

Template for Tomorrow: *The Fantastic Four* Lee/Kirby Partnership that Birthed the Marvel Age of Comics and, Ultimately, the Marvel Universe

ALAN JOZWIAK

Out of all of the superheroes that populate the Marvel Universe, none has a richer history than The Fantastic Four. Launched in September 1961 with a cover dated November 1961 (Maslon and Kantor), *The Fantastic Four* comic book series changed the nature of comics and inaugurated the modern age of superheroes. The Fantastic Four are made up of “Dr. Reed Richards, a brilliant scientist. Sue Storm, the woman he loves. Johnny Storm, Sue’s kid brother. Ben Grimm, one of the country’s top test pilots” (Kraft 4). All four decide to test an experimental rocket that will hopefully take mankind to the moon. As they are about to reach orbit, their rocket hits the cosmic storm area above the Earth’s atmosphere and is bombarded with cosmic rays. As a result of the bombardment, the rocket crash lands back to Earth (or as the narration diplomatically puts it, the rocket has “a rough, but non-fatal landing”) (Lee and Kirby *Essential*, vol. 1.1 11). The cosmic rays have unanticipated effects on the team: Reed Richards is able to stretch his body to any dimension, Sue Storm can make herself invisible at will (and later, be able to exert force fields around herself and others), Johnny Storm is able to clothe himself in flames and fly, and Ben Grimm develops super strength and a hard rocky skin. Concerning Grimm’s transformation, Sue remarks in *The Fantastic Four* Issue 1 that Ben has

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1&2
Copyright © 2016

“turned into a—a—some sort of a Thing! He’s strong as an ox!!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential*, vol. 1.1 12).

The Fantastic Four was created by writer Stan Lee and penciler Jack Kirby (with various inkers, the most famous of which is Joe Sinnott). Together, Lee and Kirby were responsible for crafting the first 102 issues of *The Fantastic Four*. Euphemistically proclaimed “The World’s Greatest Comic Magazine!” on the cover of the comic by Lee beginning with issue 4, the comic launched the Marvel Age of Comics (Lee’s term for what has become known as Marvel Silver Age comics). Despite the “fantastic” sales of the comic, the relationship between Kirby and Lee was not always cordial. They had disagreements with respect to character direction, plotting, and development of characters. These relationship problems came to a head when Kirby had disagreements with Marvel management, forcing Kirby to leave Marvel in March 1970. Yet, the Lee/Kirby partnership was still able to produce a body of work and a cast of characters, antiheroes, and villains that form the nucleus of what today is the Marvel Universe.

The current state of scholarship on *The Fantastic Four* roughly divides between historical studies of the comic and its creators and critical studies of the way that various elements within the series reflect 1960s cultural attitudes, expectations, and/or theoretical constructs. Among the best of the historical studies is Mark Alexander’s comprehensive overview of the Lee and Kirby run on *The Fantastic Four* called *Lee & Kirby: The Wonder Years*. This extended issue of the *Jack Kirby Collector* breaks down each issue, explains how that issue connects with the rest of the series, and also provides backstory behind the making of the comic, as well as some of the cultural influences which influenced the comic series. Discussing the history of Marvel in general and how it connects to *The Fantastic Four* is Sean Howe’s *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, which provides backstory for plot points within the comic series that would not be known otherwise. For instance, Howe reveals that the reason why The

Human Torch battles the Golden Age version of himself is that Marvel publisher Martin Goodman wanted to keep his company's copyright for The Human Torch so that it would not revert back to the hands of its initial creator, Carl Burgos (Howe 76).

Added to Howe's work is a Ph.D. dissertation by Jordan Raphael entitled *Four-Color Marvels: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Development of Comic-Book Fandom*. Raphael provides a historical overview of the work of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, even devoting a chapter to the controversy surrounding Lee's contribution and Kirby being wronged by Marvel. This is in line with several books that highlight various historical aspects of Kirby's career, most notably Ronin Ro's *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution*, Blake Bell and Michael J. Vassallo's *The Secret History of Marvel Comics: Jack Kirby and the Moonlighting Artists at Martin Goodman's Empire*, and Mark Evanier's *Kirby: King of Comics*. Each of these books highlights Kirby's role within Marvel Comics and/or examples of Kirby's artwork during each period of his career. With respect to Stan Lee, Lee has produced a number of autobiographical works related to his life and times with Marvel (including his work on *The Fantastic Four*). The two most recent works are *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* and his autobiographical graphic novel called *Amazing Fantastic Incredible: A Marvelous Memoir*.

In terms of the critical studies on *The Fantastic Four*, they fall under three broad categories: domestic/feminist/youth issues, national/urban issues, and miscellaneous concerns. For the first category, much has been written about the family dynamic operating with *The Fantastic Four*. Robert Genter's "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics" and Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* talk about the ways in which The Fantastic Four reflect the nuclear family of the 1950s-1960s. Focusing on Sue Storm

and her role within the team, Laura D'Amore has written two articles articulating feminism and the role of motherhood within superheroes. These articles attempt to combat the fact that "scholarship about superhero comics has been overwhelmingly focused on maleness" (D'Amore, "Invisible Girl's"). Echoing these articles is Sebastian Mercier's work on the intersection of American youth culture with superheroes. Using a historical overview, Mercier touches on the family dynamics with *The Fantastic Four*, as well as Sue Storm's place within the group as both housewife and promoter of family solidarity. According to Mercier, Sue Storm craves the "stability inherent in the family situation of the *Fantastic Four*" (41).

National/urban issues are the second category of critical scholarship on *The Fantastic Four*. Matthew Yockey's work on connecting *The Fantastic Four* with issues related to the Space Race provide valuable insights into the ways that the greater issues of Cold War hysteria and Space Race fever influenced the comic's creation. Yockey believes that Kirby's white cityscape in many of the issues can be considered like white spaceships (66) and that *The Fantastic Four* is an extension of the burgeoning corporate culture that will eventually take over America (76-77). Yockey's white skyscrapers are a perfect segue for Jason Bainbridge's article about New York City and the Marvel Universe. Bainbridge includes in his discussion of Spider-Man and New York references to *The Fantastic Four*, concluding that the cityscape of New York is "not only the spine of the Marvel Universe, it is a *suture*—suturing the Marvel Universe to the real world" (172). For Bainbridge, it is this suturing of New York City to the real world that allows for superheroes (such as *The Fantastic Four*) to have realism within the storytelling without delving into specific scientific explanations of a superhero's superpowers.

Lastly, there are miscellaneous articles that approach *The Fantastic Four* from other theoretical constructs, such as through its use of language, the American Monomyth and Marxism. Arthur Berger discusses

Lee's use of various tropes, such as alliteration, irony, and self-parody in his article "Marvel Language: The Comic Book and Reality." He sees that these tropes allow Lee to bridge societal expectations of what comic books can be; he even connects *The Fantastic Four* with the concept of the epic. Writing in 1972 when comics were not highly regarded, Berger confesses that *The Fantastic Four* is different from other comic books: "in a literary form that is generally seen as trash and seldom taken seriously we find [in *The Fantastic Four*] poetic language philosophical speculation, and the use of the epic form" (172). David Lippert provides an analysis of Issue 12 of *The Fantastic Four*, the initial meeting of The Thing and The Incredible Hulk, in light of a Marxist's view toward power relationships. Lippert asserts that the military had a hard time distinguishing between The Incredible Hulk and The Thing when The Incredible Hulk was being sought after by the military because both characters portrayed the issue of strength, and for the military, they could only see The Incredible Hulk through the lens of strength (41). Moreover, Lippert asserts that the military also views The Incredible Hulk and The Thing as "superhuman," which becomes a metaphor by which these superheroes are to be considered different from the rest of humanity (41).

Finally, Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble adapt Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's work on the American Monomyth and apply it to the Marvel Universe. While they do not specify *The Fantastic Four* with their article, what they have to say is germane to any discussion of all Marvel Silver Age superheroes. They see superheroes in light of the American Monomyth, which "secularizes Judeo-Christian ideals by combining the selfless individual who sacrifices himself for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil" (158). Under this new myth embodied by Marvel Silver Age comics, "the redeemed society does not recognize the redeemer as a hero but instead frequently thinks of him as a menace. He is freakish, different, outside society—and therefore dangerous" (Lang

and Trimble 166). One only has to think of *The Thing* and his problems to see this part of the American Monomyth in action.

By outlining the current state of scholarship, it is hoped that it will be possible to take many of the ideas found within the historical and critical studies of *The Fantastic Four* and create a meta structure so as to see how these studies interact and interrelate to each other. For the purposes of this paper, this structure will be called a template, which is a term used in cognitive psychology as a pattern recognition device or cognitive schema. According to template theory, a template allows us how to perceive a task as being structured as either relating to what is called instrumentalities (meaning that the task has either intrinsic or extrinsic rewards) or as play (meaning that there are no defined rewards) (Sandelands, Ashford, and Dutton 230). Whenever we come across a new situation, we fit it into one of these categories of understanding a new situation. Templates can be used to match up existing data to external stimuli, such as with a computer recognizing visual stimuli (Brunelli).

Not only do templates allow for identification, but they can also act as a structuring mechanism whereby data can be stored in ways that can make it easier to create new works from the basis of the template. This is the basis of how templates are used in word processing programs. In fact, the Wikipedia entry neatly summarizes these lines of thought by defining a word processing template as:

a sample document that has already some details in place; those can be adapted (that is added/completed, removed or changed, differently from a fill-in-the-blank approach as in a form) either by hand or through an automated iterative process, such as with a software assistant. Once the template is completed, the user can edit, save and manage the result as an ordinary word processing document. (“Template (word processing)”)

Such templates are designed to be filled in with any number of different things. The content will differ depending on the document, even though each document uses the same template. Moreover, a template can be augmented, changed, or reworked depending on the situation and the needs of the creators, while a formula is more static. There is a greater possibility of having a postmodern freeplay of ideas under a template. This is why FreeDictionary.com defines a template (definition 2a) as a document that is “used as a starting point for a particular application so that the format does not have to be recreated each time it is used.”

By indicating that Lee and Kirby were using a template, this shies away from the use of term “formula” that gets bandied about in the history of Marvel Comics. According to FreeDictionary.com, definition 2 of a formula is “any fixed or conventions method or approach: [as in] popular novels produced by formula.” A formula is a more rigid list of ingredients and procedures to follow that produce a specific result. It is static; ingredients cannot be changed without the possibly spoiling the result. It is for this reason that another definition (definition 4a) for a formula states that it is “A prescription of ingredients in fixed proportion; a recipe.” The best evidence of the template being used is in the Lee/Kirby creation of *The Incredible Hulk* (cover date May 1962) directly after creating *The Fantastic Four*. A formulaic approach to superheroes would mean that the next endeavor of Lee/Kirby should be another superhero team with different powers and abilities. Instead, they take the basic template of the superhero they created with *The Fantastic Four* and played with different elements to create a solo monster-hero, who still had its roots in the structural elements worked out within *The Fantastic Four*.

Considering the literature review in light of the above discussion of templates, it is possible to formulate a thesis related to templates and the work of Lee and Kirby on *The Fantastic Four*. Taking the body of work that Lee and Kirby created during their run on *The Fantastic Four*, this author argues that the 102-issue partnership on the series created a

template whereby later Marvel writers and artists could create superheroes and their corresponding villains with many structural features similar to that of *The Fantastic Four*. The artists would use the template as a whole or make additions, subtractions, and modifications to the template. As a result, this template became the house style of Marvel Comics and gave birth to the wide-ranging world that is the current Marvel Universe.

In asserting that Lee and Kirby had a partnership in creating *The Fantastic Four*, there is controversy surrounding Lee's role in the creation and development of these characters. The popular view is that Lee was the leader of that team, with Kirby being the one to carry out Lee's ideas. Under this view, Lee was the idea man and Kirby was the plodder who obeyed the dictates of Lee in carrying out Lee's ideas. There is evidence that this view is not quite accurate. The controversy starting with the Gary Groth interview of Jack Kirby published in 1990 in *The Comics Journal* in which Kirby expresses his ire against Lee hogging all the credit for Kirby's comic work. In the interview, Kirby asserts that:

Stan Lee and I never collaborated on anything! I've never seen Stan Lee write anything. I used to write the stories just like I always did. . . It wasn't possible for a man like Stan Lee to come up with new things — or old things for that matter. Stan Lee wasn't a guy that read or that told stories. Stan Lee was a guy that knew where the papers were or who was coming to visit that day. Stan Lee is essentially an office worker, OK? I'm essentially something else: I'm a storyteller. My job is to sell my stories. (qtd. in Groth)

Others have also expressed similar contentions, most notably Mike Gartland in a series of articles in the *Jack Kirby Collector* (1998-1999) entitled "A Failure to Communicate" which highlight all *The Fantastic Four* inconsistencies between Kirby's drawings and Lee's words.

In defense of Lee, Kirby was bitter about his battle against Marvel Comics to gain control of his own artwork (which he was finally able to do, although he had to pay the shipping costs). Kirby was also resentful of all of the press and acclaim Stan Lee received as the “sole creator” of the Marvel Universe. In one damaging article by Nat Freeland of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Lee came off as being “an ultra–Madison Avenue, rangy look-alike of Rex Harrison,” while Kirby was denigrated, described as “a middle-aged man with baggy eyes. . . [who] If you stood next to him on the subway, you would peg him for the assistant foreman in a girdle factory” (qtd. in Riesman). Feeling disrespected by the press and also by Marvel management may have caused Kirby to take a more strident stance against his relationship with Stan Lee. Finally, Lee inadvertently let himself open to criticism by the way he wrote his comic stories. In the Marvel Method of creating comics, the penciler drew a comic using an outline rather than a full script like is used today. As a result, the penciler had a greater range to add their own unique spin to a story and set the pacing for that story. After the penciler was done, the writer would then go back and write out the actual script used to explain a scene. This method of working could give a penciler the feeling that he was working solo. In Lee’s case, he “had writing chores for as many as eight series at a time and was editor of all of them” (Riesman). Therefore, one could see how the penciler for a book could feel that he had more of a say-so in the direction and creation of stories. As the run progressed, Kirby had more control of the storylines and began to both write and pencil the stories. Lee eventually gave Kirby co-writing credit during the latter part of their run of *The Fantastic Four*.

Both Lee and Kirby did their finest work partnering on *The Fantastic Four*. After the pair parted ways, each of their individual efforts in comics was not as innovative or compelling as what they did together on *The Fantastic Four*. Clearly, some sort of synergistic process between the two of them was operating to allow them to create the series in the way that

they did. This author contends that Lee and Kirby both had a vital role in the creation and development of *The Fantastic Four*, with their contributions being both individual and collaborative. Lee did not create *The Fantastic Four* solely by himself, but needed his partnership with Kirby in order to develop the comic fully. Kirby also needed Lee's input to achieve the artistic excellence that is a hallmark of the series. Instead of trying to determine precisely which of these creators contributed what attribute to which character, a more fruitful line of query would be to discuss the nature of the Lee/Kirby partnership and how the team operated. The word "partnership" is being deliberately used here because there are lines of scholarly thought discussing artistic advances in terms of collaborations and partnerships which could shed light on how the pair operated. Vera John-Steiner, in her book *Creative Collaboration*, sets up the concept of a creative collaboration and provides plentiful examples from both the arts and sciences of creative collaborations at work. The painters Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, as well as the cultural anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson are two examples of how pairs can generate ideas, push each other onto greater success, and produce work that they would not have been able to produce separately. John-Steiner asserts that it is only through collaborative work that "we learn from each other by teaching what we know; we engage in mutual appropriation" (3).

Echoing the work of John-Steiner, Joshua Wolf Shenk's book *Powers of Two* provides a typology of creative partnerships. Shenk discusses the different ways that creative pairs can operate, two of which have a bearing on the Lee/Kirby partnership: a) the dreamer and the doer, and b) the star and the director. Under the dreamer and the doer, Shenk asserts that some creative pairs are divided between dreamers, who "generate ideas, start new projects, inspire others to join them," and the doers, who are "productive, efficient, and dependable, they excel at finishing, have a realistic sense of what's possible, and can set priorities and make

decisions” (85). Using the example of *South Park*’s Trey Parker and Matt Stone, Shenk quotes magazine author Jaime J. Weinman, who looked at fan postings on message boards. Typically, fans complain that “Trey writes every episode and then does the majority of the voices and most of the music while Matt sits around and laughs at Trey to encourage him” (qtd. in Shenk 88). Even though that exaggeration downplays Parker’s role, Shenk quotes Weinman again by saying that “while Parker is handling *the creative side of the show*, someone needs to pull together the other elements of production” (qtd. in Shenk 88). In short, Parker and Stone work together well because each is able to address the other’s weaknesses through what they do. Stone handles the business end of the show, while Parker handles the creative end. Shenk comments on this dynamic with the phrase “creativity is what happens when the dreamer meets the doer” (89).

Lee and Kirby seem to fit this way of partnering, with Lee being the dreamer and Kirby the doer. When Kirby asserts that Lee was only a “guy that knew where the papers were [at the office]” (qtd. in Groth), he downplays the crucial role that Lee has in supporting Kirby’s comic efforts as a general editor. According to former Marvel editor Nicole Boose, a comic book editor is responsible for every detail of production of the comic book, making certain that the artwork, inking, and lettering are done on time and to specifications so as to be delivered to the next person in the production lineup and that the scheduled publication date for the comic book is met (Boose). Lee was in charge of making certain that each issue of *The Fantastic Four* went through this process and that all elements of the production of the comic book was complete and on time. While this may seem like paper pushing to Kirby, it was essential for the legacy that both of them share. Without this mundane work, no one would be interested in the series and the Marvel Universe would never have taken flight. It seems that whenever Kirby collaborated in his career, he was a doer instead of a dreamer. In the same interview where he slams

Lee, Kirby also discloses that in the partnership he had with long-time collaborator Joe Simon (the two created Captain America and the 1940s version of *The Sandman*), “Joe was the business side” (qtd. in Groth). This would indicate that Kirby was not as familiar with the intricate working of the business end of comics and, hence, his disparaging comments about Lee not doing anything.

Addressing the issue of Lee “hogging the spotlight,” Shenk discusses another dynamic within creative pairs, the star and the director. In some creative pairs, there can be a member who is “in the spotlight and another offstage” (Shenk 65). The onstage person is the one that the public tends to focus their attention upon, even though “the pair’s center of gravity is often with the one we see less” (66). There are also dangers for the person who is in the spotlight, since they tend to be blinded by the attention and can be lacking in self-knowledge and internal restraints (Shenk 68-69). By contrast, the director type is the person behind the scenes who “often act much like parents, walking the tightrope between patient indulgence and absolute authority” (Shenk 69).

An interesting dimension of the Lee/Kirby partnership is the paternal way that Kirby thought of Lee. Being five years older than Lee, Kirby always considered Lee as a kid, with himself as the surrogate parent. In the Groth interview, Kirby said that when he was working at Marvel in the 1940s, the teenager Lee was “the kind of kid that liked to fool around — open and close doors on you. Yeah. In fact, once I told Joe [Simon] to throw him out of the room” (qtd. in Groth). Certainly Kirby’s story on how he created *The Fantastic Four* also has paternalistic tone. Kirby recounts that:

Marvel was on its ass, literally, and when I came around, they were practically hauling out the furniture . . . and Stan Lee was sitting there crying. I told him to hold everything, and I pledged that I would give them the kind of books that would up their sales and keep them in business. (qtd. in Howe 2)

It sounds like a parent trying to soothe a crying child rather than colleagues making comic book history.

In terms of the charge that Lee was hogging the spotlight, Lee's press attention did have a positive effect of setting up in the minds of the general public that comic books could be taken seriously, that they were an art form on their own (which is why Marvel Comics capitalized on the Pop Art Movement and placed a label on the cover of each comic saying that it was produced by Marvel Pop Arts Productions), and that Marvel Comics was in the vanguard of this revolutionary way to tell stories. It is for this reason that Chris Tolworthy makes the distinction between Marvel Comics (upper case c) and Marvel comics (lower case c) with respect to Lee's and Kirby's contributions:

Lee created Marvel Comics. Kirby created Marvel comics. . . Stan Lee was the genius who created most of Marvel Comics: the industry, the cross-overs, the billion dollars of brand value, the fact that you and I have even heard of these characters [The Fantastic Four] and can easily relate to them. That's all Stan. Without him it would just be one more forgotten indie business, full of talented people who make no money and only historians know about them. It is equally true that Jack Kirby was the genius who created most of Marvel comics with a small "c", the characters and stories. (Tolworthy, "Stan Lee and Jack Kirby")

In short, Lee kept Marvel Comics alive so that the work that Kirby did on the individual issues can be appreciated by comic readers decades after they were created.

In setting the foundation of the Lee/Kirby partnership, it becomes possible to discuss the template itself that arose out of their partnership. Lee and Kirby developed this template in stages, with the first elements related to identity showing up early in the run and some elements (such as the element of interactivity) developing more slowly over time. In the

interests of time, the exploration of each of these elements should be thought of as a basic outline to which further research (by both myself and hopefully other researchers) can flesh out and expand in detail.

1. *Identity (a)*

Superheroes have an existential imperative or duty to make the best of the absurdity inherent within their existence and its accompanying freedoms. They must strive for authenticity for who they are as superheroes.

The philosophical movement called existentialism came into prominence in post-World War II Europe with writers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who advanced that existence preceded essence:

Thus, my existence (the mere fact that I am) is prior to my essence (what I make of myself through my free choices). I am thus utterly responsible for myself. If my act is not simply whatever happens to come to mind, then my action may embody a more general principle of action. (Burnham and Papandreopoulos)

This state brings with it anxiety based on the fact that “human existence is in some way ‘on its own’” (Burnham and Papandreopoulos), meaning that there is no God or outside authority that human beings can look forward to as an ultimate authority. Humanity must find within themselves ultimate authority and not through external means. Even science is useless here, since “unlike a created cosmos, for example, we cannot expect the scientifically described cosmos to answer our questions concerning value or meaning” (Burnham and Papandreopoulos). With this recognition of humanity being ‘on its own’ comes the recognition of absurdity. For the existentialist, “nature as a whole has no design, no reason for existing” (Burnham and Papandreopoulos) and that makes for absurdity. Moreover, we are absurd because “human existence as action is doomed to always

destroy itself. A free action, once done, is no longer free; it has become an aspect of the world, a *thing*” (Burnham and Papandreopoulos). Ultimately, Existentialists strive to be an “authentic being would be able to recognise [sic] and affirm the nature of existence” (Burnham and Papandreopoulos).

Donald Palumbo was the first to see the existentialist connection with Marvel superheroes with his article on Spider-Man who “exhibits nearly all the characteristics of the existentialist hero” (67). However, Spider-Man is indebted to one predecessor from The Fantastic Four who bears the weight of the existential imperative that they live in an absurd universe—Ben Grimm (a.k.a. The Thing). As opposed to the other members of The Fantastic Four, The Thing was turned into a walking rock pile with super strength, but with no way to revert back to human form. He is not like The Human Torch, who controls when he flames on. The Thing has to deal with the absurdity of being a monster within an urban setting. The human world is not designed to fit his frame and The Thing is constantly feeling like a fish out of water. It is for this reason he is forced to wear a trench coat when going out to avoid the taunts and sneers of the Yancy Street Gang of young hoodlums aimed at taunting, teasing, and bullying him at every turn. When he is not fighting superheroes, The Thing sometimes does not know his own strength. His super strength sometimes causes him to accidentally destroy things within the Baxter Building and elsewhere.

The Thing is always struggling with his existence, wishing he did not have to deal with these difficulties. His existential situation is as motivated by isolation and difficulties operating within the everyday world. As a result, Ben Grimm constantly desires to go back and become “human” again and Reed Richards makes it his life’s work to accomplish that task (himself feeling angst and guilt over being responsible for Grimm’s transformation). However, The Thing learns from these experiences that he cannot escape his problems so easily. In existential parlance, he must strive for authenticity, which is the ability “to recognise [sic] and affirm

the nature of existence. . . [and live] in accordance with this nature” (Burnham and Papandreopoulos).

An example of this comes at the very end of Issue 39. The Fantastic Four defeat their enemies, the Frightful Four, and are caught within an atomic blast, thereby stripping all four of them of their powers. The Thing has returned back to his human form once again. By Issue 40, Doctor Doom takes advantage of their weakened state and takes over the Baxter Building, turning Reed Richards’ invention upon the powerless Fantastic Four. Reed responds using a piece of alien technology, the Skrull Stimulator, to give them their powers back.

As he points the gun at Ben Grimm, Grimm says “But—mebbe I don’t wanna become the Thing again!! I’m finally normal—like anyone else!” to which Richards replies, “You’ve no choice, old friend! With Doom still at large, we need all our fighting strength! There’s too much at stake!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 2.40 13). With that, Richards points the Skrull Stimulator at Grimm, musing “For better, or for worse—the Thing must live again!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 2.40 14). This action eventually leads to The Thing falling into the hands of his enemy who brainwashes him so that by Issue 41, he joins forces with the Frightful Four. When Richards is able to bring him out of his trance, The Thing confesses, “And, mebbe, some day you two’ll come to my weddin’! Mebbe I won’t haveta remain a—a Thing—forever! Mebbe—” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.43 20). The Thing still has to struggle with his problems of existence and, hopefully, will reach a place of authenticity where he will be at peace with the absurdity of his existence, either as The Thing or if her gets his wish to turn back into a human being.

2. *Identity (b)*

A superhero’s identity is intimately connected with their psychological struggles to deal with their personal problems and

hang-ups. These psychological struggles create individual angst, which gets worked out through the business of being a superhero.

Arising out of the recognition of the freedom to be “on one’s own” is the notion of angst and anxiety. According to Brunham and Papandreopoulos, angst and anxiety is a byproduct of the recognition of this situation. We cannot rely on any outside source and must rely upon ourselves in order to exist in the world. Added to this existential angst are human “emotions or feelings” which have a significance role for existentialists (Burnham and Papandreopoulos). Emotions or feelings can spring from personal problems and hang-ups and generate their own form of angst. The example with Ben Grimm being turned back into The Thing is one such example in the Fantastic Four comic series. The Thing is known as much for his problems as much as for what The Thing power in battling villains.

Similarly, Johnny Storm deals with the psychological angst from transitioning out of from being a teenager and into adult life. In Issue 44, Johnny soliloquizes to himself about his problems:

I’m glad Reed and Sis got married, ’n all that, but I never expected ’em to live in our HQ till they found an apartment! I didn’t enroll in college this year because so much was happening! Boy! What a boner I pulled! Wotta life! Everything’s coming up Dullville!
(Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.44 3)

As the youngest member of the group, Johnny always feels like he is being put down by the other members of the team. Aside from the jibes he gives to The Thing, Johnny’s powers can be depleted if he uses them too much, thereby putting him into a weakened state where the others have to take care of him. This weakness cuts against his self-image as a man who can handle himself. Johnny also has hang-ups with women. In the Lee/Kirby run, he is stuck on Crystal, an Inhuman with whom he falls deeply in love. In Issue 48, he is forced to let her stay in the Inhuman Great Refuge as it is

covered over with a Negative Zone field. As Reed Richards pulls him to safety, Johnny cries out to Richards in despair, “I’ve lost her forever! And it’s your fault! If not for you, I’d still be there—with her! Crystal! Crystal! I’ll come back to you—somehow! Crystal—!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.48 6). The problems Johnny faces causes Chris Tolworthy to label their relationship as analogous to Romeo and Juliet, where “Johnny is Romeo, Crystal is Juliet” (Tolworthy, “Crystal, a love story”). After this initial encounter, Johnny and Crystal have an on-again/off-again relationship that is filled with love and despair. Together, these issues define The Human Torch.

The issues of The Thing and The Human Torch are also matched by Sue Storm. After she marries Reed Richards, she often finds herself neglected by her husband while he is busy saving the world. Her way to deal with his emotional distance and neglect is to work on herself, which is why she decides to give herself a new hairdo while The Fantastic Four are flying to the Inhuman Great Refuge to find the Inhumans. She thinks to herself: “With everything that’s happened lately, Reed has hardly been acting like a honeymooner towards me! Perhaps a new hairdo would make him realize I’m not one of the boys” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.47 13). When new hairdos do not do the job, Sue has to henpeck her husband to getting him to notice her. Later, when Richards is working on a way to defeat Galactus, she gets rebuffed from Richards after asking her husband to stop work and eat. He curtly replies, “For the love of Pete, girl! Is that what you disturbed me for?” and turns off the video monitor to get back to work (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.48 14). She promptly marches down to his lab, demanding that he listen to her, saying, “You’re my husband now, Reed Richards! And I want to keep you healthy! The world won’t come to an end if you take time out for dinner” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.48 15)—which, of course, it could come to an end because Richards is working with The Watcher on a Matter Mobilizer designed to save Earth. Part of Sue Storm’s psychological angst is that her

husband is *actually* saving the world and can be forgiven for being emotionally absent at times because his work literally involves matters of life and death.

Having superheroes with personal problems and hang-ups has become central to the Marvel Universe. It is for all of these reasons that one of the hallmarks of *The Fantastic Four* is that they have been called “down-to-earth heroes with relatable problems” (Peters). Mark Peters notes that their struggles are “intimate and mortal, despite their otherworldly powers” (Peters); the members of The Fantastic Four could have disagreements and arguments like regular human beings. As they developed into a team, they also created a family dynamic, which “was relatable on a level not seen thus far in superhero comics” (Peters). Like regular families, they regularly argue and fight and say hurtful things, but would always come back to being part of the family, part of the team. In fact, this idea became the plot for *The Fantastic Four* No. 15, where each of the members tires of being together and goes off to do their own thing, only to come back together to defeat the Mad Thinker.

3. *Identity (c)*

Superheroes do not have an identity split between their superhero and civilian identities. Both identities are either conflated or downplayed. There is also a tendency not to try and expose a superhero’s “secret” identity.

The third element dealing with identity and superheroes relates to one of the most radical departures from comic book superheroes up until that time—the abandoning of secret identities. Secret identities were the part and parcel of the DC Comics revolution, beginning with Superman disguising himself as mind-mannered Clark Kent. From there, every superhero had to hide their civilian identity for fear of being exposed as a superhero and their ability to operate in the real world compromised. Part

of the revolution which Lee and Kirby adopted was to have the members of the Fantastic Four openly live public lives as superheroes without a secret identity. What you see is what you get; there is a conflation between the superhero and civilian identities to deny “the common trope of the secret identity. . .that the hero is fundamentally bifurcated” (Yockey 70). The Fantastic Four live openly on the top floors of the Baxter Building in New York City and it is public knowledge what their civilian names are, even though they are called by their professional heroic names: Mr. Fantastic (Reed Richards), The Invisible Girl (Sue Storm), The Human Torch (Johnny Storm), and The Thing (Ben Grimm).

A side benefit of removing secret identities as a plot point is that it eliminates the need for comic book writers to come up with every-more creative and bizarre ways to ensure that the secret identity of a superhero remains secret. This was the stock and trade of the DC Universe in which storylines for characters like Superman would be nothing more than trying to keep the superhero’s identity under wraps. It is sobering to think that Lois Lane did not finally find out that Clark Kent was Superman until 1990, more than fifty years after she debuted with Superman in *Action Comics* No. 1 (cover date June 1938). By contrast, The Fantastic Four live so much of a public life that they are considered as celebrities within the populace of New York City. Everyone knows that they live in the top floors of the Baxter Building and their lives are so open that Willie Lumpkin, the Fantastic Four’s mail carrier, knows each of the members on a first-name basis. In his first appearance in the series, Lumpkin complains about the increasing amount of fan mail the team receives, complaining that “This dad-burned mail sack gets heavier every day! Blasted fan letters!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 1.11 3).

4. *Reality*

The superhero world is a skillful blend of the fantastic and the real. The real elements are selectively chosen based on their

cultural relevance to the readers and can reflect the zeitgeist of the times. The end result of this blend of the fantastic and the real is a feeling of relatability for readers.

A central contribution that *The Fantastic Four* made to comics was the introduction of realistic elements into the field of superheroes. Katherine Kuhlmann discusses this tendency by saying that in the work of Stan Lee, “readers found themselves never truly hating a villain or completely idolizing a hero. They were both incredible, but they were both flawed, much like the average person. Thus, the characters became relatable to the readers, struggling with everyday issues” (Kuhlmann). In *The Fantastic Four* comic series, realistic elements came from all quarters: current events, popular culture, the urban setting of New York City, and even the language that was used.

In terms of current events, Lee and Kirby tapped into the space race fever which had taken over the country for the genesis of the series. In his book *A Ball, a Dog, and a Monkey: 1957 -- The Space Race Begins*, Michael D’Antonio discusses the various attempts (mostly unsuccessful) in getting the U.S. space program off the ground. There were many crashes of unmanned rockets, including several Vanguard rockets (D’Antonio 57, 121, and 142-148). It is no wonder that the rocket within which *The Fantastic Four* were traveling crashes back to Earth. The U.S. public only saw the first fruits of the space race a few months before the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* was published when Alan Shepard became the first American to get into space in May 1961. His mission was in response to Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin becoming the first human being into space on April 12, 1961 (Alexander 27). Similarly, Ben Grimm being a top test pilot was in keeping with President Eisenhower’s dictate that astronauts should be drawn from the ranks of the very best military test pilots (Wolfe 76). Ben Grimm himself was an Air Force test pilot who had flown on several dangerous missions (“Thing (Benjamin Grimm)”). Finally, the creation of the villain Red Ghost with his space

apes also reflects Cold War hysteria and fear that the Soviet Union was gaining military parity with the United States. Soviet scientist Ivan Kragoff took himself and three apes to outer space where they were bombarded by the same cosmic rays as The Fantastic Four. Kragoff became able to walk through solid objects, hence his name the Red Ghost. Each of his apes also gained superpowers and this team proved a worthy opponent to The Fantastic Four (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 1.13 5).

Moreover, Lee and Kirby incorporated references to popular culture within the pages of their stories. For instance, in Issue 5, Johnny Storm is reading what he calls “a great new comic mag,” an issue of *The Incredible Hulk* (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 1.5 2). When Beatlemania swept the country, the Thing tries on a Beatles wig that the Yancy Street Gang gives him as a gag gift (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 2.34 3). Lee and Kirby also injected a measure of reality by setting their stories in New York City. At first, Lee and Kirby set *The Fantastic Four* in Central City, which was created by the predecessors of Marvel (Timely Comics) as a generic city that was set close to San Francisco near where Stockton, California, is today (“Central City”). By Issue 4, Lee and Kirby moved The Fantastic Four to New York City so that they can live as part of the Manhattan skyline in the Baxter Building, a nod to one of Lee’s inspirations for *The Fantastic Four*, Doc Savage, who lived in a skyscraper (Alexander 27).

In his article on The Fantastic Four and New York City, Matthew Yockey asserts that their placement on the top floor of a Manhattan skyscraper was not accident, but represents a connection of the team to corporate America and the space program: “Skyscrapers are as white as spaceships in the 1960s. The primary occupant of the skyscraper, the white corporate male, is mirrored by the sole occupant of the 1960s spaceship” (66). Yockey sees The Fantastic Four as a reflection of America’s preoccupation its new found status as an economic superpower, even labeling them a “corporation” because of the fact that their offices are in a skyscraper and they use corporate branding (i.e., putting their

“corporate” logo on their uniforms and vehicles). By doing these things, Lee and Kirby were keeping step with developments in American life and society that shifted towards a corporate way of doing business.

Perhaps the most obvious way the Lee and Kirby interjected reality is through the language that was through the use of the vernacular in the dialogue. While Kirby’s wrote with an eye to fleshing out the basic storylines of the issues, it is Lee who creates the ways that these characters speak and the ironic hipness of the narration that appears throughout the series. Abraham Riesman sums this contribution up best when he writes that Stan Lee reinvented the language of comic books, noting that his “rhythmic, vernacular approach to dialogue transformed superhero storytelling from a litany of bland declarations to a sensational symphony of jittery word-jazz — a language that spoke directly and fluidly to comics readers, enfolding them in a common ecstatic idiom that became the bedrock of what we think of now as ‘fan culture’” (Riesman). Lee was able to do this by using a variety of different tropes to achieve an almost poetic language, primary among them were alliteration, irony, self-parody, and hyperbole. These tropes within the narration and dialogue of the characters added another dimension to the comic. In praising Lee for these innovations, Arthur Berger feels that “by writing funny credits featuring remarkable displays of alliteration, he [Lee] nods his head to society and convention and is then free to indulge himself in his science fantasies” (170).

Through this balance, Lee felt free to use slang, purple prose, and whatever style of language they felt to convey the story best. A lot of the slang tends to be used for character delineation, so that The Thing can sound different from his peers. The Thing uses the slang battle cry, “It’s Clobberin’ Time!” instead of the proper English translation, “It’s Time to Hand Out a Beating!” The former phrasing has more character and says more about The Thing’s personality than the latter phrasing. The Thing also likes to use disparaging labels for himself and others. For instance, in

Issue No. 60, The Thing comes head-to-head in an epic fight with Doctor Doom. He is momentarily stunned and says to himself, “Fight it, Ben . . . Fight it!! FIGHT . . . ya ugly, good-fer-nothin’ orange-skinned meathead . . . Fight—!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.60 11). This use of everyday language allows readers to identify with The Thing more easily than if they were speaking a more formal language.

5. *Technology as a Tool*

Superheroes use technology to create tools that showcase a strong reliance and exuberant faith in technology, downplaying or ignoring any negative consequences or discoveries.

Science and technology are integral to *The Fantastic Four*, despite the fact that one of their creators is ignorant about science. In an interview, Stan Lee confesses that “I am the least scientific person you’ll ever know, so I tried to seem scientific with our characters” (qtd. in Kantor). Lee further confesses after providing some examples with Spider-Man and The Incredible Hulk that “if it [something scientific] sounds good, I’ll use it. . . . The whole trick is to make something seem as if you gave it a lot of thought and did a lot of research about this” (qtd. in Kantor). Through this confession, Lee underscores an underlying faith in technology, that somehow all of the gobbledegook that no one understands means something meaningful and can be important to the plotting of a story. It is no wonder that in Annual 2 within their pinup section, Reed Richards is behind a formidable piece of machinery, but confides in the inscription “Just between us, I don’t know what this silly contraption is, either!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 2. Annual 2 23).

Reed Richards’ life is devoted to building such machinery and he assumes there is always a technological fix to solve every problem. Every time there is a problem that The Fantastic Four encounter, Richards comes up with a machine that can save the day, either creating it himself or using

alien technology discovered during their adventures. He always frames the problems that The Fantastic Four have in terms of technology; he has utter confidence that whatever the problem the team faces, there is a piece of technology that will solve it. The list of machines and scientific technologies that Richards employs is endless, but there are two technological advances that are worthy of consideration because they reveal both the promise and peril that come with technology. The first comes from the Galactus Trilogy with the Ultimate Nullifier that The Watcher sends Johnny Storm to fetch from Galactus' home world. When Johnny returns, he gives the Ultimate Nullifier to Richards, who begins to fiddle with it to figure out how to use it against Galactus. Blinded by his own faith in his technological prowess, Richards does not realize that he is playing with fire. The Watcher warns him that if the Ultimate Nullifier is turned on full power, "it could erase the entire solar system in one microsecond!" (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.50 7).

The second technological breakthrough Richards makes is the discovery of the Negative Zone, an antimatter universe Reed Richards uncovers in Issue 51. Reed enters a "Radical cube . . . designed to create a dimensional entrance into sub-space" (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3.15 3), hoping to explore sub-space to better understand it. However, Richards runs into trouble with the Negative Zone, having gotten lost in it while exploring. Vowing never to use the Negative Zone ever again, he shuts the door on the Radical cube and only opens it again in Issue 71 when the Mad Thinker's killer android meets its end by falling through the door into the Negative Zone (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 4.71 17). Richards' view of the Negative Zone is the same as his view towards of technology in general; he downplays its negative effects. Richards wants to keep the negatives of technology tightly under wraps instead of trying to deal with their negative consequences. By doing this, he is still able to maintain his faith in technology.

6. Teamwork

Superheroes team up and collaborate with one another through a process of conflict and compromise for the greater good of either the superhero team or society at large.

Through the discussion of superhero hang-ups and personal problems, it is natural that there will be conflict whenever superheroes work together in teams or groups. In the case of The Fantastic Four, there have been times when the conflict within the team has been so great that one or more members decide to leave. When that happens, the rupture is not permanent; the separated member of the team always comes back to the team and the team finds ways to compromise by incorporating the difference of opinion of the team member who left. Sometimes, this involves Reed Richards telling Sue he has been insensitive for ignoring her needs or Johnny Storm saying he is sorry for teasing the Thing. The group dynamics that The Fantastic Four exhibit is also echoed in all of the other collaborations they have with various superheroes. With these collaborations, The Fantastic Four can have their ups and downs, but everyone in the team comes back to the central goal of what is good for the group. In this way, these Marvel collaborations resemble real social networks. In their paper on social networks in the Marvel Universe, Richardo Alberich, Joe Miro-Julia, and Francesc Rosselló assert that while they do not completely correspond to real-life social networks, there are some ways that the social networks in the Marvel Universe resembles real-life networks (12-13).

While the superheroes have different issues they need to address while collaborating with The Fantastic Four, there is always a sense of a common goal, whether it is to save the world, stop a supervillain's plot, or, in the case of Annual 3, to save the marriage ceremony of Reed Richards and Sue Storm. Annual 3 proves a microcosm for how superheroes team up with The Fantastic Four, since all the major Marvel superheroes and

villains put in a guest appearance. Attempting to interrupt the wedding, Doctor Doom uses his High-Frequency Emotional Charger to “fan the flames of hatred in the heart of every evil menace in existence!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 3 Annual 3 2). As each Marvel villain tries to foil the wedding, they are met by a Marvel superhero who saves the day and paves the way for the wedding to continue. These include the Puppet Master (foiled by Nick Fury), Mole Man (foiled by the X-Men), the Red Ghost (foiled by Dr. Strange), the Super Skrull (foiled by Thor), as well as Cobra and the Executioner (foiled by Iron Man and Captain America). In each case, the visiting superhero works either by him/herself or in tandem with individual members of The Fantastic Four to defeat the menace and save the day. In short, Reed Richards and Sue Storm could not have been married were it not for the help from the superheroes of the Marvel Universe.

7. *Interactivity*

Superhero comic book titles have areas of playful or meaningful interactivity by which superheroes interact with the populace of their home city, the superheroes interact with the comic’s creators within the comic itself, and the comic’s creators interact with the comic’s fans.

One of the most interesting developments within *The Fantastic Four* is various areas of interactivity whereby different constituents involved in the creation and consumption of the comic book can interact. There are several areas of interactivity that happen with *The Fantastic Four*, such as when The Fantastic Four interacts with the residents of New York City in meaningful ways that advance the action. The populace of New York City is not so much of a backdrop, but a Greek chorus echoing ideas that resonate with the populace. When The Thing is down about his girlfriend Alicia disappearing in Issue 66, it is the residents of New York City who

aid and soothe him in ways that help The Thing gain a sense of perspective. After the Thing talks with a woman in the park, a police officer sums up the encounter by saying, “You’re a lucky man, Ben Grimm! It must be a wonderful feeling to know that people all over think you’re the greatest!” (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 4.66 7).

There are also areas of interactivity between the comic creators and the fans themselves. Stan Lee was a master of this part of comic creation, having introduced the Bullpen Bulletin (which Lee discusses new events within the Marvel Universe), Stan’s Soapbox (where Lee can address various social and comic issues), and The Fantastic Four Fan Page (where Lee answers fan letters). The last of these is where Lee has the greatest impact, since he was able to interact with The Fantastic Four fans in ways that brought them inside the thought process of the Bullpen, where the comic creators worked. Building on this need to interact with the fans, Lee also was behind the creation of the Merry Marvel Marching Society in which fans could join and receive a five-minute record of Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the other members of the Marvel creative team making jokes with one another (Howe 55). The end result of all of these efforts is that the fan felt like they were interacting with the creators of Marvel Comics in ways that almost resemble social media.

As a side note, Kirby benefitted immensely from the interactivity arising from fan interest in *The Fantastic Four*. Richard Polsky observes that through The Fantastic Four Fan Page, fan letters “lavished praise on Kirby, treating him with the same respect afforded a true artist. As they continued to pour in, a funny thing began to happen. Kirby’s art grew stronger” (42). Kirby was able to produce comics that would be considered examples of superior draftsmanship, utilizing in his penciling “a dynamic line, beautiful shading, and a sure sense of placement on the page” (Polsky 30). Combining superior draftsmanship with the freedoms inherit within the Marvel Method of creating comics, it is no wonder that

Kirby's creativity reached its full potential on the run of *The Fantastic Four* (Peters).

Lee and Kirby also extended their interactivity by including themselves into various issues of *The Fantastic Four* comic. They appear in *The Fantastic Four* No. 10, where a befuddled Lee and Kirby cannot find a suitable villain for The Fantastic Four to fight. As they are musing on what to do to correct this situation, Doctor Doom suddenly walks into the Marvel Bullpen and tells them that they need to resurrect him for the next adventure that The Fantastic Four will face (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol. 1.10 5). Similarly, Lee and Kirby also try to gain entrance to the wedding of Reed Richards and Sue Storm. Unfortunately, Nick Fury considers them gatecrashers and does not let them in. Jack Kirby threatens Nick Fury by saying "You haven't heard the last of this! We have ways of getting even!" (Lee and Kirby *Essential* vol.3. Annual 3 23). This breaking of the fourth wall by having comic creators interact with their creation is unprecedented within superhero comics and allows fans another glimpse of the creative process for how the comic's creators create superhero stories.

8. Action

Action is the driving force within superhero comics. Everything in the comic book, from the titles to the individual panels, is constantly depicting physical action and/or emotional reaction to events.

Action is at the heart and soul of *The Fantastic Four* comic series. In looking at Kirby's artwork alone, action screams out from all quarters. Even if there are no scenes of superheroes socking villains, there are plenty of shots of emotional reaction within the characters. Turning to some of the various issues, their titles are also action-oriented. Consider the following titles from *The Fantastic Four*: "Death of a Hero" (Issue 32), "A Blind Man Shall Lead Them!" (Issue 39), "To Save You, Why

Must I Kill You?” (Issue 42), and “. . .And One Shall Save Him” (Issue 62). All of these titles are not staid, but point to some form of action (whether it is physical or emotional) that is about to occur or has already occurred through the proceedings of the comic.

One area where action spills out is through the mini-series that populated the storylines of *The Fantastic Four*. As the series progressed, stories would not end with one issue, but would spill out over several issues. In fact, the famed Galactus Trilogy starts with some tidying up of the multi-issue Inhumans saga and ends with another storyline of Johnny Storm going off the college for the first time. In considering the reasons for such actions, Pierre Comtois believes that this was a way for Lee to “tie his growing universe closer together, to develop its own internal consistency and to give it a semblance of verisimilitude” (57). It is for this reason that Comtois calls the period from November 1963 to May 1965 as “The Years of Consolidation” (57). The end result was that the action of the story became larger and the fight sequences longer. Some of the battles within the Inhumans mini-series (Issues 44-48) become the main focus of the storyline, thereby making the mini-series have more action with fewer panels of set-up.

9. *Villains (a) Designer Villains*

Superheroes fight designer villains, crafted for the specific superhero they are fighting.

10. *Villains (b) The Level of Justice*

Superheroes seek their own level of justice in the type of villains they fight, the level of justice being the comfort level a superhero has to fight against a particular brand of villainy.

Lumping the last two of the elements together, both of them deal with what type of villain a superhero will fight. Lee and Kirby perfected the

designer villain idea, whereby a superhero fights a villain that is crafted especially towards that superhero's own powers. Take Doctor Doom for instance. His intelligence is matched against Reed Richards' and the two are evenly pared off. While Doctor Doom might be more powerful physically, he is counterbalanced by Reed Richards' stretching ability, which allows him to defeat Doom either through stretching his body or his intellect (or both). In the same way, the other villains The Fantastic Four fight are also reflections of the powers of The Fantastic Four. Probably the best example is The Frightful Four, who appear in Issue 36. They are comprised of The Wizard, The Sandman, Paste-Pot Pete (later known as The Trapster), and Madam Medusa. The Wizard possesses Reed's superintelligence, The Sandman possessed Reed's morphing abilities, Paste-Pot Pete has paste weaponry which is designed to slow down The Human Torch and The Thing, and Madam Medusa possess hair which can seek out Sue Storm even when she is invisible.

Another consideration that Lee and Kirby had was in building a hierarchy of villainy, which is being called here the level of justice (i.e., the type of villain a superhero feels compelled to fight against and mete out justice). The level of justice has three basic categories: human threats, superhuman threats, and cosmic threats, with a degree of bleed through between the demarcation lines for each category. The human level of justice is the lowest level and deals with dangers villains pose on a city or regional level. Going from lowest to highest are the garden variety Thugs, Goons (i.e., a bad guy who works for a boss), and the Goon Boss. Higher up the villain food chain are the superhuman threats. These villains work on a larger level, either threatening either a region of the country or the entire nation with their villainy. These are villains who a) have superpowers and are willing to use them for evil, or b) humans whose potential level of destruction is so vast that it takes on a superhuman dimension. Going from lowest to highest is Organized Crime, Terrorist Organizations, the Cockroach Villain (arch criminals so named because

they are difficult to catch and operate in the shadows, like a cockroach), the Status Disrupters (arch criminals whose plans aim on massive disruption of some societal system), the Anti-Hero (an arch criminal who can sometimes use his powers for good, but whose moral compass faces the opposite direction), the Nemesis (an arch criminal whose powers and intention for destruction is evenly matched with that of the superhero), and the Big Bad (the chief villain behind much of the lower level villainy).

Finally, there is the level of cosmic threats, which incorporates threats to the planet, solar system, or universe itself. Going up from lowest to highest are Post Human (the genetically modified human who sees humanity as pawns or things that are in the way of their plans), Alien Threats (who threaten to enslave humanity or destroy the planet entirely), and the Nietzschean villain (a villain whose powers are so vast and whose care is so far removed from the petty concerns of humanity that they are—in the world of philosophy Friedrich Nietzsche—beyond good and evil. This villain can be so beyond the petty dictates of humanity that they can be almost considered as a god).

The level of justice that *The Fantastic Four* seeks out is on the superhuman and cosmic threat levels. They are less interested in your average thug on the street wanting to steal someone's purse. This is in keeping with what type of superhero they see themselves as. Kraft asserts that *The Fantastic Four* are "humanitarians. They care about people—all people. They fight to save them from oppression. It doesn't matter if that oppression is created by disease, alien invaders, or some earthly dictator" (21). It is this large-scale concern with humanity that makes them at home dealing with the Mad Thinker (an example of a Cockroach Villain), The Sub-Mariner (an example of an Anti-Hero), or Doctor Doom (an example of a Nemesis or Big Bad, depending on the storyline) on the superhuman level. On the cosmic threat level, *The Fantastic Four* are also more at home with battling Him (as example of a post-Human) and the Skrulls (an example of Alien Threats). When battling the Nietzschean villain Galactus,

he stretches The Fantastic Four's limits for their level of justice. In their first encounter with Galactus, The Fantastic Four do not try to fight Galactus as much as get help from The Watcher to deflect Galactus from destroying Earth. There is no way for defeating a character that some consider a surrogate for God. In fact, Kirby admits that "when I created the Silver Surfer and Galactus . . . I came up with what I thought was God in Galactus; a God-like character" (qtd. in Alexander 81).

With a nod toward 1960s optimism in the space exploration and the future, Lee and Kirby's run on *The Fantastic Four* created a template for tomorrow, a way for Marvel writers and pencilers to create the wide range of superheroes that dominated the Silver and Bronze Age of Comics. Characters such as Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk, The X-Men, and The Avengers all were created using this same template pioneered within *The Fantastic Four* comic. In keeping with the use of a template, these writers and pencilers creating these superheroes had license to add to, subtract from, and make minor modifications to the template to suit their tastes. This template held sway during the Marvel Silver and Bronze Ages, only to be more extensively reworked by the successful Marvel film franchises during the last decade. Today, few people think about *The Fantastic Four*, except to lambast the latest Hollywood attempt to bring them to the silver screen. However, there would be no Marvel film franchises, no Marvel Comics, and no Marvel Universe without the template for tomorrow created by both Lee and Kirby during their run on *The Fantastic Four*.

Works Cited

Alberich, Richardo, Joe Miro-Julia, and Francesc Rosselló. "Marvel Universe Looks Almost Like a Real Social Network." 11 Feb. 2002. Web. 15 April 2016. Technical Report.

- Alexander, Mark. "Lee & Kirby: The Wonder Years." *Jack Kirby Collector* 58. Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows, 2011. Print.
- Bainbridge, Jason. "'I Am New York'—Spider-Man, New York City and the Marvel Universe." *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*. Ed. Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling. New York: Continuum, 2010. 163-179. Print.
- Bell, Blake and Michael J. Vassallo. *The Secret History of Marvel Comics: Jack Kirby and the Moonlighting Artists at Martin Goodman's Empire*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2013. Print.
- Berger, Arthur. "Marvel Language: The Comic Book and Reality." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 29.2 (June 1972): 169-180. Web. 28 July 2016.
- Boose, Nicole. "The Editor's Role in Creating Comics." Get Graphic! Graphic Novel Speaker Series. Cleveland Public Library, Cleveland, OH. 26 March 2016. Lecture.
- Brunelli, Roberto. *Template Matching Techniques in Computer Vision: Theory and Practice*. Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2009. Print.
- Burnham, Douglas and George Papandreopoulos. "Existentialism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. N.d. Web. 20 April 2016.
- "Central City." *Marvel Database*. Wikia.com. N.d. Web. 30 April 2016.
- Comtois, Pierre. *Marvel Comics in the 1960s: An Issue by Issue Field Guide to a Pop Culture Phenomenon*. Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows, 2009. Print.

D'Amore, Laura Mattoon. "The Accidental Supermom: Superheroines and Maternal Performativity, 1963-1980." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45.6 (Dec. 2012): 1226-1248. Web. 8 July 2016.

----- . "Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine." *Americana* 7.2 (Fall 2008): N. pag. Web. 8 July 2016.

D'Antonio, Michael. *A Ball, a Dog, and a Monkey—1957—The Space Race Begins*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007. Print.

Evanier, Mark. *Kirby: King of Comics*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2008. Print.

Fingeroth, Danny. *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society*. New York: Continuum, 2004. Print.

"Formula." Def. 2. *Free Dictionary.com*. Farlex. 2011. Web. 29 April 2016.

"Formula." Def. 4a. *Free Dictionary.com*. Farlex. 2011. Web. 29 April 2016.

Gartland, Mike. "A Failure to Communicate—Part One." *Jack Kirby Collector* 21. (Oct. 1998): N. pag. Web. 21 March 2016.

----- . "A Failure to Communicate—Part Two." *Jack Kirby Collector* 22. (Dec. 1998): N. pag. Web. 21 March 2016.

----- . "A Failure to Communicate—Part Three." *Jack Kirby Collector* 23. (Feb. 1999): N. pag. Web. 21 March 2016.

- , "A Failure to Communicate—Part Four." *Jack Kirby Collector* 24. (April 1999): N. pag. Web. 21 March 2016.
- , "A Failure to Communicate—Part Five." *Jack Kirby Collector* 26. (Nov.1999): N. pag. Web. 21 March 2016.
- Genter, Robert. "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40.6 (2007): 953-978. Web. 5 April 2016.
- Groth, Gary. "Jack Kirby Interview." *The Comics Journal* 134 (Feb.1990). 23 May 2011. Web. 29 April 2016.
- Howe, Sean. *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012. Print.
- John-Steiner, Vera. *Creative Collaboration*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.
- Kantor, Michael and Laurence Maslow, writers. *Superheroes: A Never-Ending Battle*. Dir. Michael Kantor. 2013. Ghost Light Films and Oregon Public Broadcasting. 2013. DVD.
- Kraft, David Anthony. *The Fantastic Four: The Secret Story of Marvel's Cosmic Quartet*. Chicago: Children's Press, 1981. Print.
- Kuhlmann, Katherine. "Beyond Pow! Wam! Stan Lee's Hand in Revolutionizing Comic Books." Keck Scholars Program. Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA. 4 March 2015. Oral Presentation. Web. 5 April, 2016.
- Lang, Jeffrey S. and Patrick Trimble. "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?: An Examination of the American Monomyth and the

Comic Book Superhero.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 22.3
(Winter 1988): 157-173. Web. 5 April 2016.

Lee, Stan, Peter David, and Colleen Doran. *Amazing Fantastic Incredible:
A Marvelous Memoir*. New York: Touchstone, 2015. Print.

Lee, Stan and Jack Kirby. *Essential Fantastic Four*. Vol. 1. New York:
Marvel P, 2008. Print.

----- *Essential Fantastic Four*. Vol. 2. New York: Marvel Worldwide,
Inc., 2011. Print.

----- *Essential Fantastic Four*. Vol. 3. New York: Marvel Worldwide,
Inc., 2011. Print.

----- *Essential Fantastic Four*. Vol. 4. New York: Marvel Worldwide,
Inc., 2011. Print.

Lee, Stan and George Mair. *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*.
New York: Touchstone, 2002. Print.

Lippert, David. “Comics and Culture.” *National Forum* 74.4 (Fall 1994):
41. Web. 10 April 2016.

Maslon, Laurence and Michael Kantor. *Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and
the Creation of Comic Book Culture*. New York: Crown Archetype,
2013. Print.

Mercier, Sebastian T. “‘Truth, Justice and the American Way’: The
Intersection of American Youth Culture and Superhero Narratives.”
Iowa Historical Review 1.2 (2008): 21-59. Web. 27 April 2016.

Palumbo, Donald. “The Marvel Comics Group’s Spider-Man is an
Existentialist Super-Hero; or ‘Life Has No Meaning Without My

Latest Marvels!” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 17.2 (Fall 1983): 67-82. Web. 11 July 2016.

Peters, Mark. “Three Ways Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s *Fantastic Four* Laid the Blueprint for Our Superhero-Centric World.” *Paste Magazine.com*. Paste Magazine.com. 7 August 2015. Web. 25 March 2016.

Polsky, Richard. *The Art Prophets: The Artists, Dealers, and Tastemakers Who Shook the Art World*. New York: Other Press, 2011. Print.

Raphael, Jordan. *Four-Color Marvels: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and the Development of Comic Book Fandom*. Diss. University of Southern California, 2007. Web. 27 June 2016.

Riesman, Abraham. “It’s Stan Lee’s Universe.” *Vulture.com*. Vulture.com. Feb. 2016. Web. 27 April 2016.

Ro, Ronin. *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004. Print.

Sandelands, Lloyd E., Susan J. Ashford, and Jane E. Dutton. “Reconceptualizing of the Overjustification Effect: A Template-Matching Approach.” *Motivation and Emotion* 7.3 (Sept. 1983): 229-255. Web. 11 July 2016.

Shenk, Joshua Wolf. *Powers of Two: Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. Print.

“Template.” Def. 2a. *Free Dictionary.com*. Farlex. 2011. Web. 29 April 2016.

“Template (word processing).” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 6 Feb. 2016. Web. 11 July 2016.

“Thing (Benjamin Grimm).” *Marvel Database*. Wikia.com. N.d. Web. 27 September 2016.

Tolworthy, Chris. “Crystal, a love story.” *The Fantastic Four 1961-1989 Was THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL*. Zak-site.com. N.d. Web. 5 March 2016.

----- . “Stan Lee and Jack Kirby: who did what?” *The Fantastic Four 1961-1989 Was THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL*. Zak-site.com N.d. Web. 5 March 2016.

Wolfe, Tom. *The Right Stuff*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. Print.

Yockey, Matthew. “This Island Manhattan: New York City and the Space Race in *The Fantastic Four*.” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 (Spring 2005): 58-79. Web. 16 March 2016.