

Candidate: Matthew Piva
Topic: Heroes and Symbols

Canada's Superhero Dilemma

“Batman's inner-monologue as Superman stops a dirigible from falling

Batman: *Flying out of the sky, he once again shows us why he sets the standard for so many. Many see him as a naive boyscout whipped by his own selflessness. They will not, cannot, see him for what he is, a hero.”*

-Written by Louise Simonson, from *Superman: Man of Steel, Issue 21*

Leafing through Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, a limited-issue, four-part Batman comic series, it is hard to believe Batman would ever utter such flattering words, even internally, about Superman. *The Dark Knight Returns* concludes with a brutal battle between Superman and Batman, with each combatant bashing the other's philosophical ideology as their fisticuffs ensue. Batman, a borderline anarchistic vigilante who practices heroism with a great deal of spite and violence, counterpoints Superman, who champions stringent legal control and appeasement. It is basically a fight between order (Superman) and ordered chaos (Batman).

Of course, Miller takes the side of Batman, since Batman's is the more “heroic” view. Heroes in modern culture have to stand against something, and they typically have to oppose this something in a very kinetic way. They must battle foes with which it is impossible to sympathize and must overcome obstacles that are, preferably, not too abstract in nature. The second that a hero becomes anything other than a maverick, compromising beliefs or feeling the least bit of sympathy towards inexorably villainous enemies, the hero ceases to be “heroic.” Thus, we are left with Superman, a being who uses his immense powers for good and yet, in the eyes of Miller, does not seem to be a hero at all, simply because he chooses to sympathize with his foes, practices appeasement over violence, and experiences most of his conflict with, well, himself. Miller intends Superman to be a symbol of a stunted United States government. However, Superman is far too likeable for that, and his unrecognized courage is really *nothing* like the American government in recent history. In fact, Superman could best be viewed as a symbol for *Canadian* hero candidates, and never more so than in Miller's interpretation of the character.

Many chalk up Canada's lack of celebrated national heroes to our humility, our curious love of self-abasement, and, I have even heard, our “docile” nature. And, yes, all those things could

be it, but none go anywhere near fully explaining the origins of our hero famine. The shortage is more likely due to general standards of what heroism should look like, namely Miller's aforementioned standards. In other words, it is Miller-and-society's definition of heroism, not a unique, "Canadian" definition, which puts the vast majority of our hero candidates in the bargain bin. But why are our heroes-to-be so different from these standards? Why is it we cannot have mavericks, vigilante idols, *Batmans*? Why are we stuck with Supermans? To answer, one must pinpoint what "creates" potential heroes. Just as a superhero's qualities can be traced to his or her backstory, to find why Canada is a breeding ground for Supermans, while other countries, like the United States, tend to produce Batmans, we must look to the differences in respective national histories.

As a prime example, consider the gain of independence from Great Britain in the cases of the United States and Canada. The break from the Union Jack in the case of America provided an opportunity for heroes to emerge. At the time, there was (at least) supposed oppression from a foreign source, providing the needed foes. These foes were both powerful and influential throughout the world at the time, forming sizable and exciting obstacles for potential heroes to overcome. And the Americans did not disappoint. Whether it was George Washington winning his victories in the American Revolutionary War or Benjamin Franklin passionately stomping the Stamp Act, a new nation's national heroes fought with little remorse. Furthermore, they succeeded in their impossible goals, essentially becoming America's first Batmans, the Founding Fathers.

In Canada, our independence was won through different channels. The separation of Canada from Great Britain was much more diplomatic. While Americans could tell stories of Washington and his wooden teeth as he commanded soldiers in battle, Canadians could only talk about how brilliantly George Brown or William McDougall negotiated the terms of confederation at the Charlottetown Conference. Furthermore, throughout Canada's bid for autonomy, complete separation from the British Empire was not even being requested. In the end, Canada became simply a self-governing colony. As much as this may have been the most effective and beneficial means for the citizens of Canada to separate from Great Britain in a meaningful way, it certainly did not earn Canada any Batmans, just some compromising Supermans.

But surely Canada has not always circumvented conflict. What about World War One and Two? Canadians fought decisively against, to put it mildly, some very dastardly opponents in those events. Why weren't more Canadian heroes forged then? To answer, we must look to a finer point in Miller's hero definition, which we will call the "Maverick Effect." The Maverick Effect will be defined as the phenomenon when otherwise heroic actions are undermined by seeming to be an effect of an overarching command or trend. In World War One, Canada entered the war automatically as a colony of Britain, and even though World War Two saw the first independent declaration of war by Canada, Canada's declaration followed Britain's by a week. When compared with the early declaration of Britain and the delayed but decisive declaration of the United States, Canada's declaration, reflected in history, seems merely to follow trend.

The Maverick Effect, in addition to explaining the lack of Canadian political heroes at these times, may also explain the lack of Canadian military heroes in these wars. Soldiers are forbidden to be mavericks. If this were different, any army would lack meaningful cohesion and thus be highly ineffective. Therefore, soldiers, Canadian and otherwise, are precluded from celebrated heroism under Miller's definition. Sadly, I believe this holds empirically. Far too few remember the individual contributions of even the more famous members of the Canadian forces, like Arthur Currie or Billy Bishop.

Thus, already we see that Canada's gain of independence and participation in major wars, perhaps the foremost occasions for heroics in any country's history, did not provide strong situations for the emergence of individual heroes. Still, perhaps conditions in the lives of individual Canadians may have resulted in the production of national heroes without the need for concurrent political or social upheaval. I believe this very rarely happened in Canada. This may not be surprising, since it is difficult for heroes to emerge in any country without these conditions. In most cases, Canadian potential heroes who arose outside occasions of national conflict again fell short of Miller's criteria. Lester B. Pearson, who accomplished many improvements to Canada through increases to the welfare state, compromised far too much to seem heroic. Frederick Banting, who discovered insulin to successfully treat patients with diabetes, is close to meeting Miller's hero definition but falls short in the fact that he was fighting a disease that manifests a very limited amount of physically visible symptoms, perhaps too abstract a foe for Miller's definition.

Maybe the one exception to Canada's general inability to create heroes is Terry Fox. Fox trumps the Maverick Effect since his marathon across Canada to raise money and awareness for cancer research was a revolutionary idea, even excluding Fox's physical disability. Cancer may seem too abstract a foe at first, but the fact that cancer manifested itself physically on Fox through the loss of his leg averted the problem, making the cancer a rather concrete enemy for Fox to face. In addition, Fox's unwavering devotion and resistance to compromise in the face of adversity only strengthened his hero status. He is Canada's only Batman. With this in mind, I believe that Canadians can become celebrated heroes in the rare case that they meet Miller's criteria for heroism. Canadian nationality does not actively cause hero shortage. The cause is simply a case of generally immiscible circumstances due to Canada's particular history.

But the question remains, is Canada's lack of heroes negative? It depends on how you look at it. A lack of national mythology about the "great Canadian heroes" of our country will surely do nothing to assist in the cohesion of national culture or identity. With little known heroes to act as templates for citizens to emulate, the idea of what it is to be Canadian may be strewn and lost. Yet surely, that ship has sailed. Canada is one of the most multicultural nations in the world, and unabashedly so. As Canadians, we often celebrate our wide range of cultural ideas, beliefs, and values. Varying opinions on what it means to be Canadian is nothing new, nor does it seem to impede national progress. From a historical perspective, I would argue that Canada should be *thankful* for its lack of heroes, Terry Fox aside. Imagine if Sir John A. Macdonald and company, instead of separating from Britain peacefully, created a Canadian revolutionary war? Imagine if Lester B. Pearson decided that force, not skilled negotiation, was necessary to defuse the Suez Crisis? Obviously, these changes would not be positive for Canadians or for the world.

Essentially, it is rarely productive for potential heroes to follow the standards set by Miller. Yet, the potential heroes that follow these standards are generally the most celebrated, even though they may do less good than those who fail to follow these standards. Although Miller's definition of heroism best parallels society's definition, it is not the best definition available. Heroism should simply be a function of how much one's actions benefit others, whether these actions directly fight "evil" or not. Using this new definition, it would seem that Superman *is* a hero, as are many Canadians.