

**Japanese Superheroism in *My Hero Academia***

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### **Japanese Superheroism in *My Hero Academia***

Over the last two decades we have witnessed the exponential growth in the popularity and consumption of Japanese manga at a global scale. Millions of people have become enthralled by the diverse narratives that this medium provides. From tales of lonely swordsmen, teenagers piloting giant robots, and stories of culinary martial arts, manga has proven itself a pivotal Japanese cultural export that offers no shortage of entertainment. Among the recently famous of the many manga exports is Kohei Horikoshi's *My Hero Academia* (*MHA*), the story of an average high school teenager who gains an extraordinary power that allows him to become a great hero. Since it began its publication in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* magazine, *My Hero Academia* has become a phenomenon for both superhero comic and manga nerds around the world; and with good reason. *My Hero Academia* explores the American tradition of the superhero from a Japanese perspective. Indeed, by discussing this manga through the lens of superhero comic book studies I would argue that *My Hero Academia*, while grounding itself in the tropes and conventions of the American superhero genre, also displays subtle cultural differences throughout its representation of the superhero. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the growing interest in Japanese manga and anime as a medium worthy of academic study.

To provide some background, manga is a Japanese style of comics that includes a wide variety of genres from action, adventure, science fiction, to romance, comedy, and horror.<sup>1</sup> What

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<sup>1</sup> The term “manga” itself was coined in 1815 by the famous artist Katsuhika Hokusai (painter of the iconic *The Great Wave*) as a way of referring to whimsical pictures or sketches (Brenner 3).

primarily distinguishes the style of Japanese manga from U.S. American comics is the variety of visual storytelling techniques that greatly immerses the reader in the story. These techniques include the presence of easily recognizable and relatable character archetypes, the use of detailed environments that engaged the reader's imagination, the portrayal of real-life experiences (like sports) that mirrored the audience's own, and the depiction of visually dynamic and emotionally charged scenes (McCloud 216). Like American comics, manga is influenced by the preceding artistic traditions of its own culture, and it experienced a similar transformation into a legitimate (and academically acknowledged) storytelling format. Specifically, manga greatly channels inspiration from the limited and simple design of the characters in Japanese woodblock prints (known as *ukiyo-e*), and the extensive stories, high dramatic intensity, and exaggerated expressions of the *Kabuki* theater, all of which are still prominent in manga's iconic visual and storytelling style (Bouissou 19-20). Besides the rich tradition of Japanese art forms that served as manga's predecessors, Japan also encountered Western comics in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the global dissemination of works like London's famous *Punch* magazine.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 that signaled the end of World War II also had a massive impact on manga and its subject matter. As Brenner explains in his book *Understanding Manga and Anime*, "many of the most common themes in manga and anime today can be traced back to the war and the bombs, from the examination of the conflict between man and technology to the threat of apocalypse in many stories" (5-6).<sup>2</sup> One notable example is the incredibly popular *mecha* subgenre of science fiction manga which includes many stories about wars fought with giant robots that are mostly piloted by humans. In the years following the

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<sup>2</sup> Anime refers to animated films or television shows that are made in Japan. Many of them are adaptations of popular manga. Brenner explains that "the word itself comes from the word *animeshōn*, a translation of the English word 'animation'" (227).

war, a new generation of *mangaka* or manga artists came and laid the foundations of the manga that we know today. Among this group of artists, the most famous is Osamu Tezuka, known as the grandfather of Japanese comics, who went on to define many of the well-known characteristics of contemporary *shōnen* manga such as their elaborate narratives, iconic character designs, and dynamic action scenes. *Shōnen* manga and anime primarily appeal to the tastes of young boys and feature stories that include crude humor and focus on themes like social obligations. Tezuka drew inspiration from both traditional Japanese art styles like the woodblock prints and the cinematic techniques of animated films like the Western cartoons of the Fleischer brothers (who gave life to iconic characters like Betty Boop and Popeye) and of Walt Disney (Brenner 6). In the following decades, Japanese mangaka drew more influence from American literature, film (like the cowboy westerns and detective fiction), and even jazz music, while also incorporating elements from a wide array of genres to create globally acclaimed works like the *Cowboy Bebop* (1997) anime that is considered by many to be the proverbial “gateway” to anime. Although throughout the years Japanese artists have consistently turned towards Western popular culture to find inspiration for their *shōnen* manga, until recently there had not been many published manga that were more faithful recreations of the American superhero comic genre. By briefly observing *shōnen* manga’s relationship with American superhero comic it becomes easier to understand how Horikoshi’s work stands out amongst other manga that equally draw from the popular Western genre.

In previous decades, popular battle (or martial arts) *shōnen* manga like Akira Toriyama’s *Dragon Ball* franchise borrowed elements from superhero comics but applied them loosely to the narratives (Waller 8). As Amanda Pagan explains, “battle [*shōnen*] manga are (...) all about young men who come into a unique power that either helps them fight for the forces of good or

helps them to obtain some goal that they have” (“Beginner’s Guide to Manga 2”). Many of the storylines in these classic battle *shōnen* manga, from the 1980s up until *My Hero Academia*’s publication in 2014, although similarly about costumed, superpowered individuals saving the world from evil, were more focused on the physical training and martial arts combat of their main protagonists like the iconic character of Son-Goku (who shares a strikingly similar origin story to Superman) from Akira Toriyama’s globally acclaimed *Dragon Ball* franchise. Despite their resemblance to superhero narratives, Japanese readers did not recognize them as such, and these works employed conventions such as clashes between a giant monsters and colossal, piloted robots which were more associated with different subgenres of Japanese manga. This changed with manga like *My Hero Academia* that were more heavily inspired by superhero comics and were more faithful to the genre’s tropes and conventions.

*My Hero Academia* occurs in a fictional modern-day Japan in a world where people have abruptly begun to be born with superpowers which eventually led to 80% of the human population developing “quirks,” as they are referred to in the manga. After a period of turmoil and chaos, society has rebuilt itself (including its laws and moral codes) around the newly acquired abilities. As a result, “superheroing” has become a legitimate profession under the guise of the “Pro-Hero system.” Within this system superheroes are paid commissions based on their contributions in helping the police solve crisis situations and they can also profit from marketing their image from the fame that they have garnered from their heroic acts and public appeal (3-4; ch. 48). This has also prompted the emergence of high schools, such as U.A. Academy, that specialize in teaching young students how to become superheroes. At this high school, students go through the rigorous curriculum designed by the hero department to both help them master their “quirks” and teach them a variety of heroics-related lessons such as martial arts combat,

how to rescue endangered civilians, basic first-aid measures, and more. *My Hero Academia*'s story revolves around the teenage protagonist Izuku Midoriya who wishes to be a superhero despite being born "quirkless." In a fateful encounter with the country's top hero, All Might, Midoriya is chosen to be his successor and inherits the mystical power of "One For All," handed down through a long line of heroic individuals, that (initially) grants him incredible speed and strength. Thus, he attends U.A. Academy and begins his endeavor to become a great hero.

But before delving further into *My Hero Academia*, we should first ask what exactly it mean to be a [super]hero.<sup>3</sup> This question lies at the heart of *My Hero Academia*'s premise. When superhero comics were first published, the superhero represented the empowerment of the working-class individual who fought back against corporate greed and worker exploitation. More generally, superheroes "...pursue justice, defending the defenseless, helping those who cannot help themselves, and overcoming evil with the force of good" (Loeb and Morris 11). From an ideological standpoint, superheroes purposefully employ their superpowers to preserve a cohesive social order in the face of an ever changing, and increasingly complex society. On the other hand, the superhero is a symbol of individualism because its image is an assertion of uniqueness composed of both a heroes' extraordinary abilities, which make them stand out among other crime fighters, and their costumes, which serves a statement of their identity and the ideals that they wish to embody. Moreover, the superhero represents virtues, like courage and altruism, that resonate with the comic reader; they remind us that people have the power to make small but significant contributions in their daily lives that can make their community, and the world, a better place.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that although *My Hero Academia* never specifically mentions the word "superhero," the term "hero" clearly alludes to it while also referencing the heroic archetype that is a staple of *shōnen* manga.

The figure of the superhero lies at the heart of *My Hero Academia*'s premise and the manga's story revolves entirely around them. However, this also brings the question of how and where the manga culturally diverges from the traditional American superhero narrative. To answer this, I will first discuss Peter Coogan's chapter on the definition of a superhero from his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. This will allow us to observe the ways in which Horikoshi's work both grounds its premise in the fundamental tropes and conventions of American superhero comic books and slightly alters them; mainly, by cleverly combining these elements with those of the *shōnen* manga genre (Waller 1). Ultimately, observing these similarities and differences will also help to better understand whether *My Hero Academia* can be formally considered a superhero narrative akin to those of Superman and Batman. After all, superhero comics have their established characteristics which both differentiate them from other popular literary genres and ground their works firmly within the tradition of these tales of caped crusaders.

In his chapter "The Definition of a Superhero," Peter Coogan explains that there are three primary characteristics that can be used to identify a genuine superhero: their selfless mission, their superpowers, and their identity (30). *My Hero Academia* puts these primary conventions at the core of its premise. First, Coogan initially describes the hero's mission as "prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda" (31). Without this mission, an individual with extraordinary abilities would be someone who simply profits from his powers, or even worse, a supervillain. Traditionally, many superheroes, like Spider-Man and Batman, take up the mantle because of a tragic event which awakes in them a desire to fully devote themselves to being costumed vigilantes fighting crime. The superheroes of *My Hero*

*Academia* subscribe to this “mission” convention in so far as many of them want to serve the greater good through their profession as superheroes. In other words, they want to work for the benefit of society while also receiving monetary compensation and the public’s recognition. The idea of “heroes-for-hire” or superheroes who work legally and may even be employed by the government is not uncommon to superhero comics, but it does diverge from Coogan’s definition of the “mission” convention. Though it may initially seem that the superheroes in *My Hero Academia* have more selfish motivations for becoming costumed crime fighters, for some characters the monetary rewards that they seek are driven by selfless desires. For example, Midoriya’s female classmate Ochaco Uraraka wants to become a superhero so that she can use the commissions that she gains fighting crime to provide for her parents who are struggling financially (12-13; ch. 22). Moreover, Horikoshi takes great care in highlighting the noble motivations for each of the aspiring hero students at U.A. Academy, emphasizing their unyielding dedication to their mission akin to traditional superheroes. The superhero’s “mission” is also like the *shōnen* protagonist’s ultimate, seemingly impossible, goal. This objective is usually to achieve some measure of greatness within the manga’s fictional world, something which many of the characters in these manga are skeptical that the protagonist can accomplish. Nevertheless, the *shōnen* formula traditionally concludes with the protagonist achieving his difficult goal through dedication and perseverance, which ultimately teaches the audience the importance of these values. On the other hand, the aspiring superhero’s dreams would be impossible without the extraordinary abilities that allow him to engage in feats beyond human measure.

Second, Coogan explains that the [super]powers are “one of the most identifiable elements of the superhero genre” (31). Indeed, witnessing seemingly average people wield



extraordinary abilities to combat the forces of evil adds an element of exaggeration and excitement to superhero narratives. In the world of *My Hero Academia* there is never a clear explanation of the origin of superpowers when they previously did not exist. Many of these superpowers have their own limitations and flaws which encourages the main cast of aspiring hero students to hone them, combine them with tools and gadgets that are custom made for them, and apply them in new and creative ways which demonstrate their growth as heroes. Like the *X-Men* comic books, *My Hero Academia* has a wide variety of unusual and amusing superpowers that range from imaginative takes on classic abilities (like gaining super strength by consuming sugar, or super speed from having car-like engines in each leg) to more original and unorthodox powers like Katsuki Bakugo who can secrete nitroglycerin-like sweat from his palms which he can ignite to create explosions. Alongside the extraordinary abilities which make superheroes stand out amongst others there are also other elements which make him easily recognizable to the public, as in make up his “identity” as a superhero.

Third, regarding the “identity” convention Coogan mentions that it is composed of two elements: the superhero’s codename and their costume (32). In other words, the superhero’s “identity” is comprised of elements which help to identify them in the eyes of the general public and differentiate them from others. In *My Hero Academia* every professional and aspiring hero has a codename or “hero alias” (which is part of their public appearance and appeal) and a custom-made costume with gadgets that enhance their “quirks” and helps to keep them safe. However, the superheroes in Horikoshi’s manga do not have secret identities, which Coogan describes as a prominent, but not vital element of the “identity” convention (42). Coogan explains that the superhero’s heroic codename is supposed to externalize either their alter ego’s inner character or their biography (32), such is the case with Batman and how the bat symbol on

his chest not only symbolizes his triumph over his phobia of bats but also the fear that he strikes into criminals. Similarly, in chapter 45 of *My Hero Academia*, Midoriya and his fellow aspiring superhero classmates must go through the process of choosing their hero names and announcing them to the class. Before doing so, Eraserhead, one of the professors of U.A. Academy, tells the students: “The name you choose will bring you ever closer to cementing a certain image because names are capable of reflecting one’s true character” (8). Here, the manga draws a parallel between the growth of the U.A. students as aspiring heroes and as individuals. Each of these students has their own interpretation of what it means to be a superhero, which is composed of their own aspirations, their experiences in life, their unique abilities, and the values that they hold in high regard. The process and the struggles that each student undergoes to become a superhero emphasizes how it is as much a process of self-realization and personal growth as it is improving their ability to rescue others and fight crime. This is true of the main protagonist, Izuku Midoriya’s hero codename: “Deku” a subject of much discussion for fans of the series who have wanted to understand its significance. One such explanation is that “Deku” is an abbreviation of the Japanese word “*dekunobou*,” which translates to “good-for-nothing,” something which Bakugo Katsuki, Midoriya’s friend and rival, used as a derogatory term for him when they were children. On the other hand, Ochaco Uraraka, one of Midoriya’s female classmates (and his love interest), remarks to Midoriya that she likes the name “Deku” because she sees it as expressing an attitude of perseverance (12; ch. 7). Midoriya chooses his hero codename to be “Deku” because it serves to reaffirm him of his desire to give his maximum effort in his desire to become a great hero. This is one instance where Horikoshi intermingles Japanese culture with the superhero genre by using Japanese wordplay to cleverly highlight how Midoriya’s hero

codename reflects his character and his journey from a hopeless, “quirkless” individual, to a resilient aspiring hero.

The other element which constitutes the superhero’s identity is the costume, which Coogan explains “removes the specific details of a character’s ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume” (33). In other words, the costume becomes an emblem of the ideal that the superhero wishes to embody. Horikoshi directly alludes to this when Midoriya first dons the new superhero costume that his mother made for him. Like the initial costumes of some superheroes like Spider-Man, which are somewhat impractical and not the best designed outfits, Midoriya recognizes that his first costume, despite not being efficient or cutting-edge, is a gesture of his mother’s love for him and so he wears it proudly (*MHA* 3; ch 8). Moreover, Midoriya had originally designed his costume based on the image of his hero idol All-Might, and he hopes that his costume can represent him as a hero who always saves others with a smile despite the danger.

Finally, Coogan explains that what firmly grounds a work of fiction within the superhero comic genre is not only the presence of the three primary conventions (especially the superhero’s costume as part of his identity), but also the presence of secondary conventions that are synonymous with the superheroes, like supervillains, sidekicks, the superhero’s origins, etc, which are all present in *My Hero Academia*. For this, Coogan observes the case of the Luke Cage, a.k.a. “Power Man” comic where he establishes that “the large presence of superhero conventions which are also foregrounded, or made explicit in the comic itself, cements [him] as a superhero and not a detective or adventure hero with superpowers (44). In *My Hero Academia*, Horikoshi also foregrounds the three primary superhero conventions (mission, powers, identity) by explicitly referencing these aspects throughout the series and by combining them with the

*shōnen* genre of Japanese manga. Jerry Waller observes in his essay “The World’s Greatest Hero: An Examination of Superhero Tropes in My Hero Academia,” that Horikoshi’s work incorporates foundational themes of American superhero comics into the *shōnen* manga genre (1). Indeed, Horikoshi can highlight the parallels between the main conventions between these two genres of fiction by placing them next to each other. The superhero’s mission fits well with the *shōnen* protagonist’s drive to achieve their goal, which in many cases is also to become the hero or save the world from some form of evil. In the case of *My Hero Academia* and its main protagonist Midoriya, it is his desire to become a great hero which is the driving force behind all his physical and emotional effort which leads to his growth and development as a character. On the other hand, outlandish superpowers are a staple of the *shōnen* genre where a famous characters like Monkey D. Luffy, the protagonist of Eiichiro Oda’s *One Piece*, has the power of the *Gomu Gomu No Mi* devil fruit which turns his body into rubber, allowing to perform all sorts of over-the-top attacks by stretching and expanding parts of his body. Moreover, it is in the “identity” convention where Horikoshi’s combination of the superhero genre with the Japanese battle *shōnen* genre becomes more readily apparent with Midoriya and his classmates choosing their superhero codenames. It is here that the manga establishes a parallel between the act of students developing themselves as heroes (as in, their costumes and hero codenames) with their own personal growth.

From the above, *My Hero Academia* not only adheres to the tropes and conventions of the American superhero genre, but also places them in contact with those of the Japanese *shōnen* genre. This allows Horikoshi demonstrate how the ideals of popular literature from different cultural backgrounds interact and clash with each other. *My Hero Academia* primarily explores the tension between American individualism and the collectivist ideas that are at the center of

Japanese culture and society (Thew, 00:12:30 - 00:12:37). This friction between these two social ideologies can be seen in how Horikoshi places the superhero, a symbol of American individual empowerment, within a more constrained Japanese environment that both incentivizes (and heavily regulates) this profession of costumed vigilantism. By framing the narrative through the lens of the growth and development of the aspiring hero students of U.A. Academy, the reader slowly realizes how these cultural differences interact and how, as the narrative progresses, the resulting social conflicts within the manga's fictional Japanese society come to fruition.

To explore this notion, I will rely on Andrew Terjesen's essay "Why Are There So Few Superhero Manga". Before *My Hero Academia* began publication in 2014, traditional American superhero comics had not been well received nor did they sell well in Japan. In his essay Terjesen argues that this is because of the incompatibility between Japanese ethics and the Western ethics that are typically found in American superhero comics (67). In short, Japanese ethical beliefs are primarily based on a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism (though they have also been enriched by Western philosophy), while Western ethics mainly values utilitarianism and Kantian morality. Utilitarianism establishes that whether an act is right or wrong is determined by the amount of goodness it can produce. When applied to superheroes it means that they must be prepared to make difficult personal sacrifices in order to fulfill our moral duties (Robichaud 181). Meanwhile, Kantian morality emphasizes that for an action to be good it must be done for morally correct reasons, which includes not using people to obtain selfish ends. In this view, superheroes are not obligated to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the greater good and they are not doing anything wrong by choosing to stop being costumed vigilantes (Robichaud 186). Terjesen contends that Japanese audiences cannot relate to the binary "good vs evil" perspective of American superheroes nor how their drive to fight crime is

based on Western abstract principles of justice instead of the social responsibilities that are fundamental to Confucianism and Japanese society. In this sense, Japanese superheroes cannot ignore their social duties, nor neglect their personal life, in favor of acting as a vigilante, despite the justification that they are fighting for the greater good. Contrary to the excessively idealistic heroics that typically characterizes American superheroes, the Japanese superhero interestingly suggests a more plausible and relatable interpretation of costumed vigilantism that does not promote an individual's excessive self-sacrifice. Terjesen continues by saying that, while Japanese superheroes do have a costume and a code name like their American counterpart, they have a more limited mission that is driven by more concrete and sensible motives like revenge against someone who has wronged them (57). If Batman, for instance, followed this logic, his motive to find parents' killer would lie solely in seeking revenge and would not necessarily drive him to fight against all criminals in Gotham city. Moreover, Terjesen contends that based on Japanese ethics superpowered individuals feel isolated from average people because they cannot be considered their equals, which segregates them from the typical social relationship within a community; this typically leads the superpowered individual to find others like him to create a new moral community where they can feel a better sense of belonging (63). By observing how *My Hero Academia* explores these points throughout its narrative we can better understand how these ideals fit into Horikoshi's interpretation of the superhero.

First, *My Hero Academia* primarily portrays the moral complexity of its narrative in its cast of both superheroes and supervillains. Instead of them being clear-cut representations of good and evil, Horikoshi highlights the morally reprehensible flaws of some of the manga's top superheroes. At the same time, he either brings out some of the more admirable qualities in several of the villains or takes great care in portraying them in a more sympathetic light. Terjesen

explains that morally complex stories are much more at home in Japanese ethics than in Western ethics, because the influence of Shintoist beliefs do not teach the Japanese the same binary idea of the natural world being divided between the forces of pure evil and pure good (63-64). Instead, the Japanese see both the forces of good and evil as part of the natural order of things and necessary for maintaining balance. Terjesen then uses as an example found in a Japanese superhero manga created by Stan Lee called *Ultimo* where the influence of the Japanese's moral complexity can be seen. Terjesen describes a scene where Dunstan, one of the characters who symbolizes the ultimate good (typical of Western comics), confronts a chivalrous thief and reprimands him by telling the thief that his actions can never be justified as being good. The thief responds, "Are you and idiot? In this world, there was never anything 'ultimate,' 'good,' or 'evil' to begin with. All that is nothing more than your own stupidity" (qtd. in Terjesen 64). Horikoshi presents a similar character known as Gentle Criminal who considers himself a modern-day scoundrel that passes judgement unto those who have acted in a distinctly ungentlemanly way (5; ch. 171). When he first appears in chapter 170, he robs a convenience store that is part of a large Japanese chain that has been accused of shady business tactics, like selling pudding with falsified expiration date labels. However, he does not steal the store's money because his ultimate goal is to become famous like the other heroes and villains throughout history. Gentle Criminal is a morally complex character because he is a failed aspiring hero turned supervillain. In his story we can see how the obsession and the failure to acquire fame and recognition through what society believes are morally admirable means, in this case being a superhero, can lead people to instead turn towards morally reprehensible acts. In fact, this moral complexity is further elaborated in how Horikoshi emphasizes the similarities between him and the manga's main protagonist Izuku Midoriya. Midoriya empathizes with Gentle because as a "quirkless" child he

was in a similar position where his strong desire (or borderline obsession) to become a hero was in danger of being unfulfilled and whose consequences could have equally led him to some form of villainy or downright despair. On the other hand, and perhaps more shocking, is the case of Endeavor the man who replaces All Might as the top Japanese superhero. Throughout the plot of *My Hero Academia* it is revealed that Endeavor's obsession with claiming the spot of number one hero and surpassing All Might consumed him and led him to experience frustration and despair. Eventually Endeavor arranged a marriage with a woman who had an ice "quirk" in the hopes of producing offspring that could inherit both powers and surpass his own and finally achieve his life goal. Unfortunately, this led him to become an abusive husband and father who considered his first three children as failures. This gravely affected the family's health and tore it apart. Moreover, the manga does include superheroes that are willing to kill villains for the sake of maintaining social order. In this sense, through its representations of fallible superheroes and admirable villains *My Hero Academia* does subscribe to the idea that there is no pure good or evil that is typical of Japanese ethics. Nevertheless, the manga still establishes clear lines of division between these two forces. Another way in which Horikoshi explores this moral complexity is in the issue of superheroes and how their adherence to their selfless and self-sacrificial mission towards society is unjustifiable from a Japanese perspective.

One of the most explicit examples of how superhero values conflict with those of Japanese society can be seen in how Horikoshi portrays the idea that superheroes subscribe to an abstract ideal of justice to the point where they neglect not only their personal lives but also their social responsibilities. As Terjesen explains, "Japanese ethics has difficulty justifying a mission that requires the superhero to go above and beyond the call in the name of an abstract principle like justice" (57). Horikoshi cleverly demonstrates the consequences of this neglect of social



responsibilities through the story of All Might's former mentor, Nana Shimura. In chapter 235 the manga reveals that Nana as a mother had decided to leave her child Kotaro in foster care so that she could fight against a group of dangerous supervillains. A key aspect of traditional American superheroes like Spider-Man is their willingness to sacrifice their personal interests for the greater good for the sake of fulfilling their duties as costumed vigilantes (Loeb and Morris 15). The self-sacrificial nature of superheroes is in large part due to the Western utilitarian mindset. From this standpoint a person that has superpowers should prioritize their responsibility as a costumed vigilante not only because they have the extraordinary abilities necessary to strive to promote the good of all, but because the overall goodness they can produce outweighs the detrimental effects to their personal life (Robichaud 181). In a similar way, Nana Shimura portrays this utilitarian mindset in the act of abandoning her son to fight supervillains because she makes that decision despite whatever emotional harm and trauma it might cause her child. Though at that moment she believed she was making the correct decision (from a utilitarian perspective) to fight dangerous supervillains and keep both Japan and her son safe, the repercussions of her actions would manifest much later. Feeling that his mother had abandoned him, Kotaro grew up harboring deep resentment towards his mother and superheroes in general because he believed that they were people who selfishly abandoned their loved ones for the sake of helping strangers (*MHA* 14-15; ch. 235). This would also unfortunately cause Kotaro to direct this bitterness and hatred towards his son Tenko, who wanted to become a superhero, in the form of physical abuse; the consequences of which ultimately turn Tenko into the main supervillain/antagonist of *My Hero Academia*, Shigaraki Tomura. Horikoshi appears to align with Terjesen's argument by depicting that Shimura's neglect of her personal life not only affected her but also her offspring, eventually having much deeper and unfortunate ramifications.

The fact that Shimura's son Kotaro hates superheroes and how they are willing to risk their lives for strangers and considering that it led Kotaro to pass on this hatred to his son Tenko demonstrates the manga's criticism of this fundamental superhero value. Besides this negative portrayal of the superhero and the self-sacrificing mission based on abstract ideals of justice, Horikoshi also offers an alternative take on the mission convention that is based on more concrete motives: superheroism as a profession.

*My Hero Academia* depicts its own version of a superhero that is driven by more limited and concrete motives, which in this case is because it is simply a career choice. Within *My Hero Academia*'s "Pro-Hero" system, students graduate from specialized high schools like U.A. Academy as licensed heroes and seek to be hired by reputable "Hero Agencies" where they work under a "Pro-Hero" that they might admire. Here, the heroes work to obtain experience and popularity to become "Pro-Heroes" themselves and eventually open their own agencies. Therefore, being a superhero becomes part of Japan's corporate system and emulates a similar process of recruitment into an established firm where a person can develop their work skills. Any person that has considered themselves a superhero but worked outside the confines of the law (which is traditionally what many classic American superheroes have done), was considered a vigilante, and within the manga's "Pro-Hero" system a villain. This "Pro-Hero" system sets a precedent for others that working to preserve said social order is more admirable and lucrative than trying to change it. This conservation of the social order proves to be detrimental as the manga's narrative progresses and reveals that superheroes have ignored trying to fix a fundamental flaw within their society: the discrimination and isolation between superpowered individuals.

Before *My Hero Academia*'s narrative began, people had initially used their "quirks" to fight superpowered criminals illegally. Instead of attempting to abolish costumed vigilantism, the manga's fictional society embraced it and created laws which would promote it as one of the most celebrated and desirable professions in Japan. These regulations heavily restricted the use of "quirks" for the common citizen and only allow those who are licensed heroes to use their superpowers in the service of saving others and combating crime. The fact that these "quirks" are regulated by the law to protect social order alludes to the stricter views Japan has as a collectivist society towards inhibiting citizen's individual expression. By limiting the use of "quirks" only for the greater good, Horikoshi recognizes that individual freedom in Japanese society is limited to ensure the greatest amount of social harmony (Taguchi). Here, the term "quirk" merits closer observation. In the Japanese translation of *My Hero Academia*, the word used for these abilities was "*kosei*", which roughly translates to "individuality" (Koepp). In the manga, "quirks" are not only meant to be seen as superhuman abilities but can also be interpreted in the term's general definition of peculiar or unexpected characteristics. Many of the characters throughout the series, especially the heroes, distinguish themselves from others thanks to their extraordinary abilities that in many cases alter their physical appearances into fantastic and even monstrous forms. Within the context of *My Hero Academia* this proves to be problematic because it leads to the unequal social relationships between superhumans themselves as well as with non-superpowered individuals. Here, Horikoshi demonstrates the dangers of being more than human. In this case, the sudden appearance of superpowers changes how people perceive and relate to each other, causing social turmoil. Throughout the manga, characters hint at the turbulent social relations between people with and without quirks. Though initially people with quirks were discriminated against, *My Hero Academia* occurs at a point where people without quirks are the minority,

serving as a kind of reverse mirror to X-Men. The restriction of “quirks” also leads to one of the biggest flaws within *My Hero Academia*’s fictional Japanese society: widespread discrimination against people who lack “quirks,” those whose “quirks” make them different than humans, ones that are seen as potentially destructive and dangerous, and “quirks” which cause people to behave outside of the norm. In the manga’s first chapter the manga’s main protagonist, for example, suffers from the same treatment that is given to others who are “quirkless,” mainly they are considered failures and treated with a degree of contempt. Through the opening lines of the manga “People are not born equal” (1; ch. 1), Midoriya highlights how he lives in a truly unequal world that is caused by the division between people with and without “quirks.” It is these flaws within *My Hero Academia*’s fictional Japanese society which in turn leads to the creation of the main villains of the series.

Throughout its plot, *My Hero Academia* provides close attention to the series’ main group of villains, also known as the League of Villains, exploring their individual life stories and motivations. As the plot progresses and the reader becomes more familiarized with this group of villains it becomes apparent how the manga frames them as social misfits who want to reshape or destroy the world. The predominant theme amongst these villains is how society has failed them in some way (ultimately rejecting them), and how they are victims of a complacent and prejudiced society. The villains in *MHA* support Terjesen’s observation that superhumans feel a sense of detachment and isolation from society because of circumstances that they cannot control, which leads them to reach out to others like them (63). Throughout the series many of the supervillains point out these shortcomings of society as either the motivations for them to become villains or to expose the hypocrisy of the superheroes who are supposed to save those in need. Indeed, the members of the League of Villains faced discrimination because of their

mutant physical appearance (like the villain known as Spinner) or because their “quirk” caused them to develop mentally unstable or psychotic behavior (like Himiko Toga and Twice).

Moreover, Horikoshi frequently portrays the main villains of the series, particularly the members of the League of Villains, as humans. Though their behavior might be reprehensible and their goals evil, they do have many moments which demonstrate their humanity and how they are not shallow evil characters. In fact the members of the League of Villains form an unlikely family among themselves as they create an environment where they can accept each other and foster a sense of belonging despite their differences in personality and worldviews.

In summary, *My Hero Academia* does offer a morally complex vision of the superhero that is also incorporates Japanese ethical values that collide with the Western values that are typical of the American superhero. Though the manga does maintain a clear conflict between good and evil, it also depicts deeply fallible superheroes and flawed, but nonetheless human, supervillains. Moreover, the manga’s portrayal of superheroes, and the social issues that result from them, allows the manga to engage in a deeper exploration of the ideals surrounding the superhero itself. *My Hero Academia*’s central question is: what does it mean to be a [super]hero? To try to answer this question let us look back at the manga’s take on the idea of superheroism as a profession and its impact within the manga’s fictional society.

The notion of the superhero who personally benefits from his work is encapsulated in the manga’s “Pro-Hero” system which incentivizes individuals with “quirks” to become costumed crime fighters with the perk being that they can gain fame and fortune from it. However, there are some characters, particularly villains, who consider people who merely become superheroes for purely financial goals as not “true” heroes. For example, in one storyline, Stain, a villain and former vigilante (infamously dubbed the “Hero Killer”), goes on a violent rampage purging

Japan of phony superheroes that are "...mired in vanity and hypocrisy..." (11; ch. 42). Stain opposes the commercialization of the values that superheroes embody, such as altruism and self-sacrifice, because it limits the meaningfulness of their impact and contributions to society since they are not purely motivated by selflessness. He is disappointed with the "Pro-Hero" system itself because many heroes care more about furthering their personal goals instead of being a superhero for the sake of serving the greater good and saving people from harm. *My Hero Academia*'s main villain, Shigaraki Tomura, provides the manga's most explicit criticism of professional superheroes in chapter 281:

You Heroes pretend to be society's guardians. For generations, you pretended not to see those you couldn't protect and swept their pain under the rug. It's tainted everything you've built. That means your system's all rotten from the inside with maggots crawling out. It all builds up, little by little, over time. You've got the common trash, all too dependent on being protected. And the brave guardians who created the trash that need coddling. It's a corrupt, vicious cycle. Everything I've witnessed, this whole system you've built has always rejected me. Now I'm ready to reject it. That's why I destroy. That's why I took this power for myself. Simple enough, yeah? I don't care if you don't understand. That's what makes us heroes and villains. (2-5)

In this villainous monologue during a crucial battle with most of Japan's top superheroes, Tomura unmasks the hypocrisy of the superheroes and accuses them of making a phony commitment towards defending their society. Because the superhero works as a branch of law enforcement, Horikoshi foregrounds his role as a defender of the status quo. By creating superheroes who work for the government, Horikoshi proposes an interesting solution to one of the inherent contradictions of superheroes in society, that their illegal vigilantism places them

above the law and undermines the foundations of society by demonstrating that law enforcement and other state institutions are incapable of maintaining social order (Kohut 60). In the case of *My Hero Academia*, the superhero becomes part of these state institutions and a pillar of the manga's fictional society. Ironically, throughout the manga's narrative, and as Tomura points out, the superhero not only proves incapable of preserving society's fragile social order but also proves how deeply flawed it is. Tomura blames both the superheroes and the social system for turning a blind eye towards those who were ostracized or suffered from the cracks in their society.

Horikoshi critiques the idea of the superhero who is simply a defender of the status quo and makes the world a better place so that normal people do not have to. In *My Hero Academia*, because superheroes try to resolve most of society's problems, they inadvertently foster in the average citizen a sense of willful ignorance of the social injustices that occur around them (like the domestic abuse that Tomura suffered as a child at the hands of his father Kotaro). As a result, criminality becomes merely a spectacle for civilians, instead of an indicator of things that are wrong with their society. This complacent attitude demonstrates how people rely on superheroes to the point that they rid themselves of their personal responsibility to help the victims of these social injustices and to seek the changes necessary to resolve these issues. Along with criticizing the superhero that merely preserves social order, Horikoshi also proposes his own vision of the ultimate superhero. In chapter 323 this is directly addressed when Nezu, the principal of U.A. Academy comments:

Lack of understanding. Intolerance. It seems we're always just one step away. Try as it might, humanity struggles to make true progress down its path. Issues shift and voices clash. Making that single step feel like an impossible journey [...] And I believe once

someone takes that unlikely step and carves a path, the ultimate hero will rise up. One who surpasses [...] even All Might himself. (6, 17)

Here Horikoshi offers the idea of a superhero whose fight for the greater good is not only limited to defending the social order but also changes it for the sake of those who do not have the power to do so themselves. In effect, Horikoshi seeks to reinforce the notion of the superhero as a champion of the oppressed. Loeb and Morris summarize Horikoshi's interpretation of the superhero: "in a culture of pervasive self-interest and self-indulgent passivity, where people are often more inclined to be spectators than participants, and typically embrace easy comfort rather than initiating needed change, we can forget the relative rarity of the motivation behind what is actually heroic activity" (13). Horikoshi wishes to remind us that what motivates the superhero is the belief that their actions can make a difference and serve as a significant contribution to making the world a better place for everyone; that by going out of one's way and helping others (despite how powerless we think we are), like All Might tells Midoriya in the first chapter of *My Hero Academia*, "you can be a hero" (55).

As we have seen, *My Hero Academia* capitalizes on the longstanding history between American superhero comics and Japanese manga by grounding itself within the tropes and conventions of the former while incorporating them with manga's *shōnen* themes. Indeed the manga draws distinct parallels between the three primary conventions of the superhero genre, mainly his mission, powers, and identity and demonstrates how well they fit with the *shōnen* genre's own. Horikoshi reveals how flawed superheroes really are by demonstrating the negative consequences of their preservation of the status quo and how many of the characters harbor unhealthy obsessions with the idea of superheroism, such as with Gentle Criminal and Endeavor. This leads to the question of whether Terjesen's claim of the incompatibility between Western



and Japanese values still holds up. Throughout *My Hero Academia*'s narrative one can see how the Western values that the superhero represents, such as individualism and self-sacrifice in the name of an abstract ideal of justice, interact with the collectivist Japanese values. The fact that this interaction leads to some of *My Hero Academia*'s deepest moral conflicts, such as the neglect of social responsibilities in favor of fighting crime and helping others and the underlying discrimination which ostracizes both people with and without "quirks," heavily suggests that these two differing sets of cultural values cannot coexist within the manga's fictional Japanese society. Moreover, *My Hero Academia* takes a deeper look at the superhero itself with the manga's central question: what does it mean to be a [super]hero? Horikoshi responds this question by offering a critical view of the superhero that only defends the status quo while offering his own vision of the superhero that also seeks to protect everyone by promoting needed social change.

Given *My Hero Academia*'s incredible popularity in Japan since it began publication in 2014 this could mean that the ideological friction that is seen in the manga does appeal to and even resonate with Japanese audiences and their current social circumstances, something which superhero comics have always been good at depicting either explicitly or metaphorically. This is even more plausible if one considers that some recent studies show that Japanese culture has adopted more individualistic ideals over time and that its coexistence with collectivism has had a complex impact on Japanese society (Ogihara 8-9). Given the fact that Horikoshi's work successfully draws from the superhero genre, which had previously only been loosely depicted in Japanese manga, it makes sense to believe that Japanese manga may also be attempting to draw more inspiration from Western literary genres in an attempt to produce narratives which can help the Japanese to make sense of the social changes which they are experiencing.

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