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“The Status is not Quo”: A Genre Deconstruction of *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*

The superhero genre has saturated the culture in print, television, film, and on the web. *The Dark Knight* made billions at the box office, and *Spiderman* and *Iron Man* made hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years. *The Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon, has grossed over \$1.3 billion worldwide, making it the third highest grossing movie of all time. Well before *The Avengers*, Whedon created a web series called *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, another addition to the superhero genre. The series defied modest expectations and became an instant hit, even crashing web servers due to high volume traffic. Since its release, it has become a cult classic and has won several awards, including a Hugo Award and a Creative Arts Emmy Award.

Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog is a three act web series that follows Dr. Horrible as he works to gain admittance into the Evil League of Evil (referred to as “the League”) and work with its leader and his hero, Bad Horse. A song early in the narrative reveals exactly what must be done to gain admittance to the League: “A heinous crime/ A show of force/ A murder would be nice of course” (*Sing-Along Blog*). Dr. Horrible catalogues his journey through video blog posts, in which he speaks to a camera and then uploads the footage to the internet. *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* mixes these blog posts, which give a more personal look, with scenes from his life.

Time magazine noted, “Whedon is a known subversive. His modus operandi is to undermine the status quo and aggressively deconstruct whatever genre he's working in” (Grossman). He does the same in *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, consciously following and

breaking conventions of the superhero genre, as portrayed in comic books and film. Generic transformation, which is the development of a genre to fit evolving societal expectations, must be done to avoid becoming stale or overdone. Though tempting to stick with a sure-fire formula to obtain the most lucrative results, “strict adherence to genre convention driven solely by economics often yields derivative and formulaic results” (Barsam 80). The text must balance originality with predictability to engage audiences while still providing a foundation, which is just what Whedon has done in *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*.

This paper will deconstruct the superhero genre in relation to *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* to reveal that the villain of this narrative is inherently more heroic than the apparent hero, despite their respective categorizations. Deconstruction borrows the idea of binary oppositions from structuralism, but takes it a step further. A binary opposition posits that we make meaning by categorizing life into polar opposites, but in deconstruction, “one must examine the ways in which the members of the opposition are not completely opposite, the ways in which they overlap or share some things in common” (Tyson 254). Specifically, this paper will analyze the application and subversion of conventions of the superhero genre in *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* to show how the text defies and blends the traditional binary oppositions of heroes versus villains and good versus evil.

Roz Kaveny, a pop culture expert, asserts that there are two key aspects to every superhero: the power and the mission. Though not the “hero” of the narrative, Dr. Horrible fits the requirements of the definition. Dr. Horrible does not have any powers as far as superhuman abilities are concerned. However, he does fit into a less typical category of heroes. As Kaveny states, “A substantial minority of people without powers as such share a commitment to the superhero mission, so they are generally regarded as superheroes in spite of the absence of such powers” (Kaveny 4). Dr. Horrible is more the mad scientist type, a character that uses his

intelligence to make technological gadgets to complete his mission, much in the way Batman makes his own devices to supersede his lack of natural superhuman abilities. Also like Batman, Dr. Horrible is dedicated to a mission that often puts him at odds with the law.

Dr. Horrible's main goal is to disrupt the current political system, which he believes is a world plagued by corrupt and ineffective leaders. In the superhero genre, it is common for villains to be mad scientists, stealing money to fund various projects (11). In contrast, Dr. Horrible steals from banks in his quest to take power away from the "wrong" hands. In his first video blog post of the series, he explains to his viewers why he stole gold from a bank: "[B]y the way, it's not about making money. It's about taking money. Destroying the status-quo because the status is not quo. The world is a mess, and I just need to rule it" (*Sing-Along Blog*). To Dr. Horrible, banks are government entities that symbolize a power source for the rich and powerful.

The second part of his mission is to get the power in "different" hands, though the only hands he trusts to put them in are his own. He does not represent anarchy like many villains but rather supports the creation of a new order for the benefit of the citizens that would ultimately make the world a better place. He just happens to believe that taking over the world is the correct solution. In this way, his mission to unhinge a corrupt status quo is closer to the hero side of the continuum, but his questionable methods prevent him from being purely heroic.

Dr. Horrible is also quite morally conscious for a man whose goal is to be accepted into the Evil League of Evil. Unlike villains, "[I]t is part of the mission statement of many superheroes that they not kill, no matter the provocation" (Kaveny 18). Dr. Horrible's abhorrence to killing is introduced in the first few minutes of the narrative. When a wannabe super hero challenges him to a face off in Dooley Park, Dr. Horrible refuses because the man is not a worthy opponent, but adds, "Besides, there are kids in that park" (*Sing-Along Blog*). He is not willing to risk the lives of others to prove his worth. After he botches a mission that would

ensure his invitation to the League, Bad Horse sends him a letter that states the only way Dr. Horrible can make up for it is to kill someone. His friend Moist suggests that that Dr. Horrible kill a kid that has been foretold to become president. Dr. Horrible answers immediately that he is not going to kill a child. Moist offers, “Smother an old lady?” Dr. Horrible responds incredulously, “Do I even know you?” (*Sing-Along Blog*). Dr. Horrible is unwilling to kill anyone to achieve his villainous dreams, from a small child to and elderly lady. Dr. Horrible strictly adheres to this moral code even when strongly tempted to do otherwise.

Dr. Horrible’s nemesis, Captain Hammer, is the overt hero of this text and on the surface seems to fit the superhero definition better. He has natural superhuman strength, to the point he can throw cars with ease. Though not impervious, he is much less vulnerable than the average person. Captain Hammer’s mission is less clear, but he does work closely with the mayor and in collaboration with the police department to fight “evil” and maintain order, which is usually to foil Dr. Horrible’s various plots. In Act I, Dr. Horrible calls Captain Hammer a “corporate tool,” suggesting he is not an independent purveyor of justice but rather an instrument of a corrupt state. More insight on Captain Hammer’s goals is not revealed until later in the narrative, but these confirm Dr. Horrible’s suspicions of Captain Hammer’s less than heroic character.

Clues from Captain Hammer’s behavior throughout suggest that he is a hero for the glory and recognition, not to “fight for truth, justice, and the protection of the innocent” as is usually standard of the superhero (Kaveny 4). There is a certain element of glamour to the superhero, an element that Captain Hammer is well aware of and embraces. Virginia Postrel, a cultural writer, defines glamour as “an imaginative process that creates a specific emotional response: a sharp mixture of projection, longing, admiration, and aspiration” (Postrel 140). Captain Hammer revels in the attention he gets from the media, the mayor, and ordinary citizens. Indeed, the superhero is oft compared to the celebrity of the comic book world (Kaveny 10). They are the

subject of wonderment for the real life audience, a factor that is highlighted by Captain Hammer's enthusiastic fans, who wear shirts with pictures of his face and have everything from strands of his hair to one of his dry-cleaning bills.

Postrel's article goes on to state "[Superheroes are] special, and they know it" (Postrel 143). Unlike other "righteous" heroes, Captain Hammer embraces this at the expense of the ones he protects. Captain Hammer certainly knows he is envied, admired, and respected, and expects to be treated more as a celebrity rather than a public servant. A song that Captain Hammer sings in the musical called "Everyone's a Hero in Their Own Way" is supposed to be a call to empowerment, suggesting that everyone can make a difference in this world. However, it is obvious that Captain Hammer still considers himself above the common people. He sings "Everyone's a hero in their own way/Everyone's got villains they must face/They're not as cool as mine/But folks you know it's fine/To know your place" (*Sing-Along Blog*). The lyrics of each rendition of the chorus change a bit every time and become even more insulting to the audience he is "inspiring."

Additionally, the appearance of both hero and villain further support and challenge genre norms, which gives insight into the two main characters' true natures. According to Kaveny, "Iconographically, almost all superheroes are good-looking and muscular, and wear costumes that emphasize the fact" (Kaveny 20). Captain Hammer has large muscles and wears a tight shirt to highlight them. At one point, a song references Captain Hammer's hair "blowing through the breeze," which he accentuates with a hair flip reminiscent of a glamorous hair commercial as he sings the line. However, his shirt and gloves are black, suggesting darkness and evil. When Dr. Horrible dresses in costume, his lab coat is white, revealing innocence and a certain naivety. The coat itself perpetuates an image of intelligence and a man worthy of respect. When Dr. Horrible is admitted into the League, he changes his costume to a blood red lab coat

and the same black gloves as Captain Hammer, equating the two characters. It is important to note that even then, he is not predominantly in black and the true personification of evil but rather inner turmoil.

When he is not Dr. Horrible, he is Billy, an average man. Superheroes often have a secret identity to shield their true identity from the public (9). In this text, the villain has a secret identity, while the hero seems to live his superhero identity at all times. In this case, the secret identity does not function just to protect Billy/Dr. Horrible's private life but is another persona entirely. Billy is timid, but he uses his villain alter ego as an avenue to take charge of his life, to complete his mission to take over the world, and ultimately, he hopes, to earn the respect of the girl of his dreams, Penny. The differences are portrayed through costuming. Billy wears ordinary clothing in neutral colors, making him fade to the background. The clothing is oversized, emphasizing how small he is and his lack of self-confidence. The Dr. Horrible costume is a lab coat, stressing his intelligence and worthiness of respect. The identity that Billy/Dr. Horrible is personifying and the moments he changes between the two are crucial in the narrative.

The narrative follows that of the superhero origin story, though in this case it has been modified to a super villain origin story. The superhero origin story is one that traces the journey of an average person to the embodiment of the superhero. The first key part of the narrative is when "the hero experiences an extraordinary moment of conversion near the end of Act I", such as when Peter Parker gains superhuman abilities after being bitten by a radioactive spider (Arnett 5). The scenes that follow relate the hero's mistakes and struggles as he or she seeks to redefine the self until the end of Act II, when the hero and the main antagonist engage in an ultimate battle, like when Batman fights Ra's Al Ghul in *Batman Begins*. Afterwards, a final section solidifies that this previously ordinary person has completed the conversion to a superhero (5).

The initial act of conversion that prompts Billy to create his Dr. Horrible persona is unknown and occurs before the series begins. Even so, there is scene included within the text that propels Dr. Horrible from a fairly harmless villain with a pipe dream of making it into the League to a much darker path. This moment occurs at the end of the first heist and is a critical turning point in the narrative. Though not the initial conversion, this seems to be the moment where Dr. Horrible gains clarity in his focus and increases his efforts dramatically.

He begins the scene dressed as Billy. His goal is to steal some Wonderflonium when it is transported by courier van between two locations. He needs the Wonderflonium to power his Freeze Ray, which stops time and will be crucial in his final mission to gain the League's approval. Billy uses one of his scientific inventions to take control of the courier van. All is going according to plan until Penny shows up and asks him to sign her petition to open a homeless shelter.

This marks the first time that the two have actually had a conversation. This scene highlights a direct juxtaposition of the two things Billy thinks he wants most in life: a life of villainy and a life with Penny. He naively thinks he can combine both and that being a member of the League will earn Penny's respect and love. However, his interactions with Penny serve to move him further from villainy, and he simply cannot occupy both oppositions at once.

Billy is quite distracted, trying to carry a conversation with Penny and complete the heist. He keeps looking back and forth between Penny and the van, his two choices. Ultimately, he turns his attention to the van. Penny wanders off after Billy becomes too distracted by his heist to respond. He looks back and sees her walking away and says, "She talked to me. Why did she talk to me now?" (*Sing-Along Blog*). However, his decision is made and the van carrying the Wonderflonium is in his control. He changes into his Dr. Horrible costume, visually signifying that pursuing a life of villainy is more important at this point in time than trying to establish a

relationship with Penny. He is fighting his desire to make a connection with Penny and tries to realize his dreams of villainy, a role he could never truly fulfill due to his inherent, though unperceived, heroic qualities.

Then, Captain Hammer enters the scene. He destroys the device Dr. Horrible is using to control the van, nearly leading to disastrous results. The van almost runs straight into Penny, but just in time, Dr. Horrible manages to regain control of the van using his invention. However, both Captain Hammer and Penny are under the impression that Captain Hammer saved her. It seems like “love at first sight” as Captain Hammer and Penny start singing to each other and gazing in each other’s eyes. Penny sings to Captain Hammer, “You came from above...My heart is beating like a drum” (*Sing-Along Blog*). It can be argued that her response to the scene is a result of superhero glamor, so much so that she is instantly enamored of him. Captain Hammer responds, “The only doom that’s looming is me loving you to death” (*Sing-Along Blog*). With this line, he discounts any threat that Dr. Horrible poses and instead chooses to focus on Penny. Getting the girl has become more important than defeating the villain. A true hero would not let the villain get away due to a distraction but would complete the job to protect the city’s citizens.

Dr. Horrible is looking on at the scene in disbelief, stunned at what he is seeing. The girl of his dreams, whom he has just begun developing a friendship with, is falling for his arch nemesis. He sings of Captain Hammer and Penny, “Did you notice that he threw you in the garbage?” (*Sing-Along Blog*). In his haste to save Penny, Captain Hammer pushes Penny aside quite forcefully, literally he launching Penny into some trash against a wall nearby. Penny seems too distracted by his glamor to care, and Captain Hammer’s conceit is so strong that he does not even think to ask if she’s alright. Dr. Horrible grabs the Wonderflonium instead of intervening, showing that a life of evil is still his highest priority. At the beginning of Act II, it is clear that

the event has adversely affected Dr. Horrible. He stares blankly at his camera instead of creating a blog post, devastated that he has lost Penny to Captain Hammer. Though he made the choice to abandon the girl (at least at this point) to be a true villain, he is not happy with his decision

Act II catalogues Dr. Horrible's struggles as he grapples with his dueling identities: Billy, a good-hearted guy who wants to change the world, and Dr. Horrible, an evil member of the League. These two identities strive to embody two opposite polarities, and in truth Billy/Dr. Horrible resides somewhere in between. He thinks that by taking over (and then saving) the world, he will earn Penny's respect, thereby achieving his two main goals. However, it seems to him that Penny does not even realize the pain he's going through for her furthering his own despair. He sings "The dark is everywhere/And Penny doesn't seem to care" (*Sing-Along Blog*). He believes this all through Act II, even as his friendship with Penny grows stronger.

Following the origin story formula, there is a grand confrontation with the villain at the end of Act II, or in this case the hero. This is not the final battle as the structure dictates but is the inciting incident that leads to the final battle near the end of Act III and is key in Billy's progression to embodying his Dr. Horrible identity. This is the moment that Billy decides that killing Captain Hammer is the only option, which is what he plans to do during the final battle.

In this narrative, the face-off is not a physical battle, but a verbal confrontation initiated by Captain Hammer. Penny is in the background but cannot hear the actual conversation. Although Billy has seen the sinister side of Captain Hammer well before this scene, this reveals to the audience just how twisted Captain Hammer really is. Hammer tells Billy:

You got a little crush, don't you, Doc? Well that's gonna make this a little hard to hear. See, later I'm going to take little Penny back to my place, show her the Command Center, Hammer Cycle, maybe even the Ham-Jet. You think she likes me now? I'm gonna give Penny the night of her life. Just because you want her, and I get what you want. (*Sing-Along Blog*)

This is when Billy makes his decision. He's going to kill just like Bad Horse requires, and his

victim is going to be Captain Hammer. His true motivation is not the League, but protecting Penny. The scene directly cuts to a musical number in which Billy has changed into his Dr. Horrible costume and proceeds to detail his plans, which is just another example of the separation between Billy and Dr. Horrible.

Dr. Horrible has converted his Stun Ray into a Death Ray to kill Captain Hammer. This is especially important because Dr. Horrible never had created any devices with the intention of killing before. He's seems to be moving closer and closer to the villainous side of the opposition. He freezes Captain Hammer and has ample time to kill him with the Death Ray, but visibly hesitates, signaling he is still not evil enough to kill. The Freeze Ray then makes a whining sound, indicating that it is malfunctioning and unfreezes Captain Hammer.

This is just the opportunity Captain Hammer needs and every action from this point exemplifies his villainous nature. He punches Dr. Horrible to the ground and steps on him. Captain Hammer is obviously physically superior and could just turn Dr. Horrible to the authorities like a real hero would. Instead he picks up the Death Ray intending to kill Billy, violating the standard that heroes do not kill. Meanwhile, the Death Ray has been sparking, indicating that it has been damaged during the altercation. Dr. Horrible tries to do the honorable thing and warn Captain Hammer, but he does not listen and the Death Ray explodes. Captain Hammer runs from the scene in intense pain. This is the first time the Captain Hammer has experienced significant pain, and his first reaction is to run. In contrast, Dr. Horrible stays behind and sees that Penny has been hit by pieces of the Death Ray, and it is clear that she is not going to make it. Dr. Horrible starts to sing, and the lyrics combined with Dr. Horrible's facial expressions reveal the intense emotional pain he is experiencing. It is clear that the villain has been more affected by these tragic events than the supposed hero.

The ending montage is the denouement that, according to the origin story structure,

should signify that Dr. Horrible is a true villain. It seems that he is, but there are hints that he is still not satisfied with his life and still has good in him. It cuts to Dr. Horrible robbing a bank, but he is blank-faced and passionless. His face is in the news, and Captain Hammer's groupies are now wearing Dr. Horrible's face on their shirts. Dr. Horrible is receiving the attention and respect he thought he wanted, but Penny is no longer alive to see.

Next, apparently happy, Dr. Horrible glides through a crowded room of villains having a party. They congratulate him as he moves towards the back of the room. Here, he changes into his red lab jacket and black gloves. Then he enters the League's meeting room. He pulls his goggles down over his eyes for the first time, blocking his eyes from the rest of the world and in effort to further detach himself from others. He sings, "Now the nightmare's real/Now Dr. Horrible is here/ to make you quake with fear/to make the whole world kneel/ And I won't feel..." (*Sing-Along Blog*). The door closes, and the screen cuts to black. He he has entered the space of the worst villains in the city and is physically closed off from the rest of the world. By all appearances, he is now a true villain with no hope of return. Then, there is one final brief cut to Billy in front of his computer, blank faced and miserable, completing the line "...a thing" (*Sing-Along Blog*).

Although the ending montage reveals that Dr. Horrible is now the villain he always wanted to be, his dream has turned into a "nightmare." In the super hero origin story, the denouement generally signifies acceptance of the superhero role, but in this case, the final scene shows that Billy is not happy in his role as Dr. Horrible. He seems to be completely immersed in the villains' world, but in fact he still occupies the gray area between the binary oppositions. His connection to Penny is extremely important to this. She is a major reason he wants to become a villain; if he becomes Dr. Horrible and changes the world, she will be forced to notice him. His interactions with Penny reveal that a life of villainy is something he is not capable of because he

cares for her and others too much. His resistance to rejecting his heroic qualities will never allow him to be happy in a truly villainous, even though he considers himself a villain.

However, he also cannot go along with the corrupt state of the world, and his disruption of the status quo is considered villainous by others.

Captain Hammer is not entirely bad either, though he is certainly closer to the “evil” side of the dyad than his position as a hero would suggest. He does stop Dr. Horrible from wrecking society on multiple occasions. In many instances, Captain Hammer seems too caught up in the glory and his own conceit to realize his actions are morally wrong. However, he is certainly more villainous than Dr. Horrible and is dangerously close to being “evil,” especially in Act III of the text when gets caught up in his own power instead of doing what is right. Even in Captain Hammer’s character, the two oppositions of good and evil blend and overlap.

Through subversion of superhero genre conventions, Whedon forces the audience to reevaluate the standards of what is “good” and what makes a hero. Even Dr. Horrible considers himself a villain and seems blind to the fact that he instead occupies the middle ground between hero and villain. Dr. Horrible spends most of the narrative trying to become a better villain, thereby moving him closer to the “evil” side of the binary. He does get closer, but despite his best efforts, he never truly reaches it. However, by reversing or altering typical roles, Whedon provides a fresh perspective on the superhero genre and emphasizes the middle ground rather than the existence of two extremes. Even though society likes to categorize people in terms of binary oppositions like “hero” and “villain” or “good” and “evil”, Whedon demonstrates that people cannot be completely a hero or a villain, only human.

Annotated Bibliography

Arnett, Robert P. "Casino Royale And Franchise Remix: James Bond As Superhero." *Film Criticism* 33.3 (2009): 1-16. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 15 Apr. 2013.

This paper compares Casino Royale to the superhero origin story and offers extensive notes and examples from superhero movies. This will be used to outline the basic structure of the superhero origin story. Application of the structure will be used in much the same way as this author, but to *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* rather than *Casino Royale*.

Barsam, Richard and Dave Monahan. "Types of Movies." *Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film*. 3rd ed. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2010. 78-103. Print.

This is a chapter from a textbook that covers general but important definitions to understanding film and film genre. This chapter will be used as explanatory notes on the importance of studying genre and its transformations

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog Dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Neil Patrick Harris, Nathan Fillion, and Felicia Day. Mutant Enemy, Inc, 2008. DVD.

This is an internet web series that follows the life of Dr. Horrible on his journey to become a villain and member of the Evil League of Evil. This text is the subject of this paper.

Grossman, Lev. "The Hero Whisperer." *Time*. 179.18 (2012): 46-49 Web.

This article provides a brief discussion of Joss Whedon's works, the influence of comic books on him, and his fondness for experimenting with genre. It mainly focuses on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Avengers*, but the same ideas and influences that affected these texts are also at work in *Dr. Horrible*. This will be used to compare and contrast elements in *Dr. Horrible* to other works by created by Whedon.

Kaveny, Roz. "The Freedom of Power: Some First Thoughts on Superhero Comics." *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008. Print.

This chapter of the book provides a general overview of tropes in the superhero canon, while also pointing out examples of texts that purposely reject these conventions. The focus is on superhero comics, though these same themes can be applied to the same genre represented in other media. This is used to provide a starting point to compare *Dr. Horrible* to the typical comic book and to show how it aligns with or strays from the prototypical superhero story.

Postrel, Virginia. "Superhero Worship." *Atlantic Monthly* (10727825) 298.3 (2006): 140-144. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 4 Apr. 2013.

This article discusses the appeal of glamour and its effects in superhero movies, citing popular blockbusters like *Superman Returns*, *Spiderman*, and *X-Men: The Last Stand* as examples. It argues that the mystery and larger-than-life perception of superheroes engages the audience's best dreams. I will apply the genre principles explained in this article and apply them to *Dr. Horrible* to show how the traditional view of heroic glamour has been twisted.

Tyson, Lois. "Deconstructive Criticism" *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

This chapter offers extensive notes on deconstructive theory. This paper is used as a guide for deconstruction, including definitions of key terms and explanation of key techniques.