

PAPER TO BE PRESENTED AT THE
2004 MIDWEST POPULAR CULTURE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE
Friday, October 8, 2004, 2:30pm. St. Louis Room, Radisson Hotel Cleveland – Gateway, 651 Huron Rd., Cleveland, OH

**“The Case of the Green Arrow:
Cultural Studies and the Politics of Popular Culture”**

One of the cultural studies movement’s greatest successes has been its expansion of “the political” as an intellectual category, allowing scholars to perceive the latent forms of political expression and cultural forms of political power in everything from classic literature to rock music to comic books (and much more). At the same time, one of the chief criticisms of cultural studies has been its tendency to politicize everything but politics itself, understood as the ordinary, formal workings of power and citizenship: government, voting, policy, and ideology.

This criticism has led in turn to a greater interest, in cultural studies and related fields, in the reading of explicitly political texts. Scholars are looking to mend the disconnect between cultural politics and political culture, and perhaps buttress the political claims of cultural studies, by finding points of direct, concrete intersection between the worlds of popular culture and more ordinary forms of politics.

The DC Comics character Green Arrow (Oliver Queen) happens to be one such intersection. A perennial second-feature since the 1940s, Green Arrow became the rare mainstream comic book character with a definite political ideology beginning in the late 1960s. Remodeled with a Vandyke beard and “flaming liberal” views to suit the relevance craze of the times, the Emerald Archer was surprisingly allowed to keep his identity as the DC universe’s resident leftist even after the relevance fad passed. His politics became a defining character trait along with his short temper, (mildly) bohemian lifestyle, and long-term romance with his Justice League colleague Black Canary. Almost unique in comicdom, politically speaking, Green Arrow’s long history allows us to look directly at how a popular medium has handled explicitly political themes and situations,

including election campaigns, political ideology, social activism, and many specific issues such as terrorism and the environment.

While it was remarkable that a character could express “radical” or even just liberal political views within the pages of corporate comics, Green Arrow’s characterization as a childish “hothead” and aging beatnik tended to distance the reader from his politics and reinforce the idea of leftism and social awareness as basically naïve, irrational, and, by the 1980s, rather dated. At the same time, Oliver Queen was repeatedly put through story arcs that emphasized the futility of political action or any sort of extra-personal moral/ethical code, temporarily redirecting the character from the altruistic, socially responsible, quasi-pacifist* Superman/Spider-Man side of the superhero tradition to the Batman/Punisher side (with its true roots in other genres) emphasizing vigilantism, terror, and violent revenge on evildoers. For instance, in writer-artist Mike Grell’s *The Longbow Hunters*, the starting point for Green Arrow’s longest-running solo comic (1988-98), the rape and torture of Black Canary by sadistic criminals was used to turn Queen into a vengeful “urban hunter.” For a time, the hippie Robin Hood became Dirty Harry with a bow -- and a quiver full of pointy steel arrows rather than the non-lethal trick shafts that had previously been his trademark.

Following a common pattern across a range of media and genres, Green Arrow’s case suggests the limited political potential of American popular culture as it has usually been deployed, and the ultimately reactionary character of most of the political “messages” that can be identified. At the same time, the fact that Green Arrow has always eventually been restored to his liberal identity holds out the possibility that the more constructive and optimistic political elements of the superhero tradition have not been completely lost.

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* Fists and webs were acceptable in stopping crimes and preventing violence, but guns, knives, and taking or threatening human lives were eschewed.