appeal, which puts them, in the fetish stakes, on a par with many of the superheroines” (Taylor 352). By not depicting Daredevil as a “hardbody,” it allows the viewers to focus more on his “pro-social and selfless” mission rather than on his body. As this trend of superheroes being used for sex appeal continues, the true purpose of superheroes providing hope for the audience disappears. Another way in which Daredevil moves away from the prototypical masculinity of a superhero is by taking great amounts of pain. Most of the bulky superheroes seem unfazed by pain, but since Daredevil does not exhibit the typical superhero body, he is more vulnerable to pain. This can be seen in the episode “Into the Night,” during the fight scene with the assassin. During the fight, after Daredevil and the assassin fall out the window, the show flashes back to a scene from Daredevil’s childhood. In the flashback Matt is sitting in his kitchen waiting for his father to come back from his boxing match. Since his father comes back with many bruises, and all Matt can do is feel the bumps and cuts on his father’s face, it makes the viewer sympathize for him as he lays exhausted on the ground. This shows how pain can have two different aspects. Starry claims that “while pain is in part a profound sensory rendering of ‘against,’ it is also a rendering of the ‘something’ that is against, a something at once internal and external” (Starry 52). This double agent of pain can be seen in the episode: not only is Daredevil experiencing external pain, which is evident through the cuts and bruises on his body, but he is also
experiencing internal pain through his childhood memories of when his father would arrive bruised and beaten after his fights. This vulnerability to pain that Daredevil experiences in the episode gives viewers the opportunity to relate to Daredevil more than any other bulky and muscular superhero who often seem impenetrable. The masculinity of a superhero is usually shown as a tough bulky male with no emotions, but because of Daredevil’s lack of size and vulnerability to pain, this allows the audience to sympathize for Daredevil’s internal and external pain.

Daredevil represents a revised image of superhero masculinity by keeping the idea of a healthy body, but by moving away from “hardbodies.” This allows him to conceal his double identity of Matt Murdock and Daredevil easier, and it allows the audience to focus on the true purpose of the superhero, while his vulnerability to pain makes him more relatable to viewers. *Marvel’s Daredevil* changes the way viewers see masculinity in superheroes. Oftentimes male superheroes’ portrayal of perfect bodies takes away from what the superhero is doing. By removing the sex appeal of perfect superhero bodies, the viewers can focus more on the “pro-social” mission of the superhero. Since Daredevil lacks the “hardbody” physique, his new masculinity can influence viewers that he is just another regular guy trying to do something good for his city. Lastly, the physical abuse that Daredevil withstands allows the audience to sympathize with Daredevil, leaving the impression that, although he exhibits toughness, he is not a tough and macho male with no emotions, which is often expected with the big and muscular bodies of male superheroes.
Works Cited


