

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

“‘I Hold in My Hand’: How Dr. Fredric Wertham Exposed the Comic Book Menace”

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By

Matthew Ensley

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“One young homosexual during psychotherapy brought us a copy of *Detective Comics*, with a Batman story. When he was eight this boy had realized from fantasies about comic-book pictures that he was aroused by men. ‘I remember the first time I came across ‘the secret bat cave.’ The thought of Batman and Robin living together and having sexual relations came to my mind. I was put in the position of the rescued rather than the rescuer. I felt I would like to be loved by someone like Batman.’”¹ To Dr. Fredric Wertham this young man had been led into homosexuality, worse, seduced into a

¹ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart and Company, 1954), 192.

homosexual lifestyle by a medium that many would have thought innocent and childish; comic books. As Senator Joseph McCarthy led the charge to confront and expose the hidden menaces of communism that threatened 1950's America, Wertham led a campaign to expose another hidden enemy in our midst; the demoralizing effects of comic books. Wertham would make the case, with his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, that comic books were responsible for the growing problem of juvenile delinquency in America. The sensationalism of his findings led concerned parents and educators into an anti-comic hysteria, which led to numerous (comic)book burnings, a Senate trial on the medium, and concluded with mass censorship of the comic-book industry. Wertham's fears about comic books, which could be found in almost every child's library, fit into the state of fears in early Cold War America about subversive elements, enemies within society leading children to juvenile delinquency and sexual perversity.

Many historians have written about Wertham's anti-comics campaign. Most criticize his methods as unscientific and his book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, as the polemic of a man with a vendetta. Marjorie Heins attacks Wertham's research methods in her book *Not In Front of the Children*, in which she makes the argument that censorship is not an effective tool to protect youth. She criticizes his lack of a control group and his claim that listings of anecdotes in *Seduction of the Innocent* were scientific data.² She wrote that "Wertham achieved credibility because he was a professional and presented his findings in scientific terms."³ William Savage called Wertham a "forerunner of the media-oriented pop-psychiatrists" who "having developed an issue on which he, conveniently, was the only noted authority rode it in the direction of a healthy

² Marjorie Heins, *Not In Front of the Children*, (New York Hill and Wang), 167, 240.

³ *Ibid.*, 240.

bank account.”⁴ Savage noted that Wertham conveniently “simply ignored what he did not wish to acknowledge” in comic books, including that some opposed racism, because he labeled comics as racist.⁵ Jeffery Brown condemns Wertham’s methods as “inconsistent in the theory of effect, over generalized” with “no control group.” He criticizes Wertham’s selective use of pictures in *Seduction* because they had no story context.⁶ James Gilbert called Wertham’s methods “impressionistic” because he “lacked the use of controlled situations or statistical comparisons and because he declined to release any quantifiable results.”⁷

Amy Nyberg, whose book *The History of the Comics Code* is the most extensive study into Wertham’s involvement in the development of the comic code, dismissed critics who attacked Wertham’s research as unscientific. She said that Wertham was not held to the same standards as social scientists because he was using the “clinical method” that he created to gather detailed case histories and make general conclusions. She made the point that *Seduction of the Innocent* was “not intended to be a scholarly presentation of his ideas” but a “vehicle to mobilize public opinion” in support of government regulation on the sale of comic books to minors.⁸ Nyberg argues that *Seduction of the Innocent* fits into Wertham’s “broader context of work on violence and society” and was

⁴ William Savage, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁶ Jeffery Brown, “Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 30 (1997): 8. <http://0-vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>.

⁷ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 96-97.

⁸ Amy Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: the History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1998), 90-93.

his way to “effectively use comic books to draw attention to his wider agenda of social reform.”⁹

Historians see the time in which Wertham developed and sold his ideas about comic books seducing children into moral decay as an era that easily embraced these ideas. Andrea Friedman sees *Seduction of the Innocent*'s cautions about the sexuality of comic books as part of the anti-pornography campaign that started in the 1940s. She argued that Wertham's ability to gain support for his conclusions was based on “framing his attack against comic books in terms that appealed to middle class women” who “saw the child as the most vulnerable viewer of obscenity.”¹⁰ John Lent asserts that Wertham was taking advantage of an already existing anti-comics sentiment in America and that *Seduction of the Innocent* provided backing for these feelings by making the case that comic books led to juvenile delinquency. He wrote that “both McCarthyism and the anti-comic book hysteria were only parts of a larger, more encompassing crusade against domestic subversion in all its varieties.”¹¹ James Gilbert looks at America's fascination with and fear of juvenile delinquency in the 1950s in his book *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s*.¹² John D'Emilio provides a look at the fear of sexuality and homosexuality during McCarthyism which Wertham would capitalize upon to gain acceptance for his theories in his books *Intimate Matters: A*

⁹ Amy Nyberg, “Comic Book Censorship in the United States,” in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, ed. John Lent. (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Press, 1999), 51.

¹⁰ Andrea Friedman, “Sadists and Sissies: Anti-Pornography Campaigns in Cold War America,” *Gender and History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 202-203.

¹¹ John Lent, “The Comics Debate Internationally,” in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, ed. John Lent. (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated university Press, 1999) 12-16.

¹² James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

History of Sexuality in America (with Estelle Freedman) and *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.¹³

James Riebman, who was hired by Hesketh Wertham as her husband's biographer, wrote about Wertham's life in a wholly positive perspective. His thesis in each of his essays that deal with Wertham's comic book research is that "Wertham was not a censor, but a responsible physician who believed that children need protection from such violent images and activity while adults were free and capable to evaluate all types of material."¹⁴ Riebman provided anecdotes about Wertham's life, such as Wertham being nicknamed "Dr. Quarter" because of his fee for minority psychiatric work in New York, to paint Wertham as a human and differentiate him from the "demonized figure" many comic fans see him as.¹⁵

This paper will look at Wertham's research and the methods he used to gain popularity for his idea that comic books led children towards juvenile delinquency and unhealthy attitudes about sexuality in the context of the world he was presenting these ideas to. Most historians only look at Wertham's correlations connecting comic books and crime, ignoring the role he felt the books played in molding pre-adolescent sexual identities. *Seduction of the Innocent* played upon Americans' Cold War fears about elements of American society that were perceived as major threats to the status quo; juvenile delinquency and perverse sexuality. This paper will examine how Wertham's case against comic books was easily embraced by American society by analyzing the

¹³ John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press

¹⁴ James Riebman, "Fredric Wertham; A Social Psychiatrist Characterizes Crime Comic Books and Media Violence as Public Health Issues," in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, ed. John Lent. (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Press, 1999), 238.

¹⁵ James Riebman, "The Life of Dr. Fredric Wertham," *The Fredric Wertham Collection: Gift of his Wife Hesketh* (Lawrence: university of Kansas Press, 1999) 4-9.

society in which these ideas were presented. *Seduction of the Innocent* fit into right into the backdrop of fear in Cold War America and the politics of McCarthyism in which threats to the status quo were exposed and dealt with.

Wertham's career before his comic book work seems to be of more historical significance but it is not nearly as popular a subject for historians. Almost nothing has been written about Wertham's other contributions to history and psychiatry unless they are being put into context with his anti-comics campaign. Wertham's research on the impact of segregation on a child's psyche was part of the legal document used in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Thurgood Marshall thanked Wertham in a letter asserting "your great efforts contributed significantly to the end results."¹⁶ Wertham founded the Lafargue clinic in New York in the 1940's to provide affordable psychiatric care to minorities.¹⁷ His most important contribution to the field of psychiatry was the development of the "social method" of psychiatry, in which attention is paid to the social environment of patients to discern why they do what they do.¹⁸ His obituary in the *New York Times* is headlined: "Fredric Wertham, 86, Dies; Foe of Violent TV and Comics."¹⁹ Wertham is remembered as the man who "nearly destroyed an indigenous American art form," not for his much broader role as an important psychiatrist in American history.²⁰ One reason for this is the love that fans and people inside the industry had for the comic

¹⁶ James Rieberman, "Fredric Wertham: A Social Psychiatrist Characterizes Crime Comic Books and Media Violence as Public Health Issues," in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, ed. John Lent. (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Press, 1999), 248.

¹⁷ Amy Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: the History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1998), 89.

¹⁸ Amy Nyberg, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, ed. John Lent. (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Press, 1999), 247-249.

¹⁹ Bayard Webster, "Fredric Wertham, 85, Dies; Foe of Violent TV and Comics," *New York Times*, December 1, 1981, sec. D.

²⁰ Brian Siano, "Tales from the Crypt," *The Humanist* 54 (1994): 17.

book medium and hatred they had for a man perceived as its enemy. These fans have been very vocal and the comic book industry, with its availability of outlets to verbalize their arguments on paper, has never really been able to let go of the hatred. The second reason is that Wertham's theories about comic book reading leading to juvenile delinquency was where he made his niche, got the most immediate fame and success, made the country and the government take action, and had a best-selling book. This was due to his ability to address and confirm the fears that many Americans had about their society.

“Today there are approximately 85,000 official members of the Communist Party in the United States. They have wormed their way into key positions in government offices, trade unions, and other political positions of public trust. These people are working day and night, laying the groundwork to overthrow YOUR GOVERNMENT!”²¹ This quote, from the 1947 comic book *Is This Tomorrow* (four million copies printed and distributed primarily to church groups), represents the idea that America was already saturated with Communists who were working to infiltrate all areas of American life for devious purposes.²² This fear of a hidden enemy that was working to disrupt our way of life and moral structure was common among Americans and was not just limited to paranoia about communism. Mass media outlets like television, movies, rock and roll music, and comic books were all seen as threats to the stability of the nation.

That Communists were invading every aspect of American life was the fear of many Americans in the years following World War II. These ideas were spread among

²¹ Micheal Barson and Stephen Heller, *Red Scared* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 2001), 158. This is a quote from the back cover of *Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism*, a comic book (ironically) published by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society of St. Paul, Minnesota in 1947.

²² *Ibid.*, 156.

the public until this unseen threat led to a national panic. The national commander of the American Legion, James O'Neil warned his Legionnaires to "never forget the fact that Communists operating in our midst are a secret battalion of spies and saboteurs parachuted by a foreign foe inside our lines at night and operating as American citizens under a variety of disguises."²³ J. Edgar Hoover warned of the range of Communist infiltration of America in his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee: "for every party member," (Hoover stated that 74,000 members were registered) "there are ten others ready, willing, and able to do the party's work. Herein lies the greatest menace of communism. For these are the people who infiltrate and corrupt various spheres of American life."²⁴ The perception of how deep communist permeation had gotten reached its peak when Senator Joseph McCarthy declared that his search found that "the State Department, which is one of the most important government departments, is thoroughly infested with Communists."²⁵ This began his campaign to expose hidden communists in America who were a great threat because they were engaged in "a far more sinister type of activity" than "a paid spy who gets money to steal the blueprints of a weapon, because it permits the enemy to guide and shape our policy."²⁶ These testimonies gave confirmation to the fears of many Americans of an enemy in their midst.

Comic books, like Communists, had infiltrated America. Wertham estimated that ninety million comic books were published each month in 1954.²⁷ He would later change

²³ James O'Neil, "How You Can Fight Communism," *American Legion Magazine*, Aug. 1948, 42.

²⁴ House Un-American Activities Committee, J. Edgar Hoover's Testimony, Hearings on H.R. 1884 and H.R. 2122, 8th Cong., 1st sess., Mar 1947, 3.

²⁵ Joseph McCarthy, speech, Congressional Record, Senate, 81st Congress, 2nd sess., Feb. 20. 1950, 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁷ Fredric Wertham, "Comic Books: Blueprints for Delinquency," *The Reader's Digest*, May 1954, 26.

this estimate to over one hundred million.²⁸ *Time Magazine* had a slightly more modest number; estimating that “readers buy eighty million comic books each month.”²⁹

Wertham called comic books “the greatest mass influence on children; one billion times a year a child sits down and reads a comic book”³⁰ And, like communists who were hiding under the guise of good American citizens, comic books were hiding under the guise of harmless children’s literature. When Wertham revealed comic books as harmful, it fed many parents’ paranoia about a hidden influence on their children that was somehow subverting them. “Over the last few years,” Wertham argued in *Seduction of the Innocent*, “cases of this type have greatly increased: the young child in the grip and lure of comic books, the frustrated parent who is baffled by this invasion of his home.”³¹

Comic books were not the only forms of media that were being investigated and censored for their negative aspects around the time Wertham formulated his theories. The Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency was organized in 1953. Senator Estes Kefauver took over the committee in 1955. Kefauver believed that the mass media were at least partly implicated in juvenile delinquency and other problems in American society and was not alone in this belief. Many “experts,” social scientists and child psychologists, agreed with Kefauver.³² The Committee would investigate (along with comic books) movies, television, and radio for their contribution to adolescent misbehavior. Since the 1920s movies were criticized as being too violent, sexually immoral, and promoting crime. In 1952, the Supreme Court granted the motion picture

²⁸ Fredric Wertham, *A Sign for Cain: An Exploration of Human Violence* (New York: The McMillan Co., 1966), 194-195.

²⁹ “Horror on the Newsstands,” *Time Magazine*, Septemeber 27, 1954, 27.

³⁰ Fredric Wertham, “The Comics... Very Funny!” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 29 May 1948, 7.

³¹ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart and Company, 1954), 52.

³² James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),143-145.

industry protection under the first amendment. The film industry, in hopes to forego government regulation, created a set of standards it would be regulated by under the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America.³³ Shortly after Wertham's findings reported comic books as obscene, other magazines came under scrutiny. American clubwomen imagined themselves at war during the 1950s, taking aim at comic books, then at "lurid magazines" and "outright pornography."³⁴

The fact that comic books were considered material mostly for children made the fact that they were harmful far more insidious than other subversive forms of entertainment, like movies, television, and adult magazines. Wertham felt that "most people know little or nothing about these publications. Comic books, they assume, are Disney-type animal cartoons."³⁵ "Those with the most highly specialized training [about children] know little or nothing about comic books and assume them to be insignificant."³⁶ But comic books, Wertham argued, were not insignificant, but were "an agent with harmful potentialities. Comic books themselves are a virus, the cause of a lack of resistance to the social virus of a harmful environment."³⁷

After defeating the axis powers in World War II, America was faced with a new enemy, one that was a threat to every man and woman, its children. "Almost overnight," Senator Kefauver's biographer wrote, "America discovered juvenile delinquency, and studies, analyses, and recommendations became favorite pastimes of all those groups that focus on what seems to be the major problem of the season."³⁸ Although it was not a new

³³1997 *TV Violence Report Historical Background*, <http://ccp.ucla.edu/Webreport96/historic.htm>.

³⁴Friedman., 1.

³⁵Fredric Wertham, "Comic Books: Blueprints for Delinquency," *The Reader's Digest*, GETtDATE, 25.

³⁶Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart and Company, 1954), 14.

³⁷Ibid., 118.

³⁸Charles Fontenay, *Estates Kefauver: A Biography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 318.

phenomenon, youth crime had become more noticeable and much more sensationalized by the mid 1950s. *Newsweek* reported in 1953: “Year by year the statistics of crime are becoming more terrifying. At the same time the average age of the nation’s criminals has been falling steadily; juvenile delinquency has become a major menace.”³⁹ Kefauver warned the nation in 1953, “Juvenile delinquency is on the increase. Children in scores of cities are committing more crimes and worse crimes than at any time since World War II.”⁴⁰

As “the problem of the season,” causes for the increase in juvenile delinquency were hypothesized. “The most important factor, criminologists believe,” reported *Newsweek* “is the unrest that has gripped the world since 1939. The two wars have had an unsettling effect on the nation’s social structure, particularly on youth. They have led to a weakening of public and private morality, to a feeling of ‘tomorrow we die.’”⁴¹ This theory of social unrest as the cause for the problem was popular and was used in the opening of the 1955 film *The Blackboard Jungle* (which did much to sensationalize juvenile delinquency): “They were six years old in the last war. Father in the Army. Mother in the defense plant. No home life. No church life. No place to go.”⁴² Another popular theory for the cause of juvenile delinquency was the impact of the media, that movies like *The Blackboard Jungle*, which featured graphic scenes of violence and rape, sensationalized crime and provided a model for children to follow. The Kefauver Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency investigated the effects of the media

³⁹ Fredric Wertham, “Comic Books: Blueprints for Delinquency,” *The Reader’s Digest*, May 1954, 25. (This is from an excerpt from an issue of *Newsweek* that begins the article).

⁴⁰ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),148.

⁴¹ Fredric Wertham., 25. (This is from an excerpt from an issue of *Newsweek* that begins the article).

⁴² James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent of the 1950s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),182. This is a quote from the film *The Blackboard Jungle*, produced by Richard Brookes, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1955.

on children. Fredric Wertham's studies led him to believe that the root of the dilemma was to be blamed upon the form of mass media that was "greatest mass influence on children," comic books.⁴³

Wertham's claims against comic books were not spontaneous accusations. Wertham's began his studies of the effects of comic books on the juvenile psyche in 1948, first gaining fame for his ideas in an article published, in May of that year, titled "The Comics... Very Funny!" In this article he deemed the books "Marijuana of the Nursery" and warned parents that they "represent the systematic poisoning of the well of childhood spontaneity."⁴⁴ In August Wertham made a speech to the Annual Congress of Correction of the American Prison Association presenting the results of his study so far. He called comic books a "correspondence course in crime" because of their detailed depictions of crime scenes.⁴⁵ In this speech Wertham listed the seven ways comic books affect children:

1. Comic books may suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas.
2. They create a mental preparedness or readiness for temptation.
3. They suggest the forms a delinquent impulse may take and supply details of the latest techniques for its execution.
4. They may tip the scales in the behavior of an otherwise normal child and act as the precipitating factor of delinquency or emotional disorder.
5. They supply the rationalization for a contemplated act which is often more important than the impulse itself.
6. They set off a chain of undesirable and harmful thinking.
7. They create for the child an atmosphere of deceit, trickery, and cruelty.⁴⁶

These were the ways in which comics "seduced" children. Through "seven years of scientific investigation" Wertham (with a single-minded fixation on the negative aspects

⁴³ Fredric Wertham, "The Comics...Very Funny!" *Saturday Review of Literature*, 29 May 1948, 7.

⁴⁴Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Fredric Wertham, "The Betrayal of Childhood: Comic Books." *Proceedings of the 78th Annual Congress of Correction, American Prison Association*, 1948, 57.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 58. Wertham uses a slightly revised version of this list on page 118 of *Seduction of the Innocent* in which he adds another "bad effect": "The comic book is an invitation to illiteracy."

and effects of comic books) collected the data that he would compile into *Seduction of the Innocent*.⁴⁷ This data was collected using Wertham's "clinical method" of thousands of case studies of children in his Lafargue clinic. Before publishing his book, Wertham published frightening accounts of his findings and theories in magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Time*, and *Reader's Digest* to build a support base for his ideas made up of frightened parents and educators. With the publication *Seduction of the Innocent* in April 1954, (which was a "Book-of-the-Month alternate selection for June, 1954") in April 1954, Wertham revealed to the world, in unscientific terms that the most inept reader could understand, confirmed America's fears of an enemy within seducing children into being juvenile delinquents.⁴⁸

Another enemy that faced America in the years following World War II was sexuality. The amount of sexually explicit material available caused groups like the General Federation of Women's Clubs to warn "an entire generation is being corrupted" and crusade against pornography.⁴⁹ The Kinsey report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* found males to be much more sexual than society's prudent conventions. This report revealed that masturbation was extremely common (92-97% of males masturbated).⁵⁰ These indicated an obsession with sex in males that created fears among Americans about sexual psychopaths who would not be able to be satisfied with masturbation and would act out their sexual frustrations with violence. The 1934 arrest of Albert Fish for killing and cannibalizing a child and J. Edgar Hoover's declaring "war

⁴⁷ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart and Company, 1954), v.

⁴⁸ Fredric Wertham, "Comic Books: Blueprints for Delinquency," *The Reader's Digest*, May 1954, 24.

⁴⁹ Robert Crandall, "Calling All Women!", *The American Magazine* 1955, 34-35.

⁵⁰ Alfred Kinsey et al. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1948), 238-241, 399-340.

on the sex criminal” in 1937 created the media fascination with the “sex fiend.”⁵¹

Wertham warned in *Seduction of the Innocent* that the way sexuality was presented in comic books “suggests sexually abnormal ideas that stimulate unwholesome fantasies” in children.⁵²

Wertham listed in *Seduction* many examples of arousing pictures and sexual situations in comic books that excited his patients, the children who read the comics. Frequent in the books Wertham researched were drawings that depicted violence to scantily clad females (who were often tied up) and attention to female breasts and legs.⁵³ Wertham concluded that these drawings and stories “set up confusion” in young children and “create a sadistic interpretation of sex.”⁵⁴ He offered one example of a patient recounting “the comic book *Crimes by Women*. There is one that is sexy. Her legs are showing above her knees and her headlights (a slang term for breasts that Wertham uses often in the book) are showing *plenty!* When you see a girl and you see her headlights and she is beaten up, that makes you hot and bothered! If she will take a beating from a man she will take anything from him!”⁵⁵ When asked by Wertham what he wanted to be when he grew up, one boy replied “I want to be a sex maniac!”⁵⁶ Wertham lists instances where sexual attitudes learned from comic books lead boys to commit sexual crimes like tying up and raping girls, which he called “comic book stuff.”⁵⁷ Wertham warned readers in *Seduction* that portrayals of sadomasochism in comic books could also lead children into homosexuality.

⁵¹ Andrea Friedman, “Sadists and Sissies: Anti-Pornography Campaigns in Cold War America,” *Gender and History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 205.

⁵² Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart and Company, 1954), 17-44, 118.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 174-186.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 182-185

Another perceived threat to America's stability during the era of McCarthyism was homosexuality. The Kinsey report made Americans aware that the "problem" of homosexuality was much greater than they perceived. This report found that fifty percent of males had erotic feelings for their own sex, almost a third of males had reached orgasm in a homosexual experience, and 4% of the population was entirely homosexual.⁵⁸ There was a fear that homosexual tendencies could emasculate boys and men and turn girls and women into masculine man-haters. These perceptions and fears about homosexuals would lead the government to take actions to "treat as transgressors and deal with accordingly, sex perverts who by their acts violate moral codes and laws and the accepted standards of conduct."⁵⁹

The politics of McCarthyism were not just being used to search out communists, but also homosexuals. With reports of thousands of homosexuals being employed by the government the Senate authorized a search for and released a report on "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government." This report alleged that homosexuals were "not proper persons to be employed in government for two reasons; first, they are generally unsuitable, and second, they constitute security risks" because "they lack mental stability."⁶⁰ There was also fear that homosexuality was somehow contagious and "the presence of a sex pervert in a government agency" is "corrosive" because a homosexual would "frequently attempt to entice normal individuals to engage

⁵⁸ Alfred Kinsey et al. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1948), 611-666.

⁵⁹ U.S. Congress, Committee on Expenditures in the Executives Department, *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*, 81st Congress, 1950, 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

in perverted practices.”⁶¹ Especially at risk were “young and impressionable people who might come under the influence of a pervert.”⁶²

These findings, which fed on national fears of homosexuality, led to nationwide panic. As a result of this panic, thousands of Americans lost their federal jobs. Police crackdowns on gays and lesbians increased, with officers raiding bars and clubs to arrest homosexuals. Some newspapers would even print the names, addresses, and places of employment of people caught in raids, increasing their risk of being targets of further homophobic action and of losing their jobs.⁶³

According to Wertham, the government’s assertion that the young were especially impressionable to the seduction of homosexuality was correct. As the “greatest mass influence” on youths during these impressionable years, comic books’ portrayal of homosexuals and homosexual themes were seen by Wertham as particularly harmful. Wertham presented the threat comic books posed to young boys coming to terms with their own sexuality:

Many pre-adolescent boys pass through a disdain for girls. Some comic books tend to fix upon that attitude and instill the idea that girls are only good for being banged around and used for decoys. A homoerotic attitude is also suggested by the presentation of masculine, bad, witchlike, or violent women. In such comics women are depicted in a defiantly anti-erotic light, while the young male heroes have pronounced erotic overtones. The muscular male supertype, whose primary sex characteristics are usually well emphasized, is in the setting of certain stories the object of homoerotic sexual curiosity and stimulation.⁶⁴

Popular superheroes and American icons, Batman and Robin’s relationship was especially troubling to Wertham. Reading much further into the stories than the creators

⁶¹ Ibid., 3.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ D’emilio and Freedman, 294.

⁶⁴ Wertham, 188.

probably intended, Wertham saw the “dynamic duo” as “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together.”⁶⁵ Batman and Robin’s continual rescuing of each other was seen as evidence of a homosexual relationship. Especially homoerotic, according to Wertham, was Bruce(Batman) and Dick(Robin)’s home life; “sometimes they are shown on a couch, Bruce reclining and Dick sitting next to him, jacket off, collar open, and his hand on his friends arm.”⁶⁶ Wertham’s attention to these details and his writing style in recounting them in *Seduction of the Innocent* seem to veer near homoerotic porn. Robin is looked at intently:

Robin is a handsome boy, usually shown in his uniform with bare legs. He is buoyant with energy and devoted to nothing on earth or in interplanetary space as much as to Bruce Wayne. He often stands with is legs spread, the genital region discreetly evident.⁶⁷

For girls, Wonder Woman presented a “morbid ideal.”⁶⁸ Wertham saw the comic character as “anti-masculine” and involved in a homoerotic relationship with her own sidekicks, the Holliday Girls (“i.e. the holiday girls, the gay party girls, the gay girls”).⁶⁹ Like Batman and Robin, Wertham saw Wonder Woman’s mutual rescuing of her sidekicks as homosexual. Worst of all, Wonder Woman stories featured “extremely sadistic hatred of all males in a framework which is clearly lesbian.”⁷⁰

Wertham’s argument about the portrayal of homosexual themes in comic books was that it led children who read the books to be homosexuals themselves. Wertham used examples of homosexual patients he had analyzed who recounted (presumably after

⁶⁵ Ibid., 190.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 191.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 193.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 192-193.

some comic book memory prompting) scenes in comic books that had given them their earliest homosexual stimulation.⁷¹ Although Wertham used mostly comic books in the genres of “crime” and “horror” to make his points about comic books leading to juvenile delinquency, he focused on superhero comics as the “seducers” into homosexuality.

Wertham’s detail to his findings of sexuality in comic books often strays into obsession; an aspect of *Seduction of the Innocent* that Freud, Wertham’s contemporary (in his early years as a psychologist) would have had a ‘field day’ with. Wertham saw sex everywhere in comic books. Comic drawings of women in high heels prompted Wertham to warn of the dangers of comic books leading children to develop “high heel fetishes.”⁷² In the illustration section of the book, Wertham argued that there are sexual “pictures within pictures for children who know how to look.”⁷³



*In ordinary comic books,
there are pictures within
pictures for children who
know how to look.*



⁷¹Ibid., 191-192.

⁷² Ibid., 181-182.

⁷³ Ibid., illustration page 6, these are between pages 212-213.

Wertham's methods of proving his claim that comic books were leading children towards criminal behavior and sexual deviancy were convincing to the millions of readers who bought his book. In chapters like "Design for Delinquency" and "I Want to be a Sex Maniac!" Wertham listed hundreds of instances that he had researched where comic books desensitized and perverted the reader with graphic violence and sexually suggestive and abnormal themes and instances where children had acted upon the themes comics modeled.⁷⁴ *Seduction of the Innocent* was written in a style that (although dry and habitually listing) could be understood by the average reader. The forums that Wertham used to advertise his ideas, such as columns in *Readers Digest* and *Ladies Home Journal*, presented him arguments to his primary audience; housewives with children. Since mothers were perceived as the primary caretakers and protectors of children in the 1950s, reaching this audience provided Wertham with public support for his claims against comics. The claim that comic books were detrimental to children's health was a serious one, and the public (and Wertham) called for government intervention.

The Kefauver Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency took Wertham's claims seriously as well, and the comic book industry was put on trial. In the spring of 1944, hearings were held to determine whether the arguments that comprised *Seduction of the Innocent* were true. Numerous comic books were examined to evaluate their literary worth and subversive risk.⁷⁵ Wertham was a key witness as he made his case that "Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic book industry."⁷⁶ Although Wertham was given the most time to argue his side, and the comic book industry's lead

⁷⁴Ibid.,17-44, 147-194.

⁷⁵ U.S. Congress. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency: A Part of the Investigation of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States*, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1954, Committee Print, 8-11.

⁷⁶ Nyberg., 63.

witness William Gaines' (who published the popular *Entertaining Comics* line of horror and crime books) testimony was damned by his argument that a comic cover depicting a severed head and bloody axe was in good taste, the committee came to no conclusion in the hearings.⁷⁷ The government could not, under the first amendment, censor the comic book industry, but public outrage due to Wertham's research led the industry to regulate itself with the implementation of the Code of the Association of Comics Publishers.

This code censored the content of comic books, replacing the type of book that Wertham campaigned against with a much tamer form of entertainment. The code was a form of capitalist censorship, as publishers did not have to abide by its standards, but few stores would carry the magazine and no responsible parent (now educated of the "horrors of the nursery" the books represented) would let their children read it if it did not carry the code. The standards were very specific, with cover and story content being strictly repressed. The word "crime" could not be bigger than any other word on the cover and the words "horror" and "terror" were forbidden (killing *Entertaining Comics* top three titles *The Crypt of Terror*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *Crime Suspense Stories*).⁷⁸ Criminal acts could never be "presented in such a way that sympathy for the criminal or to inspire others to imitate criminals." Authority figures were not to be "presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority." The code's ethics of sexuality were extremely prudish. Sexual relations "were neither to be hinted at or portrayed." "Passion or romantic interests" were not to be "treated in such a way to stimulate the lower and baser emotions." "Sex perversions, such as homosexuality, was "strictly forbidden."⁷⁹ Parents no longer had to worry about the content of their children's comic books, but few

⁷⁷ Ibid., 53-84.

⁷⁸ U.S. Congress., 32-33.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

children wanted to read comics censored by the 48 standards, which had taken much of what they found exciting out of the books. The comic book industry, in a manner of months, went from being a multimillion dollar industry to almost dying out.

Doctor Wertham ends *Seduction of the Innocent* with an anecdote about a mother whom he had just relieved about the culprits behind her son's juvenile delinquency; comic books:

“She seemed to come out from under a cloud. She thanked me and got up to go. When she was halfway through the doorway she turned slowly. ‘Doctor, I’m sorry to take your time, but please, tell me again.’ I looked at her questioningly. ‘Tell me again,’ she said slowly and hesitantly. ‘Tell me again that it isn’t my fault.’ And I did.”⁸⁰

For the (seemingly new) problems that faced America in the post-WWII 1950's like juvenile delinquency it was easier to pass the blame onto a new part of the culture such as television or comic books than to think that it may be a problem of society as a whole. The results of Wertham's comic book research was the censorship of the comics industry under the Comics Code Authority which is what he wanted. The Comics Code Authority still censors material today. Dr. Wertham's arguments against comic books were easy for parents to believe because placing the blame on comic books took the blame off themselves. The paranoia that an enemy within society was causing problems like juvenile delinquency, creating unhealthy attitudes in children regarding sexuality, or weakening America for communism was easy to buy into because it perpetuated the idea that society was fine, that it was something else that was causing the problem.

⁸⁰ Wertham., 397.

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