

Teen Titans and a Generational Movement of the 60s and 70s

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A caption jumps out from the cover page, "THEY JUST COULDN'T WAIT TO START **THEIR OWN MAG!**" Approved by the Comics Code Authority and officially sealed with the Superman DC National Comics brand, the cover reveals four super powered teenagers in the midst of a struggle for their very lives. "NO, YOU'RE NOT SEEING THINGS! THAT'S ROBIN, WONDER GIRL, KID FLASH and AQUALAD-- ALL FIGHTING THE **SAME VILLAIN... The BEAST-GOD of XOCHATAN!**" Young readers across the nation could get their hands on this thrilling first issue and debut of a newly formed superhero team for only twelve cents, a decent price for nearly forty pages of entertainment. Young adults and children thought so too, back in 1966 when this comic book issue was first published. As exhilarating as it would be to see the Teen Titans battle a Beast-God named Xochatan, however. What is more important, historically that is, was what was being implicitly expressed through this series. During a time when a multitude of social movements were rapidly progressing towards social equality for most Americans, their own superheroes now seemed to be joining them.¹

What may seem like a mere comic book series can also be seen as an important historical and cultural piece from a tumultuous time period. Examining the contextual relevance and analysis of how the superhero characters of the *Teen Titans* series evolved in response to shifting social mores and historical events from the 1960s to the 1970s will reveal how important this series is historically and culturally. The findings of this cultural analysis will also aid historians in understanding the society these comics were created for. This will be achieved by analyzing the time period in regards to comic books, the creators of the series, the characters, specific stories, and various one-shot pages within the *Teen Titans* serialization itself. To understand the comic books, it is important to understand the cultural frame for which they were created in.

The 1960s was driven by progressivism and domestic policy changes that saw numerous presidential initiatives, judicial rulings, and

¹ George Kashdan (editor), Bob Haney (script), Nick Cardy (ink)(pencil), "The Beast-God of Xochatan!," *Teen Titans* #1 (Jan.-Feb., 1966), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 1.

social protest movements. The civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the youth movement, and the environmental movement washed over the landscape of America, changing the lives of many Americans. However, this wave of reform also produced an atmosphere of rebellion, confrontation, and upheaval in what historians call the counterculture movement. This movement consisted of an anti-establishment cultural feeling. Leading this movement was a social group known as Hippies, or flower children, who criticized war, middle class values, promoted sexual freedom, and often used psychedelic drugs to expand their consciousness. Hippies, who were originally beatniks, had their start as a counterculture group in the 1950s. This long clash of establishment versus anti-establishment inevitably started a war over the minds of the youth; a war that would see the establishment use comic books as its conduit to deliver its message.²

In 1989, comic book historian Mike Benton wrote that "the American comic book has touched the lives of nearly everyone alive today."³ This is evident when examining letters that were written to the editors. Letters for this series were printed in the *Tell it to the Titans* column that appeared in nearly every issue. The letter column provided a forum for readers to catch mistakes, give opinions or suggestions, or to say what they liked or did not like about the series. This makes examining letter columns such as *Tell it to the Titans* all the more important.

Found in issue #25, the letter from Mike Callahan of New Jersey makes it clear as to why analysis of this comic book series is important:

Dear [Editor]:

I must compliment you on your tremendous work on Teen Titans. I had stopped reading it around Issue #8 or #9 after it became, to me, just another comic with immature heroes (in this case, immature teen-agers) running around saving people, and occasionally the world, from horrible menaces and nasty monsters. Then I bought an issue of the "new" Teen Titans, a comic with immature heroes (in this case, immature teen-agers) running around saving people, and occasionally the

² Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

³ Randy Duncan, and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), xvii.

world, from horrible menaces and nasty monsters. While that doesn't sound any different, it really is. The present-day 'TT' no longer flaunt their immaturity. It is still evident, but it has been changed to the innocent immaturity (if such a thing exists) that characterizes true young people in a [tumultuous] time of their lives. I would say that Bob Haney is either (a) a teen-ager, (b) an extremely acute observer or (c) a father with youngsters of his own, for only one of those three could write with such insight and understanding. It's become easy to identify with the Teen Titans (my fantasy counterpart is Kid Flash) and not terribly difficult to believe in them. In fact, it is this quality that will keep me a fan for a long, long time.⁴

Callahan's letter makes three important statements. The first was his own notice of how the comic series evolved into a different type of maturity that better reflected the mindset of "true young people" in the turbulent time of their lives. Secondly, Callahan notes that Bob Haney, the main scriptwriter for the series, was able to provide insight and understanding into the life of teenagers that readers were able to relate to. Lastly, he stated the ease to which he himself was able to identify with the Teen Titans. Letters like Callahan's make the *Teen Titans* series especially important historically and culturally. However, it is not just the readers' letters that make studying the series important.

The task of completing a comic book requires the combined efforts of a group of specialized creators. Writers and artists are able to develop a social consciousness in their work as they and the times they are in progress. These social consciousness shifts within comic books encompass complex issues such as race, gender, and drug abuse, to name a few. Some of the most famous comic book series known today were written during this period, but not all have been critically examined.

One of the earliest examples comes from Will Eisner's *The Spirit*. It featured an African American sidekick named Ebony White. With a clownish appearance and monkey-like demeanor, the character was a crude and stereotypical representation of African Americans. In the middle of the century, "perhaps due to changing attitudes toward

⁴ Dick Giordano (ed), Bob Kanigher (sc), Nick Cardy (p)(i), "The Titans Kill a Saint," *Teen Titans* #25 (Jan.-Feb., 1970), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 16.

minorities in the postwar-era, Eisner realized that Ebony's dialect humor was insulting." The Spirit's sidekick was "sent to the all-black Carter School for Boys to rid himself of his 'minstrel accent.'" The fact that the character was self-conscious about the issue meant that Eisner was as well. This was the beginning of a social conscious shift in Eisner's work that would continue as the years passed on.⁵ Another comic book creator, Stan Lee, created the *Fantastic Four* in the 1960s, with the idea of going away from the typical superhero archetype. The members would argue, not be in control of each situation, and they would be dealing with relationships on a more or less adult level. Lee stated that he "did the *Fantastic Four* the way I felt I would like to write, the way a story ought to be written."⁶ This would continue to be the motif of comics during this period.

The 1960s, otherwise known as the "Silver Age" of comics, were full of comics that were relatable to the culture at the time. This is due to intertextual images. These remind readers of something he or she has encountered in other media (movies, books, paintings, TV shows, etc.). Some intertextual pictures refer to real-life events. Most only see those events indirectly, as reports in newspapers or on television. For instance, *Amazing Spider-Man #68* in 1968 featured a story titled "Crises on Campus." This was based on the student demonstrations that ended violently in the same year at Columbia University. A similar occurrence happened with Captain America's "Secret Empire" story that was published from 1973 through 1975, the same time period in which the Watergate Scandal was unfolding. In the story, Captain America finds out that the leader behind the evil secret empire was the President of the United States. The potential of comics as a useful visual communication media began to grow.⁷

Comics exploring social issues started receiving positive media attention -- enough to be noticed by government officials. In 1972, an official at the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare sought out one of the most prominent comic book creators at the time. Stan Lee was encouraged to use Marvel Comics (specifically their most popular character, Spider-Man) to educate young people about the dangers of drug use. Lee eventually went to write a three-part story about Peter Parker's friend, Harry Osborn, and his brief battle with drug

⁵ Arie Kaplan, *Masters of the Comic Book Universe Revealed!* (Chicago: Chicago Review, 2006), 8.

⁶ Kaplan, *Masters of the Comic Book Universe*, 52-53.

⁷ Duncan, *The Power of Comics*, 148; *ibid.*, 49-50.

addiction in *Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98 (1971). A *Teen Titan* character would eventually be used as well. Speedy, ward to Green Arrow, was revealed to be a heroin addict on a cover page for a *Green Lantern* issue. A teen superhero with a drug syringe would be a shocking image for most comic book readers.⁸

Before this shift in making overtly shocking issues, DC Comics would debut its new series specifically aimed at a young audience. To be successful, the company would assemble some of their most notable creators. Examining the original creators of the series will provide clarity in understanding why certain topics appear in *Teen Titans*. The series is unique in the fact that the editor, artist, and scripter remained the same for the first couple of years. The editor for this series was George Kashdan. Having graduated from the University of Chicago with a Bachelor of Arts degree with a heavy background in Liberal Arts and Philosophy, Kashdan was soon writing and editing for DC comics. From 1947 until the 1970s, he had dealt with many known major characters such as: Batman, Superman, Tomahawk, Blackhawk, Aquaman, Green Arrow, Teen Titans, Sea Devils, and Metamorpho.⁹

While Kashdan oversaw the entire development of each issue, Nick Cardy would be there to produce the art for the series. Graduating from the School of Industrial Arts, Cardy eventually went to work for Will Eisner in 1940. After being drafted in 1943 and surviving World War II, Cardy started doing work for advertisement companies in 1946. Working at various studios for a couple of years, Cardy eventually approached DC for a job in the 1950s. His most noticeable claim of work came when he started drawing the covers for the newly introduced *Aquaman* series.¹⁰ Cardy eventually started work on the newly serialized *Teen Titans* series.

Writing for the new series was Bob Haney. The main goal of the writer is to take a concept and turn it into a fleshed out script. After having worked in New York in publishing for about five years in the 1940s, Haney eventually found his way into DC Comics. In one of DC's published profiles, Haney is described as "one of those guys you build companies around." Since joining, he "has had the opportunity to write a portion of the saga of almost each and every super-hero ever published

⁸ Duncan, *The Power of Comics*, 51.

⁹ Jim Amash, "I Graduated from Plato and Aristotle to Superman and Batman," *Alter Ego* 3, no. 93 (May 2010): 40.

¹⁰ Amash, "When You Do A Lot of Super-Heroes," 20.

by DC Comics." A series that Haney is most known for is *Teen Titans*. When asked about his writing for the series, he stated that the "PR research that they had done showed — this is still the early '60s — the average reader was a 12-year-old boy living in Dayton, Ohio... Who was not that sophisticated. So a lot of my stuff I wrote... was aimed at him. Generic little boy."¹¹ Haney was also involved in the political scene. Regarding his involvement in the movements of the 1960s, Haney stated that he "went to Washington a few times. I was against [the] war. I went to antiwar meetings as early... as '64 and '65. [I] went to meetings of the old Left against [the] war."¹² With his background in political movements, Haney further reveals where the source of the dialogue for the series came from:

That awful stuff?... Some of that stuff you did hear around here. That's what some of the people who were criticizing me didn't appreciate. Around Woodstock, you did hear some of that. You heard a better form and a more raunchy form. You couldn't put that in the comics. I had to water it down and make it kind of juvenile. But, you know, some of the rap — my barber here, he's an old ex-hippy. But he's a great rapper. His stuff's very creative and very interesting and very adult. I used to go get a haircut and I'd come back and type in all his dialogue that he'd given me in my ear while he was cutting my hair... Young people who worked on the strip... they met me and they said, "Where'd an old guy like you learn all this kind of hip talk?" I didn't tell them it was my barber in Woodstock.¹³

This lingo would need "hip" characters that could match the dialogue. The grouping of four young popular teenage characters would prove to be the best setup in order to appeal to the "generic little boy."

¹¹ Michael Catron, "Bob Haney Interviewed by Michael Catron Part Four (of Five)," *The Comics Journal*, last modified January 10, 2011, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://classic.tcj.com/superhero/bob-haney-interviewed-by-michael-catron-part-four-of-five/2/>.

¹² Mike Gold, "DC Profiles #11, Bob Haney," *Batman* #289 (July, 1977), DC Comics, Inc.

¹³ Catron, "Bob Haney Interviewed."

The original Teen Titans consisted of four teenage superheroes. Each character was a teenage adaptation of their grownup counterparts, i.e., Robin to Batman, Wonder Girl to Wonder Woman, Kid Flash to Flash, and Aqualad to Aqua Man. The series followed their adventures as they tried to live up to the ideals of their adult equivalents. Why a team of teen superheroes? According to the editor, "The TEEN TITANS are our 'experts' on teen problems. Sure, their job is to tackle trouble where it arises—but as a teen team, they'll be looking for situations that call for the 'teen touch.'" After all, "there are some things they can do on their own!"¹⁴ These characters have allowed the comic book series to be more relatable to the target readers.

Often portrayed as leader of the team, Robin "Boy Wonder" acted the most mature of the bunch. He was typically the character who told the others to quit joking, slacking off, or messing around. The second member is Aqualad. The youthful marine marvel usually had to have scenarios adjusted to fit his aquatic powers (or limitations in some scenarios). The third superhero is Kid Flash. Nicknamed "Twinkletoes," Kid Flash was the jester of the group. The last male character is Speedy. The "Boy Bowman" made frequent guest appearances in the series until he eventually replaced Aqualad. The original composition consisted of three males and one female.

Wonder Girl, otherwise nicknamed Wonder Chick, Teen-Age Amazon, Feminine Titan, Teen Titaness, Doll Face, and many others, was the only female member of the group. She was also the most stereotypically written character. The character was written to be more concerned with how boys look, wooing over Rock'n'Roll stars, and pondering her chances of going out with boys she liked. Wonder Girl was also very juvenile compared to the other team members and would rather dance to music than train with the other members.¹⁵ In a letter to the editor, Colleen Chavas from Hartford, Connecticut, stated that:

Being a girl myself, perhaps the only reason I read TEEN TITANS is to see WONDER GIRL in action. As the boys have many teenaged heroes to follow, we girls need

¹⁴ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (p)(i), "The Beast-God of Xochatan!," *Teen Titans* #1 (Jan.-Feb., 1966), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 18.

¹⁵ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i), Irv Novick(p), "Large Trouble in Space-Ville!," *Teen Titans* #12 (Nov.-Dec., 1967), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 3.

something to keep our ego up, too. I think I have an idea that would considerably improve the appearance of WONDER GIRL. When she first appeared with WONDER WOMAN, several years ago, WONDERGIRL wore a mini-skirt. Although this was later discontinued in favor of shorts, a skirt would look much more feminine.¹⁶

There must have been previous thoughts on reworking Wonder Girl as the editor replied to the letter saying, "we've been thinking of re-designing WONDER GIRL'S garb, and may be coming up with a new outfit in the next issue."¹⁷ It would be almost 12 more issues (two years) before the character's suit would be updated.

In *Teen Titans* #23, Wonder Girl updates her outfit from a skirt to a full body suit. Wonder Girl appears on the cover of the issue, busting through an old picture of herself as she yells, "Back off, Tigers--the new Wonder Girl is here!" The more mature outfit does not hide the typical over sexualized female figure that is still drawn for the character. The three teammates of the current group (Robin, Kid Flash, and Speedy) stand in the back, shocked at the change that has occurred over Wonder Girl. Instead of her hair in a ponytail, it has been let down. Instead of a sleeveless American Eagle shirt with star spangled underwear tights, it has been replaced with a tight fitting, all red bodysuit. Instead of red heel tops, black boots. The new look is finished off with black and white stars and golden accessories.

This gives a more mature look to the character. However, when Wonder Girl is introduced with her new outfit, she decides not to fight or actively participate. She instead flaunts her new look to draw the attention of a disgruntled crowd as a distraction. This change occurred due to the coinciding Women's Liberation Movement. Similar changes to other female leads can be seen with the comic book characters Wonder Woman and Lois Lane. Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* goes into great detail about how the character evolved to be an iconic figure for the Women's Liberation Movement. But, with comic book series such as *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* and *Teen Titans*, the changes

¹⁶ Kashdan, "Large Trouble in Space-Ville!" 10.

¹⁷ Ibid.

to the female characters were implemented only to fix the cosmetic issue and not the social issue.¹⁸

The series continued to present more opportunities for Wonder Girl to express her feminism, however. In an issue #38, the comic book explored the deepest inner fear of some of the group members. Wonder Girl's fear was anything that diminished her femininity. She theorized that perhaps "it goes back to my Amazon background and how men always fear and put down a strong female! But I can't bear the thought of cutting off my hair! It's my most feminine attribute!"¹⁹ This story poses Wonder Girl in a situation in which she must sacrifice her femininity, in this case, cut her hair to look more boyish so that she and her spy partner may cross a border. Wonder Girl associates her ability to maintain her feminine looks and not appear to be too masculine with being a strong female.

This message of feminism is lost when Cal, the spy traveling with Wonder Girl, exclaims that, "We did it, Donna—thanks to your Amazonian strength—And disguise! You even had me believing you were a guy--!" In a state of embarrassment, Wonder Girl internally thinks, "Just as I feared! He'll never look at me again--without remembering... seeing me as a man... not female!" Cal continues, saying, "And to show my gratitude... You gorgeous thing! MMMMMM." Cal pulls Wonder Girl in for a kiss. At this moment, Wonder Girl realizes that Cal "doesn't find me... masculine!" Wonder Girl's concern that her image of being a strong female would be tarnished when she shaved her head is quickly reconciled because a man said she was still beautiful looking. This sapped the feminist message that was trying to emerge from the story.²⁰

The story was a poor representation of what was occurring with the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s. In 1974, pro-sex feminist movement leader, sex educator, author, and artist, Betty Dodson was asked to appear on Aspen's Women's Week. This was to be a full week of feminist TV programming. In Dodson's segment, she showed

¹⁸ Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014); In January 1968, another DC comic book series, *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane*, had a story ("Splitsville for Lois and Superman!," #80) where the main character Lois Lane attempted to reinvent herself to be more independent. The change in character only lasted an issue before reverting back to the overtly male dominated storyline.

¹⁹ Murray Boltinoff (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i) George Tuska (p), "Through these Doors Pass the Bravest Titans of Them All," *Teen Titans* #38 (Mar.-Apr., 1972), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 13.

²⁰ Boltinoff, *Teen Titans* #38, 12.

herself shaving a woman's hair off while being naked. Subsequently, Women's Week was cancelled. Albeit the nudity was what drove the decision to cancel the week of feminine TV programming, the act of shaving a woman's hair off, in this case, was different than what was seen in the issue of *Teen Titans*. In Dodson's case, shaving the head of another woman symbolized the liberation of women's image and sexuality from a male dominated society. In Wonder Girl's case, shaving her own head meant the decrease in her own femininity, as she held the man's opinion of her image higher than she held her own opinion.²¹

The 60s and 70s not only saw an increase in demands for gender equality, but racial equality as well. Marvel was the first to venture out with new superheroes that fell in line with this movement. Notable characters such as the Black Panther (an African native, not an African American) and the Falcon (a reformed hoodlum that would not rise above the status of Captain America's sidekick for sometime) never hit the mark on what most wanted to see in equality for blacks in American society. Luke Cage, from the Marvel series *Hero for Hire* (1972), was the first African American superhero to star in his own comic book series. However, with a staff of all white writers, it was clear to most that the series was created to profit off the early 1970s sensation of blaxploitation films. These films "featured badass, highly sexualized protagonists with ghetto street smarts"²² DC Comics also debuted their first African American superhero in 1972, backup Green Lantern John Stewart.

The first appearance of what would be *Teen Titans'* first major black character came in an issue in 1970. The Titans abandon their costumed identities when Mr. Jupiter (an adult guardian to the group) sends them to live in Hell's Corner, an inner city ghetto. A black teenager named Mal (short for Malcom) appears and saves the two women of the Titan group from a couple of street thugs. The irony of six privileged white youth trying to make life work in the inner city ghetto is not lost on the character. When the group asks where they might find work or a place to live, Mal responds, "Look in the mirror, chick! It'll give you all the answers! You're in the wrong ballpark! Head for the nearest exit!" As the story develops, Mal eventually joins the group in their adventures, despite having no superpowers.²³

²¹ "Betty Dodson Shaving Woman's Head for Feminist Week," Vimeo, accessed February 21, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/113148855>.

²² Duncan, *The Power of Comics*, 50.

²³ Dick Giordano (ed), Bob Kanigher (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "A Penny for a Black Star," *Teen Titans* #26 (Mar.-Apr., 1970), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 14.

The series was slow in developing the new character. In the beginning, Mal was restricted in dialogue. Even when the character said something, it was usually stereotypical lines for a black character. But soon, signs of Mal turning into an atypical "soul brother" character began to appear. For example, in issue #32, Mal was having a conversation with Kid Flash and said, "I feel strung out, Flasher—Like the first time I snitched an apple off the fruit stand... and hoped the fuzz was friendly to hungry ghetto kids!"²⁴ The cliché lines continued for Mal in the same story: "Wally, like the old honky saying... have I gone white with fear-- 'cause I'm really scared, man!"²⁵ Occasionally the writing for the character did show some depth. In issue #38, when the Teen Titans explored and conquered their deepest fears, readers discovered that Mal's deepest fear was of open spaces. The source of Mal's agoraphobia, as it turns out, was an incident that occurred when he was jumped by three white kids in Hell's Corner.²⁶

The most prevalent issue in the series that attempted to take on the issue of racism is published in 1972, issue #41. The story began with the group of Titans traveling to visit Mr. Jupiter's ailing 'aunt,' who had been part of his family since she escaped to the area before the Civil War. Born on a plantation, she and her father were runaway slaves pursued to the fictional town of Litchburg. Mr. Jupiter's aunt was heavily stereotyped into the 'Mammy' role. This archetype was used to refer to a black woman who have worked within a white household for generations and has often taken care of the family's children. There was also an attempt by the editor to try to make the story part educational as well. During a flashback to the slave plantation, an editor's note was attached to a bit of dialogue when another slave told Hattie (the future aunt) to follow the 'drinking gourd.' The editor's note stated that: "Drinking Gourd—The Big dipper, the star constellation runaway slaves followed North to freedom!"²⁷ This was a surprising level of effort to insure historical accuracy in what most would consider a simple comic book.²⁸

²⁴ Murray Boltinoff (ed), Steve Skeates (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "A Mystical Realm, A World Gone Mad," *Teen Titans* #32 (Mar.-Apr., 1971), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 15.

²⁵ Boltinoff, *Teen Titans* #32, 16.

²⁶ Boltinoff, *Teen Titans* #38.

²⁷ Murray Boltinoff (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i) Art Saaf (p), "What Lies in the Litchburg Graveyard?," *Teen Titans* #41 (Sept.-Oct., 1972), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC].

²⁸ "Follow the Drinking Gourd: A Cultural History," accessed February 21, 2016, <http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/>.

The intensity of the subject matter increases as the story unfolds. Mal soon became haunted by the ghost of a Civil War era slave hunter. The image of Mal being chased by a ghost with shackles and a pack of hounds certainly strikes the civil rights movement chord. --an African American in the 1970s still being constrained by a ghost of slavery past. The message would certainly feel relatable to most African American readers and shed some light on current civil rights issues to others.

The issue of race can also be found within the dialogue itself. At one point, Mal tried to explain what happened to him to the rest of the group. After hearing the story, Mr. Jupiter says, "Look... it's natural because of your color... you'd identify with Aunt Hattie's history--." Mal interrupts with:

I know! I know! Humor the black kid... Give him a little head therapy! Well, I don't buy it! I heard him... heard those chains rattling! Don't believe me! Man, scratch a white honky soul—and you always find the same attitude... 'Black Folks is just superstitious children, boss!'²⁹

Mal stormed off, leaving the rest of the group to decide whether or not his story was true or false. The story ended with the group eventually getting rid of the ghost and saving Mal with the help of a voodoo doll. In case the story did not get the civil rights message across to the readers, the editors decided to end the comic book with a quote: "Man's inhumanity to man—history is filled with terrifying examples—right to the present day! But sometimes there is help, like the singed, half-torn-apart straw doll that sits atop a lonely grave in Litchburg Cemetery!"³⁰ The quote began with a level of significance, but saying that sometimes there is help in the form of mysticism to those facing racial misdeeds departed from the overall message of the civil rights movement.

Despite Mal's importance to the series in being a vessel for an underrepresented group in comic books, it was not until late in the publication that Mal's role rose. Through donning old leftover superhero and supervillain gear, Mal became the Guardian. Although Mal had been a part of the Teen Titans' group for quite some time, it was not until this

²⁹ Boltinoff, *Teen Titans* #41, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

point that he gained some level of superhero ability, let alone a costume. Whether Mal was considered a "superhero" before this issue, he was now one of the earliest black superheroes in DC Comic's history.³¹

While these characters have cultural relevancy, the storylines of the *Teen Titan* series also contained pertinent relevancy. The very first issue had the team doing their part to help "Uncle Sam" and their "bit for humanity" by traveling to South America to help solve a conflict with the Peace Corps and superstitious villagers. The teenage superheroes were shown going through various Peace Corps orientation courses before leaving. This was that roughly five years after President Kennedy, within weeks of his inauguration, signed Executive Order 10924, establishing the Peace Corps. What better way to appeal to youth about the merits and benefits of the Peace Corps than situating a comic book story around it.³²

Continuing to appeal to the youth, the Titans helped the President's Commission on Education deal with dropouts. The Commission on Education wanted the Teen Titans to infiltrate a school in order to learn more about the teenager's perspectives on dropping out so that the campaign of lowering dropout rates would have a better chance of success. One of the high school students who dropped out did so to get a job to help his mother and sister get by. Robin explains that he could get a better job and a brighter future after he graduated. The boy responded by saying he is making a fortune now as a design mechanic at a hot-rod shop, a place where lots of kids who dropped out are making a bundle.

Unbeknownst to the dropouts, their work was going into creating getaway cars for criminals. At the end of the issue, Wonder Girl gave a group of high school kids some words of advice, "Give [school] another try! As you see being a drop-out might look rosy at first—but there's no future in it!"³³ What makes this interesting is that the U.S. high school graduation rate peaked in the late 1960s. This was due in part to a number of social guidance videos that were made to help deter kids from dropping out. Some, like *The Drop Out* (1962) were used to showcase why

³¹ Orlando, Joe (ed), Paul Levits & Bob Rozakis (sc), Bob Smith (i) Pablo Marcos (p). "The Man Who Toppled the Titans." *Teen Titans* #44 (Nov., 1976), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC].

³² Kashdan, "The Beast-God of Xochatan!," *Teen Titans* #1, 4; "History," *Peace Corps*, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/history/>.

³³ Dick Giordano, (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "The Revolt at Harrison High," *Teen Titans* #3 (May-June, 1966), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 25.

teenagers dropped out of high school.³⁴ Unfortunately, having reached 80%, high school graduation rates soon went into a 4-5% decline by the 1970s. At the end of the story, the narrator informed readers that even "junior super-heroes have to catch up on the books! But soon as they do, they'll be back."³⁵

Political imagery and rhetoric can also be found in the series. Knowing that most of the creators had served in WWII and were actively participating in political activities at the time leaves little room to guess where the dialogue source originated from. At the end of a meeting with the Chair of the US Government Treasury Dept., he told the Teen Titans that "[w]e were counting very much on your well-known reputation for aiding those in trouble! And right now, it's your Uncle Sam who needs help!" Robin responds with: "Yes, sir, we all have a high example of that to live up to! Titans . . . Salute!" The group then proceeds to salute a portrait of John F. Kennedy, citing him as a high example to live up to. In the portrait is the quote, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country!"³⁶ This would not be the first time a President's face would appear in *Teen Titans*. On the Teen Titan's bulletin board, right below a picture of the Beatles is a picture of President L. B. Johnson and it says, "For serving their country, grateful best wishes to the 'Teen Titans.' If you all are in Washington, you-all stop in. Pres. L. B. Johnson."³⁷

Political imagery and rhetoric can also be found between stories, in one-shot pages. During this time period, President Kennedy's and Johnson's reform movements were reaching the minds of the youth through Public Service Announcement (PSA) Ads. These ads were originally aimed at supporting the U.S. War effort in the 1940s, encouraging paper drives and for donations towards various

³⁴ *The Drop Out*, Dir. Henwar Rodakiewicz, by Irving Jacoby, Affiliated Film Producers, last modified 1962, accessed December 28, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/DropoutT1962>.

³⁵ James J. Heckman and Paul A. LaFontaine, "The Declining American High School Graduation Rate: Evidence, Sources, And Consequences," *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, NBER Reporter: Research Summary, 2008, accessed Jan. 1, 2016, <http://www.nber.org/reporter/2008number1/heckman.html>; Giordano, "The Revolt at Harrison High," 25.

³⁶ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "The Mad, Mod Merchant of Menace," *Teen Titans* #7 (Jan.-Feb., 1967), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 6.

³⁷ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i), Irv Novick (p), "Monster Bait," *Teen Titans* #11 (Sept.-Oct., 1967), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 3.

nonprofit organizations, but they were later used for influencing and educating children. Developed by DC Editor Jack Schiff while working alongside Nobel Prize winner Pearl Buck, the National Social Welfare Assembly, educators, and psychologists, Schiff's goal was to produce an ongoing feature of wholesome messages aimed at young readers. Topics included: racism, lessons on responsibility, manners, safety, world issues and study tips. The PSA pages were:

highly regarded by schools and civic organizations, and for years Schiff tried in vain to persuade DC to establish an educational office so the comics medium could inform and enlighten children. How effective the PSAs were in influencing the minds of young children is unknown, but the pages were definitely an enjoyable part of the comic readers' experience.³⁸

Schiff retired in 1967 and the PSA program faded from the pages of comic books.

In tandem with the environmental movement at the time, one of the first PSAs shown in the *Teen Titans* series was of President Johnson's Natural Beauty speech. In the ad, Johnson says: "At first there seemed to be no end to the wonder of the land. And then the country grew. There came ignorance, greed and ruthless exploitation. Today, natural beauty has new enemies, and we need new weapons to fight these enemies." Cities "devastate the countryside—Highways factories, signs... We must restore as well as protect... bring beauty to the cities and keep it in the countryside." The image showed an overcrowded countryside of billboards and factories with smokestacks. It then compared it to the preferred countryside, suburban-like, with a few homes close together, open pasture fields, a large forest line separating the homes, and the big city in the distance. "Poisons and chemicals pollute air and water; automobiles litter our countryside... We must

³⁸ "KNOW YOUR PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT ADS in DC Archives Message Board Forum," Marvel Masterworks Resource Page, last modified July 16, 2011, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://marvelmasterworksfansite.yuku.com/topic/17533/KNOW-YOUR-PUBLIC-SERVICE-ANNOUNCEMENT-ADS#.Vo7ucxUrKUK>.

handle waste products of technology; eliminate and screen auto junk yards."³⁹

The next two panels showed factory runoff going into a river, with the factory's smoke making the sky dark and hazy. On the other side of the river appears to be a dump yard, with a dump truck unloading trash and an abandoned old vehicle stripped bare. The 'fixed' scene shows a nice sunny day. The factories were still there, but with less smoke coming out and no run off. A fence has been planted on the other side of the river with a green forest behind it. "The forgotten outdoorsmen today are those who like to walk, hike and ride horseback... We must preserve stretches of scenic rivers; add outdoor recreation areas, enlarge our wilderness system." This panel displays an overcrowded recreational area, with a ski slope, tent ground, cabins, and cars pulling campers. The other image shows a more open wilderness with horseback riders, a canoe, two hikers, and is not nearly as crowded as the other picture. The ad ends with the final narration of: "All of us can help clean up open spaces, protect parks from damage, teach friends not to litter, respect the plants and animals that live on Earth with us."⁴⁰

Some PSA announcements targeted the youth audience directly, such as one titled "Lost—A Free Education." The ad presents a conversation between two boys and one of them wants to drop out of school in order to line up a job so he can "make some money now and have a good time instead of getting some more book knowledge." An older boy hears their conversation and regales them with his story that he had done the same thing five years ago, but remained an errand boy at the place he got a job at. At the end, he implores the two younger kids to rethink their decision before dropping out and to "remember that education is more than putting learning into your head, it makes a better person of you—a more useful citizen, able to cope with the problems in life you'll be faced with!" This ad bore a stark resemblance to the previously talked about story involving high school dropouts.⁴¹

In an PSA ad titled "CHAMPS AGAINST THE ODDS!," the setting was a malt shop. Three teenagers lamented their recent failing grades and wondered why they even bothered trying. The adult server

³⁹ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "The Secret Olympic Heroes," *Teen Titans* #4 (July.-Aug., 1966), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC] 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "The Fifth Titan," *Teen Titans* #6 (Nov.-Dec., 1966), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC] 20.

tells them of a few athletes who had to overcome handicaps to come back and successful at their sports. Examples used were: Mickey Mantle, Wilma Rudolph, Ben Hogan, Billy Talbert, and Glenn Cunningham. Most of the ads that continued to appear in the series encouraged readers to keep in school, make the best of their summer with a summer job, community projects, or even how to "be a hit" at a party. While DC thought it was important for readers to know the importance of preserving the environment or how to be groovy, the company also felt compelled to make sure the opposition to these reform movements were not to be seen as a favorable style.⁴²

A different series of one-shot pages can be found in the early part of the *Teen Titans* series, but these are intended to be humorous. The title of the one-shot pages is usually some form of 'Beat Nick,' a play on the word 'beatnik,' and follows the character (Nick) around in four different panels. In the first panel, two men with goatees are sitting around a table, one of them says to the other that "If you want to be a beatnik all you have to do is give up your job—only you keep up the coffee breaks!" The second panel shows a group of beatniks who are standing next to a man in an overcoat with a long beard. One of the beatniks says that "No, he's not a beatnik—still, you have to respect him!" Proceeding this, a woman was shown talking to a beatnik, and said that "Every woman waits for the perfect man to come into her life Nick—I mean—while she goes out with fellows like you!" Nick was again shown with a woman, this time she jested by saying, "I'll never forget you, Nick—no matter how hard I try!" This one-shot page, clearly a jab at the members of the counterculture group, ractically labeled them so ignorant to the point of not being able to tell a person with a beard apart from their group, to not having a job, and not being a suitable enough man that a woman would want in a relationship.⁴³

Another one-shot page simply titled "BEAT" continued to poke fun at beatniks. Similar to the first example discussed, this page sectioned into four loose panels that featured depictions of stereotypical beatnik characters. The first panel presented a band with each member playing a different musical instrument (bongo, saxophone, cello, and drums). After

⁴² George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "The Mad, Mod Merchant of Menace," *Teen Titans* #7 (Jan.-Feb., 1967), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 6.

⁴³ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "The Million-Year-Old Teen-Ager!," *Teen Titans* #2 (Mar.-Apr., 1966), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 11.

apparently performing a wild drum solo and destroying the drum set, another member said, "That was beautiful Steve—only your solo comes in a bit later!" To the right of this, the second panel showed three beatniks, each with bowling balls in their hands. The punchline, delivered by one of the members, was, "All the alleys are crowded! Who has a pad with a long foyer?" Following this a third panel showed a beatnik struggling to paint a horizontally long Weiner dog on a vertically tall canvas. In the last panel, a visibly angry beatnik yelled, "Who needs friends?!" He was shown standing at a ping pong table, with a string attached between a paddle and a ping pong ball. One-shot pages like these were clearly meant to be humorous. But they were also clearly singling out a specific group of people that the editors of the comic book felt needed to be ridiculed.⁴⁴

While these one-shot pages and early stories were humorous and lighthearted, the later stories in *Teen Titans* expressed a darker tone, especially ones involving political issues. While attending a peace conference, guest characters of the series Hank and Don (aka Hawk and Dove) offer a dualistic approach to keeping peace. Hank represented the more reaction oriented type, wanting to obliterate anything that threatens "our" country. Dove on the other hand, did not believe in using violence for any side, stating that peace is worth any price. The issue was replete with peace rhetoric. The character Dove commented, "Can't these dummies see that violence will send mankind back into the jungle?" Another character, Dr. Swenson (winner of a fictitious Peace Prize), told a crowd that "No baby was born with a gun in his hand! Who put it there? Men of fear and hate! Look at the man nearest you! He is your brother!"⁴⁵

When a riot erupted at the peace conference, the Titans tried to quell the mob, but Dr. Swenson was shot in the head. This is a surprisingly graphic image for the comic series. Shortly before dying, Dr. Swenson had some choice words for the superhero group: "Your powers... and capacities for violence... carry awful responsibilities—you're like... living atom bombs—but... you're still... only kids—teenagers."⁴⁶ After Dr. Swenson died, the group ponders their future. An acquaintance

⁴⁴ George Kashdan (ed), Bob Haney (sc), Jack Abel (i), Irv Novick (p), "A Killer Called Honey Bun!," *Teen Titans* #8 (Mar.-Apr., 1967), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC] 8.

⁴⁵ Dick Giordano (ed), Bob Kanigher (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "The Titans Kill a Saint," *Teen Titans* #25 (Jan.-Feb., 1970), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 23.

⁴⁶ Giordano, "The Titans Kill a Saint," 24.

reminds them that, "Your mentors have fought innumerable battles against the age-old problems that have plagued mankind! But who will combat the new problems of tomorrow--? --Who will challenge the unknown in man himself? The mystery of riots, prejudice, greed?"⁴⁷ At the end, the Teen Titans were left with the thought that soon, the young people of today would inherit the world and its problems.

It is clear that the *Teen Titans* series is well populated with cultural relevancy. The subject matter explored has only been from the first run of a series of reboots that extend to this day. *Teen Titans*, as a whole, is capable of far more cultural analysis for anyone that is interested in comic book history and American culture. The importance of this comic book series has been shown through the examination of the time period in regards to other comic books, the creators of the series, the one-shot ads, and the stories within the serialization itself. The significance was also shown by examining the letters published in the *Tell it to the Titans* column. One final letter demonstrates how impactful the series was:

Dear [Editor]

You have published my letters before, but this particular one I hope is printed because I have something heavy to say about the Teen Titans and this crazy world of ours. Magazines such as Batman, Flash, Wonder Woman, or Justice League depend on some form of violence to make the stories appealing to the readers. The "new" Teen Titans offers a new phase of comics—showing the readers what a world without violence is like, The Titans, although small in number, are using what they know about violence to make the world peaceful. Maybe if the readers of the Teen Titans could transform what they read in the fictional, bi-monthly world of the Titans into ours, we could carry their message practically and attempt in our own little way, to bring our world to peace. As the Titans are "agents" of Mr. Jupiter, we should be "agents" of the Titans and practice their mission of peace. I may sound long-winded, but I feel as a teen-ager, that something should be attempted to help this world. It's up to our generation to bring the world to Peace.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

Jess Haskins Fairview, New Jersey⁴⁸

It is certain that *Teen Titans* had affected a certain number of readers. The cultural analysis of this series can also be extended further than just this time period. Authors Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith of *The Power of Comics* suggest that although comic books have "played a less direct role in the lives of most Americans more recently, the appropriation of comic book characters and stories into major film, television, and video games franchises results in a perpetuation of indirect influence into subsequent generations."⁴⁹ This idea needs further consideration as comic book scholarship continues to grow. The characters and stories of *Teen Titans* have shown just the surface of what can be learned from studying comic books.

⁴⁸ Dick Giordano (ed), Steve Skeates (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "Blindspot," *Teen Titans* #28 (July-Aug., 1970), National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC], 11.

⁴⁹ Duncan, *The Power of Comics*, xvii.