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# Collective of Heroes: Arrow's Move Toward a Posthuman Superhero Fantasy

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**Collective of Heroes:**

***Arrow's Move Toward a Posthuman Superhero Fantasy***

by

Alyssa Grace Kilbourn

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

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### **Abstract**

Since 9/11, superheroes have become a popular medium for storytelling, so much so that popular culture is inundated with the narratives. More recently, the superhero narrative has moved from cinema to television, which allows for the narratives to address more pressing cultural concerns in a more immediate fashion. Furthermore, millions of viewers perpetuate the televised narratives because they resonate with the values and stories in the shows. Through Fantasy Theme Analysis, this project examines the audience values within the *Arrow*'s superhero fantasy and the influence of posthumanism on the show's superhero fantasy.

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## Chapter 1: When Fantasy Reflects Reality

Storytelling is a facet of human communication; it unites people and creates a shared sense of reality. Myths and legends originated in small group storytelling and grew; these stories related the experiences of the people and indicated the values held by the audience. As the centuries passed, storytelling became both visual and auditory, but how stories function remains the same. Stories relate the values in a given society at a given time, and they create metaphors through which to negotiate the changes and challenges in society. In many ways, the type or genre of story told in the various mediums tells one what cultural values exist. Specific genres may rise in popularity over time, and this indicates the values expressed in those stories relate more strongly with people in that specific time period. Any change in the popular story's genre then suggests change in the values which resonate with readers—it suggests a change in cultural identification.

In the last decade, superheroes have become a sort of cultural icon in the United States. Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan assert a change in the American cultural metaphor “from Western to superhero,” as seen when the current president and other public figures are referred to as superheroes instead of cowboys. This shift is further highlighted by the prevalence of these narratives and their means of addressing the social tensions of today. Instead of using Westerns as metaphors for modern day tensions, movies have shifted to using superhero narratives to discuss concerns of internet privacy, terrorism, immigration, and so on (*xviii*). Joe Quesada, former editor-in-chief of Marvel, points to 9/11 as a turning point in “everybody’s perspective on what heroes are and what superheroes should be, as well as the way we tell their stories” (149). This shift in perspective could be a contributing factor for the current popularity of superheroes. This popularity began in 2002 when Marvel produced the first of many superhero movies. DC

followed the trend, and now there has been at least one superhero movie produced each year by either franchise. As such, popular culture is inundated with these superhero narratives at a mainstream level. Thus, it is not surprising that superheroes have become such a cultural icon in the United States.

Furthermore, the superhero narrative has moved beyond the condensed narratives of the silver screen, and now are featured in prolonged television narratives. With the shift into television, the superhero narrative is able to explore various issues in more depth than the condensed movie form. Movies take a large plot line and shrink it into two or so hours, while television shows are able to stretch the narrative over thirteen to twenty plus hours. These narratives then become accessible to anyone with a Netflix or Hulu account instantaneously rather than movies, which (unless pirated) are not released to streaming sites until the movie is released for home purchase. This allows the superhero narrative to reach a broad, mainstream audience almost immediately while interacting with the audience's immediate concerns. The concerns addressed in the television show may range from immigration, socio-economic inequality, to police brutality—whatever concerns are most pressing to the audience at the time.

Such accessibility and breadth of topic creates an opportunity to analyze the perceived issues of modern America and possible solutions or responses to these issues. With the broad television audience, the superhero's narrative reaches millions of viewers, who buy into the fantasies because they identify with the values reflected in the narrative. As such, the superhero narrative reveals the changing fantasy themes of modern America, which one can analyze through Ernest Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis to determine the cultural values and identification of the audience.

In order to use Fantasy Theme Analysis, the artifact must have symbolic convergence. Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory explains the appearance of group consciousness from storytelling, while the analysis reveals the values the group identifies with in the fantasy. Symbolic Convergence Theory establishes group consciousness through "socially shared narrations and fantasies" ("Symbolic Convergence Theory" 128). Within small group communication, stories are shared to reduce tension and create a common culture when there might not have been one before ("Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 396-397). These stories present fantasies which may "chain out" among the group—meaning the fantasy is carried on and elaborated by the other communicators. Fantasies which chain out often reveal the values or motivations of the group which accepts the fantasy (397-398). In addition, when a group chains out fantasies, they create a symbolic reality called a rhetorical vision (398). These rhetorical visions are created from "shared interpretation[s] of events that fulfill a group psychological or rhetorical need" ("Symbolic Convergence Theory" 130). As such, the fantasies reflect reality and create an understanding of current events which others in the community share, while simultaneously forming a group identity. The sharing of these rhetorical visions is symbolic convergence; the collocutors now have a common ground through the interpretation of fantasy (131). Once a group shares a rhetorical vision, one can analyze it to determine the values audiences identify with in the fantasy ("Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 398). To conduct a fantasy theme analysis, a narrative must have chained out among a group. The analyst then examines the evidence for patterns in characterization which establishes the fantasy themes. From there, one determines the rhetorical vision suggested by the evidence and patterns (401). Once the rhetorical visions are identified, they reveal the values embedded in the fantasy which



the group has bought into. If a certain fantasy changes over time, it could reveal cultural trends and the discursive changes in the fantasy's construction.

The superhero fantasy is one such fantasy theme within superhero narratives and it does change in subtle ways to match the cultural influences. But each superhero narrative will have additional fantasy themes which reflect other values of the fan-base. As stated before, television superhero narratives are able to explore topics in more depth than movies can, and they reach a broader audience than comic books do. The CW television shows *Flash* and *Arrow* have their own fan-bases which have bought into the fantasies they offer. *Flash* and *Arrow* are in their third and fifth season (respectively) at the writing of this thesis. As such, these superhero narratives persist and have their own (and shared) audiences. Both shows are situated within the same world, as witnessed by the crossover episodes, and they both use the superhero fantasy theme. However, the two shows' superhero fantasies differ in content and focus. *Flash* deals with more fantastic situations, while *Arrow* tends to address issues reflected in society. Moreover, *Arrow* modifies the televised superhero fantasy theme into a posthuman collective of heroes over the course of its series. The posthuman aspect of the series allows for more complex negotiations and interactions within the narrative, and creates a new superhero fantasy theme. The move from generic superhero fantasy to the hybrid fantasy could suggest a changing cultural perspective on what superheroes are or what (changing) American values they reflect. A fantasy theme analysis will provide answers to these hypotheses, and will reveal the values represented through the posthuman-influenced superhero fantasy. In turn, the revealed values may suggest a changing perspective on what is heroic, or at least what Americans identify as heroic.

*Arrow* was selected for this fantasy theme analysis for multiple reasons. The primary reasons are the show's focus on the social justice concerns reflected in real-life, the mirrored

reality the show takes place in, and the length of the narrative. However, the analysis will not address the fifth season, which aired October 5, 2016. Instead, the analysis will focus on the first four seasons. The selected seasons of *Arrow* follow a core group of characters and their growth into superheroes. These characters include Oliver Queen (the protagonist played by Stephen Amell), John “Dig” Diggle (played by David Ramsey), Felicity Smoak (played by Emily Bett Rickards), Roy Harper (played by Colton Haynes), Laurel Lance (played by Katie Cassidy), and Thea Queen (played by Willa Holland).<sup>1</sup> Half of their superhero narratives come to completion by the end of the fourth season, after which point the core group of characters begins to change and new characters begin the superhero journey. Thus, the first four seasons provide ample discussion of the various fantasy themes while keeping within one definitive group narrative.

Due to the focus on said core group of characters, the analysis will only examine the narrative line which takes place in the present. *Arrow*'s episode construction follows most crime dramas in the sense that the group solves a crime in an episode. However, each episode tells two storylines; one is situated in the present (where the crime takes place), and the second takes place five years in past. The core group come together in the present story, while the past storyline focuses on Oliver's change from a helpless playboy into the lethal vigilante seen in the first season. As such, the present storyline is the focus of analysis because it shows the core group's progression into superheroes and their character story arcs.

In addition to full character story arcs, *Arrow* establishes a real-world setting, or at least a world that closely mirrors reality. Within the first ten minutes of the pilot, the dialogue between characters attempts to establish the real-world setting. Tommy Merlyn, Oliver's best friend, details the confusing ending to *Lost*, and the super bowl winners Oliver missed while he was

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<sup>1</sup> Quinten Lance (played by Paul Blackthorne) may also be included within the core group of characters; however, he is purposely left out of the analysis because of his altering support of the Team and limited part in the group.

marooned on a deserted island (all of which matched the actual winners). Tommy also mentions offhandedly there is a “black president, that’s new,” so while no names are provided for government leaders, the viewer can assume Tommy meant President Obama (“Pilot”).

Throughout the series, dialogue reminds the viewer these characters live in a similar reality—or at least a reality with the same popular culture; there are references to the Kardashians (“Lone Gunman”), Dr. Oz (“Legacies”), *Dr. Who* (“Public Enemy”), the most recent *Bond* movie (“Lost Souls”), the *Harry Potter* books and movies (“Beacon of Hope”), and more. However, more than the popular cultural references are the references to the War in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the continued US military presence throughout the world (“Dark Waters”; “Pilot”; “Suicide Squad”; “Suicidal Tendencies”; “Time of Death”; “Trust but Verify”). The references to war and military forces persists throughout the series and has numerous examples, particularly whenever Dig and Lyla (a side character with particular military connections) interact in the series. All of the cultural references tether the show to reality even as the narrative grows more fantastic.<sup>2</sup> This allows the series to act as a reflection and critique of the issues people and the country face, which in turn solidify the real-world connection.

Connecting the superhero to the audience’s lived experience is part of the superhero genre. The fantasy is always situated within reality; if a superhero story remained solely in the realm of the fantastical, it would ultimately lose audience members and meaning. The comic book superhero has always been a metaphor which the creators and readers can place any meaning into, and whose most poignant meanings come from the fantasy’s connection to the reader’s reality (Kurt Busiek 136-137). As such, the superhero must be situated within a recognizable environment or situation, lest his or her metaphor lose meaning. Of course, readers

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<sup>2</sup> Second season featured a super soldier threat, third season featured an assassin group which acted like a hidden army, and fourth season had an enemy who used magic to kill people and take over the city.

do not want superhero stories to be too real either. Real-life superheroes are vigilantes and are undesirable. Because superheroes are idealizations or better versions of real people, a real-life vigilante comes off as crazy and disturbing (Will Brooker 13). Thus, the superhero is set in a reality that mirrors or is supposed to *be* society but it still holds an element of the fantastical that makes these vigilantes actually desirable.

Ultimately, superhero stories are a balancing act; so, while the comic book superhero may use fantasy elements to draw in readers, the superhero's connection back to reality keeps fans invested (Marco Arnaudo 104). This allows the superhero to interact with modern issues, like the conflict in the Middle East, but the superhero does not “fix” or “solve” the issues. If the modern issues readers are concerned with were actually solved in the narrative, then that tether to reality would break and there would be no continued exigency for the writing (105). Superhero fantasies exist to negotiate the conflicts readers feel in their lives. It creates a discursive environment through which social concerns can be examined in more critical ways; therefore, resolving issues removes the connection and desire to read the narrative. Moreover, connecting with the reader's reality allows the superhero's narrative to hold a mirror up to the real world. The reality the superheroes exist in will reflect the reality of the time, and thus leads to critical conversation of the government and other institutions. Arnaudo points to the Green Arrow and Green Lantern team-up comics from the seventies as one example. Their narratives encountered “all-too-real problems like racism, drugs, the expropriation of native lands, pollution, and worker exploitation” during its run (95). Thus the backdrop was fantastical but the issues were real and were brought to the forefront. Moreover, characters—even those meant to reflect patriotism—do not follow the government or culture blindly; instead, they follow specific values which are not necessarily political (96). As such, the superhero can critique the society and governments

reflected in the narrative. This is how the superhero fantasy and narrative works: the superhero narrative reflects reality and examines the smaller things which contribute to the larger issues in society. The narrative is close enough to the reader's reality to allow for critique, but distanced enough to be enjoyable. *Arrow* makes that close reflection to reality, even though it is set in the fictional Starling City (called Star City in the fourth season). As the series grows more fantastical, the issues reflected in the show remain connected to real-world social issues, so *Arrow* will always reflect reality to some degree no matter how impossible the villain becomes.

The first episode of *Arrow*, "Pilot," aired October 10, 2012 during the Occupy Wall Street Movement, which had clear influences on the first season's villain choice (a CEO of a multi-billion dollar company) and various character interactions. The pilot establishes this social issue early on, which further shows the correlation between the show's setting and reality. The pilot presents shots of Starling City facing hard economic times. The audience sees these shots when Oliver requests to visit his father's old, shut-down, steel factory, which resides in the Glades—a former industrial area with low-economic housing and high crime rates. During the car ride, the camera pans over the dilapidated steel factory and the boarded up buildings surrounding it while presumably homeless persons wander the sidewalks or beg. Tommy remarks during the drive how the "city's gone to crap." The scene establishes the disenfranchised are suffering, whereas the Queen family (who had shut down the steel factory) is well-off in their castle-like mansion the viewers saw in earlier scenes ("Pilot"). Throughout the first season, the series reiterates the Occupy influences through characters describing certain persons as "one-percenters" ("Pilot"; "Honor Thy Father"), or more explicitly when Oliver explains his mission to Dig: "Starling City is dying. It is being poisoned by a criminal elite who don't care who they hurt as long as they maintain their wealth and power" ("An Innocent Man"). *Arrow* reflects the

Occupy Movement to establish a dialogue with the audience about the movement and economic system. It uses this background to connect with the readers and create an exigency for the show; those upset with “one-percenters” might find the narrative cathartic because of the protagonist taking down white collar criminals instead of street crime.

While the tensions between the social classes were most drastic in the first season, the tensions persisted into the second season, particularly due to how the first season ended.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the series, even as the conflicts Starling City faces differ more sharply from the real-world and become more fantastical, there are echoes of real-life social issues in the series. The writers wanted to present the Green Arrow narrative to a television audience because they believed the hero would do well given the social climate. According to Greg Berlanti, one of *Arrow*'s writers, they chose the Green Arrow “because he was all about social justice, and we live at a time when the country is really aware of that”—meaning social justice issues (Jensen). Through this socially minded hero, the series addresses alcoholism (“Crucible”), narcotics (“Canaries”; “The Calm”; “State v. Queen”; “Vertigo”), anti-government terrorists (“Blast Radius”), underfunded hospitals (“Keep your Enemies Closer”), businesses giving back to the community (“Beacon of Hope”; “Sara”), cyber terrorism and hacktivists (“The Secret Origin of Felicity Smoak”; “Unchained”), corrupt politicians (“Suicidal Tendencies”), police corruption or “bad cops” (“Beyond Redemption”), and more. *Arrow*'s narrative creates discussion on this myriad of social topics, which are partly a result of a posthuman perspective and the Green Arrow's comic book history. The series acknowledges the multitude of societal concerns and uses the show as a means of discussing those concerns in a manner reflective of the changing American perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Merlyn uses an earthquake machine to destroy the Glades, and while the heroes partially thwarted the plan, 503 people died in the aftermath.

The remaining sections of this thesis will focus on the primary fantasy themes presented in *Arrow*, along with their values and discursive implications. First, the superhero fantasy will be examined canonically and historically before the standard superhero fantasy established throughout *Arrow* is analyzed. Second, the posthuman perspective in *Arrow* will be examined alongside the values this perspective brings to the narrative. Third, the posthuman collective's impact on the superhero fantasy will be examined along with the values embedded in the new superhero fantasy theme. Lastly, the implications of this changed fantasy on the American perspective and identity will be discussed.

## Chapter 2: *Arrow*'s Reconfiguration of the Conventional Superhero Story

The history of the superhero fantasy informs what specifically the superhero is and how *Arrow*'s superhero fantasy theme has changed the expectations of a superhero through the inclusion of a posthuman perspective. The canonical superhero narrative has developed over seventy-plus years to become what it is today, and this history has created entrenched understandings of what the superhero is and can do. While modern adaptations of superheroes are different from the first iterations, or even the iterations of twenty years ago, the current superhero and superhero narrative draw on the past.

The “modern” superhero has existed since 1938, but definitions of what is the superhero (and consequently its narrative) have varied. There are key similarities across these definitions; for instance, academics and comic book writers agree the superhero has a mission. This mission is part of what drives the narrative and defines the genre because each issue in the comic book series will continue the hero's mission. This creates serialization, which allows the story to continue to adapt through new iterations in line with the modern concerns while still continuing the existing narrative (Alex Boney 48; A. David Lewis 33-35; Aaron Taylor 350). Because the superhero and its narrative are still growing, the varied perspectives on *what* is a superhero makes sense.

For some critics and analysts, the superhero is a clear-cut being. For others the definition of a superhero is malleable and does not need to be defined, yet these academics can still agree on a core group of characters they classify as superheroes. To Coogan, every superhero has three things: “mission, powers, and identity” (3). The mission tends to be one which aligns with the morals of the superhero's society, and the superhero works toward this mission selflessly. While the superhero's powers tend to be extraordinary, it could pertain to a



person who has honed his or her body beyond normal human capability so that they can keep up with super-powered heroes and foes (4-5). Lastly, Coogan argues the superhero must have a “code name” and “costume” to create his or her superhero identity. The code name is the superhero’s name which then allows for the superhero to have a secret (“civilian”) identity. The costume becomes a uniform of sorts and allows the superhero to be recognized for his crime fighting (6-7). However, for Geoff Klock, defining the superhero so rigidly will ultimately exclude other heroes and narratives—even those recognized as a canonical superhero (72). The superhero genre in itself is a mash-up of various other genres which coalesce into the superhero story. There could be elements of the science-fiction genre and crime drama mixed into one narrative, so to narrowly define what is a superhero could exclude these characters (74-75). Moreover, superhero stories have a long history, which each new writer acknowledges and builds off of (Marco Arnaudo 4). Thus, each new comic book iteration of Superman or Batman will include the previous iterations of these superheroes even as these characters change. Indeed, comic book writers may “kill” the superhero only to bring the superhero back with an altered focus or personality that better reflects the new generation of readers (Lewis 35).

*Arrow*, as of the fourth season, does not have any super-powered heroes on the Team.<sup>4</sup> While super-powered individuals will join the Team in cross-over episodes, they work together on equal footing, which supports Coogan’s definition of a superhero’s powers. The Team’s combat prowess (despite not having “powers”) adds to the fight, so they become an aid not a hindrance in their team-ups with Flash, Hawkgirl, Hawkman, and Vixen (“The Brave and the Bold”; “Legends of Yesterday”; “Taken”). Therefore, while the Team’s abilities only push human capability, they are still superheroes. Moreover, each team member wears costumes to

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<sup>4</sup>The Team will henceforth refer to the vigilante or superhero team the core characters create. The Team occasionally qualifies themselves as Team Arrow during cross-over episodes, but it is not a persistent title.

disguise themselves and identify themselves as “masks,” vigilantes, or even heroes. This allows them to have a codename and a secret identity, although *Arrow* takes the secret identity a step further due to the posthuman influences on the narrative. Overall, however, *Arrow* matches Coogan’s strict denotative requirements of a superhero. As for Klock’s definition, the series does mix drama, film noir, crime, and military narratives into the superhero narrative. Furthermore, the fluid Klock definition allows the posthuman influences in *Arrow* to be validated while maintaining recognition as a superhero narrative.

While the denotative understandings of the superhero help to establish a base for *Arrow*’s analysis, the genre’s history has also inscribed specific meanings onto the superhero, which explain the genre’s continuation and success today. Superman premiered in 1938, and is generally cited as the first modern superhero. At the time, the United States underwent an age of cultural uncertainty due to economic, social, political, and technological issues and advances. The literary culture of this time presented disillusioned or corrupt protagonists, which only perpetuated the cultural uncertainty and fears of change. However, the superhero offered a new way to cope with the changing world (Boney 43). Because “America [was] negotiating a revised morality” when Superman debuted and began interacting with the urban setting, he (and other superheroes) became a way to address the issues out of the reader’s controls because these heroes would always overcome the issues (Lewis 32-33). In many ways, the cultural uncertainty of the thirties and forties was like the uncertainty felt after 9/11. The United States was entering a more uncertain, complex global setting, and—just as in the forties—superheroes seem to be providing a means of overcoming the overwhelming.

The recent cinematic superhero narratives reflected on the changing world and the warring climate. While some movies focused on the superhero in his city saving people, other

movies focused on the War in Iraq and Afghanistan—like *Ironman*—or had military enemies—like *the Incredible Hulk*. Throughout all of the superhero movies is a mix of hope and cynicism, even as the industry moved toward darker and grittier narratives, like *Watchmen* or the *Dark Knight* franchise (Arnaudo 75). These movies provided opportunities to discuss the changing American culture and the fears audiences had. The superhero became an accessible metaphor for persevering through hardships and negotiating the changing technological world around viewers. Because of the superhero movie surge, superheroes became a readily available narrative to discuss the changing culture. Now *Arrow* (2012), *Flash* (2014), *Daredevil* (2014), *Jessica Jones* (2015), *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016), and *Luke Cage* (2016) take the more concentrated televised narrative form to approach discussions of class equality, gender equality, racial equality, police brutality, rape culture, technology use and privacy, and other social concerns.

While today's superhero narratives often negotiate social and technological concerns, it is not completely new to the genre either. Shortly after Superman's creation, the comic book superhero concerned his or herself with the intellectual and moral issues of the time such as "intellectual property and licensing," as well as a myriad of technological and environmental concerns (Richard Reynolds 52). This has allowed the comic book superhero to persist and adapt to the new concerns of each generation because it has always addressed the social, moral, and intellectual concerns of the readers. By nature, the superhero interacts with the reader's reality and concerns (Will Brooker 11; Danny Fingeroth 125; Ivory Madison 159; Quesada 149; Reynolds 57). The comic book industry does this intentionally because setting superheroes in the reader's reality makes the superhero have meaning (Quesada 149; Stan Lee 116), and thus they can explore the struggles the audience experiences, while also allowing the reader to see themselves in (or identify with) the character (Madison 158). All of these things enable the

superhero to be reconfigured by readers and authors so they may persist and continue their narratives.

This ability to be continually reconfigured, is the founding principle of Taylor's theory on superheroes. He asserts the very nature of the comic book superhero creates opportunities to subvert embodied realities, even though they are presently inscribed by the cultural norms (346). Taylor's theory asserts the superhero *body* is subversive because it can be read and reshaped in many different ways, ways which blur the boundaries like with Batman—who blurs the lines between man and machine or man and animal (356). While Taylor's theory focuses on the superhero's body as subversive, the superhero in general can be subversive for the same reasons. Taylor argues the superhero is reshaped physically from panel to panel through form, fanship, and history (348). The form of the comic book uses still images which can be admired, and thus puts the movement of the narrative between panels. The superhero's form is never complete and in this way one can subvert binaries by readers and artists reconfiguring the fragments (348). Furthermore, fans have an impact on the projection of story and characters, even determining if a character should die. Consequently, readers will read the superhero in specific ways which are informed by their own experiences (349). Lastly, superheroes are reconfigured throughout time. The superhero can be placed into any situation *because* they live outside of time and have "ageless bodies" (350). While all of this is directed toward the superhero *body* it could also be directed at the superhero in general.

As stated before, the superhero is a character which can do the impossible and fill a variety of metaphors. The form of the superhero narrative is a serialization which allows for the story to never truly end, even within the realm of cinema or television. Because the story never truly ends, the superhero can be remade again and again with a new actor (or new artists) to

create an illusion of the superhero never aging. One can see these aspects of Taylor's theory in the Spiderman movies of the early 2000s, which were remade a decade later with a different focus and villain. The freedom to reconfigure the superhero creates subversive opportunities to reflect and critique society, especially as fans encourage the changes. In 2012, Marvel began putting forward superheroes of underrepresented groups, and have continued to do so at the behest of readers (Dockterman 78-80). This falls in line with the history of the superhero genre because it adapts to the reader's reality and concerns. So as audiences push for more diversity and better representations, the superhero genre will adapt their heroes; thus, the changes in the superhero narrative indicate the changes in American perspectives or identification with superheroes. By nature, the superhero is subversive but recent iterations of superheroes highlight this feature. Because of their subversive nature, superheroes offer critiques on various time periods, governments, or cultures. The superhero's nature is to be constantly reshaped by the surroundings and circumstances; thus, they are built up and changed by the persons involved in their reading and creation—hence the change in identification with superheroes.

All of these developments in the superhero's history inform the narratives produced today, both in televised and comic form. The attributes established in the comic book superhero builds the superhero fantasy which fans chain out. The superhero fantasy is about an extraordinary person triumphing over some evil or ill, but the other aspects of the narrative vary by the specific superhero. The superhero fantasy addresses societal concerns which fit the specific superhero story and its audience. Moreover, the superhero fantasy has recently pushed matters of representation and diversity, which coincides with a cultural perspective shift. The values in the superhero fantasy which have more fluctuations include subversion, justice, and heroism. Not every fan may realize they accept these values within the superhero fantasy theme,

but if the audience did not resonate or identify with the embedded values then the fantasy would not have chained out. The rest of the chapter will examine how *Arrow* reflects these changing values within its superhero fantasy theme.

### **Subversion**

Based on Taylor's theory, the superhero always has subversive potential, which in turn translates to the narrative and fantasy. The superhero can blur boundaries between male and female, human and machine, or human and animal (356). In addition, because the superhero's setting often reflects reality, the superhero can critique or subvert the established norms, particularly because of the aforementioned blurred boundaries and its existence outside of time (348). But blurring boundaries means more to than the suggested boundaries listed above. Clare Pitkethly asserts the superhero is powerful because he or she encompasses two opposing identities (28). The secret and super identity represent opposing ideals or even the presence and absence of power. A superhero may be denied power as one identity (typically the secret identity) and have power as the other (typically the super identity). This also means the superhero operates within two different spheres, which allows for poignant critique and subversion of the norms established by these distinct social spheres (27). In the context of *Arrow*, Oliver (for the most part) exists within a sphere of the wealth and privilege while his vigilante persona fights for the disenfranchised within the city. The opposition inherent in these identities falls in line with the Green Arrow history and follows the cultural conversations about wealth and power. Oliver represents dominant groups (the wealthy, whites, heterosexual males) as his secret identity, but his work as a vigilante assists the disenfranchised, thus the show can be seen as a metaphor for the divide in the country between those who have and those who have not. *Arrow* creates a conversation around social binaries, and through the conversation

complicates the binaries and story. As such, the dual nature of the superhero places value on the negotiation between opposing ideals, and creates opportunity for critique of established systems or even stereotypes.

While *Arrow* follows Pitkethly's understanding of the superhero, it also matches Taylor's requirements for subversion: form, fanship, and history. *Arrow's* form is a televised serialization, which allows for character growth and exploration over the course of the seasons. Moreover, because shows are filmed a few months prior to their air date, the writers can include poignant cultural and societal references or address audience concerns. This allows the characters to offer critiques of a given social situation in a more recent way than movies often can. The character progression created through serialization reflects the social movements in reality, and it creates further opportunities for subversion. However, it is fanship which allows for the character changes because shows are able to adjust the trajectory of the show based on fan reception. Therefore, characters and their interactions may change over the course of the series based on the interaction between form and fanship. This leads to changes reflecting the cultural perspectives of a given issue—such as race, sexuality, or gender. The most prominent example within *Arrow* of fanship is the inclusion of Felicity Smoak as a main character. Emily Bett Rickards was a guest star whose character was never meant to stay on the show for longer than that initial episode, but then Felicity became an integral part of Team Arrow (Jensen). In addition to her inclusion, her romance with Oliver was due to internet fans clamoring for “Olicity” since season one. The producers eventually caved to the fans' pressure, and Felicity became a love interest for Oliver starting definitively at the end of second season (“Unthinkable”). While form and fanship impact the series the most, the history of the Green Arrow informs the show and keeps it in line. Since the Green Arrow's narrative revolves around social justice, he became a perfect hero to

place into a more socially conscious time period. In fact, Green Arrow has historically worked through controversial social issues, including substance abuse issues when other comics refused, thus this ageless hero was placed into 2012 during a charged social movement and consequently makes the narrative work. Without these three elements, *Arrow's* superhero fantasy would not have the same subversive potential. In fact, over the four seasons the show grows more subversive in matters of race, sexuality, gender, and politics. Despite the areas for further improvement in each subversive category, *Arrow's* overall improvement in the areas reflects the changing values and conversations in society about the four topics.

Most people of color in the series take prominent roles in the past narrative, while the present storyline has a handful of prominent persons of color. Initially, the only persons of color with speaking lines are a few higher ups in the police force, Walter Steel (the CFO of Queen Consolidated and Oliver's step-father), and Dig (Oliver's bodyguard). Beyond this handful of people, many persons of color in the series appear within various racialized gangs, which creates a problematic pattern of representation. By reinforcing such violent televised racial stereotypes, the show fails its subversive potential and perpetuates negative feelings toward racial groups. However, the series also uses the existing characters of color to comment on these harmful stereotypes. For instance, Dig makes wry and unimpressed comments when he encounters racial stereotypes. In the first season, Oliver gets close to Count Vertigo by implying he would sell the illegal drug (vertigo) out of his nightclub; Dig comments on how he looks "forward to my new and exciting career as a drug dealer" ("Vertigo"). Then later in the season, when Dig buys vertigo for Oliver in order to conduct chemical analyses, Dig states "Alright, the person of color has successfully purchased your drugs" ("Unfinished Business"). These comments draw attention to harmful racial stereotypes which are already in place, and then allow for critique



through Dig's comments. Thus *Arrow* uses the preexisting television racial stereotypes to reveal their absurdity, for Dig is not really a drug dealer but people assume he is because of his race. By commenting on these stereotypes, *Arrow* raises a voice in protest to these harmful tropes.

While negative racial stereotypes are used and critiqued, *Arrow* does push for more diversity, which follows the cultural push for more equal representation in media. As the series progresses more persons of color enter the cast, including Nyssa al Ghul, Sebastian Blood, and Curtis Holt as some of the more prominent and relatively positive representations. Nyssa and Curtis' status as people of color is not commented on, which suggests either a lack of acknowledgement or an acceptance of their race. *Arrow* may be advocating for people to move past race, while also increasing representation, but this can ignore the impact of race on a character. However, Sebastian Blood offers a complex look at race, which acknowledges its arbitrary nature. While Sebastian Blood may be the villain Brother Blood, he also runs for mayor with a sincere agenda to help the disenfranchised within Starling City, which he does while passing for white during his mayoral campaign. Only in interactions with his mother does the audience learn of his Hispanic heritage; thus, *Arrow* discusses passing in society and the complex nature of race through Sebastian Blood. Overall, by increasing representation and allowing subtle racial conversations, *Arrow* subverts the usual white-washed television narratives.

The progress in the show toward healthier racial representations can also be seen in the interactions between Dig and the white characters. During the pilot, Tommy had made several inappropriate racial jokes about Dig as Oliver's body guard ("Pilot"), but no protests were made to the comments. After Oliver and Dig learn more about each other, these racialized jokes end, and Dig gives a voice against racist tropes. This could be modeling a way to overcome racism by

getting to know and become friends with persons of color. The next step in a healthier relationship would then be to actively end racist commentary and sentiments, but Oliver's relationship with Dig represents a beginning. Moreover, as the series progresses, Oliver and Dig develop a close brotherly relationship that moves past race. Up until Oliver supports Dig on his rescue mission in Russia ("Keep Your Enemies Closer"), Dig has acted like the wise black man trope—an older black man who assists the younger white protagonist on his quest ("Broken Dolls"; "Burned"; "City of Heroes"; "Legacies"; "Muse of Fire"; "Vendetta"; "Year's End"; "Sacrifice"). With the advent of their brotherly relationship comes mutual respect; the two give advice freely, call each other on their lies, and take figurative and literal bullets for each other ("Blindspot"; "Brotherhood"; "The Clam"; "Restoration"; "The Offer"; "The Scientist"; "Suicidal Tendencies"; "Tremors"). Oliver and Dig represent opposite walks of life, yet they overcome their racial and economic disparities to become brothers. *Arrow* presents a hopeful look at race relations through these characters, which is especially needed in the recent racially charged times in the U.S. Dig and Oliver come to accept and respect each other's opinion while also being open to admitting when each other is wrong. They model a healthier race relation.

While *Arrow*'s examination of race follows cultural trends, the show's addition of LGBT characters reflects the trends more closely. In first season, the characters are heteronormative, but as the show progresses new sexualities emerge in line with the movements in and acceptance of the LGBT community. All the relationships in the first season are heterosexual, and the majority of the people in *Arrow* have one ascribed sexuality. The first gay man on *Arrow* is Curtis Holt, and he joins fourth season's cast after immediately establishing he is happily married. While this reveals the societal acceptance of same-sex marriage, the character does not really subvert the heteronormative undercurrents in the series. Heteronormativity is not just enforcing

heterosexuality as the norm but also the structures of heterosexual relationships. So while it is a positive move forward to have a gay male character, the established monogamous relationship validated by marriage could be seen as falling in with heteronormative power structures.

Moreover, Curtis' sexuality may (in part) only be accepted because he is in a committed and now socially accepted marriage. It is still a positive representation but not as subversive as it could be, even though it reflects the American perspective.

The characters in *Arrow* who subvert heteronormative portrayals are limited, but they do challenge notions of sexuality. Prior to Curtis, only Nyssa and Sara Lance presented alternate sexualities, and neither woman conforms to labels, which is subversive in itself. While Sara's previous relationship with Oliver and her on-going relationship with Nyssa suggests bisexuality, the *Legends of Tomorrow* spin off presents Sara as openly gay. Likewise, Nyssa may be read as gay because she only loves Sara, but her refusal to enter a relationship with anyone else could imply asexuality with Sara as the only romantic exception. Thus these characters offer complex and fluid sexualities, which the show suggests can be acceptable. Through Nyssa and Sara, *Arrow* opens up conversations on sexuality; however, their fluidity could imply the problematic idea that only women can have fluid sexualities. Regardless, the growing representation of different sexualities in *Arrow* reflects the changing audience perspectives and identification with the same-sex relationships.

In regards to gender subversion, *Arrow* does not subvert gendered norms until third season; as such, it initially follows the stereotypical hyper-gendered norms established in the comics. The comic book hyper-gendering is a hyper-sexualization through gendered characteristics. Typically hyper-masculinity is depicted through musculature and stoicism; a perpetual movement toward invulnerability and hardness both in muscles and emotions (Edward

Avery-Natale 83-84; Jeffery Brown 27). Additionally, because gender norms are constructed along binaries, the feminine is construed as the “other”; thus hyper-femininity is conveyed through softness and vulnerability. The comic books establish this in female heroes by emphasizing their sultry expressions, flowing hair, and large breasts, while deemphasizing representations of masculinity—i.e. muscle (Avery-Natale 75-76). As such, when the *Arrow*’s male heroes have shirtless work-out and sparring montages, the show emphasizes their musculature and reinforces the comic book gendered norms. In general, when *Arrow* uses the rugged individual stereotype, they conform to comic book hyper-masculinity. The show even uses film noir-esque voice-overs for the first six episodes, as if to reinforce the fact Oliver is alone in his crusade for justice like the disillusioned heroes in noir films. Moreover, each male character cannot process emotions in a positive or productive manner. In “Muse of Fire,” Oliver’s mother is shot at by accident, and instead of Oliver processing her near-death experience, he focuses on finding the shooter rather than being there for his family. In fact, anytime Oliver’s loved ones are in danger or hurt by someone, he processes by trying to hunt down the person responsible or by taking his anger out on street thugs (“Blood Debts”; “Sara”). Dig and Roy are no better in handling their emotions. Roy is in a near-constant state of anger throughout the first two seasons, and he becomes narrowed focused when Thea’s safety is concerned (“Dodger”; “The Huntress Returns”; “Salvation”; “Tremors”). Even Dig loses his composure when faced with his brother’s killer because in *Arrow* the hyper-masculine do not process their emotion and grief but lash out (“Keep Your Enemies Closer”; “Suicide Squad”). By putting forward this male representation, the show conforms to harmful male stereotypes of stoicism and aggression.

Just as how the male heroes initially conform to the comic book hyper-masculinity, the female characters conform to hyper-femininity. Whenever the female characters are made vulnerable they are placed into a hyper-feminine position due to the binary nature of comic book gender. Thea, Laurel, and Felicity have all been damsels in distress or targeted to motivate the male heroes (“Betrayal”; “Blindspot”; “Broken Dolls”; “Dark Waters”; “Deathstroke”; “Home Invasion”; “Honor Thy Father”; “The Magician”; “Seeing Red”; “State vs. Queen”; “Streets of Fire”; “Unthinkable”). The only female characters safe from this stereotype are the villains who use the same tropes against the hero—as when the Huntress forces Felicity to hack a government system at crossbow point (“The Huntress Returns”). Often a female character’s strength is undermined by all the times she is kidnapped and used as a bargaining chip or means of motivating the male hero into action; the female character is powerless to stop the kidnapping or attack, and so remains in a position of vulnerability. Worse, though, are use of the “woman in the refrigerator” stereotype. This stereotype derives from a *Green Lantern* comic, wherein the superhero finds his lover dead in a fridge (Gail Simone). The female character’s death just becomes a motivational tool and not something to be genuinely mourned. In the third season, Thea’s near-death becomes a motivational device that leads Oliver toward the League of Assassins (“Broken Arrow”). Moreover, Laurel and Sara actually die after becoming superheroes (“Eleven-Fifty-Nine”; “Sara”), and their deaths are used as motivation for the other characters or as a simple plot device. Becoming a plot device reduces the personhood and significance of the character. Ultimately, these women are threatened so the masculine hero can rescue them, which creates problematic, self-defeating feminine representations.

However, in line with the social movements and pushes for gender equality, *Arrow* begins pulling away from the comic book hyper-gendered norms. Instead of hyper-masculinity

or hyper-femininity, the characters begin reflecting cyborg notions of gender. While each character is always already gendered, the characters begin taking on aspects of the “other.” Donna Haraway argues for a movement past gender into a place of fluidity that challenges the gendered binaries and breaks down the dualisms so that people (cyborgs) can be both and neither at the same time (2219-2220). Thus third season introduces a movement toward the male characters taking on more “feminine” characteristics while the female characters take on more “masculine” characteristics. True cyborg representations of gender are still a far way off in *Arrow*; however, the show at least offers alternative gender constructions for heroes. With the advent of baby Sara, the show reveals how men can be nurturing too. Dig’s partner (Lyla) works within a secret military group (and later runs the secret military group), which leaves Dig to take care of the baby by himself (“Code of Silence”; “Sara”; “The Secret Origin of Felicity Smoak”). Dig is a father taking care of a baby alone, which challenges perceptions on childrearing as an undesirable male characteristic; instead, childrearing is noble and worthwhile. Furthermore, by placing Dig as the primary care provider, *Arrow* follows trends of stay at home dads in society, while also challenging the absentee black father stereotype. Thus, the show suggests staying at home with a baby does not make Dig any less of a hero. Even Oliver takes on more nurturing and emotionally vulnerable characteristics, as when he lives with Felicity. Oliver embraces a domestic life with Felicity—as seen by his enthusiasm to share slow-cooker recipes with his female neighbor. He enjoys cooking for Felicity and wants to start a family, even if it means his wife is the one who will bring in the family income (“Green Arrow”). Through Oliver, *Arrow* makes the statement that there is nothing shameful in staying at home while someone else makes the household income. Starting in the third season, Oliver, Dig, and Roy embrace their emotions more and accept aspects of femininity because it does not make them less but something more.

They become more complex characters and begin moving past gender; thereby subverting the comic book gendered norms and the gendered perceptions in society. *Arrow* creates a healthier understanding of gender because the narrative neither shames Roy for being more supportive in his relationship with Thea (“Canaries”; “Corto Maltese”; “The Magician”; “Uprising”), nor shames Dig and Oliver for being nurturing. This breaks down the harmful and shaming messages that men cannot be sentimental or emotional, and it reinforces more fluid gender constructions.

While the male characters take on more emotionally supportive attitudes, the women take on more masculine physicality. Thea and Laurel begin to train and fight in the third season; in particular, Laurel develops musculature through boxing (“Corto Maltese”). Female musculature is unique even in the superhero story because comic books try to deemphasize that aspect. In fact, the stronger a female hero is, the sexier the comic book will make her appear—as if to counter balance her strength by objectifying her more (Avery-Natale 86-89). So, when *Arrow* presented Sara (Laurel’s sister) with pronounced but not excessive musculature, the show was subverting established superhero fantasy norms (“Time of Death”). Moreover, Thea and Laurel join Dig and Oliver in sparring matches—a scene used to establish the male heroes’ hyper-masculinity—which suggests the women can also act “masculine” (“Beacon of Hope”). This challenges their previous statuses as vulnerable, for now these women are combatants and are taking back control in their lives. These women can fight back when someone tries to make a victim out of them—as seen when Laurel stops a gang member from killing her (“Crucible”), or when she punches out a drugged, scared, armed police officer (“Canaries”). These characters introduce a balance between their femininity and newly expressed masculinity, and thus subvert the comic book gendered norms while matching gender equality movements.

Finally, when it comes to subversion, *Arrow* subverts a more seemingly innocuous binary: conservatism and liberalism. Perhaps in an attempt to remain neutral, Oliver subverts the political binary of republicans and democrats, particularly in the fourth season when he runs for mayor. This choice for neutrality is particularly significant due to the recently toxic and divisive nature of American politics. After the recent election, seeing someone take a position between extremes is a hopeful sight and may even reflect the exasperation audiences feel with the bipartisan system. So while Oliver is relatively apolitical in the first season, the audience does see the character working to find policies which benefit the people from a position in the middle. While he initially thinks he can help the city by gentrifying the Glades like a “white knight” swooping in to save the disenfranchised “all by his lonesome” (“Lone Gunman”), Oliver learns he cannot do much as a small business owner for the people of the city. So Oliver tries to help the people as a fortune 500 president while also supporting a pro-social services mayoral candidate in the second season. Even when he must switch his backing to his mother, who represents a more conservative, “pro-business” mayoral candidate, the change suggests Oliver can see either side of the political spectrum helping the city. There is no toxicity or revulsion between the two sides; instead, Oliver can see the benefits both political parties can bring to his home. Moreover, he can only do so much as a vigilante before he must take a stand as himself; this is something he realizes by the fourth season. As such, when Oliver becomes a mayoral candidate in the fourth season, he takes a populist approach which has policies on the left and right (“Beyond Redemption”). Even his “hippie” ecological campaign move at the Star City harbor has a larger purpose in helping to revitalize the area and bring in new jobs (“Dark Waters”). Everyone in the series just wishes to help the city in whatever way is best and that is not necessarily done by the following the left or right. These characters occupy a space between



these divisive binaries, which is subversive and hopeful at the same time. The bipartisan history in the U.S. has created a toxic environment that *Arrow* tries to combat through characters who represent a middle ground within politics.

### **Justice and Heroism**

The superhero narrative has always circulated around stopping crime; after all, the superhero's mission is to protect the city he or she resides in. However, this raises questions of what and how the hero can protect his or her city. As established earlier, the superhero and the time period he or she reside in inform these choices; in addition, the values that society holds influence the manner in which the superhero safeguards said values in the fictional setting. Moreover, the superhero takes the law into his or her own hands; therefore, the superhero acts out justice without any systems controlling the manner in which they do so. Thus the superhero can easily abuse his or her power, but, like most things in the genre, the comic book history of the superhero has established a rich and entrenched understanding of what a superhero does and does not do. While the superhero may use violence to respond to violence, he or she will not use excessive force (Arnaudo 77-78). In the 90s, the comic book industry began publishing more violent comics in response to the success of other publishing houses whose narratives stopped reflecting the reader's reality and instead presented violent, epic battles (75). This created conflict with the superhero's ethics and history because once the character partakes in excessive violence, it will be forever in his or her history and character. However, the recent superhero films disregard this and other ethics for the sake of sensationalism. For instance, in the *Dark Knight* franchise, Batman brutalizes criminals and dangles or shoves them off of ledges or buildings. These are violations of the superhero code of ethics, and yet the audience writes it off for the sensational story being told. The superheroes in these movies often end up killing the

villain, usually because they are “forced” to, but the comic book superhero would never do such a thing without extreme consequence (91). The comic book superhero will make every effort to preserve life (79), even the life of the enemy (83). If a superhero goes against these ethics, he or she loses the respect and trust of those they protect and their fellow superheroes (86). The superhero then struggles to regain the trust he or she had had before (89-91). The superhero ethics are “the laws” which keep these super-powered beings from asserting their will over the people they protect. Without the ethics, people would not read the character as a hero but as someone using their great power for unknown purposes; the super-powered being becomes a danger to the people he or she swore to protect when they slip in adherence to the ethics. Thus fallen heroes struggle to reassure the people they will not abuse their power and will continue to protect them. Ultimately, these comic book ethics reveal the ideal for superheroes and the kind of justice superheroes seek.

In the comic book world, justice is ultimately served by the courts while the superhero typically brings the criminals to the authorities. If the superhero did more than capture and hand over the criminal, he or she would be exacting vengeance. While some superheroes might work within the justice system as their secret identity, it is only a continuation of justice and the superhero ethics—even if their prosecution or crime scene investigating becomes biased due to their vigilantism. Such are the values which influence justice and heroism in the comic book superhero fantasies. The fantasy suggests values of restraint and respect to the existing judicial system—even if the law enforcement system seems to fail in the fictional setting. In addition, these aspects of the superhero fantasy theme also place value on the preservation of life, which creates unique critiques on society. Arnaudo points to a Post 9/11 *Static* issue, wherein Virgil (as himself not Static) talks with a distraught and angry friend. The values Virgil holds as a

superhero makes him want to refrain from agreeing to any reactionary attacks that could harm innocent people; because no one knew who orchestrated or did the terrorist attack, they should not retaliate rashly and risk hurting innocent people (85). Even at a time when the country was hurting, the comic book hero's respect for life lead to more pacifist reactions to the national tragedy. The movie superhero would likely not have had as neutral a reaction.

The manner in which *Arrow* serves justice and shows heroism develops into the comic book ideal over the four seasons. Initially, Oliver approaches his vigilante activities like a vendetta; he crosses names off of a list his father left him—a list of people who had “failed the city” (“Honor Thy Father”). As his “Hood” persona, Oliver threatens and intimidates people into turning themselves in, but Oliver is not above killing criminals as the Hood. He justifies his actions while the Hood as “for the good of others” (“An Innocent Man”), or when he has “no other choice” (“Vendetta”). However, the comic book superhero always finds a way around killing; therefore, Oliver's choice to kill people leaves the Hood in contention with the police, and even Dig and Felicity, who both initially decline to help Oliver in his “crusade” because of his killing (“An Innocent Man”; “The Odyssey”). Yet the audience, along with Dig and Felicity, overlook the killing because it makes a sensational story (for the audience) and the “good” Dig and Felicity believed the vigilantism did despite the killing (“City of Heroes”). This reinforces the lack of consequences to killing, which is in line with the sensational movie superhero fantasies—killing becomes the lesser of two evils in a city overrun with crime and corrupt elites. Oliver does not do justice but vengeance in the first season and in this way violates the superhero code of ethics. Oliver's vengeful motives are made explicitly clear in the episode “Vertigo,” wherein Oliver chases down Count Vertigo because his product nearly killed Thea (Oliver's younger sister). During the Hood's final confrontation with Count Vertigo, he injects the man

with a high concentration of vertigo—which overstimulates the pain receptors in the brain—in an attempt to kill Count Vertigo and give him a taste of the torment the drug dealer had given to countless others in the city. This leaves the man half-crazed and in excruciating pain for the rest of the season, which is an inhumane punishment and complete violation of the superhero ethics. Oliver could have turned the man over to the police—who were on the scene when he injected Count Vertigo—but Oliver wanted revenge, not justice.

As the narrative progresses, Oliver changes his approach to vigilantism and begins to match the comic book ideal. Second season, Oliver takes on a no-killing ethic to honor his fallen friend<sup>5</sup> and assumes “the Arrow” as his new vigilante identity to reflect that commitment; however, Oliver occasionally ends up killing people as the Arrow because he does not find an alternative way to stop criminals. For instance, when Count Vertigo ends up threatening Felicity’s life, Oliver chooses to kill him instead of finding another way to stop the Count without killing (“State vs. Queen”). The villain gave Oliver “no choice” because he was still threatening Felicity after Oliver agreed to stand down, plus Count Vertigo knew the Arrow’s secret identity, which made him more dangerous to keep alive. However, having “no choice” is a movie superhero sentiment used to excuse killing the villain. The movies use “self-defense” as a way to validate the killing, but in these cases the superhero has already successfully captured the villain (Arnaudo 91-92), so he or she should be capable of doing so again without killing. The “no choice” excuse is a means to justify the death but a comic book superhero would find an alternative or face consequences even if the killing was an act of self-defense. This confrontation with Count Vertigo becomes a foil to the second season’s finale. Oliver comes to realize there are alternatives to killing—even if the villain might be more dangerous alive than dead. Just like

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<sup>5</sup>Tommy Merlyn dies at the end of first season during the earthquake.

Count Vertigo, Slade Wilson (the season's main villain) knows the Arrow is Oliver Queen. He also has a personal vendetta against Oliver and attacks Starling City to purposely hurt Oliver, which is where Slade and the Count differ. Moreover, while Oliver has an opportunity to kill Slade once he cures him,<sup>6</sup> Oliver decides to capture him after their battle, despite the harm Slade had personally done to Oliver. Not killing his tormentor is hailed as "heroic," and Oliver even states "You helped me become a hero, Slade" ("Unthinkable"). Without Slade antagonizing him, Oliver would never have learned to find the alternate option to the killing. At the beginning of the second season he had gone back on his ethics because of someone dangerous like Count Vertigo, but by the end he lets an even more dangerous enemy live because he realizes there are other ways. This leads to the characters ascribing consequences to killing while a vigilante.

Much like in the comic book universe, when a hero kills someone in the third and fourth season of *Arrow*, there are severe consequences. Admittedly, the third season's plot undercuts Oliver's growth as a superhero, but it also establishes group dynamics and stronger superhero ethics. Even though the circumstances of season three keep Oliver from following the superhero ethics, the other vigilantes continue to follow them. For instance, Roy learns he had killed a police officer while in a fugue during the second season ("Guilty"). While Roy could not be held accountable for his actions then, he still struggles the remainder of the season to reconcile what he had done. Even if a superhero cannot be held culpable for their actions, breaking the no-killing ethic has consequences. This point is driven further home when the vigilantes lose public and police support because Ra's al Ghul framed the Arrow for multiple murders. Ra's al Ghul only frames and exposes Oliver as the Arrow because Oliver refused the offer to become the next Ra's al Ghul—leader of the League of Assassins ("Public Enemy"). Yet Oliver refuses the

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<sup>6</sup>Slade Wilson was injected with a super soldier serum which makes him near impossible to kill or fight; however, Oliver levels the playing field by giving him an antidote to the serum.

position because it would mean leaving his friends but also breaking his no-killing ethic—it is a League of Assassins for a reason. Oliver would rather serve his sentence in jail than become the next Ra’s al Ghul (“Broken Arrow”). Moreover, just like the comic book superhero, the heroes in *Arrow* ascribe consequences to killing, and must also find a way to atone for breaking the no-killing ethic.

The hero may atone in multiple ways, but, the comic book superhero took time to reconcile her or his actions and regain trust. In addition, the superhero does what she or he can to keep other heroes from making her or his same mistakes (Arnaudo 90). In *Arrow*, those in the Team who break the ethics find some way to repent—usually by leaving the crime-fighting scene. For instance, Roy’s guilt over killing a cop leads to him claiming *he* is the Arrow instead of Oliver, thus Roy goes to jail in Oliver’s place. The Team then arranges to fake his death so that the inmates do not really kill Roy (“Broken Arrow”). For the rest of the series, Roy lives on the run to repent for murdering of a police officer. Likewise, Oliver may repent for breaking the no-killing ethic while in the League of Assassins by preparing to die during his final confrontation with Ra’s al Ghul (“Al Sah-him”; “My Name is Oliver Queen”). However, if Oliver was repentant of his actions he would not ride into the literal sunset with Felicity; the circumstances makes it seem like he left vigilantism for romance when his leaving the Team could be an attempt to reconcile with what he had done, and to give himself time to earn back the title of hero (“My Name is Oliver Queen”).

When members of the Team leave, it seems they do so to take the time to determine if they deserve to remain heroes. Even Thea and Dig leave the vigilante team because they needed to sort out who they were after their respective transgressions to the superhero ethics (“Schism”). Thea’s excessive violence in the fourth season led to the figurative birth of a psychotic anarchist

with an obsession for her and who pushed Damien Darhk to bomb the whole planet (“Blood Debts”; “The Candidate”; “Monument Point”). While Thea leaves to reconcile with her earlier malicious aggression, Dig leaves to reconcile with killing his brother (Andy) when there could have been another way to keep his family safe from Andy and H.I.V.E. (“Genesis”). The heroes must earn those titles after they break the ethics, and so far the preferred method of atonement has been distance from vigilantism. However, after Oliver breaks the ethics by killing the mystical and nihilistic Damien Darhk, he assumes a position as the city mayor. Felicity tells Oliver there is a schism in his actions as the Green Arrow<sup>7</sup> and his actions as Oliver Queen, but he must reconcile that somehow, and perhaps his way to reconcile is through his position as the interim Mayor. While killing Darhk may be justified, it follows cinema sensational justification, and Oliver still should atone in some way for killing Darhk (“Schism”). Despite the occasional sensationalism, *Arrow* does develop a new live-action hero not seen in the movies. The heroes’ conviction to justice and no-killing goes back to comic book superheroes, and consequently reflects the American belief in second chances. Furthermore, creating consequences to killing presents a different and more empathetic picture of the world. With all of mass shootings and the media discussing murders casually, there seems to be no moral consequence to these horrible events even if there are legal consequences. *Arrow*’s superheroes remind us there are moral consequences to murder and that killing should be avoided at all costs, which is a refreshing and heartening perspective.

Ultimately, *Arrow* reflects standard superhero fantasies of subversion, justice, and heroism. By matching the social changes in perspective, *Arrow* begins subverting expectations for the rugged individual superhero while increasing diversity and representation. Similarly the

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<sup>7</sup>Green Arrow is Oliver’s new vigilante name because the Arrow was exposed as Roy Harper and “died” in prison.

show challenges the sensational cinematic storytelling people expect, and offers instead the idealistic comic book fantasy. All of these aspects fall within the standard superhero narrative, but also open up the series to acceptance and influence of a posthuman society.



### Chapter 3: Collective Subjectivity as the New Superhero Agency

*Arrow*'s superhero fantasy may follow more closely the comic book superhero than the movie superhero, but a posthuman fantasy and collective is also established over the course of the series. Posthumanism in *Arrow* is a perspective which impacts the superhero narrative and creates interesting critiques. Posthuman, in this context, is neither anti-human nor asserting the human over technology. Instead, posthuman renegotiates humanist understandings of subjectivity and agency. As N. Katherine Hayles writes: "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction." Instead of situating subjectivity within a singular human with defined boundaries, the posthuman finds subjectivity in a collective or system. The subject's agency is spread over parts of the collective and created through interactions with the technological and chaotic environment surrounding the collective ("Toward Embodied Virtuality" 3). Hayles argues posthumanism is "the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice" ("Conclusion" 286). Posthumanism acknowledges the many forces, both human and not, which shape or constrict one's agency. Very few people can truly be autonomous, for a multitude of restrictions and circumstances impact one's decisions and understanding. Instead of having a singular human experience, the experience is distributed over a complex system of human, computer, and environment (288-289). Thus, subjectivity within this complex system is "emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness..." and it is not a matter of mastery or control but *being* in the chaotic environment (291). Ultimately, posthumanism allows for one to understand agency and

subjectivity as something created within a system or collective. It is something negotiated and ever-changing as new pieces of information alter the previous understandings; therefore, each component of the collective contributes to the subjectivity.

While posthumanism typically examines the interaction between a human and the intelligent machines around the human, one can also see posthumanism as a collective of humans negotiating their agency and subjectivity. A collective of humans creates a similar heterogeneous system as the systems Hayles describes in her book. Each person in a collective would contribute to an understanding of the problem or goal at hand, and together the collective makes decisions based on their individual experiences and interactions with each other. In a way, the problem solving ability of the collective is only as strong as their collaboration. Like the example of the “Chinese room,” the intelligence and ability of the collective is determined by those within the system. In the “Chinese room” scenario,<sup>8</sup> Hayles argues that the room was the intelligent machine that allowed the person within the room to communicate in Chinese; the human was only as intelligent as the environment he was set in (“Conclusion” 289). Likewise, a single human is not as intelligent as a crowd of humans; in fact, studies and experiments exist to show that crowds are often more “intelligent” or “wise” than a given expert. When a crowd guesses the weight of a pig (as in the classic example), the average of the crowd’s responses is more accurate than each person’s individual contribution (“James Surowiecki and ‘The Wisdom of Crowds’”). Moreover, this type of crowdsourcing has advanced beyond simple averaging. A program called UNU (Unanimous AI) uses groups of people to make predictions through principles of swarm intelligence. Using UNU, a group of twenty people were able to accurately predict not only which horse came in first during the Kentucky Derby but also second, third, and fourth place.

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<sup>8</sup> A man was given a rule book that correlated to the symbols around the room. He did not know Chinese, but he was given messages in Chinese which he responded to using the rule book and the room around him.

UNU initially polled the group members separately, averaged the answers, and then had each member negotiate the answers together. Louis Rosenberg (founder of UNU) explains that predictions made in the UNU group are more accurate than the individual predictions or the crowd prediction (which is the average of the predictions). However, this swarm intelligence only works when the participants bring forward different perspectives and negotiate their responses (“How a Group of Twenty People Predicted the Kentucky Derby”). This is how a posthuman collective can work too. By having people with different perspectives come together and negotiate responses, they create a collective that presents a different type of subjectivity. These collectives create a singular subjectivity through their negotiations, differences, and group dynamic. This collective subjectivity is the posthuman perspective brought to *Arrow*.

While superhero narratives often have team ups or specific superhero teams, *Arrow* created a collective of heroes who produce one complex subjectivity. But even before the collective’s creation, *Arrow* has been posthuman in the Hayles’ technological sense. However, the posthuman elements evolved from the technological understanding to a social understanding as more characters joined the vigilante group and created the collective. Before the Team, Oliver relied on technology in his vigilante activities. During the pilot, Oliver learns from the internet what Adam Hunt has done to be on the list. His research gives him a way to confront the man and steal money from him. Oliver uses a trick arrow<sup>9</sup> to hack the man’s bank account and then disperse the money into all of Adam Hunt’s victims’ bank accounts (“Pilot”). Without voice recorders, fingerprint databases, trackers, listening devices, or CCTV, Oliver’s vigilante duties would not be possible (“Damaged”; “Honor Thy Father”; “Identity”; “Legacies”; “The Magician”; “The Scientist”; “Tremors”). He works with the technology available to him to check

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<sup>9</sup>Trick arrows include exploding arrows, voice recorders, nets, grappling hooks, and also technology which allows Oliver to wirelessly and remotely hack a server to gain access to Hunt’s bank account.

people off his list. When his resources limit him, he seeks out others like Felicity or Dig to aid him. Dig's connections to military personnel gives them intelligence on military related crimes or facilities ("Crucible"; "Trust but Verify"). Moreover, his relationship with Lyla gives the vigilante team access to A.R.G.U.S.<sup>10</sup> information and assistance ("Broken Arrow"; "City of Blood"; "Dead to Rights"; "Legends of Yesterday"; "Monument Point"; "Nanda Parbat"; "Restoration"). Meanwhile, Felicity assists the vigilantism through all things technological—particularly hacking databases, running facial recognition software, tracking cellphones, and much more ("Blindspot"; "The Climb"; "Lone Gunman"; "The Secret Life of Felicity Smoak"; "Time of Death"; "Unchained"; "Year's End"). Nearly every episode the Team works with some form of technology to track down the criminals or understand the criminals' motives. Moreover, the apocalyptic finale events of the fourth season are diverted almost entirely by the efforts of Felicity, her father, and Curtis. The three of them hack Rubicon<sup>11</sup> and stop the nuclear weapons from being launched for nearly two days. Later, when the missiles are launched, they work together along with various technological hacks to make the bombs believe their targets are in outer space ("Lost in the Flood"; "Schism"). Without their interactions with technology, the fourth season's apocalyptic ending could have occurred. Nearly everything in *Arrow* is only possible because of the Team's interaction with technology. It reflects the importance and prevalence of technology in human life, and suggests we are posthuman in the technological sense if not in the social sense; after all, technology has integrated with most aspects of life.

However, humans interact with more than just technology; interaction and collaboration with other humans is also essential to life. So, while the Team uses the environment's

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<sup>10</sup> A.R.G.U.S. is the secret military group Lyla works for and later becomes the director of.

<sup>11</sup> Rubicon is a device in *Arrow* that can access the nuclear weapons around the world to theoretically stop them from launching; however, Darhk uses it for the opposite purpose.

technological contributions, each team member's human contributions also lead to successful crime fighting. Even before their time on the Team, Laurel and Roy assist Oliver's vigilantism—sometimes without knowing. As a lawyer, Laurel has access to cases Oliver may not be able to reach through hacking or other means (“An Innocent Man”), and she can get information from the police for on-going cases under the guise of assisting with her defense or prosecution (“Burned”; “Home Invasion”). Furthermore, when Laurel becomes an assistant district attorney, she gains access to city buildings Oliver would not be able to enter (“Blindspot”), and she can work more closely with the police department without raising questions (“The Magician”). Meanwhile, Roy assists the Team through his street (underworld) contacts. Second season he acts as the Arrow's eyes and ears in the Glades (“Identity”), and later Roy runs down old connections to assist in whichever case the Team is on (“Crucible”; “Keep Your Enemies Closer”; “Left Behind”; “The Offer”). The team member's connections and individual resources provide crucial intelligence which is shared with the Hood or Arrow—sometimes inadvertently. Yet, that is part of posthumanism; people are not completely autonomous and one's actions do not have a clear and known end. Laurel may not have always wanted or known she was aiding the Hood or Arrow, but she still had because she cannot control the people around her and what they choose to do with the information she provides.

Beyond giving intelligence on criminals to the Team, each character brings new perspectives which broaden the scope of who the Team helps, or what a hero is. Originally, Oliver saw street crime as a “symptom” of a larger “disease” plaguing the city—he had planned to target the disease, which he believed were the people on the list. Yet, Dig helps Oliver realize there are more ways to help the city than targeting the list. In fact, during “Legacies,” he convinces Oliver to go after a bank robbing crew, which Oliver later learns is only robbing banks

because they are victims of the Queen family shutting down the steel factory. Oliver decides to help the city by making amends for what his father had done, which broadens his understanding of a hero. Oliver would have continued his vendetta if not for the input of those around him. His understanding and scope of what he could do as a vigilante was limited to his vendetta, but Dig, Felicity, Roy, Laurel, and Thea have influenced him and together changed what it means in *Arrow* to be a hero. They remind Oliver and each other that more people need their help. Even those initially outside of the Team help each other and the vigilantes broaden their perspectives.

While the characters may not be a collective in the beginning of the series, their interactions set up the eventual posthuman collective. Each character's interactions influence them in ways that help the characters grow and become heroes. Without Laurel and Roy showing Thea how privileged her upbringing had been, she would not have come to care so deeply about the people of the Glades ("Dodger"; "The Huntress Returns"), which would have given her less motivation to be a hero. Thea becomes empathetic to the people's plight because of Roy, and ultimately is willing to risk her life during the Undertaking to save Roy from the impending earthquake ("Sacrifice"). While Roy inspired Thea to be better, he had given up on himself becoming anything more than a criminal, but when the Hood saved Roy's life, Roy realizes he can be more than a criminal ("Salvation"). This notion instilled in Roy by the Hood and Thea leads to Roy drawing Oliver's attention to the needs of the people in the Glades during the second season ("Identity"; "Keep Your Enemies Closer"). The core characters help each other realize they have more potential and can be heroic. They provide each other with insight and perspectives they would not have had otherwise, which leads to the success of their eventual collective. Each member becomes part of the intelligent system within the collective, and thus contribute to a better understanding of a given problem.

In fact, the collective they create pulls their different ideas together into something productive, just as UNU does with swarm intelligence. While the Team is not a swarm, they do bring their individual perspectives to an issue before negotiating on a final choice. This leads to the Team making a collective decision on what a hero is and ultimately creates their singular subjectivity. When one part of the system stumbles, it does not fall apart because the other components adjust and adapt. So when a member of the Team falters or fails, the collective keeps working and helps to restore equilibrium. This may be by reminding each other why they fight, or why they belong. For instance, when Felicity loses confidence in her role on the team, Dig reminds her she is “irreplaceable” and they could not do this without her (“Time of Death”). When Oliver feels there is no way to stop Slade but let the man kill him, Laurel convinces Oliver to think about those in his life he would be abandoning (“City of Blood”), and Felicity reminds him “You honor the dead by fighting and you are not done fighting” (“Streets of Fire”). Even at the most tumultuous times in the show, the collective reminds each other why they risk their lives as vigilantes. If Roy, Dig, Laurel, and Felicity did not discuss what to do after Oliver’s apparent death, the Team would have fallen apart. They were ready to give up until Laurel mentioned how there are other people who still need heroes. This prompts Felicity to add that they are vigilantes for the people still alive and “It’s not just Oliver’s mission anymore. It’s ours” (“Midnight City”). Thus, as a group, the remaining team members decide being a hero is more than following Oliver’s crusade. Their collectivity and shared subjectivity as vigilantes is an example of a posthuman society. This society then influences the rest of the superhero narrative.

## Chapter 4: Hybrid Superhero fantasy:

### Posthumanism on the Conventional Superhero

With the posthuman perspective in *Arrow* comes a change in the superhero fantasy exhibited in the show. The fantasy changes primarily from the posthuman collective's influence on the characters. Certain aspects of the superhero fantasy and posthuman subjectivity interact to create a hybridized superhero fantasy. Additionally, the history of Green Arrow comics influences the trajectory of the hybridized superhero story and creates unique narrative features in *Arrow*. Some of the unique hybridized aspects of the fantasy include a movement from a singular hero to a collective of heroes who share leadership and an emphasized utility to the secret identity, which in turn leads to the heroes' ability to change systems from within as well as from without.

As mentioned before, superhero teams and team-ups exist within the superhero fantasy. Superhero team-ups tend to struggle because they resist shared leadership. While superhero groups, like the Avengers, eventually settle on a single leader, they still have internal power conflicts. In *Arrow*, the distribution of leadership develops over the four seasons and becomes more easily shared. So while a group of heroes is not unique to *Arrow*, the shared leadership is. By sharing leadership among a collective of heroes, *Arrow* shows a working collective subjectivity. However, the show initially follows standard superhero fantasies by presenting a single hero with sideline support (e.g. Felicity and Dig). This standard of leadership persists until the third season when the superhero collective fully forms and they create a posthuman society. However, like most things in *Arrow*, interactions occur which lead the characters to realizing the necessity of others. For example, the "Lone Gunman" episode is the first time Oliver realizes he cannot protect everyone on his own, and he must ask for assistance from Dig and the police.



Furthermore, Oliver admits at different points in the series that he had never intended to work with others (“Blast Radius”). One particular instance occurs after the Team thwarts the League of Assassins’ bioweapon attack at the end of the third season. In Oliver’s address to the Team, he explains:

When I started this, I wanted to keep you as far away from it as possible. Because that has always been my instinct: to go it alone. But the truth is we won tonight because I wasn’t alone. I thought this crusade would only end with my death. But even if I had died tonight, it would live on because of you. (“My Name is Oliver Queen”)

A posthuman society cannot have members act alone; each group member weighs in and contributes to the effectiveness of the collective’s plans. Thus, the Team faces success when they work together, just as Oliver acknowledges. The Team became a collective third season and because of that they were able to stop another city-wide attack before it could claim many lives.

Perhaps the slow move toward a posthuman society is to acclimate the audience to this change in perspective. The series began with the recognizable singular hero and moved to a hero with a partner. This could be suggesting that the modern hero no longer works alone but needs partners. Oliver had never let Dig into the field until the first season’s finale when Dig insists on backing Oliver up in his confrontation with Malcolm Merlyn—also known as the Dark Archer (“Sacrifice”). After that point, Dig joins Oliver in the field regularly and becomes his visible partner while Felicity continues her role as partner behind the computer screens. More significantly, the series refuses to use the term “sidekick”; in fact, Dig explicitly says he did not “sign on to be a sidekick” but someone to remind Oliver who he is and to help reduce the casualties (“An Innocent Man”). Therefore, while Oliver may be the definitive leader early on, the others in the Team are “partners,” never sidekicks or employees (“Blast Radius”; “The

Clam”). *Arrow* dismantles hierarchical structures one would expect to see in the superhero narrative because in a posthuman society everyone contributes to the system’s effectiveness. The expectation that the titular character is the designated leader becomes disrupted because the subjectivity is distributed and emerges from the interactions with each other not just from a singular character.

However, posthuman societies are not made from always like-minded people. For the wisdom of crowds or swarm intelligence to work, the group must be diverse and offer different perspectives. Thus the heroes within the collective cannot always be agreeable, which is bound to happen as more people join the Team. When the series moves from a duo in the field to a small team with the addition of Roy (and later Laurel), the dynamics change. Originally, Oliver had the final say, and Dig would criticize him, particularly whenever Oliver let his personal feelings and relationships cloud his judgement (“Betrayal”; “Birds of Prey”; “Blindspots”; “Home Invasion”; “Muse of Fire”; “The Undertaking”; “Vendetta”). But it is the third season when the Team truly begins to challenge Oliver’s leadership. During “The Calm” Oliver tries to sideline Dig so he can be there for his family, but Dig retaliates by saying it is his own decision whether or not he is in the field. Back then, Oliver still believed the vigilantism was his crusade, so he *could* decide who goes out into the field and not. This altercation marks the beginning of a change within the group members. Dig, in particular, begins challenging Oliver’s choices, like in “Guilty.” Oliver wants to forgive Roy for possibly killing Sara, but Dig argues “we can’t have two separate rules, one for us and one for them.” This reinforces the no-killing ethic within the comic book franchise, but also shows the Team is more comfortable standing their ground against Oliver. The Team needs to air their grievances and negotiate responses. So each step

toward shaking the established power structure culminates in the events after Oliver leaves to battle Ra's al Ghul during "The Climb."

The Team believes Oliver is dead when he does not return for several weeks, and as such they must figure out why they are vigilantes and how to keep going without the designated leader. While the collective had been falling into place throughout the seasons, the episodes after "The Climb" establish the final push toward the posthuman society in *Arrow*. Because of the events in "Midnight City," the team realizes they each have a reason to continue fighting crime in the city even though Oliver is presumed dead. This reinvigorated group then decides how they should proceed now that the Glades have been abandoned by the police and left in the hands of Brick's crew.<sup>12</sup> Rather than having a leader make decisions for them with some input from them, the group votes on how to proceed after each sharing their perspective. In the end, the group realizes there is another way to take down Brick than use the antagonist Malcolm Merlyn's help. The team encourages the people of the Glades to take back their home from Brick's gang, and so they all take to the streets as a united force against the criminals overrunning the city ("Uprising"). The Team proves they can be vigilantes without Oliver, and they can each assist in the leadership process. Thus, when Oliver returns, the group does not immediately jump back into following his orders. Oliver then has to learn to work with this more independent group because now they equally contribute to the larger goal of saving the city—in this way their collective subjectivity is their vigilantism. But perhaps the best example of the Team pushing back against Oliver's leadership is when they orchestrate their plan to keep Oliver out of prison. The other members of the team do this without his approval, but this solidifies the fact that

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<sup>12</sup> A gang leader named Brick kidnapped the city aldermen and held them ransom in return for the police to leave the Glades and not attempt to reclaim the neighborhood, thus effectively leaving a portion of the city to Brick and his crew to terrorize.

Oliver no longer has “mastery” over the group (system) and now interacts with the others as equals (“Broken Arrow”).

The fourth season’s Team is a depiction of the posthuman society because they are a group of people who share leadership roles easily. The episode “Green Arrow” shows Dig, Laurel, and Thea working together to stop a Kord industry heist. They work efficiently and would have stopped the equipment from being taken if not for enemy (Ghost) back-up. Because of the escalation in targets, Laurel and Thea feel they need assistance from Oliver and Felicity, yet this does not mean they will follow Oliver’s leadership when he returns. The Team had grown used to Dig’s more prominent leadership role, but they also had learned to share leadership like a posthuman collective. In fact, numerous times Laurel and Thea need no prompting from Dig or Oliver in regards to what they should do. They do not need a designated leader to operate anymore, but when they do, the leadership goes to both Dig and Oliver (“Beyond Redemption”; “Eleven-fifty-nine”; “Haunted”; “Legends of Yesterday”). As such, the group members are never truly autonomous, but this does not mean there is a singular leader either. A singular leader would imply the group’s subjectivity comes from a singular component rather distributed over each of them. The group interacts with each other and also shares leadership which allows for their subjectivity as vigilantes to emerge from their cooperation. Moreover, by denying the singular leader, they create an environment wherein the Team can check each other whenever a member goes too far because of their own personal feelings; the collective reminds each other of the ethics set in place (“Blood Debts”; “Brotherhood”; “Canary Cry”; “The Candidate”). In these ways, the team creates a collective which shares responsibilities, burdens, and leadership. This allows the team to self-regulate and adapt to the

situation by feeding off of each other's input; whereas, typical superhero narratives have members defer to the team leader frequently.

### **Secret Identity and Changing Systems**

As with all superhero fantasies, *Arrow* uses secret identities to counter the superheroic identity. The secret identity is the identity the reader or audience is supposed to connect with, yet many times the secret identity is forgotten for the superhero identity and the crime fighting. Superhero comics and cartoons often fall into this trap; the more exciting narrative revolves around the superhero side to the character, yet that story eventually loses audience connection. *Arrow* falls into this pattern at times, but generally the show focuses on the interpersonal relationships of the core characters in true drama fashion. Still, a different pattern appears by fourth season within the secret identity. The secret identity has a utility that allows for change within a social system while the superhero identity allows for change from without the systems of power. The emphasis on changing social systems likely comes from the social justice focus of the series, which in turn derives from the posthuman society created in the show and Green Arrow comic history. The posthuman society has emergent subjectivity created through the interactions with others and the environments around them. The collective's subjectivity is their vigilantism, which works from without established systems; yet, a posthuman society acknowledges there are many forces acting on their subjectivity, and so there must also be other ways to enact change than from without systems of power. Thus, with Green Arrow's historical stance on social justice, *Arrow* uses the secret identities of several characters to enact change from within systems, and consequently critique the existing social systems.

Initially Oliver tries to better the various social systems in place solely from the outside, and it works in part. Oliver's time as the Hood reduces the crime rates ("Burned"), but he also

spawns copycats who are “without restraint” (“City of Heroes”). Furthermore, as Oliver Queen he only opens a club with the intention of gentrifying the neighborhood. This does not help him as a vigilante besides giving him an excuse for being up every night and having a convenient base of operations. Moreover, opening a club in the Glades does not challenge the established class or economic systems which currently disenfranchise the people in the Glades—if anything it could push people out of their homes as prices in the surrounding areas increase. Second season, Oliver begins trying to change things as a Fortune 500 president, but he realizes he must take a more active role in changing the actual social systems. He begins these moves as his secret identity when he supports Sebastian Blood and funds a cash for guns event (“Crucible”). While he uses his secret identity to fund these endeavors, he is ultimately ineffectual as a businessman and does not revitalize the community through his business practices. Even Dig, Felicity, and Roy’s secret identities during the second season do not do much when it comes to changing the social systems in place. Instead, their secret identities are convenient or informative—like all superhero secret identities. The traditional superhero might be a reporter or CSI to gain intelligence on crimes, but they do not try to change social systems while in those jobs. However, third season challenges this superhero convention of the secret identity’s utility.

During “The Calm,” Laurel states how her position in the District Attorney’s office allows her to put away the criminals Oliver catches faster. In addition, the police support the Team at the start of the third season, which further helps the Team in their crime fighting. Thus Oliver’s position from outside the police force, and Laurel’s role within the judicial branch work together to speed up the criminal justice process. Laurel’s work as an A.D.A already allowed her to address the systems from within, but as Black Canary she became able to help from without too, especially as the systems began to fail the people of the Glades (“Midnight City”). Laurel’s

secret identity's utility becomes crucial in the fourth season. During "Broken Hearts," Laurel is able to get Damien Darhk into the Department of Corrections' custody because of her work as an A.D.A. Laurel establishes the necessity to have a useful secret identity which can help the Team and the people of the city from within established systems of power. This specifically reinforces the need for a secret identity and a superhero identity, for together they can effect change in the systems and best help the city.

During third season, Oliver reflects the need to have two identities by the simple fact that he lost his secret identity. Because Oliver neither has a job in the third season nor interacts with people outside of the Team or League of Assassins, the audience does not see how his secret identity effects change within systems. Oliver falls into the superhero fantasy trap of only being a superhero, thus when he loses that role ("Broken Arrow"), Oliver has nothing to turn to but the League of Assassins. Oliver lost his dual identity third season, which may in part be why the rest of the core group began to take more focus. While Dig, Roy, and Thea do not hold positions with which to enact systematic changes, they still hold utility because of their connections. As mentioned before, the members of the posthuman collective bring forward perspectives which would not have been accessible before. Moreover, Dig's relationship with Lyla and A.R.G.U.S. leads to eventual changes in the secret military group; so, while he does not spearhead the changes, his personal relationship with their director does lead to the change ("Genesis"). Still secret identity utility becomes central in the fourth season.

When Oliver rejoins the Team during the fourth season, they come across a villain (Damien Darhk) who they cannot beat through their usual methods. The various characters in the show repeatedly inform Oliver he cannot help the city from the shadows alone—sometimes the city needs to be fought for "in the light" ("The Candidate"). Thus Oliver runs for public office,

wherein he can help the city publically and in a more effectual way than simply through crime fighting. Oliver also intends to reunite the city as his secret identity, which he cannot necessarily do as just the Green Arrow. While he may give them hope by showing a vigilante will fight for the city (“Green Arrow”; “Beacon of Hope”), he does more in his speeches as Oliver Queen. His secret identity is able to calm the rioting and panicking masses as they face a nuclear threat; this later rallies the people to help him fight Darhk in the climax of the season (“Schism”). Even Felicity’s secret identity attempts to change systems for the betterment of all. As the president of Palmer Tech, she wants to follow Ray Palmer’s lead and give back to the city through the business. Felicity refuses to lay off her employees because the board members believe it will maximize profits and cut losses; instead, she finds a way to keep everyone employed while also appeasing the board members—if only temporarily (“The Candidate”). She also wants to make a bio-stimulant affordable for all people suffering spinal cord injuries, which the board members believe is “giving” an incredibly expensive piece of technology away for “free” (“Beacon of Hope”; “Monument Point”). Felicity’s time as president of a Fortune 500 company pushes against the established capitalist system and tries to give back to the community and her employees. Thus Laurel, Oliver, and Felicity use their secret identities to enact change in different social systems because the collective always strives to better the city. These secret identities reveal alternate means (a means from within systems) to better help the city in addition to what they do as the collective. By using the secret identity to engage and critique existing systems, *Arrow* establishes the desire and value to affect social change. This desire is created through the posthuman perspective’s influence on the superhero fantasy theme, so that the secret identity is more than just a relatable character but a way to critique the systems the characters engage with.



## Chapter 5: Reviving Green Arrow for a Posthuman Society

*Arrow* initially aired in the days of Occupy Wall Street and in the wake of the *Dark Knight* franchise (Jensen). Moreover, sensational superhero narratives were everywhere, and the United States exhibited an increased awareness for social justice issues. Thus *Arrow* initially reflected society's anger toward big business and its preference for sensationalized superhero fantasies. Like the *Dark Knight* franchise, *Arrow* is dark and gritty; Oliver's crusade is originally a vendetta against a list of corrupt elite, but the series changes over time. This should be no surprise. Green Arrow comics have always been about social issues—be it matters of substance abuse, equality, class disparity, and so on—thus the show based off of Green Arrow *would* adapt with the concerns its viewers felt. *Arrow* has adapted and changed its superhero fantasy in line with changing societal views and perspectives, thus continuing the Green Arrow comic book legacy. In this manner, *Arrow* establishes a possible trend in the superhero fantasy by creating a posthuman society which challenges and changes previous understandings of superhero fantasies.

*Arrow* initially reflected the familiar, dark, cynical superhero movie, while also acting as a direct reflection of society. The movie superhero fantasy focuses on a singular hero who uses excessive violence and may even kill his enemy.<sup>13</sup> While the superhero movies leave the killing as an “absolute” last resort, it is far more prevalent than in the comics. Moreover, the hero killing the villain at the end of the movie is brushed off as a necessary act while the comics establish serious consequences for any killing—Arnaudo points to the 2002 *Spiderman* movie wherein the hero lets his uncle's killer die (92). The act of killing undermines the whole superhero's story because superheroes are supposed to be ideals and always find another way. Instead, the movie

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<sup>13</sup> I use “he” exclusively because, before the upcoming Wonder Woman movie, most singular superhero movies have male protagonists.

superhero fantasy is sensationalized and at times excessively violent (as with the *Dark Knight* franchise), which pushes against the comic book superhero ethics and further normalizes death and killings in the U.S. However, *Arrow* has moved further away from the movie fantasy and toward the comic book ideal during the first four seasons. Elements of the sensational will always exist within the television show (likely for ratings and familiarity), but the characters eventually face greater consequences for breaking the superhero code of ethics, and when they do, they must redeem themselves. Perhaps the televised medium allows the producers to explore these elements of the superhero fantasy more than films can because it creates a similar sort of serialization as the comics do. Or perhaps the creation of the posthuman society forces the collective to regard killing or letting the villain die as immoral. Within the posthuman collective, a variety of perspectives exist and interact, thus the morals of each character begin to influence the other characters more. The no-killing ethic becomes stronger as more members of the Team ascribe to it. Furthermore, the posthuman society's recursive nature leads to the Team continually discussing their actions and, in this manner, reminding each other of the agreed upon values while also keeping each other in check. Thus the posthuman system could enforce more of the comic book ideals while still existing within the recognized sensational superhero narrative.

By conforming more to the comic book superhero fantasy theme, *Arrow* establishes value on a less cynical and more hopeful superhero. Moreover, by chaining out the comic book fantasy, *Arrow*'s audience shows they resonate with its values. These values include justice, heroics, and subversion. Within justice and heroics, one places value on letting the criminal justice program do its job, and giving the criminals a chance to redeem themselves rather than killing them. Superheroes are vigilantes, but they still allow the systems in place to function and

do their duty; moreover, it reinforces that these systems (systems various Americans are losing faith in) can work to keep people safe. While the inherent vigilantism within the superhero fantasy can be problematic, the narratives do not necessarily suggest police are ineffective. *Arrow*'s vigilantes work alongside the actual police force or different members of the police to better reduce the city's crime. So, the Team and police are not truly antagonistic and neither one is better than the other. When a threat too great for the police to face on their own occurs, the vigilantes work to help the police keep the city safe. Superheroes only capture the criminals, but let the rest of the criminal justice system carry out *justice*. Likewise, the superhero is *heroic* because they do not kill when they take down criminals—they always find a way to preserve life. In the last few years, this particular element of the superhero narrative will resonate with people. As more news stories come out describing how someone died in a confrontation with police, superheroes who do not kill in criminal apprehensions sound more and more appealing. Regardless of where one falls on the matter—whether the police were in their rights or were acting out of fear and racism—people can appreciate a non-lethal end to confrontations. A non-violent end would be just as appreciated, and sometimes the superhero in the comics can do that, but ultimately heroes do not need to kill in order to bring the criminal to justice.

In addition to the values laden within justice and heroics, the reflection of the comic book's subversive characters shows further changing societal perspectives. *Arrow* was originally very white, hyper masculine, and heteronormative. However, as the U.S. began to accept homosexuality in more mainstream ways, *Arrow* added varied sexualities to its characters. As moviegoers and audiences throughout the country demanded more equal and positive representation of people of color, *Arrow* included more persons of color in prominent roles. As gender equality conversations picked up momentum in the country, *Arrow* began introducing

female superheroes and less stereotyped male characters. As the last election cycle divided and disheartened the county, *Arrow* offered a more unifying political perspective between the left and right. The series kept its exigency by adapting to the changing perspectives in the U.S. and using the societal concerns<sup>14</sup> to keep in touch with the viewer's reality. However, these subversive characters did more than create a tether to reality; they matched the comic book's subversive characteristic but also reflected posthumanism in their subversions.

The racial, political, gendered, and sexual identities established throughout the series fit the Green Arrow comics' legacy, but the posthuman comes in the manner that these elements—some more than others—were subverted. Alan Smart cites postmodernist theories (particularly post-structuralism) as a theoretical backing for posthumanism (332), and he lists Haraway among the number of informative theorists. Yet, one can see the connection between the *Cyborg Manifesto* and posthuman perspective; both theories assert outside forces act upon the individual and thus he or she is never truly autonomous (Haraway 2217; “Conclusion” 286). Moreover, fluid boundaries and inhabiting the borders allow for discourse and thus subjectivity (Haraway 2215; “Toward Embodied Virtuality” 3-4). Haraway's cyborg writes from within a place between boundaries, where its meaning struggles to be heard but allows the cyborg to survive the potentially hostile conditions around it (2216). In a similar fashion the posthuman's subjectivity is created through the interactions within the system and environment, thus the boundaries are always in flux because the environment is always changing and influencing the system (“Conclusion” 286-287). So, when characters inhabit the positions between borders, they enact cyborg notions and additional posthuman perspectives. The most obvious case for border blurring is the healthier perspective on gender within *Arrow*. Gender has always been subversive

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<sup>14</sup> Societal concerns include those mentioned in chapter one, such as substance abuse, police corruption, and the like.

in superhero comics because of the objectification male and female characters undergo due to their self-parodying hyper-gendering. However, *Arrow* subverts gender in another way that can be liberating because the male heroes no longer need to be rugged individuals; the male heroes can have softer elements without being feminized or marked as less than. Gender can be understood as taking on aspects of the *other* and blurring the boundaries, which follows Haraway's theory. As such the character's gendered performances are then influenced by the elements around them. As the Team interact with each other and these new gendered elements, the show would further normalize the more fluid gender construction of the characters within the posthuman collective.

This posthuman collective influences many aspects of the television show, even the elements which follow the comic book ideal in superhero fantasies. By incorporating a posthuman society, *Arrow* alters the superhero narrative and subverts audience expectations. The concepts and values attached to posthumanism infiltrate most aspects of *Arrow*. Even before the collective's creation, *Arrow* used posthuman concepts, perhaps to ease viewers expecting the conventional superhero narrative into *Arrow*'s hybridized fantasy. From the beginning, *Arrow* subtly challenges understandings of subjectivity through the incorporation of technology. A posthuman perspective views the "use" of technology as equal interaction; without the intelligent machines around the Team, they would not be effective vigilantes. To be a vigilante or superhero in modern times, the superhero must become posthuman; the superhero must interact and learn from technology in order to act to his or her best ability. Yet, *Arrow* introduces another form of posthumanism that takes full root in the third season. This posthumanism is the social applications of posthuman theory. Just as the Team would be ineffectual without the input from technology, they would be similarly disadvantaged without each other's input. Each group

member comes from a different social upbringing and offers a corresponding perspective to the problem at hand. Through negotiations with technology and each other, the team is able to fight crime as one collective. This posthuman collective challenges notions of a singular subjectivity, and instead acknowledges the emergent subjectivity based on the input of those within a given system. No single character is completely autonomous, thus *Arrow* breaks the recognized rugged individual trope of the superhero fantasy. The actions of the villains<sup>15</sup> and each person in the collective informs or guides the Team's actions. If *Arrow*'s posthuman collective is the means through which the Team is able to fight crime, this suggests that subjectivity comes from the interaction with others and technology—not the individual hero. Because *Arrow* created a posthuman society, it implies the audience accepts or values on some level posthumanist perspectives on superheroes and their subjectivity.

With *Arrow*'s collective of heroes comes shared leadership, which further disrupts audience expectations of the superhero genre. Because everyone within the collective contributes to the Team's actions or subjectivity, they each share leadership in some way. They communicate and discuss their perspectives on a problem before reaching a decision instead of having a singular leader decide for them. The show's move from the singular vigilante to a collective of heroes follows the series' movement toward the inclusion of a social posthuman perspective. The Team (or collective) readily assigns themselves jobs without deferring to the two prominent leader figures (who share that leadership). Moreover, the heroes within the collective check and remind each other to follow the superhero comic book ethics. This collective of heroes suggests the influence of the posthuman collective on the superhero structure, and it reinforces the acceptance of posthumanism. But the influence of the posthuman

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<sup>15</sup> Exploring the villain as an autonomous agent and foil to the superhero's posthuman collective is beyond the scope of this project, but should be considered for later extensions to the project.

goes beyond the group formations and collectivity; the perspective influences a fundamental aspect of the superhero fantasy: the secret identity.

With a broader subjectivity within the Team, comes more opportunity for the group members to enact change outside of their vigilantism. Each member of the collective contributes to the posthuman subjectivity through their backgrounds and secret identities; however, these secret identities are useful beyond information gathering and connections. In fact, *Arrow* alters the significance of the secret identity within the superhero fantasy. Typically the superhero fantasy uses the secret identity as a means to connect with the reader's reality and give the superhero meaning. *Arrow* does use the secret identity to connect with readers, but the show also gives the secret identity more utility than the conventional superhero, which falls in line with the Green Arrow comic book history as a social justice advocate. Therefore, the secret identities critique or attempt to challenge the various social systems in place. While half of the core characters do not challenge existing social systems, Felicity, Laurel, and Oliver do work to change certain systems of power. Laurel strives to make the judicial system more efficient, while Oliver strives to help the city through his campaign as mayor, and by doing so, he takes a more neutral stance while he attempts to change the city's government from within. Felicity also attempts to change business practices by focusing on her employees and consumers more than making profits. Setting these characters' secret identities in positions where they can enact change within social systems reflects values or perspectives of audiences. For instances, more businesses are agreeing to give their employees livable wages, while other companies strive to make the world better through more affordable technological advances. Moreover, the American people have increasingly begun to feel the government no longer has their interests at heart. They feel the governing systems are corrupt and need change, thus a political figure like Oliver reflects

that desire. Finally, with all of the protests for criminal justice reform, a character like Laurel—who ensures the guilty party is always put away—addresses those societal concerns. The secret identity in *Arrow* has true utility to change the established systems because the collective brings each other's attention to matters and perspectives the individual might not have otherwise seen. The secret identity and the superhero identity work together to perpetuate the collective's goals, like the betterment of the city. Yet the power in the secret identity is checked by the posthuman society just as the vigilante's power is checked. Furthermore, the secret identity's utility could be a call to action; if Americans want to effect change in the corrupt systems around them, they can do so from within. The secret identity is the figure in which the audience sees themselves most easily, thus they too could run for mayor or become an assistant district attorney.

*Arrow* takes the popularity of the superhero narrative from the silver screen to the television screen, and in doing so creates a discursive environment which critiques and reflects reality. The social justice concerns audiences live are mirrored in *Arrow* and addressed in various (often subtle) ways. The change from movie to television allows the story to be told in a way that encourages complexity and offers deeper exploration of the concerns reflected in the narrative. Moreover, the focus on a group subjectivity and a continuous interaction with technology shows a move toward posthumanism in the superhero fantasy. Through the posthuman altered superhero fantasy, *Arrow* reflects the changing American perspective which places more value on the posthuman collective than previously seen in American popular culture. In fact, *Arrow* exemplifies the posthuman America. Technology has become an integral part of human life and human interactions with it do help inform identity and subjectivity—be it through Facebook, on-line petitions, or even researching. Thus, *Arrow*'s reliance on technology in crime fighting reflects a posthuman society, but more than that, Americans may be more receptive to



posthumanism within social relations. For so long, the cultural narrative was the rugged individual—a cowboy who confronted matters of immigration and a changing America through very specific ways. But since 9/11, the superhero has become the cultural icon, and while the superhero still often fights things alone, viewers see the superhero reflect a changing and diversifying America. *Arrow* took that rugged individual and created a collective of heroes who share their subjectivity. Like everyday people, even the superhero is influenced by their interactions with other people and the environment around them. Thus the series offers a new perspective on subjectivity and enacting change in society. *Arrow* also implies people are becoming posthuman if not only in the technological sense. People can no longer enact change as the rugged, stoic individual. One must become a subversive posthuman being who acknowledges the influences of others and technology on his or her own subjectivity.

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