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Philip Wylie's *Gladiator*: At the crossroads of scientific romance, weird fiction, superhero comics and science fiction

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Abstract/introduction

In this paper I'm going to be taking a look at Philip Wylie's novel *Gladiator*, first published in 1930, and show how it wasn't just the alleged predecessor of Superman, but is an example of fiction at the start of, and may indeed have inspired, several literary genres. I hope to show that this is a neglected classic that deserves greater study, not just because it may be a founding text, but because it displays a distinctive sense of the world that is part of a literary historical trend, a trend that is itself worthy of more attention.

Gladiator analysed

If you look around enough, you'll often see it stated that the novel *Gladiator*, published in 1930, was the inspiration for Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman, who first appeared in *Action Comics* issue 1 in 1938. Reading *Gladiator* now, the similarity to the original version of Superman is clear, as both stories see super strong, near invulnerable characters leaping over tall buildings, and so it's easy to see why people would think one would inspire the other. Both may in fact have been inspired by other stories, such as the John Carter stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs, in which Carter has the ability to leap prodigiously thanks to Mars' lesser gravity. Regardless of who influenced whom, the parallels between the protagonist of *Gladiator* and Superman go even further than the obvious, as not only is *Gladiator* about a physical superman, it covers many of the themes that appear in future comics.

It starts with Abednego Danner the amoral, if not evil, scientist, who creates a method to generate super strong creatures. After experimenting on tadpoles and a cat, he injects the serum into his pregnant wife Matilda, thoughtless of the consequences on her and his unborn son. There are also allusions by Abednego Danner early on to the creation of insect-like proportionate strength, a concept that has since become popular in regards to Spider-Man.

“Consider the grasshoppers. Make a man as strong as a grasshopper—and he'll be able to leap over a church. I tell you, there is something that determines the quality of every muscle and nerve. Find it—transplant it—and you have the solution.”

Chapter I

Like Superman, the young Hugo Danner, result of these experiments, has his own Fortress of Solitude to retreat to, after he builds a fort in the woods; unfortunately this is discovered and rendered psychically tainted almost straight away, and is then physically destroyed by Danner in a fit of rage at this intrusion on his refuge. Siegel and Shuster's Superman never destroyed his own Fortress of Solitude out of pique. Danner's strength doesn't just set him apart from the people around him, but makes him move ever onwards, propelling the story as well as Danner physically. As happens with the Hulk and Wolverine from comics, at times he flees through the world, leaping away from his pursuit, pursuit that is often imaginary. Like those two tortured anti-heroes, Danner sometimes experiences great rage, even accidentally killing an opposing player on the American football pitch after being goaded into a rage by the jealous actions of his own team captain. He mopes about the world, experiencing the sorts of prejudice and trauma that the X-Men have so often experienced in both comics and films.

Unlike the Superman we know today, Danner has affairs with many women, including a married one, and frequents prostitutes. Throughout, he has a gloomy and introspective outlook on life. Everyone is out to get him. The one thing he has in common with Superman emotionally is a sense of difference, but unlike Superman who generally tries to see the best in people or to at least have some normal relationships through his secret identity as Clark Kent, Danner sees everyone as against him, or at the best not for him. His attitude and experiences are more those of the outcast and tortured Marvel characters than DC's Superman. Throughout the book Danner experiences a constant rejection by normal humanity, but looked at more closely, this is just as much a rejection of humanity by Danner.

He has a very juvenile approach to life, never seeking to open up to anyone about his experiences and feelings, always looking for evidence of his difference and fleeing when he receives any sort of adverse response. He flees from the one person who works out his secret and who promises to keep it secret, his college football coach. This summarises the repressed life of someone on the edges of society and seems both a metaphor for anyone with a secret life not generally approved of by society and also a theme used often in comics since.

In just a single paragraph, Wylie foreshadows comic book superheroes *and* supervillains, and not just ordinary supervillains but cosmic ones as well:

What would you do if you were the strongest man in the world, the strongest thing in the world, mightier than the machine? He [Danner] made himself guess answers for that rhetorical query. "I would—I would have won the war. But I did not. I would run the universe single-handed. Literally single-handed. I would scorn the universe and turn it to my own ends. I would be a criminal. I would rip open banks and gut them. I would kill and destroy. I would be a secret, invisible blight. I would set out to stamp crime off the earth; I would be a super-detective, following and summarily punishing every criminal until no one dared to commit a felony. What would I do? What will I do?"

Chapter XVII

The book, though, is more than this list of parallels with comics; it is also a commentary on, and a travelogue through, the world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and is amazingly moody for it, given its history as the precursor of the lively four-colour comics. After accidentally killing the American footballer, Danner travels to Europe, ending up on the battlefields of the Great War. Unlike Captain America, who fought bravely in the Second World War and whose contribution to the war effort was recognised and rewarded (fictionally), Danner's super exploits, such as rolling up the German trenches, do little other than to contribute to the general carnage. Though expressed in language that often seems dated to modern ears, these scenes are surprisingly bleak and affecting:

Hugo shivered and stared into no man's land, whence a groan had issued for twenty hours, audible occasionally over the tumult of the artillery. He saw German eyes turned mutely on the same heap of rags that moved pitifully over the snow, leaving a red wake, dragging a bloody thing behind. It rose and fell, moving parallel to the two trenches. Many machine-gun bullets had either missed it or increased its crimson torment. Hugo went out and killed the heap of rags, with a revolver that cracked until the groans stopped in a low moan. Breaths on both sides were bated. The rags had been gray-green. A shout of low, rumbling praise came from the silent enemy trenches. Hugo looked over there for a moment and smiled. He looked down at the thing and vomited. The guns began again.

Chapter XIII

Both before and then after the war, Danner wanders the world much like David Banner in the television series *The Incredible Hulk*, but he is a much more maudlin character. His attempts to help people, though they might initially be successful, sometimes result in unforeseen and unfortunate consequences for him. At one point he saves a man from suffocating in a steel vault, only to be arrested as a potential bank robber through the connivance of the bank manager who sees Danner's apparent safe cracking skills as a threat to his company. This conflict with self-centred businessmen was also present in the early Superman stories, along with gangsters, corrupt politicians and the like, before supervillains were introduced.

After the war, through the machinations of the father of a dead battlefield comrade, he gains but then loses a fortune that is based on arms sales, eventually ends up labouring in a steel mill, becomes a hobo, before regaining his wealth and becoming a political activist. His political activism, a curious mix of the idealism of Professor X but the brute force of Magneto, fails. Finally, he joins a scientific expedition in search of other beings like himself. It is while on this expedition that he meets one other person who accepts him for who he is, the scientist Daniel Hardin, who suggests a plausible, but rather horrible, course of action, to cure Danner's loneliness.

"Every kind of assistance I [Danner] have enlisted has failed me utterly."

"Except one kind."

"Science?"

"No. Your own kind, Hugo."

The words did not convey their meaning for several seconds. Then Hugo gasped. "You mean—other men like me?"

"Exactly. Other men like you. Not one or two. Scores, hundreds. And women. All picked with the utmost care. Eugenic offspring. Cultivated and reared in secret by a society for the purpose. Not necessarily your children, but the children of the best parents. Perfect bodies, intellectual minds, your strength. Don't you see it, Hugo? You are not the reformer of the old world. You are the beginning of the new. We begin with a thousand of you. Living by yourselves and multiplying, you produce your own arts and industries and ideals. The new Titans! Then—slowly—you dominate the world. Conquer and stamp out all these things to which you and I and all men of intelligence object. In the end—you are alone and supreme."

Chapter XXIII

Danner never gets to fulfil this dream, or nightmare, of a Magneto-esque mutant homeland, a kind of Genosha-onwards-to-Genocide. While raging against the universe, standing on a mountain, unable to decide whether to put Hardin's plan into action, he is struck dead by lightning and the notebooks containing his father's formula are destroyed.

So here we have an example of the super powered individual contemplating world domination. Hence, *Gladiator* isn't just a link between pulp fiction and comics, but is possibly a link between the pulps and other fictions more well known to readers of this journal, most notably the novel *Odd John* by Olaf Stapledon. Danner is a physical superhuman, but the characters in *Odd John* are intellectual superhumans. However, both experience a similar sort of fear and prejudice from normal humanity.

Although Danner contemplates founding a hidden society of superhumans, he equivocates and never does this, partly because he fears it would be destroyed by humanity. In *Odd John*, the mutant John Wainwright creates just this sort of colony of superhumans, which is destroyed, by the superhumans themselves, rather than directly by humanity. *Gladiator* was published in 1930. *Odd John* was published in 1935. So, *Gladiator* isn't just a forerunner of the garish and lively pulp comics; it is also quite possibly a forerunner of, or at least a contributor to, another type of speculative fiction story, that of Stapledon and later of the persecuted Slans of Van Vogt, John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, and others. There is more to this pulp story than its reputation as the inspiration of Superman might imply. It is almost the Platonic ideal of what constitutes both superhero comics and science fictional stories of humans gifted beyond the normal.

But it isn't just in going forward that we find something interesting, but in looking backward too. *Gladiator* often comes across as Romantic fiction but turned to the romance of human society and conflict, displaying the horror of it, the strange beauty of the industrial age, and the mind-numbing, awe-inspiring nature of modern war. Instead of the grandeur of a John Martin biblical painting, we have the scenes of carnage in the Great War - in other words, scientific romance in the sense of Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. It is Romantic fiction that goes outside the norms of its own genre to critique both society and the genre itself. And Danner isn't just a Romantic hero, rejecting established norms; he is almost the prototype of a hero from libertarian fiction such as Ayn Rand's works, a man who stands alone, mighty and misunderstood, but perhaps such a Randian hero turned inwards, one who does not become the Nietzschean capitalistic superman who is "the creator of all value, the source of

all wealth, the instrument of human progress.” (Newman, 1984, p.26). Although physically attractive, individualistic, intelligent and self-directed with a type of quiet magnetism, his individualism never leads him to any sort of satisfaction or ultimate self-actualisation. Even with all of his wealth and strength, the system is too complicated for him to change it. This is perhaps a libertarian seam to mine on another day.

Esquire magazine slated *Gladiator* as being seriously bad and asked “Who would inflict that book on themselves if they didn't have to?” but I feel that they were misrepresenting it. The writing isn't terrible, it's merely of its time. If we judged past writing by the standards of today, we wouldn't bother with Shakespeare as his grammar and vocabulary are often incomprehensible. You have to spend some time learning the language of the foreign country that is the past before you can understand it. *Gladiator* was written in a period when weird tales and pulp SF were becoming more popular, and the story was written in a way appropriate to having a misunderstood romantic hero as its protagonist. Moody introspection and overblown, over-emotional responses are de rigeur when writing about an X-Man like outcast. Also, when you've read any Lovecraft from the same period, examples like this one from the end of *Gladiator*, quoted by Esquire as particularly bad, look like Orwellian clear prose:

He put his hand to his mouth and called God like a name into the tumult above. Madness was upon him and the bitter irony with which his blood ran black was within him. A bolt of lightning stabbed earthward. It struck Hugo, outlining him in fire. His hand slipped from his mouth. His voice was quenched.

Chapter XXIII

Danner wanders about, trapped in an unforgiving economic system. The war scenes certainly get across a similar sense of cosmic horror to that which is seen in Lovecraft, as does the short segment set in the gigantic steel works: man as, at best, a cog in someone else's mighty machine, at worst an insignificant cockroach when set against those supra-human and incomprehensible systems of war, politics and industry¹:

[At the steelworks] he walked with excited eyes, watching the tremendous things that happened all around him. Men ran the machinery that dumped the ladle. Men guided liquid iron from the furnaces into a maze of channels and cloughs, clearing the way through the sand, cutting off the stream, making new openings. Men wheeled the slag and steered the trains and trams and cranes. Men operated the hammers. And almost all of the men were nude to the waist, sleek and shining with sweat; almost all of them drank whisky...

His task was changed numerous times. For a while he puddled pig iron with the long-handled, hoe-like tool.

"Don't slip in," they said. It was succinct, graphic.

¹ Indeed, this emphasis on man impotent before the triple-faced god of war, politics and industry could summarise much of life in the twenty first century, making *Gladiator* pertinent to present day readers, and not just a historical curiosity.

Then they put him on the hand cars that fed the furnaces. It was picturesque, daring, and for most men too hard. Few could manage the weight or keep up with the pace. Those who did were honoured by their fellows. The trucks were moved forward by human strength and dumped by hand-windlasses. Occasionally, they said, you became tired and fell into the furnace. Or jumped. If you got feeling woozy, they said, quit. The high rails and red mouths were hypnotic, like burning Baal and the Juggernaut.

Chapter XVII

This sort of worldview, proposed by Lovecraft, has been called either Cosmicism or Cosmic Indifferentism.

“Lovecraft found that the most powerful way to express his philosophy in literary terms was through what he termed *cosmicism*. This is the idea that, given the vastness of the universe in both time and space, the human race...is of complete inconsequence *in the universe-at-large*...Specifically, this meant - in such tales as “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926) and its successors - the depiction of vast gulfs of time and space by the creation of huge monsters who rule the universe and who, far from being hostile to human beings, are utterly indifferent to them and occasionally destroy them as we might heedlessly destroy ants underfoot.”

Joshi (1997, p.12-13)

The steelworks sample above displays this type of attitude through, for example, the laconic direction to not slip into the molten metal, but the war scenes come closest to demonstrating this viewpoint. At times it even seems as if Wylie had inverted Lovecraft; Danner, with his strength and near-invulnerability, is almost a Great Old One brought down and constrained in a human form, forced to live and endure a type of ‘humanic’ or societal horror: industrial age cosmic horror, slaving away in a great faceless machine. Although the Great War and the steel industry are segments of Danner’s story rather the whole thing, this Lovecraft quote does describe at least a significant portion of Danner’s experiences.

Gladiator demonstrates a historicist viewpoint, where *historicism* is defined as “A theory that events are determined or influenced by conditions and inherent processes beyond the control of humans” [1] or “a theory that history is determined by immutable laws and not by human agency” [2]. These two dictionary definitions of historicism are quite close to those for determinism and hark back to William Blake’s cry for freedom by Los in Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion, “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man’s”; likewise, the Great War and industrial settings hark back to Blake’s “dark satanic mills”.

Danner can achieve nothing substantive through his efforts; at the end of the Great War, he resolves to use his strength to end the conflict, but before he can do so, Armistice is declared and he breaks down in tears. When trying to change the world through the political system he realises that he cannot change anything. By contrast, Superman can rescue anyone; he changes everything. Danner’s determinism versus Superman’s freedom. Danner

is a Tragic and Romantic hero whose life ends with an impotent scream of rage into the sky at God. The story is thus a demonstration of the argument in favour of determinism over free will, a topic taken up by others in speculative literature, most noticeably by Isaac Asimov in his Foundation series.

One thing that has come across from analysing Gladiator is that there is a series of different worldviews throughout the history of speculative literatures: romanticism leading to scientific romanticism, leading to historicism, leading to cosmic indifferentism etc, perhaps not so much in a linear path as a mesh of influences. It would be interesting to look at these worldviews in SF to see how they showed the mindset of the published authors in their times, and to see what the creatives of today demonstrate as '**our**' worldview.

Conclusion

Gladiator is a work at the crossroads of several different style or genres; it comes out of the proto-genre of scientific romance, and its main character displays characteristics of Romance literature before it; it has a very strong tinge of the cosmic horror of weird fiction as displayed most obviously by Lovecraft; it prefigures much of the later characters, themes and styles of superhero comics, not just Superman but more especially the tortured mutants of Marvel's X-Men series; it has some similarities to Randian libertarian fiction; and it leads on to the superhuman/homo superior tales in genre SF. Whether Gladiator itself was the inspiration of these genres or styles, or if it is just a historical accident that it displays these characteristics is a topic for another and more extensive paper.

This all leads to a conclusion that Gladiator shares some features of interstitial fiction, but *from the other direction*. Interstitial fiction is that which straddles several boundaries. As defined by The Interstitial Arts Foundation (n.d.), "*It is art made in the interstices between genres and categories. It is art that flourishes in the borderlands between different disciplines, mediums, and cultures. It is art that crosses borders, made by artists who refuse to be constrained by category labels.*"

The term 'interstitial art' has been popularised recently and thus implicitly refers to works that straddle **existing** boundaries. Can Gladiator really be called interstitial, given that it comes from the **early** years of many genres (pulp comics, weird fiction, pulp SF etc)? If such a term doesn't exist, I think it makes sense to use a new term for works at a starting point of so many types: crossroads fiction or generative fiction, perhaps? Crossroads fiction stands at the junction of many types or styles but may not be the creator of any of those and may have been generated itself by some of those other paths; generative fiction is crossroads fiction that created, or helped create, at least one or more of these paths. Gladiator would thus be generative crossroads fiction.

But let's be more visual and more direct, and say it's a Catherine Wheel story, spitting off sparks in many different directions at once.

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