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### The World's Greatest Hero: An Examination of Superhero Tropes in My Hero Academia

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The World's Greatest Hero:  
An Examination of Superhero Tropes in *My Hero Academia*

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## Abstract

In this paper the author explores the cross-cultural transmission of genre archetypes in illustrated media. Specifically, the representation of the archetype of American superheroes as represented in the Japanese manga and anime series, *My Hero Academia*. Through examination of the extant corpus of manga chapters and anime episodes for the franchise, the author draws comparison between characters and situations in the manga series with examples from American comic books by Marvel Comics and DC Comics. By skillfully incorporating foundational themes of American superhero comics into the *shonen*<sup>1</sup> manga genre, *My Hero Academia* joins a growing collection of media that draws inspiration from overseas, to be distributed for global consumption. In this way it serves as the ultimate form of cultural exchange.

Keywords: *My Hero Academia*, Superheroes, Marvel Comics, DC Comics, comic books, shonen, manga, *Weekly Shonen Jump*

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<sup>1</sup> Manga series specifically targeted at young males, although a series may have a much wider audience than that.

## Start Line<sup>2</sup>

Sent from a dying world by his parents, he found that on his adopted home of Earth, he had amazing powers of flight as well as superhuman strength and durability. Using these gifts, he became a hero of his world, defending it time and time again from numerous villains. Although originally thought to be the sole survivor of his world, he eventually encounters another survivor from his home world and together they fight to protect their adopted home from threats on a universal scale.

While there's no doubt that the preceding paragraph describes a heroic alien protector of Earth, am I referring to Superman,<sup>3</sup> from comics distributed by DC Comics, or am I referring to Goku,<sup>4</sup> of the *Dragon Ball (DB)* franchise, distributed by Japanese publisher Shueisha? The correct answer? Both. These heroes share many superhuman abilities such as immense strength, extreme durability, flight, energy projection, and global popularity. However, the *Dragon Ball* franchise's focus on martial arts tournaments with ever-increasing stakes frames Goku as a martial artist, who performs heroics as opposed to a superhero who employs martial arts as his means of fighting crime. This subtle distinction serves to illustrate how minute differences in setting and focus can serve to define genres.

While Goku and other *shonen* protagonists, whose tales are targeted at a young male demographic, may demonstrate many of the trappings of American superheroes, some more recent manga franchises, such as *My Hero Academia (MHA)*<sup>5</sup> by Kohei

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<sup>2</sup> All of the section headings are adapted from individual chapter titles from the manga.

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman," *Action Comics*, April 18, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Akira Toriyama, "Bulma and Son Goku," *Weekly Shonen Jump*, June 19, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Yosuke Kuroda, writer, *My Hero Academia*, directed by Kenji Nagasaki (2016; Tokyo: Bones, 2016), [https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B06Y48VPV5/ref=atv\\_yv\\_hom\\_c\\_unkc\\_1\\_3](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B06Y48VPV5/ref=atv_yv_hom_c_unkc_1_3).

Horikoshi, have hewn more closely to the model of American superheroes. This popular series challenges the notion that superheroes are primarily an American institution. My research examines how the protagonist of *MHA*, Midoriya Izuku, draws strongly from the themes and tropes of American superhero comics, within the framework of a Japanese high school series, while forging a path that is uniquely his own in the pages of *Shonen Jump Weekly*. I draw examples both from the anime of *MHA*, produced by Bones, and the manga form, citing timestamps and issue numbers, to compare these heroes with their American antecedents, who will be represented by appearances in comic books, cartoons, and live action representations as appropriate.

For this project, I attempted to collect the entire catalogue of adventures of Midoriya Izuku, the protagonist of *MHA*. To do this, I turned to the *MHA* repository at Viz Media, the largest translator and distributor of manga in North America. Their website<sup>6</sup> provided access to all 271 chapters of the manga release, translated into English.<sup>7</sup> I also utilized Crunchyroll,<sup>8</sup> an online anime streaming service, for access to subtitled<sup>9</sup> episodes of the anime series, which totalled 88 episodes through season four. Then I read through the entirety of the work coding for instances when Horikoshi's work deliberately incorporated superhero themes on top of the native *shonen* tropes of its genre. In order to compare *MHA* with other *manga* series I draw examples from the *DB*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.viz.com/shonenjump/chapters/my-hero-academia>. The author would also like to thank Dave Casipit, Senior Localization Manager, VIZ Media, LLC, and John Bae, Digital Content Editor on *Weekly Shonen Jump*, also at VIZ Media, LLC, for invaluable insight they provided on themes and localization of Japanese media.

<sup>7</sup> As of May 17, with a new chapter being available nearly every week.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.crunchyroll.com/my-hero-academia>

<sup>9</sup> As I do not speak Japanese well enough to follow the dialogue in its native language, I must depend on translated materials. I chose to work with subtitles over dubbed because I feel that the emotional performance of the Japanese actors can convey meaning beyond the actual lines of dialogue, that may be unintentionally altered by dubbed scripts.

franchise, particularly the “Great Saiyaman Saga,” contained in *Dragon Ball Z* volume 20. This particular volume demonstrates how familiar superhero tropes fall flat when the story being told (or the author) refuses to cooperate. Additionally, specific issues of individual Marvel and DC comics will provide examples of superhero tropes for examination of *MHA*.

As a longtime enthusiast of both American comic books and Japanese manga, I enjoy many aspects of both mediums. My background in history and philosophy equips me with an exceptional tool kit with which to examine themes in the stories themselves, while gaining additional context from the environment from which they spring.

### **Hero Notebook**

While an examination of superhero tropes in Japanese anime and manga may seem like a combination of foregone conclusion and pointless exercise, I intend to demonstrate that by embracing superhero tropes while remaining firmly grounded in *shonen* literature, Horikoshi Kohei, the *mangaka*<sup>10</sup> of *MHA*, is participating in the emergence of a convergent global media, where many different societies contribute to culture on a global scale. As the more than 18 billion that Disney has earned off of Marvel superhero movies shows, American superheroes have appeal far beyond America’s shores.<sup>11</sup> The performance of *MHA*’s theatrical release *Two Heroes*, which earned 5.7 million dollars in a limited run in American theaters indicates that the

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<sup>10</sup> Japanese term for manga creator.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Whitten, “Disney Bought Marvel for \$4 Billion in 2009, a Decade Later It’s Made More Than \$18 Billion at the Global Box Office,” last modified June 22, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/21/disney-has-made-more-than-18-billion-from-marvel-films-since-2012.html>.

attraction goes both ways.<sup>12</sup> By identifying how the character of Midoriya interacts with familiar superhero tropes, either by embracing or subverting them, we can come to a more thorough understanding of what being a superhero means in a global sense.

First I will focus on Midoriya Izuku, the protagonist of *MHA*, and how his role as a *shonen* protagonist compares to the traditional hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of *MHA*, Midoriya is a middle school student preparing to enter high school. His journey from relative weakness to growing power provides much of the structure of the series.

Building off of Midoriya's status as a hero, we will examine how setting elements and themes determine the scope of a superhero universe. Peter Coogan, director of the Institute for Comics Studies, argues that the superhero genre is defined by the mission, powers, and identity of its protagonists.<sup>14</sup> In Coogan's conception, "mission" refers to the drive to fight crime, much like Spider-Man or Batman's crusade against crime in response to their tragic backstories. "Powers" are the superhuman abilities of the protagonists, although characters such as Iron Man or Green Lantern are normal humans who wield weapons that can be given to others.<sup>15</sup> Finally, "identity" consists of

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<sup>12</sup> Megan Peters, "My Hero Academia: Two Heroes' Box Office Puts Film in Anime Hall of Fame," last modified October 10, 2018, <https://comicbook.com/anime/2018/10/10/my-hero-academia-two-heroes-anime-box-office-top-ten/>.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), Commemorative Edition, Kindle.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Coogan, "The Hero Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero," in *What Is a Superhero?*, eds. Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>15</sup> In American superhero comics, particularly early ones from the 1940s, powers came from a multitude of sources (with a frightening number coming from industrial accidents). Conversely, in *MHA*, the characters derive their powers from "Quirks," whose origin is largely left unexplained. This most closely resembles the use of "mutation" as the source of powers for Marvel's X-Men.

the costume and persona of the superhero, whether it is concealed from the general public or not.

In reference to superheroes in manga and anime, Andrew Terjesen, a noted scholar on the intersection between superheroes and philosophy, contends that the underlying psychological motivations for superheroes are incompatible with the Japanese psyche, thus explaining the relative scarcity of superhero representation in manga.<sup>16</sup> While this seems like a somewhat simplistic view of Japanese society, what's interesting about Terjesen's position is that his views were published prior to the release of *MHA*. Close examination of Terjesen's conclusions, along with direct comparisons with *MHA*, will be necessary to determine whether the protagonists of this series conform to his view of the Japanese mindset.

While the internet facilitates international communication and thereby allows dialogue between fans of American comic books and fans of Japanese anime and manga, these exchanges have not always been on the highest scholarly level. Comparisons between Japanese manga characters and American superheroes are often debated on websites such as CBR.com (Comic Book Reader) and Reddit. Given the malleable nature of power levels in both traditions, these discussions often consist of determining whether Saitama of *OPM* can beat up Superman or vice versa.<sup>17</sup> My research instead focuses on philosophical and ethical motivations for the heroes of *MHA*, rather than comparisons of those character's power levels. By examining how the concept of

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Terjesen, "Why Are There So Few Superhero Manga?," in *Manga and Philosophy: Fullmetal Metaphysician*, eds. Josef Steiff and Adam Barkman (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2010), 56.

<sup>17</sup> Sam Stone, "Could One-Punch Man's Saitama Beat Superman? (Spoiler: Yes, But Here's Why)," CBR (CBR, November 24, 2019), <https://www.cbr.com/one-punch-man-saitama-beat-superman/>.



superheroes have been reinterpreted by Horikoshi, we can come to a clearer understanding of how cultural transmission and reinterpretation functions across illustrated media, both in printed and animated forms.

### The Test

Many of the hallmarks of superhero stories such as dashing masked figures, or feats far beyond the capabilities of mere mortals are the staples of many different storytelling traditions. The tradition of the secret identity, where the hero operates in disguise while maintaining a “civilian” identity dates back at least to the adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel<sup>18</sup> and Zorro<sup>19</sup> at the dawn of the twentieth century. Heroes such as Gilgamesh<sup>20</sup> of Sumerian myths and Merlin<sup>21</sup> of the folklore of King Arthur, routinely performed feats with superhuman strength and magic are common in myth and folklore. While the themes from these tales may be often repeated in annals of superhero lore, these earlier tales belong to other times and traditions. Before delving into how *MHA* both draws from and expands on the American superhero concept I want

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<sup>18</sup> Baroness Orczy, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Penguin Books: London, 2018), 156-165, Kindle. Originally published in 1905 the eponymous Scarlet Pimpernel rescued French nobles during the French Revolution while masquerading as a rich playboy who did nothing useful.

<sup>19</sup> Johnston McCulley, *The Curse of Capistrano: The Original Adventures of Zorro*, (Akron, Ohio: Summit Classic Press, 2013), 177. Kindle. Originally published in 1919, Don Diego Vega (later Don Diego de la Vega) is the cowardly son of the wealthiest landowner in Spanish California who secretly fights the oppressive governor as Zorro.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald J. Davis, translator, *Gilgamesh* (Bridgeport, Connecticut: Insignia Publishing, 2014), 17-18. Kindle. Gilgamesh was a demigod of Sumeria who is the subject of one of the earliest written texts in existence. He demonstrated many feats of superhuman strength and may have served as a model for other mythological characters such as Samson and Hercules.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*. (New York: Quarto Publishing Group, 2017), 1-28, Adobe. While Merlin was not the first magic user in folklore, he is one of the most prominent and widely known. His position as advisor to King Arthur helped solidify the tradition of the wise magic user advising the monarch.

to draw examples from *Dragon Ball*<sup>22</sup> to demonstrate how a *shonen* anime series can feature both superhumans and heroes prominently, yet still fall short of being a superhero anime.

While *DB* features many of the elements of superhero comics, including alien characters, characters with superhuman skills or strength, and characters that wield magic, the structure of the series does not support the superhero genre. *Dragon Ball* storylines often follow one of two patterns, either training for or participation in martial arts tournaments or periods of exploration chasing the wish granting MacGuffins of the series, the Dragon Balls.

While both Marvel comics and *MHA* have had their characters indulge in a tournament at one time or another they are hardly the focus of the series. *Contest of Champions* relates the story of two cosmic entities holding the tournament using teams of heroes from the Marvel universe.<sup>23</sup> However, this tournament consists of teams of superheroes fighting to collect artifacts in a way that resembles a game of capture the flag more than it does a fighting tournament. *MHA* also indulges in a fighting tournament early on, in *shonen* tradition, namely the “U. A. Sports Festival Arc.”<sup>24</sup> While the tournament does span 22 chapters, this is a very small fraction of the ongoing series which recently surpassed 265 chapters. In contrast, *DB* introduces the *Tenkaichi Budokai*<sup>25</sup> in chapter 24, and features the characters training for and competing in these

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<sup>22</sup> While the manga continued to be released under the Dragon Ball title, chapters after 194 were adapted to anime as Dragon Ball Z.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Gruenwald, Bill Mantlo and Steve Grant, *Contest of Champions* 1, no. 1-3 (June-August 1982),

<sup>24</sup> Kohei Horikoshi, writer, Caleb D. Cook, trans, *My Hero Academia*, (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2014), Chapters 22-44. English edition. <https://www.viz.com/shonenjump/chapters/my-hero-academia>.

<sup>25</sup> Literally, the Strongest Under the Heavens Martial Arts Tournament

tournaments four more times over the course of the series. Eventually, in volumes 33-35, even the villain of that saga, Cell, organizes a tournament in order to fight the heroes of the series.<sup>26</sup> Toriyama's focus on training and tournaments emphasizes the martial artist genre of the series.

Toriyama directly parodies the superhero genre with the saga known as "The Great Saiyaman Saga." At this point of the series, Gohan, son of Goku, has inherited his father's Saiyan powers as well as trained in the martial arts extensively, although not as extensively as his father. This is partially due to his mother, who insists that he study in school as well as fighting.<sup>27</sup> This results in Gohan attempting to hide his abilities while fighting bank robbers in addition to normal sports activities.<sup>28</sup> By comically overplaying how bad Gohan is at concealing his abilities (for example, Gohan flies 30 feet in the air to catch a baseball, then tries to pass it off as an accident), Toriyama references the lengths that superheroes such as Spider-Man will go to conceal their heroic identities from those who know them well. This skewering of superhero tropes supports the idea that while Toriyama may find such hijinks entertaining, he doesn't feel they are appropriate for the story of *Dragon Ball*.

Secret identities aren't the only element of superhero comics that Toriyama parodies in this particular saga. To protect his identity while performing heroics, Gohan receives a costume, including a helmet that only exposes his mouth and chin.<sup>29</sup> However it avails him little as a fellow student penetrates his disguise within minutes, due to him

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<sup>26</sup> Akira Toriyama, *Dragon Ball* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 1985), vols. 2-5, 10-12, 14-16, 33-35, 36-37, 42.

<sup>27</sup> Akira Toriyama, *Dragon Ball* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 1985), vol. 36, 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-18, 25-32.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

not changing his voice and mannerisms, as well as calling the student by name.<sup>30</sup> In this way, Toriyama draws attention to how poorly a costume would disguise someone from their close associates, unless the rules of the work directly support it.

### **What It Takes to Be a Hero**

In contrast, Horikoshi embraces the superhero genre in *MHA* by paying homage to superhero tropes while adapting them to a *shonen* high school setting. In the first chapter of *MHA*, when describing how the emergence of Quirks ushered in a time when “Fantasy became reality,” the panel depicts a number of recognizable superheroes silhouettes, both American and Japanese.<sup>31</sup> This awareness is an example of Horikoshi’s appreciation and acknowledgment of American superhero media from the very beginning of *MHA*. However, while he borrows themes and trappings from American comic books, by adapting the genre to a Japanese high-school setting, Horikoshi is able to introduce new expressions of these forms that are unique to this series.

Because these characters are students in a school, they don’t start the first chapter with splashy costumes and hero names like the superheroes in many American comic books. When the students have their Quirks assessed by their homeroom teacher on the first day of class, they wear identical school uniforms that wouldn’t look too out of place in a typical *shonen* high school series.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Horikoshi helps humanize the experience of his superhero students, by having them share common experiences with typical Japanese high school students.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>31</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 4, 14.

It isn't until the eighth chapter that the students in Midoriya's class receive individualized costumes.<sup>33</sup> Fittingly, this plays into traditions at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, as the X-Men and the New Mutants, two teams of Marvel superheroes ostensibly centered around students attending a private school, debut with matching uniforms before "graduating" to individualized costumes.<sup>34</sup> Unlike heroes such as Spider-Man, who have to do their own tailoring work,<sup>35</sup> the students' costumes in *MHA* are custom-designed for each student, by companies contracted by the school. That there is enough demand to support an entire industry for costumes and equipment for those with powers is further proof of how profoundly the existence of Quirks has changed the world of *MHA*.

Another vital aspect of the American superhero comics that Horikoshi embraces in *MHA* is superhero identities, or code names that help encapsulate what the character is about. For example, Superman's powers make him "superior" to all other heroes appearing in DC comics, while Spider-Man alludes to Peter Parker's abilities received from a radioactive spider.<sup>36</sup> Horikoshi honors this tradition with All-Might, a hero with overwhelming power and charisma, and Eraserhead, Midoriya's homeroom teacher, whose Quirk allows him to "erase" or temporarily remove other character's Quirks.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 8, 1-5.

<sup>34</sup> Stan Lee, "X-Men," *The X-Men*, September 1963, 1. Chris Claremont and Bob McLeod, "Initiation," *The New Mutants*, September 1982, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Stan Lee, "Nothing Can Stop . . . The Sandman!" *The Amazing Spider-Man*, September 1963, 6.

<sup>36</sup> The civilian identity of Spider-Man.

<sup>37</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 6, 12-13.

Along with uniforms, these codenames help codify the identities of these characters, regardless of whether these identities are secret or not.<sup>38</sup>

However, while most American superheroes will often have a code name in their first appearance, the students at UA do not have code names until chapter 45, nearly a year after the series launched.<sup>39</sup> These high school students are tasked with coming up with their own names. Both their regular home room teacher, Eraserhead and Midnight, the guest instructor brought in to oversee the processes, emphasize that these are tentative names. However, both caution that some heroes get stuck with their first choice, so it is important to get it right.<sup>40</sup>

While American superheroes often develop their superhero names off the cuff, or are named by the in-universe media,<sup>41</sup> Horikoshi imbues this scene with all the emotions of a public speaking class by having the students present their names to their fellow classmates.<sup>42</sup> While spending an entire issue on choosing a superhero name would be unthinkable in American comics, it fits right into a *shonen* slice-of-life manga. Even if that life is in a world filled with superheroes.

It is because the main characters are minors in high school that going out to battle supervillains every day isn't the main focus *MHA*. However, from the very first

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<sup>38</sup> Jason Cohen, "Superman Reveals His Identity to His Closest Friends - and Their Reactions Are Perfect," TL/DR, CBR.com, December 11, 2019, <https://www.cbr.com/superman-18-secret-identity-reveal/>. *Iron Man*, directed by Jon Favreau (2008; Burbank, CA: Marvel Studios, 2008), Google Play Movies.

<sup>39</sup> Horikoshi, "Time to Pick Some Names," *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 45.

<sup>40</sup> Horikoshi, "Time to Pick Some Names," *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 45, 7-8.

<sup>41</sup> This refers to reporters and journalists that exist within the story. By having reporters name the hero, writers sidestep how the reclusive and mysterious hero can get his name spelled correctly in front-page headlines.

<sup>42</sup> Horikoshi, "Time to Pick Some Names," *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 45, 9-18.

chapter of the series, the existence of supervillains is front and center.<sup>43</sup> These villains and their destructive natures justify the existence of heroes and their place in society. This context is essential in establishing the “shared universe” where events important to the plot are going on in the world around the characters, but are not the focus of the current story. This is an important aspect of both the Marvel and DC comic universes, allowing characters such as Batman and Superman to interact, and allowing events in one series to affect another, enriching the whole. While Horikoshi does not have different series to use,<sup>44</sup> he simulates the effect by indicating that heroes introduced for a particular storyline continue to exist outside of that storyline. In this way, Horikoshi gives the reader a glimpse into a much larger universe than the one they can see in the pages of *MHA*.

In addition to the outward visual aspects, the trappings of comic books, Horikoshi pays a lot of attention to the themes of American superhero comics as well. For example, a majority of the tension in Midoriya’s life before attending U. A. stems from the fact that in the world of *MHA*, 80% of the population exhibits some type of superhuman ability, typically called a “Quirk,” by the age of four. Midoriya, who idolizes heroes and wants to become one when he grows up, does not.<sup>45</sup> This, combined with his tendency to help and protect others, leads him to be bullied by peers with powerful Quirks.<sup>46</sup> This feeling of powerlessness warring with a spirit determined to act is a

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<sup>43</sup> Horikoshi, “Izuku Midoriya: Origin,” *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Although there is a spin-off series, *My Hero Academia: Vigilantes*, due to being set five years before *MHA*, there is little to no opportunities for actual crossovers. However, the series has been used to flesh out the universe and does showcase some of the characters as they were in earlier times.

<sup>45</sup> Horikoshi, “Izuku Midoriya: Origin,” *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 5, 19-21.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

common theme in superhero comics, as demonstrated by heroes such as Captain America and Spider-Man demonstrating much greater agency and success after receiving powers.<sup>47</sup> By establishing his protagonist as an underdog, Horikoshi ties into one of the strongest recurring themes in comics.

Another important theme of American superhero comics is the legacy hero. A legacy hero is one who takes on the powers, and sometimes costume of an older hero, as a means of extending a heroic identity into the next generation. One of the most famous legacy heroes in DC Comics is the Flash. At its heart the identity of the Flash as “the fastest man alive” is the legacy that is inherited. Jay Garrick bore the title in the Golden Age of Comics,<sup>48</sup> starring in one of the first comic magazines to be named after its lead character. Prominently featured in his costume are the color red and a thunderbolt, both items that came to be strongly associated with the identity of the Flash. Garrick’s powers were that he could move very fast, most often by running. He used these powers to perform numerous feats.<sup>49</sup> His last appearance during the Golden Age was in the pages of *All Star Comics* #57, in 1951.<sup>50</sup> The identity of the Flash would be revisited in 1956, when the character of Barry Allen would take on the role. While sporting a different, more streamlined costume, Allen’s version of the Flash incorporated the same red color and a similar, although not identical thunderbolt motif that Garrick’s costume had.

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<sup>47</sup> Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “Meet Captain America,” *Captain America*, vol 2, March 1941, 4-5. Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, “Spider-Man,” *Amazing Fantasy*, August 1962, 1-4.

<sup>48</sup> Eras of American comics are broken into 3 major divisions: Golden Age is the period from 1938 (appearance of Superman) to 1956 (Appearance of Silver Age Flash), Silver Age is the period from 1956 to roughly 1970 (no single clear event marks the demarcation, with many changes contributing to an overall tone shift), and the Bronze Age which spanned from 1970 to approximately 1986. Other ages, (Dark Age, Iron Age, Modern Age, and Heroic Age, among others) exist, but fail to gain the widespread recognition that the first three do.

<sup>49</sup> Gardner Fox and Harry Lampert, “The Flash,” *Flash Comics*, January 1940.

<sup>50</sup> Gardner Fox, “The Mystery of the Vanishing Detectives,” *All Star Comics*, February-March 1951.



From the second page of Allen's story, the legacy of Garrick's adventures were acknowledged, in the form of a comic book that Allen was reading.<sup>51</sup>

The *MHA* character that most closely resembles this type of legacy hero is one of Midoriya's classmates, Kirishima Eijiro, Red Riot. His choice of hero name is an homage to a hero from a previous era with similar powers, Crimson Riot. Kirishima idolizes the hero for both his abilities and adherence to old-school ideals of nobility and fair play.<sup>52</sup> Although it isn't shown that Kirishima has ever had any personal contact with Crimson Riot, by paying homage to his idol through the adoption of a similar name, Kirishima carries Crimson Riot's legacy into the next generation.

The Flash identity from DC also provides yet another example of legacies in American superhero comics. In issue #110 of the Silver Age Flash series, the character of Wally West is introduced. Wally West is the nephew of Allen's fiancée, Iris West, and a big fan of the Flash. In an amazing coincidence that is a hallmark of Silver Age comics, the freak accident that caused Allen to gain the abilities of the Flash recurs, this time with the young West as the recipient of super speed abilities. Allen gifts the boy with a pint-sized costume and the young hero debuts as the Flash's sidekick.<sup>53</sup> However, Wally West is not destined to be a sidekick forever. During a large event that crossed over into many titles of comics published by DC called "Crisis on Infinite Earths," Barry Allen tragically gave up his life, and Wally West, now in his early 20s, took his place as the Flash.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Kanigher and Carmine Infantino, "Mystery of the Human Thunderbolt," *Showcase*, January 1940.

<sup>52</sup> Horikoshi, "Time to Pick Some Names," *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 45, 11-12.

<sup>53</sup> John Broome and Carmine Infantino, "The Flash meets Kid Flash," *The Flash*, December 1959. 19-30.

<sup>54</sup> Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, "Final Crisis," *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, March 1986. 45.

In a similar tragic legacy, after his older brother is struck down in combat with a villain, Iida Tenya takes on his brother's name, Ingenium, to carry his brother's legacy.<sup>55</sup> Initially, Iida was reluctant to take up his brother's mantle, believing himself to be unworthy of the name.<sup>56</sup> However, after facing, and with the assistance of his classmates, defeating the villain that maimed his brother, Iida vowed to live up to the name and his brother's memory.<sup>57</sup>

### **Izuku Midoriya: Origin<sup>58</sup>**

Midoriya Izuku lives in a world where people are not born equal. Eighty percent of the population is born with superhuman abilities known as "Quirks" that grant them powers far beyond that of the common citizen.<sup>59</sup> While most individuals are born with mild Quirks and carry on fairly normal lives, some individuals with more powerful and destructive Quirks choose to turn to crime. In response, other individuals rise to combat these villains, like heroes "straight out of a comic book."<sup>60</sup> These heroes are organized into agencies and receive government pay, based on performance. They can also garner fame and celebrity if they desire it.<sup>61</sup> Horikoshi's attention to how society would react to superhumans firmly grounds *MHA* in the superhero genre.

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<sup>55</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 50, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 45, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 50-57.

<sup>58</sup> Although the official English translation of this chapter title uses Western name order, I chose to use the Japanese name order for consistency with the rest of the references to Midoriya's name in this paper.

<sup>59</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 1-5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 12, 10, Chapter 1, 9.

Midoriya, however, was born with no Quirk. When he had not manifested a Quirk by age 4, his mother took him to a specialist, who informed Midoriya and his mother that he would never manifest a Quirk.<sup>62</sup> His Quirkless condition earned him never-ending ridicule and bullying from his peers.<sup>63</sup> However, Midoriya continues to aspire to be a hero who saves people, even without a Quirk.<sup>64</sup> He dreams of attending UA, a prestigious high school for students who wish to become Pro-Heroes. His idol All Might also went to UA, and in order to follow in his idol's steps, Midoriya must do the same.<sup>65</sup> To this end, he follows reports of hero activity and takes careful notes on how specific powers are applicable to real-world conditions.<sup>66</sup> This often results in him running towards danger when non-heroes should flee. The pivotal instance of this in the first issue of the manga leads to a Pro-Hero<sup>67</sup> he idolizes telling him what no one else would, "You *can* be a hero."<sup>68</sup> Thus begins Midoriya's hero's journey.

### **Boy Meets...**

As recognized by Campbell in *Man with a Thousand Faces*, almost all societies have heroic tales. And while they are diverse in their culture, achievements, and settings, the stories that are most fondly remembered follow a similar trajectory. The hero is marked as different from his peers, causing separation. Next through many

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<sup>62</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 19-21.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13, 15-17.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>65</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 12-13, Chapter 2, 12-13.

<sup>66</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 9, 15.

<sup>67</sup> In *MHA*, Pro-Hero is used to designate an individual with a Quirk who has been licensed and is registered with the government in order to engage in professional hero activities.

<sup>68</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 55.

trials, our hero suffers and triumphs, becoming more capable, proceeding to ever greater challenges. Finally, with his labors completed, the hero shares boons with the world.<sup>69</sup> As a *shonen* protagonist, Midoriya follows a similar path, although his journey is not yet completed.

For Midoriya, his remarkable birth comes in two parts. First is his actual birth, in which he is one of a minority that does not express a “Quirk” by age four. This sets Midoriya apart from his peers and makes his dreams of entering UA seem like complete fantasy. If this had been all there was to Midoriya’s origin, *MHA* would be a very different story. However, the second part of Midoriya’s birth, when All-Might passed the power of One for All down to him, “fantasy became reality” and Midoriya began his heroic journey.<sup>70</sup>

Even with this ringing endorsement, Midoriya cannot become a hero overnight. All Might explains that if he passed on his powers to Midoriya with no preparation, “[Midoriya’s] limbs would pop right off!”<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Midoriya embarks on a brutal custom training regimen over the course of ten months to transform his body into a suitable vessel. As part of his training, All Might has him clear discarded appliances from a beach because, “being a hero is all about volunteer work.”<sup>72</sup> In this way All Might passes on moral lessons in addition to physical ones. With dedication and unbreakable

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<sup>69</sup> Campbell, 28.

<sup>70</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 55.

<sup>71</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 2, 11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-13.

resolve, Midoriya overcomes all obstacles in his way and earns his place in UA's incoming class of first years.<sup>73</sup>

Even after all of his initial training, using just 5% of One for All caused Midoriya severe bruising and damage to his body. Over the course of the series, he has steadily increased how much of One for All he can handle at one time without further injury. He has also learned new fighting techniques that differ from All Might's, synthesizing his own unique style of using One for All. This growth provides much of the driving force in this series. This struggle to overcome his current limitations and achieve greatness demonstrates that while Midoriya's powers and origin make him a hero, it is his drive and his goals that, along with his setting, make him a superhero.

### **In Each of Our Hearts**

As a young child, Midoriya was thrilled and inspired to help people, just like his idol, All Might, the Number One hero. While watching a video of All Might's debut, he is inspired by the hero's reassuring smile during the rescue, telling his mother, "A super cool hero like that. That's what I wanna be."<sup>74</sup> This inspires him to become the Number One hero himself, to inspire others how All Might inspired him.

What does it mean to be the Number One hero though? We aren't given any examples of the position before All Might held it. Endeavor resolves more incidents,

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<sup>73</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 4, 19. A first year student in Japan would be roughly equivalent to a 10th grader in American schools. Japanese schools restart the numbering of years in primary, middle school, high school, and college. When the story began, Midoriya was a third year in middle school. Then he progresses to being a first year in high school.

<sup>74</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 1, 21.

especially after All Might retires, so it's not based on that.<sup>75</sup> Is it just popularity? Early in the series, we aren't given many specifics, although All Might does seem to have an informal leadership role, if more in the form of an example, rather than having any sort of authority over his peers.

This is addressed in Chapter 184, "Hero Billboard Chart JP"<sup>76</sup>. It turns out that roughly twice a year, hero rankings are released, based on "incident resolutions, contributions to society, approval ratings"<sup>77</sup> with rankings being recorded out to at least triple digits. This ranking, like those used for sports athletes or musicians demonstrates how integrated the concept of superheroes is into the weave of the story. For the average citizen, a Pro-Hero is a real concept even if they have never met one, much like a professional athlete or musician would be in real life.

Midoriya also struggles with whether he is worthy of the legacy he has inherited when others who are more skilled or stronger could have taken the mantle. When he believes he has failed the UA entrance exam, Midoriya wallows in despair over betraying All Might's trust.<sup>78</sup> Even when he does gain entrance to UA, Midoriya is very aware that compared to the rest of his class, he's "literally starting at the bottom," and must work very hard to be worthy of what he's been given.<sup>79</sup> This sense of unworthiness drives Midoriya to constantly train and improve his abilities.

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<sup>75</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 164, 17.

<sup>76</sup> JP indicates that the hero rankings are localized for Japan. This brings up an interesting question on whether global hero rankings or crossover "artists" exist.

<sup>77</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 184, 10-11.

<sup>78</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 4, 11-12.

<sup>79</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 7, 7.

The legacy of One for All did not start with All Might, but has been passed down a number of times.<sup>80</sup> Each time, although there is some overlap, the Quirk wanes in the predecessor and grows in the successor. This is both similar and different from how hero legacies have been depicted in American superhero comics. In the case of One-For-All, the actual superhuman abilities are being passed down, transferred from one bearer to another. This is similar to how the powers of the Green Lanterns<sup>81</sup> in DC Comics are passed down. In *Showcase #22*, a dying alien passes the source of his powers, a ring, to pilot Hal Jordan. Thus Jordan is inducted into a brotherhood of intergalactic police officers<sup>82</sup> known as the Green Lantern Corps.<sup>83</sup> At different times Jordan would pass the ring and responsibilities of being a Green Lantern onto other individuals.<sup>84</sup> The powers of a Green Lantern are contained entirely within the ring. Once the ring is removed, Jordan does not retain any powers. However, he can regain his powers by obtaining another ring from the Green Lantern Corps. This differs from how Horikoshi has presented the permanent nature of the legacy of One-For-All. Once One-For-All has been passed on, the previous bearer of the legacy slowly loses their powers. Yet, by incorporating a sense of legacy, Horikoshi pays homage to numerous superheroes in American comics.

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<sup>80</sup> Horikoshi, *My Hero Academia*, Chapter 2, 5-7

<sup>81</sup> Green Lanterns, starting with Alan Scott in the Golden Age, focus their abilities through a device in the form of a ring, most often in the form of mental constructs in the color green. Alan Scott's ring was magical, while his Silver Age reinvention Hal Jordan had a more "scientific" explanation.

<sup>82</sup> While Jordan and other Green Lanterns would face their share of interplanetary evildoers, a strange proportion of Jordan's adventures would take place on Earth, firmly grounding his space adventures in a superhero framework.

<sup>83</sup> John Broome, "SOS Green Lantern," *Showcase*, October 1959, 2-6.

<sup>84</sup> John Broome, "Earth's Other Green Lantern," *Green Lantern*, vol. 2, March 1968, 10. Neal Adams and Dennis O'Neal, "Beware My Power," *Green Lantern*, vol. 2, December 1971-January 1972, 8.

## Bright Future

While it is without question that Midoriya Izuku and his classmates at UA are superheroes in every sense of the word. By comparing the goals, abilities and of the students of UA with the likes of heroes such as Superman and Spider-Man, we have found that Horikoshi's charges are fitting heirs to those brave stalwarts. However, while it may be personally gratifying to have two of my personal interests converge into a single work, *MHA* is only one series in *Weekly Shonen Jump*, and not representative of manga as a whole. The unique blend of Japanese manga art with American superhero conventions is popular, as we have seen, but has not inspired a rash of imitators.<sup>85</sup>

Nor should it. Manga artists have rarely been censored in the way the American comics field was in the 1950s, so the manga industry has remained much more diversified than American comics. This diversity is one of manga's greatest strengths. It allows creators to draw upon many different sources of inspiration, including American superheroes, to generate the plethora of series we have today. This wide variety allows different series to resonate with different audiences outside of Japan, much as *MHA* resonates with me. For this reason, manga has reached an enormous global audience.

This brings us to the true importance of *MHA*. In so closely adapting superheroes to the *shonen* style while staying true to their core concepts, Horikoshi has demonstrated a truth of our globally-connected world. This truth is that all media is global media. Whether manga based on superheroes, available in multiple languages the day it's released in Japan, or Hollywood movies, based on British novels, screened for

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<sup>85</sup> While other series, such as *One Punch Man*, combine Japanese manga sensibilities with American Superhero tropes, these seem to be isolated series, and not part of larger trends, such high school drama or series based in *isekai*, or different worlds.



audiences in China and Johannesburg, the cultural boundaries of entertainment are eroding. Although we are in no danger of losing the cultural artifacts that each society uses to identify itself, we must recognize that the audience is now a global audience. No work can be constrained to its nation of origin any longer.

In order to speak to that global audience, creators like Horikoshi draw upon a world's worth of inspiration, and in doing so, translate that inspiration for a local audience, which is then reflected around the globe. While this may not be a catalyst for an era of world peace, by seeing and amplifying what we admire about one another's cultures, we may achieve greater understanding among our disparate societies. That can't be a bad start.

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