

THE FLASH AND HIS FANTASTIC FEAR OF FEROCIOUS FANS

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Introduction

Comics conferences indicate a friendly relationship between popular culture creators and their fans. These author/audience relationships are often fun and productive. Superhero fans, specifically, have acquired a reputation for being passionate about their feedback to comics creators. Reynolds (1992) aptly observed that “adult superhero readership (a subsection of the adult comic readership as a whole) has come to identify itself as a small and very cohesive subculture” with organizations such as “specialist comic-book retailers, ‘marts’ and full-scale conventions as the outward signs of this cohesion” (p. 7). Despite this cohesion among superhero fans themselves, though, there has also historically been a bit of uneasiness between authors and audiences. While this uneasiness has not been limited to comics creators/consumers, it has certainly included them. The author/audience tension might be essentially summed up in this way: authors rely on audiences to consume their content, while audiences want authors to generate content that they enjoy. When author and audience objectives have clashed in the past, each side has navigated the tension in different ways. One way comics authors have navigated tensions with their audience was to use their work to communicate their

feelings to their consumers. McCloud (1993) supported the notion of authors using work to convey information to audiences when he wrote that comics are an effective means of communication because “comics [act] as intermediary between storyteller and audience” (p. 172). McCloud also concluded that this communicative function of comics remained intact regardless of an author’s present standing with an audience. He clarified that “all aspects of comics have the potential for self-expression, even when economic survival is the artist’s main concern” (p. 182).

A particular set of comics characters who may be particularly representative of creator/consumer tensions have made a flashy recent re-appearance in the public eye. In 2014, the CW released their first episodes of a TV adaptation of superhero *The Flash*. The first season of *The Flash* – a story about a young forensic investigator named Barry Allen who accidentally receives a super ability of incredible speed – also features a character who functions as a narrative foil: Barry Allen’s arch nemesis, the Reverse-Flash. Reverse-Flash, also known as Eobard Thawne, was a super fan of the Flash who gained his power by stealing from his idol. The resurgence of these characters in the contemporary limelight hail audiences back to comics storylines from the 1960s – stories which

utilize allegory to express authors' feelings of tension with their increasingly powerful consumers. This essay seeks to review examples of comics creator/consumer conflict by examining the Reverse-Flash's origin story for simple allegorical qualities, provide historical context for the topic of authorial power in literary criticism, excavate rhetorical representations of author/audience tensions from the Flash / Reverse-Flash allegory, and, finally, argue for the potential heuristic value of the uncovered allegorical lessons from the Flash and Reverse-Flash. In short: theories of active stakeholder and relational dialectics will be applied to the Flash/Reverse-Flash origin story and mined for lessons. In this analysis, we will focus our scope on ideological trends in literary criticism as an explanation of comics creator/consumer relationships. While we may not cover all factors that may result in creator/consumer tensions with our selected scope (e.g., market trends and increased consumerist aspects of fandom), we aim to provide a productive historical snapshot with potential applicability to contemporary relationships between consumers and fans.

Stakeholder Theories and Comics Fans

The Reverse-Flash, AKA Eobard Thawne, is a villain with an especially symbolic origin story: Thawne is an obsessively dedicated fan of Allen's Flash. In Flash mythos, he used his scientific background to recreate the circumstances that gave The Flash his powers and developed his own superhuman abilities. Thawne was eventually disappointed by his

hero and turned against him – becoming The Flash's most formidable foe. The Flash / Reverse-Flash rivalry seems to hold some allegorical qualities offering insight into the relationship between creators and fans. In order to explore the notion that The Reverse-Flash story acts as an allegory reflecting a fear of comics stakeholders who have been disappointed by their heroes (the authors), basic understandings of stakeholders must first be established.

One social sphere in which stakeholder as related to identification with icons (much like comics fans) has been studied is the area of sport communication. For instance, Brown, Brown, & Billings (2015) designated sports team fans who explicitly and transparently supported their favorite teams or players as “active stakeholders” (p. 296). More generically, they defined active stakeholders as those who “visibly identify with their respective team,” usually by being “willing to speak out publicly” in defense of a certain person or group when they feel it is called for (p. 297). We posit that there is evidence of active stakeholder among comics readers as well. Active stakeholders would stand out against other types of people with vested interest in comics such as publishers or distributors. Dedicated and verbal fans are the group represented by “active stakeholder” label.

The trends and activities of active stakeholders have been studied much more in mediated contexts, such as online, than in face-to-face encounters. For this purpose, active stakeholder is also apt to describe committed comics fans who – especially during the comics Silver Age when fan

letters appeared in major superhero comic books – are often limited to media in their communications with comics creators. Crisis communication scholars Veil, Pentrun, & Roberts (2012) presented research on online stakeholders’ interactions with large organizations, containing the warning that stakeholders may come to highly identify with the object of their interest or stake. The result negative expectation violation between stakeholders and organizations is often a reputational threat to the organization. Veil, Pentrun, & Roberts defined a reputation threat as “expectation gaps whereby stakeholders’ expectations of corporate behavior do not match the stakeholders’ perception of actual corporate behavior” (p. 320). While some stakeholders may balk when organizations do not meet their expectations – causing a reputational threat through negative feedback or shifting loyalties – others attempt to keep a firm hold on their identification with the organization. Brown, Brown, & Billings (2015) extended from Wann’s (2006) research concluding that “highly identified fans directly associate their team’s on-field performance with their self-worth” (p. 305). In other words, when active stakeholders feel as if their object of interest is threatened, their own identities feel threatened as well.

Although little research has been completed on active stakeholders for Flash stories, evidence exists that superhero fans make strong identifications with their favorite character[s]. Further, as we will explain in a future section, active stakeholderhood in 1960s literature (when the Reverse-Flash was born) fits historical ideological movements that pit fans against

authors. As an example of active stakeholderhood in comics, Brooker (2000/2005) wrote an entire chapter on fandom and authorship in his cultural history of Batman, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. Before analyzing the stakeholderhood of Batman fans in particular, Brooker began by discussing the general history of authorship and fandom in comics. His research uncovered that “the two concepts of comic book ‘author’ and ‘fan’ evolved in tandem from the early 1960s” (p. 249). The 1960s were a catalyst for new modes of fandom when DC comics began inviting letters to the editor and, perhaps as a result, fan magazines began to develop and be circulated at conferences (Brooker, 2000/2005, p. 250). These new venues of discussion created the circumstances under which the notion of comics authorship was most clearly developed. While certain aspects of authorship on the editorial end of production is sometimes debated (i.e., Are authors the writers? Artists? Inkers? Etc... All of the above?), fans themselves were also able to exert influence on comics producers that some felt may constitute authorship. The conclusion of Brooker’s research on the general history of comics fandom was that, though letters to editors, fan magazines, and convention data, “readers and writers alike were... seeing their names in print for the first time, at the same time” (p. 253). His interpretation of these findings was explained in this way:

“It is perhaps for this reason that comic book fandom has always had a particularly close relationship with the text’s creators. The boundaries

between comic author and fan, writer and reader, have always been thin and often dissolve entirely” (p. 253)

Comics fans, then, may be thought of as “active stakeholders” in that they have had a close historical relationship with comics producers and, since the 1960s, have actively and explicitly accessed writers, artists, etc. with creative input. The increased attention to notions of comics authorship in the United States during the 1960s were undoubtedly also tied to larger cultural movements in literary criticism and narrative hermeneutics which were coming into conflict around the same time. These hermeneutic shifts in literary criticism will be further explored in future section of this essay as the allegorical qualities of the Reverse-Flash’s origin story are unpacked.

The history of comics has lead observers to a resolution of the “authorship debate” regarding the power of fans. Reynolds (1992), reflecting on significant comics narrative changes in the 1980s, realized that superhero stories must hold fidelity with fans over time. One way for comics producers – particularly longstanding organizations such as DC and Marvel – to maintain this fidelity is through a sort of meta-narrative continuity with readers. Reynolds noted that “continuity presupposes the existence of some form of ideological consensus... between creators and fans” (p. 100). Although the characters of the Golden Age and part of the Silver Age of comics “enjoyed the backing of a social consensus,” comics creators began playing with hegemonic interpretations and complicating continuity in the 80s (Reynolds, 1992, p.

105). In the end, Reynolds found that “the genre’s limitations seem to lie within the expectations of the audience” (p. 118). In other words, when audiences buy into the [current] stories and continuity of their favorite characters, they buy/read comics and support the medium. When audiences find continuity or certain stories undesirable, their consumer responses can be threatening to comics producers. Sometimes, while feeling the pressures of responsibility to stakeholders, comic creators have coded their frustrations into their stories.

The Man of the Future Hails to the Past

Evidence of felt author-audience tensions from creators of *The Flash* comics may be exemplified by the fact that Broome & Infantino (1963) created an arch-villain for the Flash out of a fan. This fan, Eobard Thawne, became known as Professor Zoom or the Reverse-Flash. Both titles for the character were used in his origin story. Thawne’s origin was recorded in a story arc titled “Menace of the Reverse Flash.” The story begins with a scientist using nuclear power to send a time capsule containing artifacts of his era – including one of the Flash’s uniforms – into the future. Shortly thereafter, the scientist must recruit the Flash to travel into the future to diffuse the nuclear time capsule, which he fears may become unstable and explode. Before the Flash reaches the future, the time capsule has already been discovered and opened by Thawne – a tech-savvy thief going by the name of The Professor. Upon finding Flash’s uniform in the capsule, Thawne used his scientific background to analyze the

uniform, extrapolate information to recreate the Flash's powers, and don himself Professor Zoom. Thawne's thoughts upon finding the Flash's suit were written by Broome & Infantino as follows:

"You see, The Flash had always been my favorite character of history! It wasn't that I liked him so much – in fact, I hated him and I still do! I guess because he stood for law and justice – and I – ha – haaa! – stand for just the reverse! But what I did admire about Flash – what I envied – was his super speed!" (1963)

The CW's recent Flash television show featured a version of Thawne that not only reiterates the fandom theme from the comics, but furthers it to high identification with the Flash – active stakeholdership.

"I was obsessed with you. For so long I wanted to *be* the Flash. I spent years figuring out how you came to be. Duplicated the reaction. And it worked! I became like you... This ability to travel through time revealed a truth: my fate was to become your greatest enemy. I was never going to be the Flash, so I became the reverse of everything that you were." (Helbing & Helbing, 2016)

For the skeptic reader who might believe that the Reverse-Flash is only coincidentally a "fan" and not an allegorical reflection of comics readers, consider also that the

Reverse-Flash's origin story was about his desire to steal ownership of artwork. In *The Flash* #139, Thawne schemed: "There's nothing anywhere as priceless as the cribi sculptures! Their value has become astronomical! And only the very richest men have been able to afford to own one – up to now, that is!" His plan was not to sell the sculptures, though; rather, his plan was to create a sense of wealth by stealing and hoarding the artwork to himself. Thawne's plan to steal artwork might be more clearly understood in the context of the narrative structure of Silver Age comics stories. Toward this end, Reynolds (1992) elaborated that, although superheroes are the protagonists of their own series and overall meta-narratives, supervillains are often the protagonists of individual comics issues. Reynolds said that "the hero is in this sense passive: he is not called upon to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain's plans" (p. 50 – 51). He further noted that "the common outcome, as far as the structure of the plot is concerned, is that the villains are concerned with change and the heroes with the maintenance of the status quo" (p. 51). What status quo was being threatened by Thawne's plan in *The Flash* #139? The answer is a future in which ownership of art is seized by an intelligent, but obsessive and manipulative superhero fan. Analyzing and evaluating Thawne's origin story may then be a productive practice in understanding historical comics author/audience tensions and exploring contemporary implications.

Authorial Power in Narrative.

Debates surrounding the notion of authorship in comics should be understood in the broader frame of a similar debate in literary criticism. The origin story of the Reverse-Flash did not emerge solely from a newfound voice for comics readers in the 1960s, but also a similar historical conflict regarding interpretation in literature. In fact, the Reverse-Flash origin story in *The Flash* #139 was likely a reflection of tensions in literary criticism that had spilled over into comics fandom.

In his seminal work on romantic theory and literary criticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Abrams (1953/1971) overviewed the major historical trends in criticism up to his time of writing in the 1950s. Although Abrams completed *The Mirror and the Lamp* before *The Flash* #139 was published, his outlining of trends in criticism up to the decade preceding the introduction of the Reverse-Flash in comics still provides broad historical context that illuminate the genealogical background of the famed Flash publication. Abrams framed his tracing of trends in criticism by setting “co-ordinates of art criticism” which constitute “four elements in the total situation of a work of art” that “are discriminated and made salient... in almost all theories which aim to be comprehensive” in literary endeavors (p. 6). These coordinates were nature/universe, audience, artist, and work. Further, the coordinates corresponded to four critical orientations respectively: mimeticism, pragmatism, expressivism, and objectivism.

Mimeticism – most clearly initiated by Aristotle and basically meaning “the explanation of art as essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe” – prevailed as a “prominent item in the critical vocabulary for a long time after Aristotle – all the way through the eighteenth century, in fact” (Abrams, 1953/1971, p. 8, 11). Following the long-held popularity of mimeticism, literary critics began to primarily attend to the notion that art “imitates only as a means to the proximate end of pleasing, and pleases, it turns out, only as a means to the ultimate end of teaching” (Abrams, p. 14). This subsequent trend to mimeticism was retroactively deemed pragmatic criticism because authors adhering to this set of literary tenets felt that art should be evaluated in terms of its instrumentality. Of note in regard to pragmatic criticism is that pragmatic theorists put final authority for the value of a work in the hands of the audience. If witnesses to art “got something” out of their encounter with it, then the art could be deemed as functional and, therefore, useful and good. Even though pragmatic critics held sway in Western literary trends until the nineteenth century, though, other views of criticism boiled in the background as early as the time of Aristotle. Abrams cited 1800 as a “good round number” for the clear introduction of a new critical trend, expressivism, even though a clear point of emergence for expressivist theories in popular criticism has been difficult to identify (p. 23). In expressive criticism, scholars held that “the primary source and subject matter of a poem... [were] the attributes and actions of the poet’s own mind” and, therefore, that “the artist himself

[became] the major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged” (Abrams, p. 23). This mode of criticism re-focused attention on authors as having the locus for control over interpretation in art. Expressivism reigned supreme until the early emergence of objective orientations to criticism, which Abrams claimed had “been comparatively rare in literary criticism” at the time of his writing. In the 1950s, when Abrams initially published *The Mirror and the Lamp*, objectivist criticism emphasizing the details of artistic works in-and-of-themselves was emerging, but had yet to gain the organizational backing to overtake the competing theories of pragmatism and expressivism.

As related to The Flash and his fateful encounter with the Reverse-Flash in 1963, the Western world at large was primarily trained to understand literature from the expressivist point of view. In other words, when *The Flash* #139 was initially released, authorial power over meaning in art would have formally been attributed to the comics creators. However, as previously noted from Reynolds (1992) and Brooker (2000/2005), the world of comics suddenly experienced a surge in pragmatic beliefs as fans were given access to comics creators and a voice in public forums in ways that were unprecedented in other forms of literature. Even though continued use of letters-to-the-editor pages in comics and content-creator participation in conventions indicated a general acceptance of fan-oriented authorial input, some content-creators felt the pressures of public accountability. For example, the 1950s saw the introduction of

Wertham’s (1954) *Seduction of the Innocent* leading to Congressional hearings on “juvenile delinquency and comics” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 8). Reynolds records that “comic publishers responded to the adverse publicity of the report and hearings with the self-censoring Comics Code” (p. 8). The authorial control and respect once possessed by comics creators was now, at least at times, in direct conflict with the audiences that consumed their product. Comics creators of various kinds e.g., (editors, writers, artists, etc.) worked through these tensions in various ways; but the flames of the clash between pragmatic and expressivist criticism had been renewed in the comics industry as in no other area of literary production. It is no wonder, then, that authors of flagship superhero titles such as *The Flash* coded forces of pragmatism and expressivism into personified characters placed in opposition to each other. The pragmatic-expressivist conflict could not be directly addressed without stoking the fires of the tension and hurting readership... so comics producers found more covert ways to poke at their public detractors: weaving the conflict into their characters’ narratives.

The Flash and His Reverse

With the broad historical context of pragmatic-expressivist tensions and the knowledge (via Reynolds) that villains represent perceived diabolical disruptions to the status quo, audiences may learn from assessing the types of tensions introduced to comics readers through villains in the 1960s and beyond. Particularly, this essay will turn its attention to *The Flash* #139 and the

dialectics presented in the rhetoric of the Reverse-Flash's origin story. The Reverse-Flash narrative is an especially useful case study for evaluating tensions between comics authors and audiences because: 1) it is a story from a time period particularly concerned with new understandings of authorship and stakeholderhood, 2) the Reverse-Flash was a superhero fan, just like readers of *The Flash*, through whom comics authors were able to express dialectical tensions, and 3) the Reverse-Flash character has maintained popularity with comics fans over time and is still contemporarily featured in various productions of popular culture, including comics and television.

The Flash #139 presented a number of dialectical tensions that have historically been integral parts of superhero stories, such as "good v. evil," "justice v. injustice," etc... For the purposes of this analysis and evaluation, more time will be committed to dialectics that are both unique to the Reverse-Flash origin story and lend insight into author/audience relationships. Specifically, this section will address dialectics of ownership, progress, and humility.

Ownership v. Cooption

In *The Flash* #139, the criminal Eobard Thawne finds one of the Flash's uniforms, takes it for himself, extrapolates how to harness the Flash's powers, and uses his borrowed abilities to steal valuable pieces of artwork. A number of dialectics are implied by Thawne's actions which fit into the broad category of "ownership versus cooption." First, Thawne noted his transition from an

"ordinary thief" to one who used his genius to begin "becoming the greatest criminal in human history" (Broome & Infantino, 1963). Thawne's self-declared change marks a shift from Flash fan (a consumer of the Flash's reputation and beneficiary of his deeds) to an equal with the Flash, in terms of power. The major difference between the Flash and the Reverse-Flash in the narrative is their motives: one uses his power and reputation to benefit others while the other, the fan, seizes power with only his own opinions and interests in mind. This tension might be labeled along the lines of "ordinariness versus imagination." The story clearly situates the fan as an ordinary being who uses ingenuity only toward the end of furthering their own interests. Even more, the ingenuity of the fan is not authentic because it is conjured only to coopt the power and ability of another figure.

That authorial power for fans is, essentially, inauthentic also fits another tension under the broader heading which might be categorized as "mimesis versus poesis." The clash between the Flash and the Reverse-Flash should not simply be summed up by the question of fans' volition to gain authorial control, but should also recognize indicators that a fan's ability or talent to create original content is called into question by the story. When the Flash met his Reverse, Barry took the initiative to stop Thawne from stealing a series of priceless sculptures – pieces of rare artwork. Just as Thawne stole his uniform and abilities from another author, he also, attempts to continue his criminal activities by very literally stealing ownership of art from others. Bound up in this conflict is the concern of mimicry

against originality, imitation versus creation, or, ultimately, a personification of pragmatism versus mimeticism and expressivism. No matter which label is chosen, the actions of the Reverse-Flash clearly disrupt the status quo of the series' hero by unjustly seizing ownership of the work of others – placing the historical clashes regarding authorship on the forefront of story.

Forward v. Backward

The phrasing of the Reverse-Flash's name was undoubtedly purposeful. He was not dubbed the "Opposite-Flash" or "Negative-Flash"... he was given a name that indicated backward movement. The theme of "forward against backward" may easily be perceived as a literalization of Broome and Infantino's beliefs on progress versus regression. Chiefly, as linked to the theme of "ownership versus cooption," the forward/backward motif indicated a conviction that artistic progress does not come from copying others or taking power from art originators. Instead, progress – forward motion – comes from experimentation and cooperation such as was conveyed in team up between the Flash and his inventor friend, Dr. Drake, who built the time traveling capsule that prompted the Flash's trip into the future where he first meets the Reverse-Flash. Although Drake's experiments sometimes failed or created risks, they ultimately pushed the Flash to further hone his abilities and to grow. Drake's experiments lead Flash to see the future of villainy: a copycat turned thief. Again, the story used its major characters to

express the felt tensions of whether pragmatism or expressivism offered the most productive opportunities for the future of art.

Arrogance v. Humility

Thawne ended up being defeated by the Flash due to his maniacal monologuing. After Reverse-Flash/Professor Zoom outraced the Flash during their first encounter in *The Flash* #139, he teased the hero by detailing the process through which he imitated the Flash's powers. Flash deduced, "Zoom's boasting tongue may have shown me the one terrible way to defeat him!" (Broome & Infantino, 1963). The hero's inkling about the Reverse-Flash accidentally revealing the key to his own defeat proved to be true. Thawne was bested by the Flash because his powers came by a suit which protected him from friction via chemicals (instead of from a natural "aura of protective radiation" that Flash's body generated). The chemicals could burn up and dissipate if Thawne's speed were accelerated enough to increase friction to a tipping point for the chemicals. Symbolically, the message here seemed to be that the arrogance of the fan was his downfall. Not only did the fan's lack of humility show his weakness, but the weakness itself came from the fact that Thawne's imitation of the Flash's powers did not grant him the same abilities as the original. Thawne's hubris may have existed in some form before his transformation into the Reverse-Flash, but stealing the Flash's appearance and power certainly fueled the conceit that led to his downfall. At the end

of the story, Flash recollected about Thawne that “He’s a beaten man... even though I slowed down before any real harm could to come to him! His spirit is gone!” The Flash’s conviction for good drove him to use his creative potential to overcome his copycat nemesis; and, the Reverse-Flash’s superficiality was exposed through his selfish ramblings and exploited unto his downfall.

After introducing the major narrative dialectics of Ownership v. Cooption, Forward v. Backward, and Arrogance v. Humility, Broome & Infantino resolved their story with a clear winner in the pragmatism-expressivism tension: the original character/creator/one with initial authorial power breaks the spirit of the intrusive copycat fan and endures to fight another day with unhindered agency. Both generators and consumers of popular culture would perhaps do well to explore more nuanced approaches to handling these tensions in the present, though. The Reverse-Flash remains a popular character and, as has already been discussed earlier in this essay, he becomes more and more like a hyper-obsessed fan (and less-and-less like a common thief) in every iteration. Surely, with ongoing comics conventions, fan letters, audience responses to movies and TV shows, and other interactions increasing access for consumers to creators, the question of authorial power in comics remains relevant. Determining strategies for navigating these ongoing tensions may be a productive exercise for addressing the conclusions from *The Flash* #139.

Lessons from the Life of Eobard Thawne

In light of the history and dialectics uncovered, the Reverse-Flash character clearly acts as a personified representation of fans / audience members with whom comics creators could directly battle on an interpersonal level (i.e., representations of *individuals* in *symbolic* conflict in place of true life masses experiencing tension). Due to the interpersonal nature of this conflict, both literally and symbolically, a potentially productive way of approaching these dialectical tensions today would be to examine interpersonal conflict mediation approaches. Before offering conflict management suggestions, though, it is noteworthy to observe that there is no resolute method for solving every tension that was uncovered in *The Flash* #139. We anticipate that, though creator/consumer relationships may be collaborative and useful, there will still always be some sense of push and pull for authorial power. Brooker (2000/2005) eloquently articulated that this conflict of authorship may be ongoing for certain characters because their “myth lies not in the details of continuity debated by fans, but in the narrative which has entered popular consciousness” (p. 40). Though Brooker was addressing the Batman character, his point is generalizable. Comics creators will feel a sense of ownership over their stories and comics consumers, who have come to know and love their favorite characters over time, will feel protective of the heroes that they appreciate. The fact that this tension cannot be fully resolved comes with benefits as well as drawbacks. Remember that the long-popular character

The Reverse-Flash only came to be because of creator/consumer tensions. However, in the case that these dialectics seem to be overwhelming at a particular time, there are strategies for easing them. In their summary of interpersonal conflict strategies, textbook authors Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2007/2014) offered that “the way people manage conflict is more important than how much people disagree” (p 272). They also gave insight into how conflict can be negotiated in a productive manner with two communication skills: effective listening and logical argument (p. 292, 293).

We would argue that the core issue that can unproductively stifle author-audience relationships is ineffective listening. In *The Flash* #139, the Reverse-Flash stealing the cribs sculptures no doubt represented the authors, Broome and Infantino, feeling as if their own artistic ability and freedom was being infringed on. Especially in the expressivist point of view, art involves an element of self-reflection that the authors wanted to protect (not unlike the owners of the cribs in *Flash* #139). The impulse to automatically vilify fans, though, disregarded empathetic points of view. Effective listening is a tool that may be interjected to functionally solve for both the dialectics of “ownership” and “progress.” Scholars (e.g., Stark, 1994; Seil, Barker, & Watson, 1983; Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim & Sleight, 1988) identified by Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, provided research that ultimately culminated in the excavation of five gates to effective listening: 1) Let your partner speak, 2) Put yourself in your partner’s place, 3) Don’t jump to conclusions, 4) Ask questions, and 5)

Paraphrase what your partner says. In order for authors to have an optimistic, functioning relationship with their audience, they must be open to feedback. Likewise, audiences must recognize that publishers have entrusted superhero stories to particular people for a reason – typically, because they see potential in the storyteller that they hire. The locus of control must in some way be shared between reader and writer in order to maximize the mutual success of authors and stakeholders. Again, this theme ties to *The Flash* #139 and the historical struggle over authorship: the major motives for the respective characters identified in the “ownership” dialectic section of this essay were the Flash’s desire to save others and the Reverse-Flash’s covetousness and narcissism. By categorizing audiences as unequivocally selfish, especially if there is no attempted engagement in effective listening, comics creators risk becoming exceedingly more selfish due to a lack of communication and empathy. Similarly, audiences risk breaking down beneficial relationships with publishers, editors, writers, etc. if they allow overprotectiveness to unnecessarily censor or creatively choke others. Surely creative progress most usually occurs in instances of collaboration or cooperation. Authors and audiences must practice empathetic listening, otherwise consumers will be left with dissatisfying stories and comics producers will be doomed to write stories that no one will ever read.

Beyond simple empathetic listening, though, authors and audiences should hold themselves – and each other – accountable for being reasonable. Just as the Reverse-

Flash lashed out at his hero for no more than upholding the law, the creators of *The Flash* #139 seemed to lash out against the general public for treating them in a way that felt unfair. Even though the internal motives of Broome and Infantino cannot be concretely known, *The Flash* #139 showed transparent motivation by emotional response over logical processing of the historical situation. This was evidenced by the characterization of audience members as evil, malicious, and immature. Without disregarding the value to emotional competence and knowledge, interpersonal scholars often recommend attempts to put feelings into words and to structure them. For example, Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2007/2014) contrasted logical argument with the idea of verbal aggressiveness, which involves a person lashing out at the identity of the individual who they are in conflict with (p 292). On the other hand, rhetors who utilize logical argument “[recognize] issues of disagreement, [take] positions on controversial issues, [back] up claims with evidence and reasoning, and [refute] views contrary to their own” (p 292). Logical argument is key in solving the last dialectic uncovered in the *Flash* #139: arrogance v. humility. While, in some traditional sense, arrogance does not necessarily imply right or wrong, it can often produce detrimental effects on a relationship by manifesting as resistance to empathizing with others. Logical argument can counteract some forms of arrogance by requiring the parties involved to engage in active attempts to understand each other. That is, in order to make a logical argument, one must first have a working understanding of major

arguments from the opposing point of view. Understanding opposing arguments often generates a type of sympathy, or even empathy, for other people and their positions. Most importantly, as related to comics creators and consumers, the role of logical argument is to actually articulate feelings to the other party and to solicit feedback. Authentic attempts at dialogue are at the heart of productive relationships between groups such as those mentioned in this essay.

Zooming Away

Reynolds (1992) keenly noticed that virtually all of the popular villains in comics myths are “all... corrupted by power, and power in the particular form of knowledge” (p. 24). These characters fall to the Edenic temptation recorded in Genesis 3:5, “your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” Thawne’s advanced knowledge allowed him to pursue likeness to the Flash unlike others of his era. Though he aspired to be like the Flash in certain ways, Thawne’s aspirations ultimately lead him to copy and steal power from others. His narcissistic tendencies were only amplified by his newfound powers, which bred covetousness, further thievery, and violence. The potential trouble with viewing Thawne as a mere representation of outspoken comics critics, though, is that his dangerous qualities could fit much broader contexts than the one presented in this essay. While it is true that the Reverse-Flash is a rhetorically unique product of his time, he reflects dark motives that could potentially be possessed by anyone, regardless of their

relation to comics content (e.g., producers, stakeholders, etc.). The story of the Reverse-Flash should be a call for collaboration among all people who share superheroic myths. Perhaps the conflict between pragmatist and expressivist orientations to literature and authorship would be best handled by attention to the relationship[s] between authors and audiences and how the locus of authority lies somewhere in that space. Only by pursuing that liminal place where authorship lies can lay unproductive dialectics to rest.

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