Shaping National Identity: Myth Manipulation in the Aeneid and Post-9/11 Superhero Films

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the ways in which Virgil’s the Aeneid shaped and unified national identity in Augustus’ Rome, and the ways in which post-9/11 American superhero films do the same. The theory of instrumentalism provides the lens for analysis, as outlined by Daniele Conversi in Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations, complemented with the ethnosymbolic nationalist approach described by Anthony D. Smith in Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach. This thesis applies both instrumentalism and ethnosymbolism to the cultural symbols, myths and icons in each text. “Shaping National Identity: Myth Manipulation in the Aeneid and Post-9/11 Superhero Films,” focuses on the similarities in the ways the Aeneid and post-9/11 superhero films use mythologies and ethnosymbols to canonize certain values and effect audiences. It also examines the fundamental doctrines of each text, specifically fate in Augustus’ Rome and the City on a Hill ideal in post-9/11 America. The distortions the Aeneid and post-9/11 superhero films make to the ethnosymbols they depict reveal the motives of the state, and influence audiences’ ideals, values and self-perceptions, all the while creating a sense of unity among nationals and loyalty to the nation.
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**Introduction**

“There’s only one way this ends, Kal. Either you die, or I do,” General Zod says to Superman after hitting him with enough force to launch him ten stories in the air. After two hours of watching Clark Kent grow up in the American heartland, travel the country as a nomad, forge an alliance with the military, and brood as Superman has never before, *Man of Steel* (2013) comes down to this moment. General Zod wants to turn Earth into a New Krypton, which will surely lead to the extinction of the human race, and only Superman stands in his way. The two men battle through the streets of Metropolis. Glass shatters, explosions boom, buildings collapse. They crash into a bank, where Superman is able to get Zod into a sort of chokehold. Not ready to surrender, Zod uses his heat vision as a weapon against bystanders, barely missing. Clark yells, “Don’t do this,” and begs him to stop, but Zod’s line of fire moves closer and closer to the people and he responds with a definitive, “Never.” The camera zooms in on Superman’s face, lands on his eyes, then zooms out again as Superman snaps Zod’s neck. Superman drops to his knees in anguish and lets out a guttural yell. Lois Lane runs to comfort him and the scene ends—wait, did Superman just kill someone?

Not once since his inception in the first issue of *Action Comics* published in 1938 has Superman killed someone. It’s long been an integral part of his characterization that he will not take a life, so why now? Why, in this modern reboot of the Superman franchise, must this important part of Superman’s mythology change? In order to understand why such a decision was made, it’s helpful to understand another work where such alterations to long-held mythologies were made—Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, approximately, between 29 BCE and 19 BCE on the behalf of Augustus Caesar. Augustus had just come into
power in Ancient Rome after a period of civil warring, and he intended to make changes to the structure of Rome as a nation. The *Aeneid* was to serve as an origin story for his Roman Empire. It was an epic poem, but it was treated largely as a historical account of Rome’s founding, just as Homer’s *Iliad* was treated as an account of the Trojan War. Every aspect of the *Aeneid* had to ultimately legitimize Augustus Caesar’s rule over Rome and support the belief that Rome was fated to exist by the divine. In order to promote these messages, mythologies had to be altered, histories had to be changed, and events had to be fabricated.

In writing this epic poem, Virgil produced a national epic that unified Romans under a common heritage after years of war and instability. Superman’s mythology also had to be changed in *Man of Steel* to reflect the post-9/11 age. With the wars of the past decade and the availability of information about torture perpetrated by the United States, it’s impossible to believe in an America that doesn’t use force, therefore it’s impossible to believe in a Superman doesn’t use force, and his image changed accordingly. Both the *Aeneid* and post-9/11 superhero films reflect the times in which the works were produced, promote national ideals and create a sense of unity through common mythology among members of the nation.

The superhero movie boom took place in the years after September 11th, 2001. Just as the *Aeneid* was produced after a warring period of instability, modern superhero films were produced after the instability of 9/11. Both the *Aeneid* and post-9/11 superhero films shape and enforce national identity, defined here as a sense of unity among members of a nation through shared mythology and shared ideals. This paper will look at the ways in which Virgil’s the *Aeneid* shaped and unified national identity in Augustus’ Rome, and the
ways in which post-9/11 American superhero films do the same using the lens of ethnosymbolism, a nationalist approach, and instrumentalism, a theory of nationalism.

Ethnosymbolism is a term that identifies traditions, memories, values, myths and symbols as ethnosymbols, which citizens use to define their relationship to the nation. *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism* by Anthony D. Smith describes ethnosymbolism an approach in the field of nationalist studies, not a theory. Instrumentalism, however, is a theory of nationalist studies. *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism* edited by Steven Elliott Grosby and Athena S. Leoussi defines it as a theory that “conceives ethnicity as a dependent variable, externally controlled according to its strategic utility for achieving more secular goods,” (17). “Ethnicity” here refers to a person’s national citizenship. These two texts form the backbone of this study. This paper applies the theory of instrumentalism as modified by ethnosymbolism to Augustus’s Rome and post-9/11 America, meaning it examines the ways in which national identity is shaped by the manipulation of ethnosymbols in the *Aeneid* and superhero films¹.

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* are formative texts in the field of nationalist studies. They provide a foundational understanding of the nationalist studies field and contribute to an understanding of nationalist theory broader than instrumentalism and ethnosymbolism. Anderson’s text also provides a useful theory on the way in which nationalism is similar to religion. *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* by Philip M. Taylor describes different uses of propaganda throughout history and was especially useful in identifying

¹ This view of instrumentalism modified by ethnosymbolism is a rejection of radical instrumentalism, which views the elites of society as social engineers who manufacture nations. In response to radical instrumentalism, this paper aligns itself with Smith, who believes a person’s sense of national identity can be manipulated but cannot be created.
the uses of propaganda in Augustus’s Rome. In addition to theory texts, this paper consulted history books for context. *She-wolf: The Story of a Roman Icon* by Cristina Mazzoni dealt with foundational myths of Rome and described the various competing origin myths Virgil had to reconcile in the *Aeneid*. It also delved deep into the myth of Romulus and Remus, as did *Remus: A Roman Myth* by TP Wiseman. *Caesar Augustus: Seven Aspects* by Fergus Millar and Erich Segal, and *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* by Anton Powell were also consulted in researching Roman history.

The post-9/11 superhero films this thesis studies are the Iron Man trilogy, *Iron Man* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), and *Iron Man 3* (2013), the Batman trilogy, *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the Captain America films, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014) and the newest Superman film, *Man of Steel*. It also briefly analyzes a scene from *The Avengers* (2012) and references *Superman Returns* (2006). Movie reviews and articles were especially useful in providing analyses of these films, including the *Man of Steel* review entitled “Seeking Moviegoers’ ‘Steel’ of Approval” by Tom Russo and an interview with the writers of *Captain America: Winter Soldier* by Asawin Suebsaeng first published on Mother Jones.com. The online journal *Student Pulse* published one of the most useful articles in researching this paper, called “The Hero We Create: 9/11 & The Reinvention of Batman” by Joshua Flebowitze. It analyzes Christopher Nolan’s take on Batman in his trilogy and how his films provided a cathartic experience for viewers in response to 9/11.

In addition to material related to superheroes, this paper also consulted texts outside of the superhero universe to analyze post-9/11 America. One of the main primary texts used is the sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” by John Winthrop (1630), in which
Winthrop preaches that the Massachusetts Bay Colony will be a “city on a hill.” Winthrop’s phrase became an American ideal and this paper posits that the City on a Hill ideology, or the belief that America is an exceptional example for the rest of the world to follow, provides the foundation for all post-9/11 superhero films. It’s the underlying dogma of each film, and it’s also the basis of an archetypal structure to which post-9/11 superhero films adhere. This archetypal story structure is referred to here as the Exceptionalist structure. In comparing the Exceptionalist structure to other archetypes, this paper consulted *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, *The Myth of the American Superhero* by John Lawrence and Robert Jewett and *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America* by Susan Faludi. These three sources contain alternative narrative archetypes, none of which fit perfectly with the post-9/11 superhero film, but all of which influence the Exceptionalist story structure. This study also looks at primary sources like the United States Department of State’s “U.S Export Policy for Military Unmanned Aerial Systems” and “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices,” Mitt Romney’s 2012 New Hampshire Primary victory speech, and President Obama’s 2014 speech on the National Security Agency. By comparing actual political rhetoric and government policies to the concepts in post-9/11 superhero films and to the language of Winthrop’s sermon, it becomes apparent that these three sources influence each other.

The *Aeneid* and post-9/11 superhero films are not perfectly analogous works and while this analysis of the two texts looks at similarities between them, it’s not driven by identifying the parallels. This paper is an analysis of the ways in which the *Aeneid* and post-9/11 superhero films both manipulate myths and ethnosymbols as tools of instrumentalism to shape national identity and create a sense of belonging, and by
extension a sense of loyalty, to the nation. The *Aeneid* alters historical fact and accepted mythologies in order to promote the ideals of Augustus’s Rome and justify his leadership as fated by the divine. Superhero films alter the existing mythologies of the superheroes in order to reflect the changes in modern American society. Superman becomes capable of murder to reflect wartime morality, Aeneas encounters Augustus’s image and is promised that in the future he will bring a Golden Age to Rome, reflecting Augustus’s new leadership. Both texts are also built on the main ideologies of the time, fate in the case of the *Aeneid* and the notion of America as a City on a Hill in post-9/11 superhero films. By disseminating ethnosymbols that are both recognizable and aligned with the ideals of the nation, these texts create unity among members of the nation. They transmit common cultural references, common values and a shared self-perception to members of a nation — Rome is exceptional because it was fated to be by the gods, and America is exceptional because it is a City on a Hill. They may have been produced on different continents, in different languages, in different millenniums, but post-9/11 superhero films are America’s *Aeneid*. 
Part 1: the Aeneid

The epic poem is a classic form of literature that recounts a hero’s journey. In western culture, Homer’s the Iliad and the Odyssey represent the ideal of epic poetry. Both are set around the time of the Trojan War and tell the stories of figures involved in the conflict. According to the Aeneid translator Robert Fitzgerald, Homer’s work spellbound Virgil, inspiring him to model his style and structure after Homer, and prompting him to choose the same mythical setting for his epic. Virgil also drew his narrative from a minor character in the Iliad, Aeneas, a Trojan soldier.

Written approximately between 29 and 19 BCE in Latin, Augustus Caesar commissioned the Aeneid to serve as the official origin story of Rome. Virgil painstakingly composed the poem for years and ordered it to be burned after his death because it wasn’t completed. Augustus chose to overrule Virgil’s wishes and published it despite the unfinished lines that appear every so often. In the Aeneid, ethnosymbols are stripped of their original contexts in order to support the ideals of Augustus’s Rome and promote him as Rome’s true leader. It isn’t strictly a pro-Rome national epic, however. Virgil also incorporated subversive elements and critiqued Augustus’s Empire and imperialist agenda. The Aeneid is one of the best-known works of Roman literature and provides a compelling case study in the shaping of national identity through manipulating ethnosymbols.
Chapter 1: Blending Foundational Myths

There was little differentiation between myth and fact in Ancient Greece and Rome. Stories that are today regarded as mythology were then accepted as historical truths. Perhaps the best example of this is the Trojan War, a ten-year conflict between Greece and Troy that inspired the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, and anchored Greek identity for centuries, but whose veracity is still debated by historians. Whether it took place as was documented or not\(^2\), the Trojan War is a part of the canon of classical antiquity and was a recognizable ethnological symbol in Ancient Rome. Virgil had to incorporate it, along with other familiar myths, symbols and characters, into his epic in order to create a foundation of ethnological symbols upon which to present Augustus’s Roman and its ideals.

Although his Roman origin story pulls directly from the myths of Aeneas, it also contains elements of other Roman origin tales. Virgil blends competing Roman origin myths into the narrative of the *Aeneid* in order to account for the various versions of Rome’s founding, while also elevating Aeneas’s myth above all other foundational tales by casting him as the protagonist of the epic. There were two main myths related to the founding of Rome, both well known before Virgil began his writing. One was a Greek myth about a foreigner, a Trojan, who sailed into Latium with a small fleet and conquered the land for Rome. This, of course, is the central myth in the *Aeneid*. The second is a Roman myth about two local brothers, Romulus and Remus, who were both born on the Italian peninsula and raised by a she-wolf, and set out to found their own city before Romulus

\(^2\) Modern scholars believe the city of Troy existed, in what is now western Turkey, but there’s disagreement over whether the Trojan War actually took place. According to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, archeological evidence indicates that there was “a Greek expedition against Troy in the late Bronze Age” which was most likely the real life event from which the Trojan War myth developed.
murdered Remus. Virgil had to incorporate Romulus and Remus in his story about Aeneas because they were important Roman ethnospheres, but he had to do so in a way that supported both the idea that Aeneas founded Rome and supported Augustus's vision of Rome. Fortunately, there was already a foundation upon which to reconcile these two myths.

The myth of Aeneas can be traced back to the 5th century BCE. His is originally a Greek myth, and he has his own scene in Book V of Homer's *Iliad*. Aeneas is half human, half god—he's mother is Venus—and through the help of the gods and the ordinance of fate, he claims the land that will one day become the center of the Rome state. The Roman myth of the she-wolf and twins Romulus and Remus can be traced to the year 300 BCE. According to this myth, the daughter of the ousted King of Alba Longa gave birth to twin boys who would one day found Rome on Palatine Hill. Mars (god of war) raped the princess of Alba Longa, Rhea Silvia, in her sleep and impregnated her with twin boys. The notion of twin male heirs to the throne threatened the current King, and he order his servants to drop the boys in the Tiber River. The current carried Romulus and Remus to the foot of Palatine Hill, where a she-wolf, who has since become an iconic figure in Rome, discovered them. She nursed the twins and cared for them until a human man discovered the boys and brought them into his home. In a 753 BCE, a date calculated by a scholar during Julius Caesar's reign, the brothers returned to Alba Longa, killed the king and restored their grandfather to

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3 The she-wolf is an incredibly important ethnospheres in Roman national identity. Through a linguistic analysis, she also represents a connection between the Trojan and Roman foundational myths. The Latin word for Troy is *Troia* and the word for wolf is *lupa*. *Troia* and *lupa* are also both derogatory terms for prostitutes. Livy, a Roman historian of the early first century, suggests Romans understood the she-wolf to be a prostitute. Mazzoni writes, “It is from the fusion of two separate legends embedded in each of these ambiguous, grammatically feminine words —*troia* and *lupa* —that the story of Rome’s birth derives” (Mazzoni, 1).
the throne (Mazzoni, 3). They then decided to found their own city, which Romulus wanted to locate on Palatine Hill and Remus wanted to locate on Aventine Hill. Their disagreement culminated in murder, with Romulus taking Remus’s life. He went on to retain god-like status in Roman mythology as its founder, making him an ethnosymbol impossible for Virgil to ignore, despite the fact that Romulus’s mythology wasn’t central to Virgil’s objective of establishing Aeneas as Rome’s founder.

These two myths are from separate eras and have different origins, but by the 1st century BCE they were combined into one lineage as parts of the same story. According to this version, Aeneas is the progenitor of Rome because he brought the Trojan people to the Italian peninsula where, in several generations, his ancestor Romulus would found Rome on Palatine Hill. It’s a tenuous connection, and examining the role of Rhea Silvia further confirms the two myths began as two separate tales united years after creation. According to the combined myth, Rhea Silvia is of Trojan descent, making her the sole familial connection to Aeneas and the character who links the two myths (Mazzoni, 3). On a macro level, not only does Rhea Silvia connect Romulus to Aeneas, she connects the Romans to the venerable Greeks. The origin of Aeneas’s myth is Greek, bridged to the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus through Rhea Silvia, but she plays a very small role in the myth. This makes it clear that the connection between Aeneas and Romulus was manufactured later in history rather than upon inception. The myths were combined organically, most likely through the oral tradition, but Virgil had to blend them together in a way that was more fluid and preserved the sense of honor that came from being connected to the much admired Greek civilization. He also needed to demonstrate a familial link between Aeneas,
Romulus, Remus, and Augustus in order to establish Augustus as their descendent and therefore the rightful leader of Rome.

There are two significant mentions of Romulus and Remus in the *Aeneid*. The second mention is in Book VIII, when Vulcan, god of fire and blacksmiths, gives Aeneas a shield. The shield is artfully decorated with scenes from Rome’s history, though to Aeneas they are prophetic scenes from Rome’s future. Romulus and Remus are depicted on the shield, along with many other iconic images from Roman history. The shield carries great ethnonsymbolic importance and will be further evaluated in Chapter 4. The first mention of Romulus and Remus comes in Book I, in the context of a speech delivered by Jupiter to Venus. Venus asks him why he’s creating such trouble for her son while he sails to found the Roman state. Jupiter responds by telling her not to worry, that her son is fated to accomplish this goal and therefore nothing will be able to stop him. Here, Virgil attaches Rome’s existence to the firmly held concept of fate. Jupiter then goes on to summarize the future of Rome — or the past, as it is to Virgil and his contemporaries. Jupiter tells Venus that Aeneas will conquer Latium, and then in three centuries, a princess with Trojan blood will become pregnant.

> Pregnant by Mars, will bear sons to him.  
> Afterward, happy in the tawny pelt  
> His nurse, the she-wolf, wears, young Romulus  
> Will take leadership, build walls of Mars,  
> And call by his own name his people Romans. (I. 369-373)

Virgil uses Jupiter as tool to blend the myths of Aeneas and Romulus and Remus. It effectively and authoritatively tethers the *Aeneid* to both prominent origin tales, and reaffirms the connection between the Greeks and the Romans through Rhea Silvia.
Virgil also uses Jupiter’s voice to provide an origin of the city and state’s name—it was derived from the name of Romulus. There are other possible myths from which the term “Roman” could have been derived, but by specifically stating that “Rome” came from “Romulus,” Virgil elevates the validity of this version of history over the others. Another myth exists to explain the origin of the name “Rome” but it doesn’t support the divine lineage of Aeneas, Romulus and ultimately Augustus, therefore it wasn’t included in Jupiter’s etymological reasoning for the term “Romans.” This myth is the story of Rhome, a Trojan woman who left Troy with a group of refugees after a fire burned down their homes. The expedition sailed up the Tiber River and stopped in Latium with the intention of merely resting, but Rhome was frustrated with the aimless journey and immediately saw the potential of the land. She convinced the other women to help her burn down the ships so that the group would have no choice but to settle on Palatine Hill, making her the founder of Rome not through divine intervention, but through trusted instinct.

This telling of Rhome’s myth comes from Roman historian Plutarch, who claims it’s an explanation for why wives are so affectionate with their husbands—because they’re still apologizing for burning the ships (Mazzoni, 5). The myth has credence because it was first recorded in the 5th century BCE by Hellanicus of Lesbos, meaning it most likely existed orally before then, possibly predating even the myth of Aeneas. Because the story of Rhome had a presence in Roman history and the minds of the people, Virgil couldn’t ignore it altogether. As a competing myth, Virgil distorted it as a tool of instrumentalism to promote Romulus as one of the founders of Rome over Rhome. In Book V of the Aeneid, Virgil includes a scene in which Juno incites a group of Trojan women to burn their ships. This clearly draws from the myth of Rhome but places responsibility for the actions onto Juno.
and removes its connection to the founding of Rome. This scene contains the most recognizable element from Rhome’s ethnysymbolic myth — the burning of the ships — but omits the rest of the story and Rhome herself to avoid contradicting the belief that the divine line of Aeneas, Romulus and Augustus was responsible for founding Rome.

Rhome, Aeneas, Romulus and Remus were all Roman legends important to the conception of Roman identity at the time of Virgil’s writing. Cristina Mazzoni defends the important role of legends in her book *She-Wolf*, stating: “Unlike fables, legends are narratives in which people believe, identifying with what they have to tell: Legends repeat belief and reinforce it, affirming the values of the group to whose tradition they belong” (7). In the *Aeneid*, Virgil took widely known Roman legends and subverted the beliefs they reinforced in a way that served his purpose of promoting Augustus’s ideals and legitimizing his rule. Rhome’s myth placed importance on the instinct and ability of women, qualities not valued in Augustus’s patriarchal society. In the *Aeneid*, hers becomes a myth of a vengeful goddess and the mad women she creates. The myth of Romulus and Remus, however, reaffirms the roles men played in founding Rome, as well as the roles of the divine and Augustus’s godly heritage, so Virgil blended it with his central narrative about Aeneas. By curating and then blending elements of foundational myths already existent in Roman mythology, Virgil created a narrative out of recognizable figure and legends, and provided a familiar basis for his origin tale through which he could promote Augustan ideals and legitimize him as Rome’s leader.
Chapter 2: Virgil the Dissident

Virgil was born in 70 BCE and died in 19 BCE. He was a crucial player in Augustus’s initiative to forge a cohesive tale of Roman national identity that didn’t contradict the origins or structure of his Empire, but Virgil was more than a mercenary poet. Aside from the *Aeneid*, he’s best known as the poet behind the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*. Both of these works were produced in a time of instability, and the *Georgics* is especially politically influenced. It was written during the period of civil wars preceding Augustus’s reign, first between Julius Caesar’s assassins, against Octavian (soon to become Augustus) and Mark Antony, and then Octavian against Mark Antony (Powell, 111). Unlike the *Aeneid*, however, neither of these works were commissioned and Augustus didn’t contribute to their creation.

Anthony D. Smith⁴, founder of the ethnosymbolic approach in nationalist studies, points to intellectuals as pivotal players in the production and analysis of ethnosymbols. In *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism*, contributor Daniele Conversi reaffirms his position, stating, “They mostly acts as ‘chroniclers’ of the ethnic past, elaborating those memories which can link the modern nation back to its ‘golden age’” (22). She writes specifically about post-industrial nations, believing that nationalism emerges out of the period of

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⁴ Anthony D. Smith was a student of Ernest Gellner before he became a nationalist studies expert in his own right. Gellner is one of the most influential scholars in the field of nationalist studies. His work takes a decidedly modernist approach, asserting that nationalism is a modern occurrence and arises out of the transitional period of instability as a nation goes from agrarian to industrial. Smith critiques Gellner’s rigidly modern view and rejects that industrialization is a prerequisite for nationalism. In *The Warwick Debates on Nationalism* between Gellner and Smith, one of their main theoretical disagreements is over the importance histories of nations. Gellner refers to it as the “navel” question — “some have it and some don’t and in any case it’s inessential” (*Nations and Nationalism*, 367), while Smith argues history is in fact essential to understanding nations, hence his development of the ethnosymbolic approach.
instability during the shift from an agrarian society to an industrial society, but her ideas also apply to Ancient Rome and the nationalism that emerged in the shift from Republic to Empire during Augustus’s reign. Virgil fits Conversi’s description of an intellectual who utilized, analyzed and juxtaposed ethnosymbols from Roman history, as does Augustus because he ordered the chronicling of Roman history. As the author of the epic, however, Virgil’s role is more complex. He was the instrumentalist, creating a national epic and making use of ethnosymbols in ways that suited his narrative, but he also was also a dissident, incorporating subtle critiques of Augustus into his narrative.

Though Augustus commissioned the *Aeneid*, Virgil had creative control and exercised it immediately with his choice of time and place. It’s probable Augustus didn’t anticipate an epic set so far in the past. Virgil inverted this expectation by writing a poem “on the Trojan ancestors with glimpses forward to Augustus,” (*Caesar Augustus*, 213) instead of producing a poem sent in the present with glimpses to the past. In doing so, he anchored his poem in a time period awash with nostalgia, or a Golden Age. Conversi notes the importance of a Golden Age in instrumentalist texts, and this is an idea that will be explored in Chapter 6. By setting the *Aeneid* just after the Trojan War, Virgil emphasizes the Roman connection to Ancient Greece. He effectively weaves storylines from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* into his work, tying his epic to a trusted and familiar past and giving it a sense of legitimacy. In the process, he also justifies Roman conquest of the Greeks as revenge for destroying Troy and raises Rome to equal or greater antiquity than the Greeks.

Praise and glory for Rome are abundant in the *Aeneid*, but it also contains subtle critiques of Augustus’ Rome and his imperialist policies. Virgil subverts the characterization of Aeneas as dutiful by including his immense dissatisfaction with his
duty. He portrays Aeneas as a suffering man. Aeneas doesn't emote the pride or joy one might expect from an epic hero, or from a character intended to be a thinly veiled depiction of Augustus. Instead, Virgil chooses to represent Aeneas as restricted by his duty. He acts in the interests of Rome but reaps none of the benefits: “Aeneas himself, protégé of heaven, but personally unhappy and deprived of everything he values, ending the poem with the knowledge that he has killed Dido and Turnus, that he has failed to save Pallas, that he will not live to see the Rome for which he has done and suffered so much: he is presented by Virgil in a light which brings out both the triumph and the cost of Empire” (Caesar Augustus, 213). Aeneas's life is one marred by war and loss. Virgil makes it clear that, if left to his own devices, Aeneas would have never left Troy. When pressured by the gods to leave behind to his lover, Dido, Queen of Carthage, Aeneas tells her:

If Fate permitted me to spend my days
By my own lights, and make the best of things
According to my wishes, first of all
I should look after Troy and the loved relics
Left me of my people (IV. 469-473)

This passage makes it clear to the audience that Aeneas lives a life of self-denial, weighed down by duty and is unable to act as he would like. Not only does his fate force him to sacrifice his homeland of Troy, he must sacrifice his love, Dido.

But now it is the rich Italian land
Apollo tells me I must make for: Italy,
Named by his oracles. There is my love;
There is my country. (IV. 476-478)

This marks the theme of Aeneas's life —“There is my love/There is my country,” and country always triumphs over personal happiness. It’s not a positive comment on imperialism, and Virgil could have presented it in a more pleasant light if that was his goal. Instead, he chose to underscore the cost of imperialism and subtly question its worth.
In addition to this emotionally based criticism of Augustus’s Rome, Virgil also includes a more pointed critique of Augustus’s image. Smith writes that a basic identity crisis occurs during periods of instability, and “that is typically when grand narratives of the national history are formulated, its exemplary or golden ages are defined, and its heroes and saints are selected” (Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism, 36). The Aeneid is exactly this type of text, written after a period of massive instability and warfare, to reaffirm national identity but also to ease the transitional period between the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Augustan Empire by retroactively inserting Augustus into the pantheon of Roman heroes. In order to canonize him, however, Virgil had to reshape Augustus’s image into something more heroic.

For Augustus to become the sole ruler of Rome, he had to win five different wars, giving him a reputation for being cold-hearted, vengeful, and selfish. By far the worse quality he was perceived as having, however, was cowardice. The specific rumor was that Augustus did not participate in the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, fought against Julius Caesar’s murderers, and that the victory should be attributed to his aides (Caesar Augustus: Seven Aspects, 76). It was a damaging public image and one of the many things Virgil sought to adjust in the Aeneid. Augustus also publically distanced himself from this image once he was in power by establishing a policy of clemency and emphasizing his devout loyalty to Rome. This quality of loyalty to Rome is evident in the Aeneid, albeit at personal cost, but the text doesn’t present Aeneas as merciful in the same way Augustus presented himself as merciful.

There are two scenes in the Aeneid in which opponents beg Aeneas for mercy, but he kills them regardless. The first occurs in Book X after the death of Evander’s son Pallas, who
was entrusted to Aeneas’s care. Aeneas is enraged by Pallas’s death and his fury turns into a killing spree. In an extended scene of warfare, not one but three different men beg Aeneas to show mercy. Magus, Tarquitus and Liger are all denied clemency by Aeneas, who’s described as being “in fury/Wild as a torrent or a dark tornado” (X. 846-847). Aeneas’s passionate reaction to Pallas’s death may seem justified by modern standards, but in the *Aeneid* Virgil goes to great lengths to depict Aeneas as controlled (the ways in which Virgil does this are discussed in Chapter 3). Augustus’s Rome valued rational behavior and punished impulsive behavior, as was made evident in a series of political, social and moral reforms Augustus passed. These reforms specifically targeted impulsive sexual behavior by increasing the strictness of divorce laws and making adultery a civil crime (Fife). This scene in Book X, shows Aeneas forgoing one of the most important Augustan values and allowing irrational passion to motivate his actions instead of logic. His killing spree directly contradicts the image of a merciful leader as well as the image of a restrained and rational ruler that Augustus promoted himself as being.

In the last lines of the final book, Book XII, Aeneas corners his enemy, Turnus.

Turnus begs for his life:

If you can feel a father’s grief—and you, too,
Had such a father in Anchises—then
Let me bespeak your mercy for old age (XII. 1268-1270)

He concludes his plea by conceding to Aeneas and asking him to “go no further/Out of hatred” (X.1275-1276). Aeneas nearly complies, but then sees Pallas’s swordbelt around Turnus’s shoulder and slips away from logic and into fury, and acts out of hatred. Showing neither restraint nor clemency, Aeneas kills Turnus. The image of Aeneas that Virgil depicts in these two scenes is similar to the negative public image of Augustus and echoes
the rumors of his merciless behavior in battle. When examining the *Aeneid* as a whole, it overall supports the Augustan ideals of clemency and rationality and reflects Augustus's reshaped public image of his own design, but when looking at these two scenes in Book X and XII, there's a clear subversive underpinning. Virgil may have been the intellect who produced an instrumentalist text, but he also found a way to quietly dissent and push back against Augustus's imperialist conception of Rome and Augustus's conception of himself.
Chapter 3: Creating a Foil

Aeneas’s characteristics must represent the characteristics Augustus values and anticipate the characteristics of his Rome. Therefore, in Virgil’s interpretation of Aeneas, he depicts Aeneas as a dutiful, loyal, rational leader guiding his fellow Trojans towards Latium where he will found the Roman state. Virgil communicates these characteristics to the audience through Aeneas’s near constant reaffirmation of his fated duty, and also through the use of foils. Dido, the Queen of Carthage and Aeneas’s love interest, represents the antitheses to Aeneas, and by extension Augustus’s Rome. She embodies the opposite of Augustan values. She’s hotheaded, irrational and impulsive. Dido was propelled into their madness by divine intervention, as opposed to Aeneas, who was propelled into greatness by divine intervention, promoting the idea that Rome, and Augustus, has the will of the gods on its side. Dido functions as a foil for Aeneas, but only after Virgil greatly distorts her mythology. By deconstructing Dido, one can see the great extent to which Virgil went in manipulating ethnosymbols to serve his narrative.

The first half of the Aeneid recounts Aeneas’s journey to Latium. Robert Fitzgerald’s translation uses “Italy,” “Rome,” “Ausonia,” “Hesperia” and “Latium” interchangeably to refer to Aeneas’s destination, but Ausonia refers specifically to lower Italy, Hesperia is a Greek term meaning “lands to the west” often used to refer to the Italian peninsula, and Latium is an ancient territory in west-central Italy (The Oxford Classical Dictionary). Aeneas’s specific fate is to sail to Latium, where he will marry Lavinia, the daughter of Latium’s king. He’s fated to become King of Latium and his son, Ascanius, will found Alba Longa, where Romulus and Remus will be born and go on to found Rome. Throughout Aeneas’s journey, Juno constantly harasses him, despite having full awareness of his fate.
She cannot alter his fate, so instead she settles for making his journey miserable. Virgil’s contemporary Roman audience would have known exactly why Juno hated Aeneas because of their familiarity with Ancient Greek mythology and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A central theme in the *Iliad* is Juno’s hatred for the Trojans because Paris, a Trojan prince, chose Venus as the most beautiful of the goddesses over Juno. Throughout the epic, the gods are depicted as playing a large role in the trajectory of the war, and Juno is shown sabotaging the Trojans and favoring the Greeks. Virgil references her overwhelming hatred for the Trojans by writing, “The race I hate is crossing the Tuscan sea” (I. 94). By using the word “race,” Virgil cues his readers to draw on the myth of the Trojan War as Juno’s reason for hating the Trojan race, and therefore Aeneas.

The events of the *Iliad* are the basis of Juno’s hatred for Aeneas, but Virgil also incorporates a more recent event as a reason why Juno hates the Trojans, and this relates to Dido. In the opening stanza of the *Aeneid*, Virgil writes, “And Juno, we are told, cared more for Carthage/Than for any walled city of earth” (I. 24-25) establishing Carthage, the Phoenician capital in North Africa (modern day Tunisia), as Juno’s favorite city. There’s no historical record that a love of Carthage was a part of Juno’s mythology, but by adding this to her canon of characteristics, Virgil is able to create a secondary reason Juno hates Aeneas that also legitimizes a past Roman war—the Punic Wars against Carthage. Virgil alludes to the series of wars in the first few lines of the epic:

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5 The Punic Wars were a series of three wars fought between the Roman Republic and Carthage spread throughout 264 BCE to 146 BCE. At the time, these were the largest wars Rome had ever fought. During the Third Punic War, Carthage was completely destroyed, nearly all of its citizens were taken as slaves and the land left behind was claimed for the Republic. After conquering Carthage, Rome asserted domination over all of the western Mediterranean (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*).
But she had heard long since
That generations born of Trojan blood
Would one day overthrow her Tyrian walls (I. 30-32)

The word “Tyrian” refers to the Phoenician city of Tyre. Dido was the Queen of Tyre until a
coup forced her to leave. Along with a group of colonists, she founded Carthage. Virgil
establishes Juno as loving Carthage, and hating Aeneas because his people will one day
destroy it. One of the Aeneid’s many objectives as a politically motivated text is to account
for the wars and periods of turmoil in Rome’s past by affirming them as unavoidable
aspects of Rome’s fate. In the Aeneid, Virgil retroactively inserts a reference to the Punic
Wars to alleviate the perception of Rome’s responsibility. Through Dido, Virgil builds on
Juno’s hatred for the Trojans by incorporating Juno’s foresight of the Punic Wars, while
simultaneously establishing a counterpart to Aeneas.

Dido serves as a foil for Aeneas because while he is duty-bound and rational, she is
indulgent and irrational. In Carthage, Aeneas and Dido fall into an all-consuming type of
love. They’re described wasting an entire winter as “prisoners of lust” (IV. 265). The
Phoenicians, Dido’s people, begin to lose respect for her as their leader and the gods begin
to worry that Aeneas has lost sight of his mission. Jupiter sends Mercury to remind Aeneas
of his fate, which causes him to immediately snap out of his passion-induced state of
distraction and refocus on continuing towards Rome. The conversation between Dido and
Aeneas when he informs her of his impending departure highlights the difference between
the two of them and her role as a foil for him. Aeneas hopes to leave Carthage without
saying goodbye to Dido, but she confronts him, saying:

    You even hoped to keep me in the dark
    As to this outrage, did you, two-faced man,
    And slip away in silence? Can our love
    Not hold you, can the pledge we gave not hold you,
Can Dido not, now sure to die in pain? (IV. 417-421)

She reacts passionately and dramatically, as shown by her statement that she will now surely die in pain. Aeneas responds in a much more reserved, resigned manner. He makes a level-headed speech about how they never entered into a contract of marriage, and though he wishes the fates would allow him to spend his days with her, he must go forth towards the rich Italian lands. In a request indicative of his own nature, Aeneas ends his speech with the plea that she be reasonable:

“So please, no more
Of these appeals that set us both afire.
I sail for Italy not of my own free will” (IV. 497-499).

Virgil doesn’t endow Dido with rationality, piety, or a sense of duty even though she’s Queen. As a result, she’s unable to be reasoned out of her despair, neither by Aeneas nor by her sister. As a counterpart to Aeneas, who is accepting of fate, she descends into madness and refuses to accept his unalterable destiny. Dido’s character also reinforces to the Roman people that fate must be accepted unquestioningly just as Aeneas demonstrates, because the alternative is to be like Dido, who is portrayed as crazy. The Aeneid treats the act of rejecting the fates as a symptom of madness, while Aeneas, man of reason, dutifully accepts fate even when it contradicts his wishes. Acceptance of fate is a part of Roman culture and religion, but it’s also a useful tool for elites like Augustus as a means of explaining and justifying the unequal, unpopular or unstable aspects of their rule as being out of their hands.

Dido is not just an irrational person, she’s an irrational woman. Her womanhood is significant for many reasons, one of which being that in a patriarchal society, like Rome, it’s
easy to accept a woman as a mad, irrational individual. The text of the *Aeneid* promotes this stereotype when Mercury comes to Aeneas in a dream and says:

The woman hatches  
Plots and drastic actions in her heart,  
Resolved on death now, whipping herself on  
To heights of anger (IV. 782-785)

He then closes his speech with the line, “Woman's a thing/Forever fitful and forever changing” (791-792), which conveys a negative stereotype of women to the audience. Dido isn’t the only foolish woman to be featured in the *Aeneid*, though. In Book V, Juno sends a messenger to Sicily, where the Trojans landed, with the intention of delaying their travels. She does this by whipping the women onboard into a frenzy. This is one of the only instances in the poem that mentions the Trojan women and it’s solely because they’re tools used by Juno and Virgil to further sabotage Aeneas. The women burn their ships and then cower with shame at what they’ve done. They’re not characters, they’re Virgil’s instruments, and they’re left behind when the men carry on with their journey. This is also the scene in the epic that alludes to the myth of Rhome, presented in the context of women behaving irrationally and destructively, which helps to further diminish the legitimacy of Rhome’s competing foundational myth.

Dido also serves both Virgil and Augustus as an example of a madwoman and the antithesis of Roman qualities because her irrationality and passion are sexually motivated. She’s a classic wayward woman within the context of Augustus’s laws and moral ideals. Augustus built an Empire with himself as the Emperor, but he would describe his actions in familiar, ethnosymbolic language. Instead of calling himself the Emperor, he’d referred to
himself as the “First Citizen.” As the Restorer of the Republic, Augustus passed a series of reforms, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, to reinforce traditional values of monogamy, chastity and virtue in what he saw as an immoral Roman society. He created monetary incentives for families with multiple children, particularly sons, made divorce laws more strict, and changed adultery to a civil crime for which a woman could lose half her dowry, a third of her property, be exiled, or in extreme cases, be executed. These laws were documented as unpopular in Roman society and ultimately rarely enforced, though Augustus did eventually exile his own daughter after she was convicted as an adulteress (The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome). Nevertheless, his objective was to re-elevate the morals of Rome, specifically the literate upper class. The Aeneid promoted these traditional values by presenting Dido’s death a result of her sexual desires. Dido dies by piercing herself with a sword Aeneas gave her on top of a funeral pyre as he and the Trojans sail away from Carthage. It’s an extremist response to the departure of her lover and one that conveys the destructiveness of sexual desire and a non-chaste lifestyle.

Dido didn’t begin as a mad, lust-driven woman. Her descent into passionate love and then madness came about through divine intervention. Upon realizing Aeneas landed in Carthage, his mother, Venus, became worried that Juno would compel the Phoenicians to greet the Trojans violently. In order to prevent this, Venus asked her son, Amor, to afflict Dido with a deep love for Aeneas so that she “cannot be changed by any power/But will be kept on my side by profound/Love of Aeneas” (1.923-925). Before she’s afflicted with love

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6 Philip Taylor identifies Augustus as one of the great propagandists. His controlled use of his image and grounding of his language in familiar, if incorrect terms, allowed him to aptly control the presentation of his Roman Empire to its citizens. Taylor notes that Augustus maintained the language of the Republic even when it was clear he was building an imperial dynasty (45).
for Aeneas, Dido is a respected Queen and faithful widow. This adds to her complexity as a foil for Aeneas because though she serves as an antithesis to his sense of duty and logic, before Venus orders her to be ensnared with love, Dido herself is duty-bound and logical.

Dido is an ethnosymbol of Greco-Roman culture that predates Virgil and the *Aeneid.* By all accounts, except Virgil's, Dido was a strong woman and a fair, successful ruler. She was the Princess of Tyre, whose brother murders her husband, causing her to flee in search of a new home. She led a group of Phoenicians to Carthage, and in doing so freed them from tyranny. This is the description of Dido Venus tells Aeneas in *Book I* and thus far it aligns with her backstory as it was prior to Virgil's distortion. Her canonical mythology and Virgil's version of her mythology deviate after the founding of Carthage, however.

Dido's pre-existing myth maintains that she was loyal to her deceased husband throughout her entire life. She constantly turned down marriage offers and finally committed suicide in his honor on top of a funeral pyre. Perhaps it was this image of Dido on a funeral pyre that attracted Virgil, because he kept this aspect of her myth when fabricating her madness and her relationship with Aeneas.

Dido is an example of an ethnosymbol wielded as a tool of instrumentalism because prior to Virgil's rendering, her myth was not at all associated with that of Aeneas.

According to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome,* Dido, who was a real woman of history, founded Carthage near the end of the 9th century. Carthage did not exist in 1184 BCE, the date accepted by Greeks and Romans as the end of the Trojan War and when the *Aeneid* was set. Dido and Aeneas weren't contemporaries, therefore they could not have been lovers. Virgil inserted her into the myth of Aeneas because she was a known ethnosymbol with a striking end and an association with Carthage, meaning she fit his
purposes very well. Virgil simply had to reposition Dido in time and distort her myth to strip her of her respectability, and create for her a death centered around a passionate fury that served as a stark contrast to Aeneas’s reserved control.
Chapter 4: Medium Influencing Message

There were a limited number of means to disseminate information in Ancient Rome. Coins were one option because they circulated throughout the state and could support visual imagery. This was how Augustus published his manifesto “Peace and Victory,” which depicted the many achievements of his government after the civil wars (Taylor, 45). He also used statues and sculptures done in relief on buildings to portray scenes from both history and his life. Augustus’s public image was highly controlled in order to present him favorably, including depicting him as more attractive than he really was. The most effective way of spreading large amounts of information, however, was through the medium of poetry. In addition to Virgil, Augustus was a patron to well-known poets Horace, Ovid and Propertius. Though only members of the upper classes would have been literate in Ancient Rome, these poets were among the most influential people in society and therefore effective tools in targeting the upper class with the ideals promoted in the Aeneid. The medium of an epic was also important to Ancient Roman society because of the connection to the epics of Ancient Greece.

Within the Aeneid, one of the most important scenes as related to ethnosymbolism is presented through a meta-medium. In Book XIII, Venus gives Aeneas a shield made by her husband, Vulcan. This shield is one of the most powerful tools Virgil uses in his text to glorify the Roman state. It’s engraved with a series of scenes, presented sequentially like a comic book, from Rome’s future—the past of its contemporary readers—conveying the message that not only is Rome a powerful society, but also that its power is innate, woven into the fabric of its existence because of fate. Virgil’s choice of a shield as the vessel for this imagery of Roman icons as opposed to something with more immediate power, like a
sword, is significant because it speaks to the role the Emperor must have in Roman society. Shields are used for protection. Aeneas carries a shield covered with images glorifying Rome’s future leaders for his protection. This reinforces the idea of one man as the nation’s protector, subtly preparing the Roman people to become citizens of an Empire ruled by an Emperor. It encourages the Romans to trust the wielder of the shield—Aeneas and by extension Augustus—as their protector. The medium of the shield affirms Augustus’s position as the guardian of the Roman people and affirms the notion that Rome’s past wars were for purposes of self-defense and motivated by the need to protect, and each scene of glory described as featured on the shield works towards this end.

The shield is a prime example of instrumentalism through ethnosymbolic means. As Conversi notes, the myth of a Golden Age is an important foundation upon which national identity is constructed. According to the ethnosymbolic approach, scholars, and others charged with recording the past, make strategic use of national symbols, and this is exactly what Virgil does with the icons he chose to depict on Aeneas’s shield. On the shield, Vulcan has “wrought the future story of Italy,/The triumphs of the Romans” (VIII. 850-851). It functions as a literary device because within the narrative of his text, Virgil creates a promising future for his characters to work towards while also reminding his audience of their noble and heroic heritage, and ensures a continuation of that trend. Through the medium of the shield, Virgil emphasizes a Golden Age by canonizing figures from Rome’s past and using them to evoke nostalgia for the greatness he insists they represent.

The first image Virgil describes on Aeneas’s shield is that of the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus mentioned in Chapter1. Virgil describes the scene as, “The mother wolf, lying in Mars’ green grotto;/Made the twin boys play abut her teats” (VIII. 854-855).
This is the most famous image of the she-wolf and the twin boys, and Virgil capitalizes on its prevalence. It’s such an important ethnosymbol that in modern Rome, centuries after the first mention of the she-wolf, her likeness nursing Romulus and Remus can be found in relief throughout the city. By situating the she-wolf as the first ethnosymbol on Aeneas’s shield, Virgil ensures Romans associate it with the larger myth of the *Aeneid* instead of a separate myth. It’s another effort to blend Romulus and Remus’s foundational myth with that of Aeneas and reiterates the point that Romulus, Remus and Aeneas are related, and Augustus is their descendent.

The next scene Virgil describes is the rape of the Sabine women and the subsequent war. This is another ethnosymbolic myth Virgil’s contemporary audience would have expected to be included in any honest telling of Rome’s history. Virgil then transitions into a canonization of selected individuals from history. Virgil describes the imagery of Lars Porsenna, the Etruscan King who waged war with Rome, and Horatius Cocles, the Roman officer who defended the Pons Sublicius (Sublician bridge) against Porsenna’s invasion (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*). Cocles is a Roman hero and his image was often used in Ancient Rome to reinforce the idea of city above self, which is most likely the values Virgil intends to transmit by including him on Aeneas’s shield. Virgil also mentions Cloelia, a woman taken captive by Porsenna. She escaped from him but was eventually recaptured.

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7 The first generation of Roman men abducted the neighboring Sabine women and took them for wives. This caused a brief period of turmoil with the Sabine people and their king, Tatius (who is also mentioned in the description of the shield) but they eventually brokered peace. Tatius and Romulus combined territories to expand Rome and ruled jointly (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*).
Porsenna was so impressed with her courage that he allowed her to set free half of his prisoners of war. Cloelia chose all the young boys so that they could continue fighting. Like Cocles, the story of her heroism promotes the ideal of protecting the city over oneself. The next ethnosymbol Virgil highlights on Aeneas's shield is also known as a protector—Marcus Manlius. Manlius single-handedly defended the Capitol of Rome while the city was abandoned. Virgil refers to him as the “Guard of Tarpeian Rock” (VIII. 885) in the text, further emphasizing him as a protector. Manlius was also considered a martyr. He was a champion of the plebeians, or the lower class, and he was executed for accusing the wealthy of mistreating the plebeians (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*). Manlius is associated with social reforms in Rome, making him an effective ethnosymbol to associate with Aeneas, and therefore Augustus, because he was both a protector and a reformer.

After using these icons to create a framework of heroism, Virgil inserts Augustus by describing a scene in which he sails towards Actium. During the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Augustus decisively defeated Marc Antony and Cleopatra and established himself as the sole ruler of the Roman world (*The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*). In his description of Augustus arriving to the battle, Virgil endows him with godlike qualities. He writes:

> With ships maneuvering, sea glowing gold,  
> Augustus Caesar leading into battle  
> Italians, with both senators and people,  
> Household gods and great gods: there he stood  
> High on a stern, and from his blessed brow  
> Twin flames gushed upwards, while his crest revealed  
> His father's stars. (VIII. 915-921)

This stanza describes Augustus as high in the stern of the ship, blessed from his brow, among both the senators and the people, minor and major deities. It's a description
permeating strength, control and godliness. This passage, along with the frequent mentions of Augustus’s divine lineage through his relations to Venus and Mars via Aeneas and Romulus, elevates Augustus to the status of a god. Virgil never plainly states that Augustus is a god, but this type of indirectness aligns with the way Augustus treated the matter of his divinity. He never publically identified himself as a god, but he officially deified Julius Caesar and made a point of emphasizing their familial relationship, thereby implying that he too was divine, and the *Aeneid* reaffirms this.

Virgil then goes on to further describe the Battle of Actium, also known as the final war of the Roman Republic, or Marc Antony’s Civil War. By including this war on Aeneas’s shield, Virgil elevates it to the status of mythology and affirms its importance. It was an important war in history because it ended the period of turmoil and ushered in the Pax Romana, which is still today the longest period of peace Europe has ever experienced. The battle also marked the end of the Roman Republic, because Augustus became Emperor as a result of his victory. All of this is information comes with historical hindsight, however. As Virgil used it in the text of his poem, it’s simply another way to lure his audience into regarding the Battle of Actium with the level of importance Augustus desired.

The purpose of the shield is to canonize figures from Roman history and imply a Golden Age, but it is also a means through which Virgil situates Augustus among Roman icons, thereby elevating him to the level of importance of these legendary heroes. By placing a description of Augustus’s legacy alongside Cokes, Cloelia and Marcus Manlius, Virgil effectively weaves Augustus into the mythology of Rome. The shield also represents the underlying doctrine of the *Aeneid*—fate. Augustus’s presence on the shield makes it clear that his fate is to rule Rome. Virgil also draws a parallel between Cleopatra and Dido
that reinforces Aeneas and Augustus’s fate. Both are exotic women from North Africa who try and fail to interfere with the fate of the Roman state. Virgil reinforces that Cleopatra’s defeat, and the war itself, was the will of the gods.

Closing out the description of the shield, and Book VIII, is the wide-eyed wonderment of Aeneas.

All these images on Vulcan’s shield,
His mother’s gift, were wonders to Aeneas.
Knowing nothing of the events themselves,
He felt joy in their pictures, taking up
Upon his shoulder all the destined acts
And fame of his descendants (VIII. 987-992)

This allows for a certain level of detachment between Aeneas and his future descendants.

It’s as though Virgil wants to remind the audience that while Romans will go on to do the great things he’s outlined here, that’s all inconsequential to Aeneas. His task and his focus is to found Rome as was fated. The ethnosymbols presented on the shield are more like prophecies to Aeneas than facts. In describing Aeneas’s shield, Virgil incorporates vast swaths of Roman history in the epic, and by dutifully taking up the shield, Aeneas enables all of the events upon it to happen.
Chapter 5: Continuity Beyond Fatality

Aeneas's familial ties to the gods and his godlike qualities suggest a commonality between religion and nationalism. The intersection of religion and nationalism is within the doctrine of loyalty. Religion is a loyalty to a god and his teachings; nationalism is a loyalty to a community and its values. Because they use similar rhetoric, religion and nationalism are often blurred together—to love ones country is to love ones God and vice versa. In the United States, the language of the Pledge of Allegiance in the phrase, “one nation, under god, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” exemplifies this. It captures both nationalist and religious sentiments, implying that the United States is a nation founded by God and united by a loyalty to him. The Aeneid also captures this intersection. Aeneas’s journey is punctuated by interactions with the gods and the narrative constantly reiterates that his mission of founding Rome is divinely ordained. There’s no distinction made between loyalty to the gods and loyalty to his country and countrymen. Aeneas continues onward towards Italy out of duty and allegiance to his fate as ordained by the gods, to his ancestors, and to the nation that will one day be Rome.

The Aeneid is both a religious and a nationalist text and the two are so entwined they’re impossible to separate. Nationalist theorist Benedict Anderson accounts for the similarities between religion and nationalism in his book Imagined Communities. He writes largely about the industrial era but the fundamentals of his ideas apply to more ancient nations. Anderson posits that during the age of Enlightenment in Western Europe, the

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8 The phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 in response to the Cold War and the threat of communism.
9 Along with Gellner, Anderson is one of the fathers of nationalism studies. He defines a nation as “an imagined political community —and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6).
dimming of religious thought left a void that was filled with nationalist thought. He points specifically to the 18th century, but the similarity he identifies between religion and nationalism is present in every instance where the two dogmas coexist. This similarity between religion and nationalism is that both provide a means of upholding the continuity of life beyond fatality.

Religion serves many purposes, a major one being combatting mortality through the emphasis of continuity — life continues after death in the afterlife. When the emergence of more secular thought in 18th century Western Europe diminished religious beliefs, people were stripped of their defense against fatality and left desiring an alternative assurance of continuity of life beyond death. Anderson writes, “What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity…As we shall see, few things were [are] better suited to this end than an idea of nation” (11). Augustus’s Rome was a religious state, not the site of lessening religious beliefs as Anderson describes 18th century Europe, however the similarity Anderson identifies between nationalism and religion serves as an explanation for why nationalist and religious rhetoric are largely one in the same in the *Aeneid*. The epic exemplifies this blend of nationalist and religious sentiment throughout, particularly whenever Aeneas states a variation of: “Apollo tells me I must make for: Italy,/Named by his oracles,” (IV. 477-478) in which he explains his mission through religion. The text best captures the concept of life after death as it relates to nationalism in Book V, however, when Aeneas travels to the underworld.

Aeneas’s deceased father, Anchises, summons him to the underworld because, according to Anchises, before Aeneas can continue onwards to Italy, he must “hear of your whole race to come” (V. 958). Aeneas, and by extension the audience, must learn about the
future glory of Rome through the spirits in the underworld before he can continue with his journey. In the underworld, Aeneas encounters both the dead from his life and the dead from history. He sees Dido and begs for her forgiveness, but she ignores him. Then, Anchises points out to Aeneas a series of figures from Roman history, the glorified heroes and the scorned traitors:

“What glories follow Dardan generations
In after years, and from Italian blood
What famous children in your line will come,
Souls of the future, living in our name,
I shall tell you clearly now, and in the telling
Teach you your destiny.” (VI. 1015-1020)

In the context of the Aeneid, the icons Anchises identifies are from the future, but in the context of Virgil's Rome, these figures are from the past. Virgil inserts ethnonyms from Roman history into the Aeneid as the future, the fated future that supports the glory of Rome in a scene similar to Book VIII when Venus gives Aeneas the shield. At this point in Book V, though, Virgil applies the idea of reincarnation to each ethnysymbol, implying that supporting the nation allows dutiful citizens to be reincarnated and therefore have life after death.

Continuity beyond fatality is present in this underworld scene because the underworld is the Roman religious construction against fatality. While standing along the river Lethe, Aeneas asks Anchises who the men on the other side of the river are and asks what they’re doing. These men are Roman ethnonyms, and Anchises tells Aeneas they are “Souls for whom/A second body is in store” (VI. 956-957). Anchises speaks of reincarnation, the ultimate example of continuity beyond fatality. Anchises’s catalogue of Roman heroes soon to be reborn in corporeal form comprises the most important figures from Roman history, including Romulus and Remus, Alba Silvius — about whom Anchises
states, “Through him our race will rule in Alba Longa” (VI. 1028), again reaffirming Aeneas’s impressive lineage —Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus. This serves two purposes —it reinforces the fated glory of Rome and it reinforces a life beyond death for those loyal to the nation. The fact that these ethnosymbolic figures will be reincarnated affirms earned continuity for loyal countrymen. It’s also a means of highlighting the accomplishments and greatness of Rome for an audience of Virgil’s contemporaries just as he did with the shield.

This scene also serves to underscore the connection between Augustus’s Rome and Mars, god of war. In the narrative, Anchises points out Romulus wears the double plume of Mars on his chest (VI. 1044). The link between Rome and Mars was important because it implied that Rome had Mars on its side in warfare. It was also important to Augustus that he be linked with Mars personally because it created the appearance of military prowess and counteracted his reputation for being weak in battle. During the Battle of Philippi, Augustus prayed to Mars for victory and vowed to erect a temple in his honor if the Triumvirate of Augustus (known as Octavian at this point), Marc Antony and Lepidus defeated Julius Caesar’s assassins (The Oxford English Classical Dictionary). After the battle, Augustus credited the victory to his prayer and began construction on the Temple of Mars Ultor, (meaning Mars the Avenger). It was inaugurated in 2BCE and it honored Mars and the Battle of Philippi, while also presenting Julius Caesar as Mars’s peer. To promote him close association with Mars throughout the Roman Empire, Roman coins depicted the temple, and Virgil emphasized it in his epic.
Returning to the representation of continuity beyond fatality in the underworld scene of Book V, Virgil describes in detail Julius Caesar and Augustus. Of Julius Caesar Anchises remarks:

Here is Caesar, and all the line of Iulus [Ascianus]
All who shall one day pass under the dome
Of the great sky: this is the man, this one,
Of whom so often you have heard the promise (VI. 1060-1063)

Caesar's soul is waiting to be reborn into life and lead Rome to greatness. It's continuity beyond fatality in that his soul will be reincarnated into the form of a great leader, and it's continuity beyond fatality that death did not end the legend of Caesar or end his influence. Augustus is also mentioned in this scene. While his soul waits for rebirth, Anchises tells Aeneas:

This is the man, this one,
Of whom so often you have heard the promise,
Caesar Augustus, son of the deified
Who shall bring once again an Age of Gold (VI. 1062-1065)

This implies to the audience that Augustus’s leadership will be glorious enough to make his soul worth reincarnating. The message Virgil transmits through incorporating both Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar in the underworld scene is the message that loyalty to a nation allows one to live continuously, even after death, as a part of the nation's culture.

At this point, Virgil cements both Julius Caesar’s and Augustus’s roles as ethnonyms of Rome by juxtaposing them with already existing ethnonyms and by giving them life after death, which they earned through their great service to Rome.
Chapter 6: Fate, Chosenness and the Golden Age

The third line of the *Aeneid* reads, “He came to Italy by destiny” (I.1) in reference to Aeneas. This is a sentiment repeated constantly throughout the text. Aeneas was fated to found Rome, Rome was destined to exist, all actions are preordained by the divine. Fate is a concept intrinsic to Ancient Roman religion and it’s the underlying doctrine of the *Aeneid*. It serves as the justification for the instability prior to Augustus’s rule and it serves as the legitimizer of Augustus’s leadership. Fate also implies a quality of chosenness. That Aeneas was fated to found Rome also means Aeneas was chosen by the divine to found Rome. That Augustus was fated to rule Rome, means Augustus was chosen by the divine. In Book V, Anchises’ image appears to Aeneas and affirms this, stating: “Embark for Italy chosen men, the bravest,” (V. 947). This is the foundation of the *Aeneid* upon which the story is told — the Romans are the chosen people because the gods fated them into existence.

Chosenness is a crucial aspect of foundational myths. Conversi writes, “The persisting features in the formation and continuity of national identities are myths, memories, values, traditions and symbols” (Grosby and Leoussi, 21) or ethnosymbols. She goes on to explain, “Myths of ethnic descent, particularly myths of ‘ethnic choseness,’ [sic] lie at its core. Of all myths, the myth of a ‘golden age’ of past splendor is perhaps the most important” (Grosby and Leoussi, 22). It’s integral that origin myths establish a chosen people and indicate that the chosen people will bring about a Golden Age, and this is exactly what the *Aeneid* does. Through the glorified icons depicted on Aeneas’s shield and featured in the underworld, Virgil’s epic promises a future Golden Age to Aeneas and reminds contemporary readers of a past Golden Age that can be returned to if the ideals of the text are upheld. The poem associates qualities like dutifulness, piety and virtue with Aeneas and
the legendary ethnosymbols, thereby associating dutifullness, piety and virtue with the Roman conception of a Golden Age. Augustus’s reign also emphasized these qualities, creating harmony between Augustus’s Rome and the Golden Age as Virgil represents it in the *Aeneid.*

Augustus presented the changes he made in Roman society with rhetoric that drew on nostalgia for the past and implied a return to a Golden Age. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, he referred to himself as restoring the Republic, even though he eliminated the Republic and created an Empire, and he gave himself the title of First Citizen instead of Emperor because First Citizen disguised his role as an Empire-builder. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, Augustus also made reforms that he presented as returning Rome to its former moral center —reforms that encouraged dutifullness, piety and virtue —qualities the *Aeneid* proves to be related to a Golden Age.

Augustus also restructured traditional religious ceremonies in order to better align with his ideals, specifically the Lupercalia. As was made clear through the representation of Dido in the epic, self-control and a sense of duty were more valuable in Augustan Rome than impulsiveness and sexuality. Prostitution and adultery were rampant in Rome so one of the reforms made by Augustus financially incentivized legitimate children and rewarded families with over three children (Thompson). The Lupercalia was a fertility festival known for its encouragement of promiscuity, but under Augustus’s restoration it became a festival about fertility among married couples. He also eliminated the participation of young boys. The Lupercalia appears in Book VIII of the *Aeneid,* as an image on Aeneas’s shield. By depicting the Lupercalia on Aeneas’s shield, which is itself a symbol of Augustan ideals, Virgil affirms the changes Augustus made to the festival.
The *Aeneid* promotes Augustan ideals as the ideals of a Golden Age and establishes the Romans as people chosen by the gods through the instrument of fate. In addition to the use of ethnosymbols, it’s the combination of identifying the ideals of a Golden Age and establishing the chosenness of Rome and the Romans that makes the *Aeneid* an effective tool of instrumentalism because it influences the audience’s self-perception. Like fate in Ancient Rome, the United States also has a doctrine that is an instrument used to establish the chosenness of the America people and identify the qualities of a Golden Age. This doctrine is the belief in America as a City on a Hill and it originated in John Winthrop’s sermon “Model of Christian Charity.” In 1630, while still aboard a ship sailing towards the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winthrop delivered this sermon to his fellow Puritans, telling them: “We shall find that the God of Israel is among us...For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” Winthrop borrowed the concept of a city on a hill from Matthew 5:14-16 in the Bible. The verse reads:

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Winthrop’s intention was to urge his countrymen to treat their new city as a City on a Hill, or the ultimate paradigm of Christian living and goodness to serve as an example for all. Due to this sermon, the phrase “city on a hill” entered American lexicon. It became a way to refer to the great experiment of America — as a City on a Hill where democracy, justice and freedom shine for all to see.

Winthrop’s presentation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a City on a Hill implies that the Puritans were chosen by God to create a model society that will, as the Bible verse states, emanate the light of God. The notion of America as a City on a Hill compares to
Rome’s fated existence because both imply chosenness by their respective gods. When Winthrop declares that God of Israel is with him and his community, it’s not unlike when Aeneas states:

“I am Aeneas, duty-bound, and known
Above high air of heaven by my fame,
Carrying with me in my ships our gods
Of hearth and home, saved from the enemy.
I look for Italy to be my fatherland,
And my descent is from all-highest Jove.” (I. 519-523)

Aeneas also proclaims the gods are on his side in his mission to found a new nation which, like Winthrop’s nation, the divine assures will be great. Fate was the dogma of Ancient Rome that permeated throughout society and throughout the Aeneid, and the concept of America as a City on a Hill is the dogma of America.

Over time, the notion of America as a City on a Hill became secularized. Today, it’s the cornerstone of American Exceptionalism, or the belief that the American nation is superior to all other nations and serves as an example for others to follow. The notion of a secularized City on a Hill identifies the qualities of an ideal society, or a Golden Age, as democracy and justice. The City on a Hill dogma captures a sense of promise and possibility that was available in a perceived Golden Age of America, and this is how it often appears in political rhetoric. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, for example, used the phrase in his 2012 New Hampshire primary victory speech, stating, “Americans know that our future is brighter and better than these troubled times. We still believe in the hope, the promise, and the dream of America. We still believe in that shining city on a hill.” In this quote, Romney calls for a return to a Golden Age by drawing on the image of the City on a Hill. In post-9/11 America, the underlying doctrine of the nation is the notion of America as a City on a Hill,
and politicians point to this doctrine as a means of asserting the greatness of America and evoking a Golden Age.

Fate was a concept intrinsic to Ancient Roman religion and it is the underpinning of the *Aeneid*. The ethnosymbols appropriated by Virgil in the text were utilized in support of the notion of fate and Rome’s fated existence. Through the representations of fate in the *Aeneid*, religion is wielded as a tool of instrumentalism in order to shape Roman identity. It’s is a useful tool of instrumentalism and an effective base for a nationalistic text because it endows Rome with a sense of chosenness and positions its people as the chosen ones. In America, it is the belief of the nation as a City on a Hill that serves as the foundation of national identity and permeates post-9/11 superhero films just as fate permeated the *Aeneid*. 
Part 2: Post-9/11 Superhero Films

The years following the attacks of September 11th, 2001 saw a great increase in superhero film production. It was time of great instability and fear, but one thing became clear—superhero movies were moneymakers. Director Sam Raimi’s first Spider-Man film began the phenomenon. It was released in April of 2002 and became the first film to ever surpass $100 million at the box office in its opening weekend. It was also the highest grossing superhero film of all time, though it’s since been surpassed. In a time of uncertainty, Spider-Man provided audiences with a world in which good and evil were clearly defined and a hero who would always save the day. Since 2008, Marvel Studios released 10 superhero films and has nine more movies slated for release before 2019. DC Comics is represented in the film world as well, from Christopher Nolan’s incredibly successful Batman trilogy, to the reboot of Superman in 2013. Superheroes are American ethnosymbols and the recent and enormous success of superhero franchises proves they’re incredibly successful vehicles for American ideals. Post-9/11 superhero films are predicated on the notion of America as a City on a Hill and reflect the changes of the post-9/11 world. They influence American self-perception and promote American ideals, effectively shaping American national identity through a modern and entertaining medium.
Chapter 7: The American Mythological Landscape

In order to understand superheroes as American ethnosymbols, one must understand the mythology from which they came. Ethnosymbols in the Aeneid, like Aeneas, Jupiter and Venus, have religious origins and come out of a tradition of mythology as historical fact. Juno fills a role created by Virgil in the Aeneid but her backstory is a part of the collective consciousness of Ancient Roman society and has no clear creation date. This is not the case with American superheroes. Superman’s backstory may be widely known due to his cultural ubiquity but one can easily point to the date he first appeared in the cultural consciousness—April 18th, 1938 when Action Comics #1 was published featuring his first panels (“Superman Turns 75”). To understand the ways post-9/11 superhero films use Superman and other superheroes just as one can understand the way Virgil uses Aeneas and other ethnosymbols, one must analyze the mythological landscape of American culture. It’s punctuated by the Judeo-Christian tradition, by historical narratives like the Revolution and the western frontier, and by fictional characters like Paul Bunyan and Bigfoot. These elements combine to create a unique American mythological landscape that’s not accepted as truth in the way mythology was in Ancient Rome, but is still significant in America’s self-perception.

The archetypal Hero’s Journey, or the classic monomyth, is a structure used to interpret narratives. Joseph Campbell coined both terms in his 1949 book The Hero with a
Thousand Faces, where he outlines a story structure that he asserts can be used as a guide in reading all stories. He claims myths, religions, novels and the lives of figures like Jesus and Buddha follow the pattern of the Hero’s Journey and that the pattern amounts to a monomyth—a universal narrative structure. The summary of the monomyth is as follows:

The hero lives in an ordinary world until he receives a call to adventure. The hero encounters supernatural forces and survives a challenge, often with help. The hero then returns home with a gift or a strength that’s used to help the community. The Aeneid follows the classic monomyth, specifically when Aeneas visits the underworld, reunites with his father and emerges with the strength to fulfill his duty and found the Roman Empire. Fairytales like Hansel and Gretel, myths like the story of Prometheus, and Hollywood blockbusters like George Lucas’s Star Wars (1977) also follow the classic monomyth structure.

The foundation of the classic monomyth, as identified by John Lawrence and Robert Jewett in their book The Myth of the American Superhero, is the rite of initiation. Lawrence and Jewett write, “persons depart from their community, undergo trials, and later return to be integrated as mature adults who can serve in new ways,” (6) and highlight social responsibility as the underlying theme of the classic monomyth. American mythology doesn’t emphasize the rite of initiation that defines the classical monomyth, however, and by extension its underlying theme is not social responsibility. Because of this departure, Lawrence and Jewett propose an American monomyth that differs from the classic monomyth and better captures the nature of American mythmaking.

Finnegans Wake by James Joyce influenced Campbell and inspired The Hero with a Thousand Faces. The text’s thesis was “that myths embody profound and enduring truths about human societies,” (The Oxford Companion to American Literature).
Lawrence and Jewett describe the American monomyth as follows:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal conditions; the superhero then recedes into obscurity (6).

Where the classic monomyth highlights the rite of initiation into a community, the American monomyth highlights the act of redemption for a community. Lawrence and Jewett believe that the American monomyth is a secularized version of the Judeo-Christian community redemption tales. They also propose that superheroes are secularized versions of Christ and reflect a desire for divine intervention and a desire for a savior. Most interestingly, however, is their assertion that at its core, the American monomyth is “the endlessly repeated story of innocent communities besieged by evil outsiders” (17). Of all the components of their proposed American monomyth, this aspect is the most useful in analyzing superhero films because it reflects the superhero movie trope in which villains attack communities without reason, and reflects the way America perceives itself.

Author Susan Faludi identifies a third myth structure in the American mythological landscape, which she argues is the foundation of all American narratives. In her book *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America*, Faludi states the myth structure that emerged after 9/11 is that of male dominance and female vulnerability popular in western and frontier narratives. She specifically points to the masculine archetype of the lone hero with no familial bonds or attachments beyond a sidekick and no material possessions beyond a weapon. His defining characteristics are the ability to give and receive torture and
to rescue innocent women from the threats of corrupt men. Narratives following this structure always hinge on a rescue mission, and Faludi suggests that nearly all post 9/11 narratives could be described using this frontier story structure. One could also argue her frontier-based story structure includes narratives applied to American foreign policy, not just entertainment plots. The 2003 invasion of Iraq exemplifies this. It was named “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” a title that glazed over the nuances of the war and packaged it as a digestible rescue mission. Faludi believes that rescue fantasies are a deep-seated part of American mythology, accounting for narratives from the western expansion to post-9/11 America, but it doesn’t perfectly explain the post-9/11 superhero film.

Campbell’s classic monomyth, Lawrence and Jewett’s American monomyth, and Faludi’s frontier-based narrative structure align with many stories, but none of them perfectly capture the post-9/11 American superhero narrative. The post-9/11 story structure lies outside of their story structures because they don’t account for the sense of chosenness of a place, which is typically a divine chosenness. They also don’t account for the innate quality of greatness of a place that’s so prominent in post-9/11 narratives, no do they account for the exemplary quality of a place, which relates to the importance of being an example for others found in post-9/11 films. Campbell, Lawrence and Jewett and Faludi’s structures emphasize on the qualities of a story’s hero, and while the superhero is obviously an important character in the superhero movie, the greatness of the place he defends is equally important, and none of their narrative structures capture it.

The mythological origin of post-9/11 superhero films is Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” sermon. The notion of America as a City on a Hill has become so

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11 This archetypal western narrative can be found in such films as Fistful of Dollars (1964), The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966) and Django Unchained (2012).
ingrained in the cultural consciousness that it’s developed into a story structure in its own right, which this paper will refer to as the Exceptionalist archetype. It pulls elements from the American mythological landscape, including Campbell, Lawrence and Jewett and Faludi's theories, but unlike their structures, the Exceptionalist archetype is rooted in the City on a Hill ideal that permeates through post-9/11 America. It unfolds as follows: There is a city associated with greatness—either previous greatness or current greatness—and because of this greatness, people on the outside closely observe the city. The city is threatened by evil and a hero with abilities beyond those of a normal human takes on the task of saving it. The hero saves the city and it is restored to greatness. The Exceptionalist archetype incorporates the three elements of Winthrop’s sermon. It incorporates the sense of chosenness through the city's innate greatness, it incorporates the idea that the city has raised above all the other cities, and it incorporates the idea that people outside of the city look to it watchfully as an example. The Exceptionalist archetype is the narrative structure all post-9/11 superhero films follow.
Chapter 8: Saving the City on a Hill: The American Narrative

Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* trilogy closely follows the Exceptionalist archetype.

The first film, *Batman Begins*, is Batman’s origin story. It establishes Bruce Wayne’s character and covers the death of his parents, his frustration with the justice system, and his evolution into Gotham’s superhero. Gotham is the City on a Hill of the Batman universe, and Batman’s heroics are always related to saving it. The main villain in this film is Ra’s al Ghul, head of an underground criminal organization called the League of Shadows. In the following scene, Ra’s asks Bruce to destroy Gotham.

Wayne: And where would I be leading these men?
Ra’s al Ghul: Gotham. As Gotham’s favored son, you will be ideally placed to strike at the heart of criminality.
Wayne: How?
Ra’s al Ghul: Gotham’s time has come, like Constantinople or Rome before it, the city has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice. It is beyond saving and must be allowed to die. This is the most important function of the League of Shadows. It’s one we’ve performed for centuries. Gotham must be destroyed.

This interaction launches the plot of the movie, in which Batman protects Gotham from Ra’s al Ghul and the League of Shadows. Up until this point in the film, Gotham has only been presented as a site of corruption and injustice, but it’s clear from this scene that it’s a city associated with greatness, satisfying the first requirement of the Exceptionalist archetype. Ra’s al Ghul establishes Gotham’s greatness in his dialogue by relating it to Constantinople and Rome, two legendary and powerful cities that served as the paradigm of civilization to their contemporaries. Constantinople’s official name was New Rome (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*) and the juxtaposition of Rome, Constantinople and Gotham implies Gotham is a third Rome. This exemplifies instrumentalist rhetoric because it influences audiences to mentally elevate Gotham (an amalgam of American cities and
therefore a proxy for the American nation as a whole), and by extension America, to the level of Rome.

The film satisfies the second requirement of the Exceptionalist structure—that a hero with abilities beyond those of a normal human is tasked with saving the city—when Bruce pledges to protect Gotham and becomes Batman. Unlike most superheroes, Bruce doesn’t have supernatural abilities. He is, however, incredibly wealthy. Batman’s abilities beyond those of a normal human are the strength and martial arts skills he spent years building and his immense wealth. The film establishes his role as Gotham’s protector when he tells Ra’s that Gotham is worth saving, stating, “I’ll be standing where I belong: between you, and the people of Gotham.” *Batman Begins* captures the first part of the Exceptionalist archetype by establishing that city with innate greatness on par with Rome and Constantinople is being threatened by evil, and captures the second part of the archetype by establishing Batman as the hero who will save the city.

The events of the second film in the trilogy, *The Dark Knight*, restore Gotham to greatness, satisfying the final element of the Exceptionalist archetype, albeit in a different film but still in the same narrative. The final film in the series, *The Dark Knight Rises*, takes place eight years after the second film in a crime-free, Batman-free Gotham. At the end of *The Dark Knight*, Bruce sacrificed Batman’s image in order to preserve the memory of Gotham’s beloved, but ultimately evil, District Attorney. Bruce recognizes that the District Attorney is a more useful symbol of hope for Gotham, while Batman, a masked figure outside of the law, is a more convenient scapegoat. To ensure Gotham is restored to its greatness, Bruce sacrifices Batman’s image as a hero and allows the citizens of Gotham to deride Batman as a criminal. Gotham remains on the hill, restored to its original greatness,
and the hero withdraws from society. This supports the Exceptionalist archetype because it proves that the place, Gotham, retaining its role as a City on a Hill is more important than Batman retaining his role as a hero.

The post-9/11 American superhero’s main job is to keep the City on a Hill on the hill. He’s a savior, the role in which America always casts its superheroes, and his story follows the Exceptionalist story structure. The role of the savior isn’t just reserved for superheroes, however, it’s also a role in which American politicians are cast, and the Exceptionalist archetype isn’t just the narrative of superhero films, it’s the preferred narrative to apply to politicians. The American media is quick to cast politicians into the savior role, but politicians also insert themselves into the role of the savior who will preserve America as a City on a Hill, therefore injecting themselves into the Exceptionalist archetypal. Mitt Romney most plainly inserted himself into the narrative in his New Hampshire Primary victory speech in 2012 referenced in Chapter 6.

“Americans know that our future is brighter and better than these troubled times. We still believe in the hope, the promise, and the dream of America. We still believe in that shining city on a hill...He [President Obama] apologizes for America; I will never apologize for the greatest nation in the history of the Earth...But if you want to make this election about restoring American greatness, then I hope you will join us.”

In this short excerpt from Romney’s speech, he references the City on a Hill metaphor as a tool of political rhetoric. Romney’s speech places him within the Exceptionalist archetype, just as Batman did when he promised to save Gotham, satisfying the first two of its requirements: he establishes America as a City on a Hill, and he pledges to restore it to greatness. Unlike Batman, however, Romney was unable to bring the Exceptionalist archetype to completion, because he lost the election, thereby forfeited his self-appointed role as savior.
Chapter 9: Ethnosymbols and Embodying the City on a Hill Ideal

The Exceptionalist archetype represents the City on a Hill ideal at the level of narrative in post-9/11 superhero films, while the superheroes themselves represent the City on a Hill ideal at the level of character. Through characters, superhero films compel audiences to absorb the City on a Hill ideal. Only characters can fully embody ideals because they are with whom the audience identifies and empathizes, making them the most powerful tools in an instrumentalist text. Each superhero analyzed in this paper is an ethnosymbol who embodies the City on a Hill ideal.

In the Iron Man movies, Tony Stark is one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in America, just like America is one of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world. In the Captain America series, Steve Rogers is one of the strongest soldiers in the military, just as America has one of the strongest militaries in the world. In the Batman trilogy, Batman is one of the most intimidating men in Gotham, just like America is one of the most intimidating countries in the world. In Man of Steel, Superman is nearly a god—his parents named him Kal-El, and “El” is the Hebrew word for “God” (Iverson), which, along with his strength, immortality and righteous, underscores his godliness—meaning he’s elevated above all other American citizens, just as the City on a Hill ideal elevates America above all other nations. Despite representing the same ideal, Iron Man, Captain America, Batman and Superman are different characters. Each of the ethnosymbols comes to embodying the City on a Hill ideal differently, and in doing so, they each represent a different perspective on the City on a Hill ideal.

In The Avengers, the most powerful superheroes of Marvel’s universe unite to save Earth. During a moment of tension, Steve Rogers challenges Tony Stark’s role as a
superhero, and by extension challenges his position on top of the hill. Steve says, “Yeah, big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?” to which Tony responds, “Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.” From the first moment *Iron Man* introduces the audience to Tony Stark, he is the personification of the City on a Hill ideal. He was born into a successful family and inherited his father’s company and all the wealth and power that went along with it. Becoming Iron Man is not his ascent to the summit of the hill, it’s a reaffirmation of his position there. As a man already installed on the hill, Tony represents an embodiment of the City on a Hill ideal who must defend his role. This echoes post-9/11 America, in which America has often had to defend itself to the international community. Tony offers the audience the perspective of a man who has always been like a City on a Hill, and demonstrates that those who serve as paradigms must often defend themselves as paradigms.

In the first Iron Man movie, Tony must defend himself not to Steve Rogers, his peer on the hill, but to a character who does not embody the City on a Hill ideal. Rather, she embodies the watching eyes Winthrop describes. After proclaiming that Winthrop and his peers will be as a city on a hill, Winthrop goes on to state, “the eyes of the people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken...we shall be made a story and byword throughout the world” (“A Model of Christian Charity). In the context of Winthrop’s speech, he means that as a City on a Hill, their community is watched closely by those not on the hill. If their community fails to uphold the Godly values that

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12 In 2004 President George W. Bush defended his decision to invade Iraq during a speech at the United Nations. He said, “The advance of freedom always carries a cost, paid by the bravest among us. America mourns the losses to our nation, and to many others. And today, I assure every friend of Afghanistan and Iraq, and every enemy of liberty: We will stand with the people of Afghanistan and Iraq until their hopes of freedom and security are fulfilled,” (“President Bush’s Speech to the UN”).
make them a City on a Hill, they will have to answer to the watchful eyes. This aspect of the City on a Hill ideal manifests in Iron Man as Tony having to defend himself to Christine Everheart, a reporter for *Vanity Fair* who criticizes his actions:

> Tony: My old man had a philosophy — peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy.
> Christine: That’s a great line, coming from a guy selling the sticks.
> Tony: My father helped defeat the Nazis. He worked on the Manhattan Project. A lot of people, including your professors at Brown, would call that being a hero.
> Christine: And a lot of people would also call that war-profiteering.
> Tony: Tell me, do you plan to report on the millions we’ve saved by advancing medical technology or kept from starvation with our IntelliCrops? All those breakthroughs — military funding, honey.

Tony responds to Christine’s criticisms by defending his actions, thereby prohibiting to be made a story or a byword. In addition to demonstrating Tony defending his role on top of the hill, this scene also creates positive connotations with military funding and defense spending in the mind of the audience. This is the power of an ethnosymbol — Tony Stark provides the audience with an example of a person who embodies the City on a Hill ideal, while also influencing the way an audience thinks about military spending. *Iron Man* uses the intelligence, wealth and success that are integral aspects of Tony’s character to establish him as embodying the City on a Hill ideal and uses him to present the perspective of one who must defend his position on top of the hill.

In contrast to Iron Man, Captain America is not initially the embodiment of the City on a Hill ideal. *Captain America: The First Avenger* introduces him as skinny, sickly Steve Rogers from Brooklyn who’s rejected from the military because he’s too weak. Steve Rogers’ character journey depicts his ascent to the peak of the hill. The film emphasizes his multiple attempts to join the Army, and his multiple rejections. It also emphasizes his innate goodness as a means of establishing that he has the proper foundation upon which
to become the City on a Hill ideal. An Army general is convinced Steve is the right subject to receive the experimental serum that will transform him into Captain America only after he witnesses Steve throw himself onto an inactive grenade (unbeknownst to Steve) to protect others from the explosion. This transmits the message to the audience that Steve earns his eventual ascent to the hilltop through his goodness. The audience watches Steve become a superhero, and in doing so they watch one man become the embodiment of the City on a Hill ideal. The other characters in the film bear witness to this transformation as well, and it has a great effect on them. The film refers to him as a super solid— with the serum, Steve becomes the paradigm of military strength and skill.

The film clearly establishes to the audience Steve’s transformation into an ideal. Just after he receives the serum, a photographer photographs him chasing a German spy and the image is published nationwide. In response, a United States Senator says to Steve:

“I've seen you in action, Steve. More importantly, the country's seen it...The enlistment lines have been around the block since your picture hit the news stands. You don't take a soldier, a symbol like that, and hide him in a lab. Son, you want to serve your country, on the most important battlefield of the war?”

The Senator directly refers to Steve as a symbol, signifying his ascent to the top of the hill and his new position as an ideal. Audiences absorb Steve’s journey from man to symbol as an example of the City on a Hill ideal from inception—Steve as a sickly man with a selfless spirit— to completion—Steve as Captain America, the super soldier. Steve Rogers is significant as an ethnosymbol because his story, as presented in the post-9/11 Captain America movies, offers audiences an example of the journey to becoming the City on a Hill ideal, and an example of the kind of man qualified for such a journey. Iron Man was born on the hill and Captain America rose to it, and their narratives depict the differences in their journeys, but both embody the same ideal.
Though Batman and Superman are vastly different characters, which will be further explored in Chapter 11, they came to embody the City on a Hill ideal in a similar way. Both men were explicitly instructed to become ideals and did so with full awareness of what they were doing. Steve Rogers became a symbol as Captain America, but it was a byproduct of his mission to join the United States military—he didn’t intend to become a symbol; Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent did. When Henri Ducard meets Bruce in *Batman Begins*, he offers to train Bruce, saying, “But if you make yourself more than just a man, if you devote yourself to an ideal, and if they can’t stop you, then you become something else entirely… [a] legend, Mr. Wayne.” In telling Bruce to devote himself to an ideal in order to transcend being just a man, Ducard inspires Bruce’s decision to become Batman. Like Tony Stark, Bruce was born into great wealth, but he didn’t embody the City on a Hill ideal until he chose to become Batman because up until he became Batman, Bruce lived a transient and nondescript life. He didn’t live in the public eye or allow himself to be treated as a role model in the way that Stark did. This changes when he follows Ducard’s advice and decides to become Batman. The film emphasizes his decision to publically present himself as a symbol in a conversation with Alfred, Bruce’s butler:

> Bruce: Gotham needs me, Alfred. Gotham needs…a symbol.
> Alfred: What symbol, sir?
> Bruce: I’m not sure. Something for the good to rally behind.

As Batman, Bruce’s position in Gotham is to provide the people with something good to rally behind, just as the City on a Hill ideal gives Americans a symbol of good to rally behind. With a self-awareness not displayed by Tony Stark or Steve Rogers, Bruce chooses to become a visible symbol for the people of Gotham and in doing so, embodies the City on a Hill ideal as paradigm for all to see and follow.
Like Batman, Superman also comes to embody the City on the Hill ideal through another person's suggestion and a self-aware decision. In *Man of Steel*, Clark Kent's biological father explains his decision to send his son from Krypton to Earth. He says, “You will give the people of Earth an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun, Kal. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.” This quote captures the essence of the City on a Hill ideal, with Superman as a stand-in for America and America's purpose in the world. Clark, was born with superhuman abilities, but he spent his life trying to hide them out of fear and self-preservation. His biological father's words free him from his self-created pressure to hide his powers and allow him to ascend to his rightful place atop the hill and fully embody the City on a Hill ideal. *Man of Steel* makes changes to Superman's mythology, and therefore to the definition of the City on a Hill ideal, which will be analyzed in Chapter 11, but even with these changes, Superman embodies the City on a Hill ideal. *Batman Begins* and *Man of Steel* both depict their protagonists deciding with full awareness to become superheroes and embody the City on a Hill ideal, whereas Iron Man and Captain America become superheroes as byproducts of lives' trajectories. The end result is the same, however. Each superhero fully embodies the City on a Hill ideal.
Chapter 10: Reflecting Anxieties of the Post-9/11 World

In order for an ethnosymbol to be effective in promoting a sense of national identity, it must reflect the time in which it’s being used. Audiences must be able to see themselves and see their world in ethnosymbols in order to be guided into action and thought by them. The *Aeneid* incorporated the Battle of Actium on Aeneas’s shield in order to justify Augustus’s victory, and because it was a recent battle and therefore recognizable to readers. Even though the *Aeneid* is set centuries before the time in which it was written, it contains familiar signposts that readers would recognize from their own lives, causing them to feel more connected to the work and making it a useful tool in uniting a nation. Superhero films do this too, most clearly in their choice of villains and conflicts. They’ve always done this; it isn’t a new development that superhero villains reflect the era in which the narrative was released. Cold War films often feature Russian villains and superhero comics have shown their heroes fighting in both World Wars, Vietnam and Iraq. Post-9/11 villains reflect the worries and anxieties of the post-9/11 world specifically, a tone that was set with Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy and continues onwards. Analyzing the depictions of villains and the ways in which they reflect the post-9/11 world reveals the collective anxieties of Americans.

*Batman Begins* came out in 2005, therefore its villainous organization is a clear analogy to al-Qaeda. The antagonist in the film is named Ra’s al Ghul, which is never translated in the movie but in *Detective Comics* Volume 1, issue 411, it is written in Arabic as “The Demon’s Head.” Ra’s lives in the mountains of an unspecified Asian country—a decision that automatically establishes him as Other—and is the head of a powerful, threatening terrorist organization called the League of Shadows. The set-up is reminiscent
of al-Qaeda, but it’s the values of the League of Shadows that most closely align with al-Qaeda. Ra’s arrives at Wayne Manor during Bruce’s birthday party and makes it clear that the League of Shadows is intent on destroying Gotham. He says, “When a forest grows too wild, a purging fire is inevitable and natural. Tomorrow, the world will watch in horror as its greatest city destroys itself. The movement back to harmony will be unstoppable this time.” This mimics the ideology of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, an organization built on radical Islam and rejection of western values.

In his only post September 11th TV interview, bin Laden spoke about the US war on terrorism in Afghanistan and stated, “I tell you, freedom and human rights in America are doomed. The U.S. government will lead the American people in—and the West in general—into an unbearable hell and a choking life,” (“Bin Laden’s Sole Post-September 11th TV Interview Aired”). Both bin Laden’s and Ra’s al Ghul’s quotes capture a similar ideology. They relay the idea of a powerful place destroying itself and both convey a rejection of western values. Bin Laden’s rejection of western values is clear—he specifically names “the West” as a doomed region. Ra’s doesn’t use the phrase “the West” but through his use of the word “purge” it is clear that he too rejects western values. Ra’s intends to purge Gotham because it has grown too wild, gone astray from the values he considers to be important, and it will be doomed if he does nothing.

Ra’s considers himself to be restoring balance to the world by eliminating Gotham just as Osama bin Laden wanted to restore his vision of balance to the world by removing America as a global superpower. The attack on the World Trade Center was a symbolic rejection of the capitalist economic system that aided in making America a world superpower, and in a 2003 sermon, he stated, “America is a great power possessed of
tremendous military might and a wide-ranging economy, but all this is built on an unstable foundation which can be targeted, with special attention to its obvious weak spots. If it is hit in one hundreth of those spots, God willing, it will stumble, wither away and relinquish world leadership and its oppression,” (“Osama's Sermon on the Feast of Sacrifice”). The unstable foundation to which he refers is the foundation of the western values he rejects—consumerism, capitalism and Christianity. Because of his rejection of that foundation, bin Laden implies that he will continue attacking America and states that with enough attacks, the American nation will wither away. Ra’s al Ghul plans to destroy an entire city out of a rejection of its values, an act intentionally reminiscent of the 9/11 attacks and bin Laden’s ideology. Ra’s is a villain who echoes the Public Enemy Number One (as Bill Clinton dubbed bin Laden according to the article “The Most Wanted Face of Terrorism”) of the nation in the post-9/11 world.

Iron Man 3 also deals with a neo-al-Qaeda terrorist organization led by Mandarin, another ambiguously Asian-named villain who despises America. Mandarin terrorizes America throughout the film, hijacking airwaves and communicating to the President and the public through faceless voiceovers accompanied by violent imagery from past crimes he claims to have committed. He says, “Some people call me a terrorist. I consider myself a teacher. America, ready for another lesson?” America has gone astray from the values he considers most important and now he must use terror to correct the imbalance. Osama bin Laden also seems to view himself as a teacher with the responsibility of teaching America a lesson. In an interview with Time Magazine in 1999, the journalist asked bin Laden, “What can the US expect from you now?” Bin Laden replied, “Any thief or criminal or robber who enters another country in order to steal should expect to be exposed to murder at any time.
For the American forces to expect anything from me personally reflects a very narrow perception. Thousands of millions of Muslims are angry. The Americans should expect reactions from the Muslim world that are proportionate to the injustice they inflict,” ("Conversation with Terror"). In this response, bin Laden clearly views himself in the role of a teacher taking punitive action against those who acted against his values. In this way, the language of Mandarin’s threats mimics that of bin Laden’s.

Mandarin becomes a more complex example of an ethnosymbol made to reflect the anxieties of the post-9/11 world when Tony Stark discovers that Mandarin is merely a character created by a think tank working for Tony’s rival and portrayed by an actor. Mandarin is nothing more than an idea that Tony describes as a “custom made terror threat.” There is a real, human villain in the film, but it’s not Mandarin. Mandarin was a role carefully crafted by intellectuals in order to embody specific characteristics that would elicit fear and alarm in the American public. The actor hired to play Mandarin describes these characteristics as, “the pathology of a serial killer, the manipulation of western iconography, ‘ready for another lesson,’ blah blah blah.” In the film’s narrative, a think tank selects each one of these characteristics because they reflect the fears of the American public in the post-9/11 world. The pitting of western iconography against eastern iconography and the need to teach wayward people are both derived from the extremist Islam of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Mandarin is a useful example of an ethnosymbol shaped for the post-9/11 world because in the movie he is literally a villain created for the post-9/11 world.

In Man of Steel the mythos of Krypton, Superman’s home planet, is an ethnosymbol that’s distorted in an effort to reflect the anxieties of the post-9/11 world. The film depicts
Krypton not as the famous ice palace of 1978’s *Superman*, but as a vibrant planet with an ecosystem and atmosphere different than Earth. Inherent to the Superman canon is the idea that he was sent to Earth by his parents in a rocket ship moments before the planet was destroyed. In *Man of Steel*, this plot point gains an element of environmentalism. Superman’s father is a scientist and the film begins with a conflict between him and the ruling council of Krypton. He says to them, “Will you not understand? Krypton’s core is collapsing! We may only have a matter of weeks! I warned you, harvesting the core was suicide! It has accelerated the process of implosion!” The specifics of Krypton’s core harvesting practices aren’t explained but it’s undeniably analogous to the current fracking debate\(^{13}\). The council then concedes that they’ve exhausted their energy reserves, echoing another environmentalist concern that the Earth has depleted its natural resources.

Environmentalist anxieties in the post-9/11 world were not caused by the attacks of September 11th but they are very much a condition of the modern age. In New York City, on September 21st, 2014, over 300,000 people marched in support of many branches of the environmentalist movement, including global warming, anti-fracking, and pollution. It was the largest ever demonstration in support of an environmentalist cause, proving that although environmental activism wasn’t spurred by the 9/11 attacks and isn’t unique to the post-9/11 age, it is the strongest now that it has ever been. Turning Krypton’s destruction into an environmentalist cautionary tale is a way of taking an ethnosymbol and manipulating it to reflect the anxieties of the age in which its produced by giving readers a

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\(^{13}\) Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is a technique used to drill deep into Earth for natural gas. In the fracking process water, sand and toxic chemicals are injected at a high pressure into the earth, causing gas to flow out. The negative effects of fracking include causing tremors that can lead to earthquakes and the contamination of carcinogenic chemicals in groundwater (“What is Fracking and Why is it Controversial?”).
marker they will recognize as an issue with which they also contend. Krypton’s destruction is streamlined from a vague planetary combustion into an environmental disaster caused by the people of Krypton in order to further situate *Man of Steel* and its mythology in the modern age.
Chapter 11: Updating Superman

Superman is the original American superhero. He made his debut in April of 1938 and became wildly popular. His creator, Les Daniels, remarked that Superman was “an instant triumph, a concept so intense and so instantly identifiable that he became perhaps the most widely known figure ever created in American fiction” (Lawrence and Jewett, 42). Superman first appeared in cinemas in the form of animated shorts from 1948 to 1950. In 1951, he was the titular character of a feature film, which spawned a television series, but Christopher Reeve’s portrayal of Superman is perhaps the most iconic version of the character. The first of Reeve’s Superman films was released in 1978, with sequels following in 1980, 1983 and 1987 (“Superman Turns 75”). In 2006, Warner Brothers Pictures released Superman Returns, incorporating the events of Reeve’s first two Superman films while largely ignoring the plots of the second two. In response to the film, Warner Brothers President Jeff Robinov said, “Superman [Returns] didn’t quite work as a film in the way that we wanted it to. It didn’t position the character the way he needed to be positioned,” (Schuker). The studio abandoned plans for a sequel of this movie and instead released a total reboot of the character. The reboot is an origin story much like Batman Begins, called Man of Steel. Man of Steel was released in 2013 and made $668 million dollars at the box office. To use the words of Robinov, Man of Steel positioned Superman in a way that was necessary in order for the film to be successful in the post-9/11 world.

Superman was the first superhero. He’s the model upon which all other superheroes were based and because of this he’s more of a one-dimensional character than Batman or Spider-Man, in the way that prototypes often are. He’s strong, he can fly and he’s defined by his sincerity, selflessness and an unshakeable sense of morality. His one weakness,
kryptonite, is an external factor. Superman’s appeal is his perfection. He is without emotional baggage and none of the messiness that comes with being human, and this is exactly how his character is portrayed in *Superman Returns*—he’s the same character he was upon debut in 1938 and the same character made famous by Christopher Reeve. If *Superman Returns* presented the character as he’s been for the 68 years prior, what did Robinov mean when he said the film didn’t position Superman in the way he needed to be positioned?

The idyllic, flawless Superman is no longer the type of superhero to whom Americans respond in the post-9/11 world. In its reboot of the series, the studio abandoned the loyal characterization of Superman in *Superman Returns*. *Man of Steel*, directed by Zach Snyder, essentially restarted the franchise. It respects the canon and the Superman universe but ignores the events that took place in other works. The film reworks Superman’s character in order to better fit into the post-9/11 world. In Robinov’s *Wall Street Journal* interview, he comments on Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy as a source of inspiration in remaking Superman, saying he wanted Superman reboot to have the same brooding quality as Nolan’s. The article remarks, “Creatively, [Robinov] sees exploring the evil side to characters as the key to unlocking some of Warner Bros.’ DC properties. "We’re going to try to go dark to the extent that the characters allow it," [Robinov] says.” *Man of Steel* intentionally portrays a version of Superman different than he’s ever been—more brooding, more flawed and more human.

In the context of the DC Comics universe, Superman and Batman don’t get along. The animosity between the two superheroes derives from the fact that the two men exist at opposite ends of the superhero spectrum. Superman is alien and godlike while Batman is
human. Superman uses as little violence as possible while Batman routinely beats up villains and doles out torture. *Man of Steel* screenwriter David Goyer explained it best when he said, “Batman’s roots are in pulp detective fiction, and Superman was influenced by pulp science fiction, things like Flash Gordon...then there are the Christ and Moses elements. Batman’s an antihero, Superman’s a hero. In terms of archetypes, they’re extremely different,” (“Seeking Moviegoers ’Steel’ of Approval”). Superman reflects the City on the Hill as its inhabitants view it—untouchable and perfect, while Batman reflects the way outsiders, or the “eyes of all people” Winthrop references in his sermon, see it—as aggressive and imperfect.

In the wake of the attacks on September 11th, 2001, the United States changed. The Bush Administration signed the PATRIOT Act into law on October 26th, 2001, dramatically altering surveillance laws in the United States. Under the PATRIOT Act, the US government can obtain personal information from citizens without a judge’s approval. On October 16th, 2002, the American Civil Liberties Union launched a $3.5 million campaign called “Keep America Safe and Free” built on the belief that the Bush Administration was asking Americans to choose between being safe or free, and the PATRIOT Act eliminated freedom (“Surveillance Under the Patriot Act”). The national visibility of this campaign worked to inform Americans of their government’s more objectionable actions, both at home and overseas.

Also in 2002, the first Afghan suspects were brought to Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba. In 2003, the Red Cross issued a public statement on the deteriorating mental state of detainees and by 2006 the United Nations called for the closure of the prison (Norton-Taylor and Goldenberg). The post-9/11 age is not the first time in history that the American
government has acted with ambiguous morals, but the technology of the modern age creates more visibility and better-informed citizens. WikiLeaks, an online organization that publishes classified information and news leaks on the Internet, was founded in 2006 and made national headlines in 2010 when it published United States Army field reports from the Iraq War (“About Wikileaks”). It is the biggest leak in the history of the US military and the story dominated American news networks for months. That, coupled with the Edward Snowden’s National Security Agency leaks of 2013, makes it impossible for American citizens to see their City on a Hill as irreproachable. This transition is reflected in the Superman of Man of Steel, who is still the most morally absolute of all the characters in the film, but who is also not without flaws. In his newest incarnation, Superman has more in common with Batman than ever before because Americans have started seeing themselves more like other countries see America. Superman’s pedestal was lowered in order to match the way America perceives itself as a nation. Superman, like America, is still an exemplar, but like Batman he is not perfect.

One of the biggest changes made to the Superman canon, which reflects the post-9/11 need to see a flawed superhero, is Man of Steel’s exclusion of kryptonite. Kryptonite is an integral part of the Superman mythology. It’s a mineral from his home planet, Krypton, which causes Superman to lose his powers when encountered with it. In past Superman films, kryptonite has been a central plot device, but Man of Steel does away with it altogether. Snyder’s Superman universe may not exclude kryptonite forever, but the decision to forgo this iconic weakness in the first installment of a series seeking to reboot and redefine the character underscores the film’s intentions of humanizing Superman. Superman has weaknesses in the film, but they’re internal, emotional weaknesses that
make him vulnerable and realistic. He struggles with being different from humans, he struggles with saving people or protecting his identity, he struggles with following the advice of his beloved father and he struggles with loneliness. In this film, he’s depicted as having far more emotional turmoil than any other incarnation. Instead of a Superman whose most debilitating weakness comes from kryptonite, something audiences will never encounter, the Superman of *Man of Steel* is most affected by his internal struggles, with which audiences can readily identify. This move away from external, alien weakness and towards internal weakness further humanizes the character and lowers his pedestal.

The single greatest change in Superman’s character becomes evident at the end of the film, when he kills General Zod in the scene described in this paper’s introduction. It’s a dramatic and significant moment. This act goes against Superman’s well-established refusal to murder that has been so integral to the Superman canon since his creation and is truly the moment that redefines his mythos. He has never killed anyone before this moment in *Man of Steel*. Superman has always been too moral for murder, even in the most dire of situations, but that type of black and white thinking doesn’t reflect the grayness of the post-9/11 world. In the modern age, Americans have at least a baseline understanding the torture perpetrated by the United States government. In addition to the well-publicized human rights violations at the Guantanamo Bay detention center, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released a detailed report on the CIA’s torture practices in

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14 The 2006 UN Report on Guantanamo Bay states, “The interrogation techniques authorized by the Department of Defence, particularly if used simultaneously, amount to degrading treatment,” and lists techniques such as force feeding, prolonged periods of isolation and exposure to extreme hot and cold as such examples (“Commission on Human Rights: independent experts issue report on Guantanamo detainees”).
December of 2014 that received widespread new coverage. It is nearly impossible for Americans in the modern age to be ignorant to the United States military’s morally questionable treatment of prisoners.

The American government has perpetrated such acts before, but there’s a level of transparency in the digital age that informs citizens to a much greater extent than in the past. The City on a Hill still stands as a beacon of light for all to see, but it can no longer pretend to be perfect and morally absolute because too much information exists to the contrary. Americans no longer live in a world in which they can expect their country to abstain from torture and murder. They no longer live in a world where they can imagine their country as occupying an untouchable space of moral superiority, and as a result they can no longer expect their superheroes to be morally superior. America, and Superman, both represent the City on a Hill ideal, but the realities of the post-9/11 world changed the conventions of the City on a Hill ideal in order to accommodate a layer of moral ambiguity. By positioning Superman as capable of murder, *Man of Steel* distorts Superman as an ethnosymbol to reflect the new vision of the City on the Hill. After seeing Superman kill Zod, audiences recognize that while he is still an exemplar, like America, he is no longer pure.
Chapter 12: The Subversive Superhero

Superhero films play a crucial role in communicating a perception of America to American and global audiences. The images of America and the values the films present have national and worldwide reach as mediums of storytelling. They are created primarily as entertainment, not as state-sanctioned tools of nation building like the Aeneid, but nation building is a byproduct. Superhero films are nothing if not mainstream, following mainstream conventions, using mainstream villains that reflect post-9/11 anxieties, and depicting a hero who is committed to preserving the City on the Hill as the paradigm of greatness. They’re also corporate-branded movies, produced in highly controlled environments with serious attention given to the way they reflect the corporation. Captain America: Winter Soldier is an especially interesting and significant superhero film because, contrary to the status quo, it is a studio movie that blatantly features subversive themes. The film overtly criticizes the Obama administration’s drone policy, targeted killing and the National Security Agency. The central villain is a police state. Within the framework of a superhero film, Winter Soldier subverts the conventions of the genre in which the protagonist consistently supports of the political climate it reflects, and creates a film highly critical of post-9/11 governmental policies.

Much of the film’s plot centers around SHIELD, which stands for Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. It is the Marvel Comics Universe’s governmental counterterrorism and intelligence agency. Winter Soldier begins with SHIELD Director Nick Fury introducing Captain America to helicarriers—the film’s equivalent to drones.
Fury: These new long-range precision guns can eliminate a thousand hostiles a minute. The satellites can read a terrorist's DNA before he steps outside his spider hole. We're gonna neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen.

Captain America: I thought the punishment usually came after the crime.

Fury: We can't afford to wait that long.

Captian America: Who's we?

Fury: After New York, I convinced the World Security Council we needed a quantum surge in threat analysis. For once, we're way ahead of the curve.

Captain America: By holding a gun to everyone on Earth and calling it protection.

This scene reflects both sides of the drone debate through Captain America and Nick Fury.

Drones are technically called “unmanned aerial vehicles” or UAVs, and by definition include any type of unmanned aircraft. The “term” drone, however, has become largely associated with combat aerial vehicles used to launch missiles. The first armed drone mission took place in October of 2001 (Matthew). Their use was a direct response to 9/11 but they still exist as a part of US foreign policy over a decade later. Drones are a condition of the post 9/11 world and derive their legality from the Authorization for Use of Military Force passed by the US Congress on September 14th, 2001. The Authorization states, “That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.” Captain America represents the anti-drone stance and Fury represents the pro-drone stance, and by extension Fury represents the Obama Administration.

Fury supports the use of helicarriers, or drones, because he believes the benefits of neutralizing a threat before it happens outweighs the importance of due process, or a trial.

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15 Drones sent primarily to Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia with a death total estimated to be about 4,700. The Washington Post reported that the civilian death total in Pakistan and Yemen is between 276 and 368 with 118-135 occurring under the Bush Administration. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism includes Somalia in the total and puts the number between 446 and 993 (“Everything You Need to Know About the Drone Debate, In One FAQ”).
In a May, 2013 speech on drone policy, President Obama expressed the same sentiment. He said, "But as Commander-in-Chief, I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives. To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties—not just in our cities at home and our facilities abroad, but also in the very places like Sana’a and Kabul and Mogadishu where terrorists seek a foothold," ("Obama’s Speech on Drone Policy"). Both President Obama and Nick Fury are aware of the positives and negatives of drone use, but both believe their use benefits the greater good. Fury’s opinions on helicarriers transition from positive to negative over the course of the film in a way that reflects a double standard, which will be more closely analyzed in Chapter 13. The message Captain America communicates to the audience, however, remains consistently anti-drone throughout the film.

Winter Soldier also criticizes the National Security Agency’s data-mining program. In the film, Captain America discovers SHIELD has become a sort of Orwellian government organization, monitoring its people and accessing their private information. One of the villains explains to him, “The 21st century is a digital book...Your bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, emails, phone calls, your damn SAT scores! [The] algorithm evaluates people’s past to predict their future.” This is a clear analogy to the NSA and it appalls Captain America. By making the film’s villains responsible for NSA-like data mining and by making the film’s hero critical of NSA-like data mining, the film clearly makes a statement against the NSA.

It’s significant that such an overt criticism of mainstream US policies takes place within the context of a Captain America film. In Anthony D. Smith’s book, he writes that a basic theme of ethnosymbolism is the emphasis of a Golden Age, as was discussed in
Chapter 6. Just as the *Aeneid* draws on a Golden Age of pure motivations and piety among Romans, *Winter Soldier* draws on a symbolic American Golden Age through Captain America. Smith writes that periods of crisis in a nation are often seen as a retreat from some pure state of national being. He states, “this raises the issue of the ‘authenticity’ of the nation and the need for guidance for the present generation through a return, at least in spirit, to these earlier ‘golden’ ages of the nation’s history,” (36). Instrumentalists, like Virgil and the studio executives responsible for crafting superhero films, create narratives that take readers on a journey to the Golden Age. This is evident in the *Aeneid* and in the *Captain America* series. Captain America is a relic from an era that, in times of modern crisis, Americans view as a pure standard of national identity—World War II. He serves as an authentic ideal of patriotism and guides the present generation in a return to those standards. When Captain America criticizes drones, a whole generation of Americans perceived as authentic criticizes drones.

Captain America symbolizes an American Golden Age. He’s a part of the Greatest Generation, a term coined by journalist Tom Brokaw in his 1998 book of the same name. In this book, Brokaw argues that the generation born during the Great Depression and fought in World War II was the “greatest generation any society has every produced,” (xxxviii). He writes that 1940 was a critical year in America history, a year that shaped the nation:

> “Once again the American people understood the magnitude of the challenge, the importance of an unparalleled national commitment, and, most of all, the certainty that only one resolution was acceptable. The nation turned to its young to carry the heaviest burden, to fight in enemy territory and to keep the home front secure and productive. These young men and women were eager for the assignment. They understood what was required of them, and they willingly volunteered for their duty.”
His writing is steeped in the City on a Hill ideal as he describes American young dutifully working to preserve America as a City on a Hill, not for fame or glory but because it was the right thing to do. Captain America represents this time, this generation, this era, and the film addresses it. Immediately after Cap criticizes Fury’s helicarriers project, Fury responds:

Fury: You know I read those SSR files. The Greatest Generation? You guys did some nasty stuff.
Captain America: Yeah, we compromised, sometimes in ways that made use not sleep so well, but we did it so that people could be free. This isn’t freedom. This is fear.
Fury: SHIELD takes the world as it is, not as we’d like it to be. And it’s getting damn near past time for you to get with that program, Cap.
Captain America: Don’t hold your breath.

This dialogue reaffirms Cap’s role as a symbol of the Golden Age by addressing a criticism of his generation, the Golden Age, and justifying the criticism in the name of the greater good. *Winter Soldier* incorporates an objection to drones into Captain America’s mythology in order to influence the audience to share his beliefs. He’s the perfect ethnosome through which to transmit this message because he’s associated to a perceived Golden Age in America’s past, giving him the authority to make morally-based criticisms of drones and the modern defense program.

The film goes even farther with its criticism of the NSA by incorporating an Edward Snowden-inspired whistleblower\(^\text{16}\). Agent Natasha Romanoff, also known as the Black Widow, leaks classified SHIELD information to the public in order to expose the data-

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\(^\text{16}\) In June of 2013, Edward Snowden, a private contractor working for strategy and consulting firm, leaked confidential information about PRISM. PRISM is a tool used by the NSA to collect electronic data from major Internet services, including Google and Facebook (“Edward Snowden: the Whistleblower Behind the NSA Surveillance Revelations”).
mining program. The movie’s central villain, played by Robert Redford, warns Agent Romanoff that by releasing classified government documents, she will be vulnerable to prosecution, but she does it anyways. At the end of the film, the United States government criticizes her actions, but the narrative of the film supports Romanoff as a whistleblower. This is a significant commentary on Edward Snowden because the American public and media has widely criticized him for releasing classified NSA information, but *Winter Soldier*, a corporate-branded Hollywood blockbuster, communicates support for his actions.

The film’s message of support for the whistleblower is ultimately a mixed message, however. When Romanoff leaked classified SHIELD information revealing a data-mining program, she also leaked information that incriminated her. Here, the film deviates from the Snowden analogy because his information leak incriminated him only in so far as he was responsible for it—it didn’t reveal further illegal activities on his part. By making Romanoff guilty of crimes against the United States, the film aligns her with the NSA because both the NSA and Romanoff suffered negative consequences due to the respective information leaks. At the end of the film, a Senate subcommittee calls Romanoff into a hearing about her crimes revealed in the leak. In this scene she’s no longer a proxy for Snowden, she’s a proxy for the NSA:

Natasha: You’re not gonna put me in a prison. You’re not gonna put any of us in a prison. You know why?
Senator: Do enlighten us
Natasha: Because you need us. Yes, the world is a vulnerable place and yes we help make it that way, but we’re also the ones best qualified to defend it. So if you want to arrest me, arrest me. You’ll know where to find me.

17 The choice to cast Redford in this film was in part a reference to his 1975 political thriller *Three Days of the Condor* (“Captain America: Winter Soldier Is About Obama’s Terror-Suspect Kill List, Say the Film’s Directors”).
Romanoff speaks on the behalf of herself but she could also be speaking on the behalf of the NSA. She helped make the world vulnerable by committing crimes against the United States in her past and by being a part of SHIELD—and by extension a part of their data-mining program, but she’s confident she won’t be arrested because Romanoff and the other SHIELD agents are also the people best equipped to defend the United States, just as the NSA maintains its actions allow it to best defend the United States.

Romanoff’s line is reminiscent of President Obama’s speech on January of 2014 about the results of a review of the NSA:

“For all these reasons, I maintained a healthy skepticism toward our surveillance programs after I became President...What I did not do is stop these programs wholesale - not only because I felt that they made us more secure; but also because nothing in that initial review, and nothing that I have learned since, indicated that our intelligence community has sought to violate the law or is cavalier about the civil liberties of their fellow citizens,” ("Remarks by the President on Review of Signals Intelligence").

By suggesting that surveillance programs make the US more secure, Obama confirms the world is a vulnerable place. By admitting his skepticism towards surveillance programs, he admits that such programs contribute towards making American citizens more vulnerable. By stating his decision to continue surveillance programs instead of stopping them, Obama reaches the same conclusion as Romanoff—governmental agencies like SHIELD and the NSA are best qualified to defend the United States, and for that reason they cannot be terminated. *Winter Soldier* subverts America’s negative perception of Edward Snowden by aligning Romanoff with him, but by also aligning her with the NSA, the film proves that a corporate-branded studio film can only be so subversive, just as Virgil could only be so subversive when working on the behalf of the Augustus’s Rome.
Chapter 13: Double Standards: “Us” versus “Them”

The American origin of the City on a Hill ideal (as opposed to the biblical origin) contains an “us” versus “them” mentality. As was stated in Chapter 6, the exact line from John Winthrop’s sermon referencing the City on a Hill concept reads: “We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us” (Winthrop). Winthrop’s use of “We” refers to the people on the hill, while “the eyes of all people” refers to everyone who is not on the hill, but rather in the valley watching the example of the City on a Hill. This “us” versus “them” worldview often presents itself as double standards—the City on the Hill holds itself to a more permissive set of standards than to which it holds the eyes in the valley. After 9/11, the United States government began passing laws to fight terrorism that ultimately restricted individual rights, all the while maintaining criticism of other nations for restricting individual rights. In post-9/11 superhero films, just like in post-9/11 America, rhetoric does not always align with action and values extolled to “them” are not always upheld by “us.”

In *Batman Begins*, after Bruce Wayne completes his training with Henri Ducard, Ducard instructs him to kill a Chinese prisoner. The scene unfolds as follows:

Bruce: I’m no executioner.
Ducard: Your compassion is a weakness your enemies will not share.
Bruce: That’s why it’s so important. It separates us from them
Ducard: You want to fight criminals, this man is a murderer.
Bruce: This man should be tried.

Bruce uses the words “us” and “them” to create a distinction between those who are lawful and those who are lawless. By stating that the Chinese criminal should be tried before being sentenced to death, Bruce defines his understanding of justice to include the accused’s right to a trial. Because Ducard does not define justice as including the right to a
trial, this issue becomes the division between “us” and “them” in the scene. This scene establishes Bruce’s moral compass, but it quickly becomes evident that Bruce holds himself to a different standard of morality than his holds Ducard. He condemns Ducard for sentencing the Chinese criminal to death without a trial, but as Batman, Bruce acts in the same way. Batman doesn’t hold back from using force to promote justice. He’s depicted beating up street thugs, gangs, and mafia members who are often last seen lying lifelessly on the ground, fate unknown. He’s not guided by an understanding of justice that includes the right to a trial, even though he endorsed the value of a trial earlier in the film. Batman’s actions directly contradict the definition of justice he righteously defended to Ducard. It’s a double standard and proves that, although Bruce believes otherwise, the division he established between himself and Ducard, or “us” and “them,” is non-existent.

Batman’s double standard applied to the definition of justice and the right to a trial reflects the United States government’s double standard on the same subject. Every year, the US Department of State publishes country reports on Human Rights Practices. The most recent Country Report is from 2013 and contains a preface by Secretary of State John Kerry, which opens with, “As we mark the 65th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights this year, the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices highlight the continued pursuit of “free and equal dignity in human rights” in every corner of the world,” (“Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Secretary’s Preface”). The County Reports goes on to criticize nations like Iran\(^\text{18}\) and Russia\(^\text{19}\) for punishing criminals without

\(^{18}\) “The constitution and penal code require a warrant or subpoena for an arrest and state that an arrested person must be informed of charges within 24 hours. Authorities often violated these procedures by holding some detainees, at times incommunicado, for weeks or months without charge or trial, frequently denying contact with family or timely access to legal representation” (“Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Iran”).
trials, just a year after the US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for the 2012 Fiscal Year restricted individual rights to a trial. The 2012 NDAA allows the United States to arrest and imprison terrorism suspects, including American citizens, without charges or a trial. This directly contradicts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Kerry cites in his preface and it directly contradicts the United States Constitution. The 2012 NDAA is the equivalent of Batman altering his definition of justice to forgo the right to a trial when it suits him but condemning Ducard when he does the same. It’s a double standard that’s also indicative of the “us” versus “them” mentality of the City on a Hill ideal because while the right to a trial must be upheld at all times by nations that are not the City on the Hill, for the nation that is the City on a Hill, the right to a fair trial is not as strictly applied.

In Captain America: Winter Soldier, SHIELD Director Nick Fury’s character arc embodies a double standard that also reflects an “us” versus “them” mentality. Before Fury reveals SHIELD’s helicarriers to Captain America, he prefaces it with an anecdote about his grandfather. He says his grandfather used to walk home every night with his tips in his lunch bag, but as his neighborhood grew rougher and rougher, he began carrying a loaded 22 Magnum in his lunch bag too. Fury then reveals the helicarriers to Captain America and

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19 “According to an April report by the ombudsman for human rights, Vladimir Lukin, almost 57 percent of the 24,930 complaints received by his office in 2012 related to violations of civil rights. Of these, more than 67 percent involved alleged violations of the right to a fair trial” (“Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Russia”).
20 Article 8 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.”
21 Amendment 6 of the United States Constitution states, “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the state and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.”
Hickey says, “Yeah, I know. They’re a little bit bigger than a 22.” Fury supports the use of helicarriers—or drones—as a means of protecting the United States in a world that has become more dangerous, and believes it’s no different than when his grandfather began carrying a weapon in a neighborhood that had become more dangerous. When the film makes it clear that SHIELD has been infiltrated, however, and the helicarrier technology is in the hands of the villain, Fury teams up with Captain America to destroy the helicarriers. Fury’s character arc isn’t a journey of supporting helicarriers to rejecting them, it’s a journey of supporting helicarriers when they’re in his control to rejecting helicarriers when they’re in the control of others, or “them.” The film clearly applies both a double standard and an “us” versus” them worldview to the subject of drones.

In the post-9/11 age, the United States is the leading actor in the development of drone technology. In February of 2015, the Department of State released “U.S Export Policy for Military Unmanned Aerial Systems” which allows the US to sell drones to other countries as long as those countries adhere to the “Principles for Proper Use of U.S-Origin Military UAS” outlined in the document. The first principle states, “Recipients are to use these systems in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as applicable.” Based off of this requirement, the United States wouldn’t be able to sell drones to itself because the US does not provide enough transparency to evaluate whether or not its use of drones is in accordance with international law.

The United Nations released a report in 2013 called the UN SRCT Drone Inquiry that urged the United States to declassify information “relevant to its lethal extraterritorial counter-terrorism operations; and to release its own data on the level of civilian casualties
inflicted through the use of remotely piloted aircraft,” but the United States has yet to do so. Vocal critics, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, believe the lack of US transparency is because the country’s drone use does violate international law and both groups point to civilian casualties as proof (“Killing Outside the Bounds of Law?”). The Department of State’s drone export policy applies a double standard to the ways in which the US is allow to use drone as opposed to the ways in which other nations are allowed to use drones. Fury supports helicarriers when they’re in his control, but the thought of others using helicarriers is enough to make him destroy the technology altogether. The drone export policy is the real world analogy for Fury’s decision to destroy helicarrier technology because both are actions taken to ensure that others cannot use drones in the way that the US and Fury use them.

Double standards are inherent in an “us” versus “them” worldview. The City on a Hill ideal has an “us” versus “them” worldview because of the distinction it creates between the City on a Hill and the eyes of the people watching it. Because the concept of America as a City on a Hill is so ingrained in the American consciousness, the “us” versus “them” mentality is also ingrained in the American consciousness, giving the United States a great capacity for double standards. Both double standards and an “us” versus “them” mentality are evident in post-9/11 superhero films because the changes made to America after 9/11 caused these them to become more prominent in American political rhetoric and foreign policy, and superhero films reflect the increased prominence.
Conclusion

In the scene immediately following Zod’s death, Superman confronts the American military General who became his ally when Earth was under Zod’s threat. The General and a soldier are driving along a desert road when a surveillance drone comes crashing down in their path, followed by Superman. He stands before them in his Kryptonian suit, or the Superman suit. It’s a shade of blue so dark it’s almost gray. The red on his cape and “S” emblem are muted, and the yellow, which just barely fills in the background of the large “S,” is a muddled shade of gold. Superman tells the General he knows the military is looking for him, but they won’t find his home. The General asks, “How do we know you won’t one day act against America’s interests?” Superman responds, “I grew up in Kansas, General. I’m about as American as it gets,” and even though these words come from the mouth of an impossibly handsome, strong, and godlike alien, they're believable.

Superman is an effective ethnosymbol because American audiences recognize his characteristics as identifiably American. His strength, power and moral integrity reflect the perceived strength, power and moral integrity of the City on a Hill. His grittier, more militaristic outfit reflects the darkness that has become a part of the post-9/11 City on a Hill. Post-9/11 superhero films represent the ideals of the United States and reflect the transition the nation has undergone in the years following 9/11.

The concept of the United States as a City on a Hill is deeply embedded in the American consciousness. It’s the underlying doctrine of the nation, appearing in political rhetoric, entertainment, and American narratives. Ethnosymbols serve to reinforce it, and when the rules of the City on a Hill change, so do the ethnosymbols. After the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the ensuing wars, the revelations of torture and data mining
perpetrated by the United States and the impossibility of ignorance to these realities due to the ubiquity of information in the digital age, America can no longer view itself as untouchable or faultless. The post-9/11 ideal of the City on a Hill reflects this and accounts for the way America now views itself—still as an exemplar, but no longer faultless. The definition has been altered to include a layer of moral ambiguity, and ethnosymbols have been adjusted accordingly. This is why audiences can still recognize Superman as a hero even after they've seen him kill someone. He is an American myth who reflects the doctrine of the nation.

In Ancient Rome, the doctrine of the nation was the concept of fate. A firm belief in fate was a tenet of Ancient Roman religion and deeply embedded in Roman consciousness. The Aeneid reflects that deep belief in fate and manipulates it in order to legitimize Augustus Caesar's rule. The ethnosymbols in the epic embody characteristics that are recognizably Roman—or recognizably not Roman and therefore overtly condemned, like Dido's sexual behavior. Aeneas embodies the characteristics of a model Roman citizen, depicted as nothing but pious and dutiful. Even when Dido distracts him, it takes only a reminder of his duty to propel him onwards. Because of these characteristics, Romans identify Aeneas as Roman even though he's a Trojan, just as Americans identify Superman as American even though he's an alien.

Both the Aeneid and post-9/11 superhero films are highly manipulated narratives. They reflect efforts to shape national identity through the manipulation of widely known mythologies important to their cultures. The most recent incarnations of Superman, Batman, Iron Man and Captain America reflect the imperfect post-9/11 America and an altered City on a Hill ideal in which the City on the Hill is an impure exemplar. Virgil
distorts Aeneas’s mythology in order to promote the belief that the divine fated Rome to exist and fated Augustus to be its ruler. Post-9/11 superhero films and the *Aeneid* are both vehicles for promoting and disseminating the underlying doctrine of the nations—the City on a Hill ideal and fate, respectively. Modern America and Ancient Rome use the same instrumentalist strategy to shape national identity and create a sense of unity among nationals, and this creation of loyalty through artifice is evocative of an Empire.

The characteristics of an Empire are broad. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as, “Supreme and extensive dominion or sovereignty; especially that exercised by an emperor, or by a sovereign state over its subject territories,” a concept that is not inherently malevolent, but conjures a strong negative reaction. The term “Empire” implies forced loyalty, while “Republic” implies inclusion and choice. Augustus knew this and continued to refer to Rome as a Republic even when this was factually incorrect, and continued to refer to himself as Princeps, or First Citizen, instead of Emperor in order to disguise his Empire-building from the Roman people (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*).

America is also aware of the negative connotations of the term “Empire” and also rejects the term. In an April 28th, 2003 interview between Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based news network, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Rumsfeld reacted strongly to the suggestion the United States was an Empire. He stated, “We don’t seek empires. We’re not imperialistic. We never have been. I can’t imagine why you’d even ask the question,” (Schmitt) but America has an undeniable imperialist past and many, including philosopher Noam Chomsky, consider America’s post-9/11 presence in the Middle East to be
imperialistic at its core\(^{22}\). The United States is the lone world superpower, it has permanent American military bases all over the world, it spends more money on more money on the military than improving domestic conditions at home, and the United States government deposes foreign leaders who contradict American objectives\(^{23}\). Like Augustus’s Rome before it, the United States is an Empire disguising itself as a Republic and shaping a sense of national identity, and by extension loyalty to the Empire, among its citizens through myth manipulation.

After thoroughly examining the ways in which Ancient Rome and post-9/11 America shaped national identity through instrumentalists texts containing manipulated ethnosymbols in the forms of myths, symbols and values, it’s clear that the *Aeneid* and post-9/11 superhero films are tools of Empire-building. When Superman declares he is about as American as it gets at the end of *Man of Steel*, he conveys loyalty to America. Superman reinforces to the audience that are unified under the same nation. He’s American; he is of the Republic just as the audience is of the Republic. His loyalty to America isn’t forced, it’s genuine—he’s from Kansas, after all. Through his dialogue, through the dialogue of an ethnosymbol, Superman communicates to the audience that they are all members of an inclusive Republic, not an involuntary Empire.

\(^{22}\) In 2008, Noam Chomsky delivered a speech at Boston University entitled “Modern-Day American Imperialism: Middle East and Beyond” in which he argued that the founding fathers intended America to be an Empire and the conflict in the Middle East is merely a continuation of that agenda.

\(^{23}\) CIA documents declassified in 2013 revealed that the United States was responsible for overthrowing the Prime Minister of Iran in 1953. In 1991 the US overthrew the first democratically elected president in Haitian history. During the Ukraine revolution in 2014, the US backed Svoboda, an anti-Russian political party despite strong evidence that it is also a Neo-Nazi organization (“35 Countries Where the U.S has Supported Fascists, Drug Lords and Terrorists”).
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