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*Editor*

EMIL A. GUTHEIL, M.D.

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# PROCEEDINGS

of the

## ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

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### SCIENTIFIC SESSIONS

At the April 30th, 1948, session of the Association *Walter S. Boernstein, M.D.*, read a paper entitled "The Role of Unconscious Processes in the Analytic Procedure and in Productive Thinking." In the discussion that followed Drs. Johann G. Auerbach, Max W. Friedemann, Edith Klemperer and Joseph Wilder participated.

On May 21st, 1948, *Alexander Wolf, M.D.*, read a paper entitled "The Psychoanalysis of Groups." This interesting presentation was followed by a discussion in which Drs. Paul Goolker, and Alfred Schick participated.

The fall season of the Association will be inaugurated on October 29, 1948, with the presentation of "Psychiatry and the Science of Economics" by *Joseph Wilder, M.D.*, and *Dr. Albert Lauterbach*.

### SEMINARS

The following Seminars will be held in the Fall:

*Emil A. Gutheil, M.D.*: "Practice of Active Analysis." A ten-session Seminar.

*Frederic Wertham, M.D.*: "Practice and Theory of the Mosaic Test." A four-session Seminar.

Full details about time and place of these Seminars will be announced at a later period.

### THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF COMIC BOOKS

#### *A Symposium\**

FREDERIC WERTHAM, M.D.

*New York, N. Y.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Psychiatry was practiced intramurally in institutions originally,

\* The following is an abstract of the symposium held by the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy on March 19, 1948.—Frederic Wertham, M.D., introduced the subject and the speakers. Dr. Wertham's remarks in extended form appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, March 29, 1948.

and only gradually concerned itself with the mental hygiene problems outside. In the same way psychotherapy was originally confined to the consultation room and is only now beginning to overcome its own claustrophilia and take an interest in the social influences that come to bear on the individual. It is, therefore, in the best scientific tradition to consider a social phenomenon so enormously widespread as comic books. The idea of this symposium originated in researches first carried out by the Lafargue Clinic.

This is the first exhibition of comic books. You see here examples of about one-third of all the comic book titles. This is also the first report on scientific research about comic books which is not under the auspices of the comic book industry itself. It was carried out in clinics, in schools and in private practice.

### THE COMIC BOOKS AND THE PUBLIC

GERSON LEGMAN

*New York, N. Y.*

The aggressive content of comic books is so conspicuous that most people fail to notice that this aggression is rigidly channelized, that the willingness of any reader to accept a fantasy escape from his frustrations presupposes a willingness to achieve something less than total and actual escape.

The comic books concentrate on aggressions which are impossible under civilized restraints—with fists, guns, torture, killing, and blood. The internalized censorship of both artist and child makes this attack respectable by directing it against some scapegoat criminal or wild animal, or even against some natural law like gravity, rather than against the parents, teachers, and policemen who are the real sources of the child's frustration and therefore the real objects of his aggression. At the same unconscious level that the child identifies himself with the heroic avenger, he may also identify whoever has been frustrating him with the corpse.

Violence displaced in this way from its intended object invariably appears in larger and larger doses, more and more often repeated. Twelve years ago, in 1936, there was not one comic book published in the United States. Today, at a conservative estimate, there are five hundred million yearly. The secret of this unprecedented success—the greatest, fastest literary success the world has

ever seen—is, of course, violence. All comic books without exception are principally, if not wholly devoted to violence.

The price being only a few cents apiece, and the distribution national, every city child can, and does, read from ten to a dozen of these pamphlets monthly, an unknown number of times, and then trades them off for others. If there is only one violent picture per page—and there are usually more—every city child who was six years old in 1938 has by now absorbed an absolute minimum of eighteen thousand pictorial beatings, shootings, stranglings, blood-puddles, and torturings-to-death, from comic books alone. The fortification of this visual violence with similar aural violence over the radio daily, and both together in the movies on Saturday, must also be counted in. The effect—and there are those who think it has been a conscious intention—has been to raise up an entire generation of adolescents who have felt, thousands upon thousands of times; all the sensations and emotions of committing murder, except pulling the trigger. And toy guns—advertised in the back pages of the comics—have supplied that.

Disguises are still necessary. At the lowest age level the necessary violence is presented as taking place between little anthropomorphic animals; gouging, twisting, tearing, and mutilating one another—Disney style—to a running accompaniment of all the loud noises and broad swift motions enjoyed by, and forbidden to, small children.

About a fifth of all comic books today openly glorify crime, and even these have to take it all back in fatuous exhortations to law and order at the top of every page. Also, after every seven pages of glorious cop-killing and law-breaking, the outlaw or gangster must be shown, on page eight, full of bullet-holes and covered with blood. In other words, the Katzenjammer-Kid formula, but with killing instead of spanking as the punishment, since killing and not “naughtiness” was the crime. This teaches the reader that CRIME—in big letters (and then in little letters underneath) “does not pay.”

When children get to be nine or ten, the necessary violence is given a quick coat of literary paint by the industry, and re-appears under the respectable camouflage of being “classic,” meaning that all the most violent children’s books of the last two centuries are condensed into eight-page picture-sequences, omitting every literary element but the rougher dialogue, and squeezing into fifty pic-

tures or less all the violent scenes that can be found anywhere in the three hundred or more pages of the original “classic.” Or the manufacturers hire psychiatrists, educators, clergymen, quiz-kids, public-opinion pollsters; and under their supervision the comics become “educational,” meaning that instead of fictional violence, real violence will be substituted. Alfred Nobel is made educational in eight pages of dynamite explosions, Florence Nightingale in eight pages of Crimean war horror, Louis Pasteur—this was a hard one—in eight pages of corpuscles killing germs. There are even Bible comics—eight pages of Jesus Christ flagellated, on the cross, dripping blood.

These “classic” and “educational” products accepted by educators and psychiatrists are immeasurably more harmful than the crime comics they intend to replace. The crime comic tells the child that murder is the act of a criminal, and that it will be punished. The educational comic tells him the opposite. It gives murder prestige. A military hero killed so many and so many men. (Go thou and do thou likewise.) Not only murder is no longer a crime and need not be punished; in the educational comic, murder is rewarded, murder is heroic.

It is this same ability to transcend all human laws—and be honored for doing so instead of punished—that makes the Superman formula so successful. All of Superman’s violence being on the side of right, there is no necessity for any Katzenjammer-Kid punishment on the last page, and this obvious flimflam suffices to blind parents and teachers to the glaring fact that the Superman formula is essentially lynching.

Instead of teaching obedience to law, Superman glorifies the “right” of the individual to take that law into his own hands. Instead of being brave and fearless, Superman lives in continuous guilty terror, projecting outward in every direction his readers’ inward aggression. In the ten-year effort to keep supplying sinister victims for Superman and his imitators to lynch, comic books have succeeded only in giving every American child a complete course in paranoid megalomania such as no German child ever had, a total conviction of the morality of force such as no Nazi could even aspire to.

Nor are the comic books lacking in any of the trappings of their Naziism. There is the same appeal to pagan gods for totally unearned powers; there is the same exploitation of magical insig-

nia; there is the same anti-intellectuality, not only in the worship of thick necks and ape-jaws, and in the stock characters of the "mad" scientist, but in actual propaganda strips showing whole hordes of sinister scientists about to enslave and destroy the world. There is of course the same anti-Semitism—the more sinister villains have Jewish noses—there is the same glorification of uniforms, riding-boots, and crushed caps; and there is the same undercurrent of homosexuality and sadomasochism.

It is the intention of the comic book industry, and its psychologists, to focus the attack on comic books, now gathering, against the sexual element in them. And this sexuality is to be discovered, not in the comics' stupendous dosage of sado-masochistic excitements, but in the female breast; the women in certain comic books, the complaint essentially deposes, have highly developed binocular bosoms, and run around in brassieres and panties. Now just what there is about even a woman's *unbrassiered* breast that would come as a surprise to even a nursing child is hard to say, but the really surprising thing is the hypocrisy that can look at all these hundreds of pictures in comic books showing half-naked women being tortured to death, and complain only that they're half naked. If they were being tortured to death with all their clothes on, that would be perfect for children.

Naturally this formula is not popular with girls. Granting all the masochistic excitement of terror, it is difficult to identify yourself with a corpse. And so there are a whole series of so-called 'teen-age comic books, specifically for girls, in which adolescent sexuality is achieved in sadistic disguise, without father-daughter incest, without petting, without even a single kiss; through a continuous humiliation of scare-crow fathers and transvestist boy-friends by ravishingly pretty girls.

The Supreme Court of the United States has just struck down the laws of half the states against these and similar forms of literary bloodlust.

It is necessary to be realistic. It is an open question whether the fixation on violence and death in mass-produced comic books is a substitution for a censored sexuality, or is, to a greater degree, intended to siphon off—upon human sacrifices and fantasy victims—the aggression felt by Americans, children and adults alike, against general social conditions by which and to which they allow themselves to be distorted. In either case the distorting element

is basic, and until we are prepared to come to grips with these basic repressions, any attack or mere escape mechanism like comic books must be futile.

## AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE IN FANTASY AND FACT

HILDE L. MOSSE, M.D.

*New York, N. Y.*

When praising comic books all experts state that they provide an outlet for children's innate "aggressiveness." Where does the idea of a ubiquitous presence of aggressiveness stem from?

Freud's theory of the death instinct has invaded all papers on aggression whether or not the writer adheres to any one of the analytic schools or bases his research more on the behaviorist approach. A striking confusion exists even in the description of what Freud meant—varying from one author to the other. The conclusions, however, are similar wherever comic books are described, namely, that there exists something called "aggression" for which an outlet has to be provided—otherwise harm will come to society or the individual.

At about the time of the first world war Freud, stimulated by the horrors of war, began to be interested in the problem of death and aggression. Then he did not find it necessary to assume the existence of a death instinct. As he had done before, he based his elaborations on "two groups of primal instincts, the self-preservative or ego-instincts and the sexual instincts" (1).

Cruelty, as discussed by Freud, was first conceived as originating with the individual and being linked with the sex instinct. Based on the war, which showed the State to be capable of greater violence than the Individual, he found cruelty to be connected also with the instinct of self-preservation. He never further investigated this latter social aspect of cruelty and violence. Freud called upon the science of biology and developed his theory of the death instinct.

From then on all of Freud's theories are based on the assumption of two instincts: the death instinct and the life instinct. He postulates that the aggressive instinct needs an outlet at all times in the actions of individuals as well as of groups, and that it constitutes the most powerful obstacle to culture. He repeatedly

emphasizes that, unless an outlet is provided, the instinct is taken over by the superego which thus heightens its aggressiveness against the ego. This instinct also provides Freud's dynamic explanation of wars, discrimination, and all forms of cruelty and exploitation.

It is possible to write two papers on this problem—one based on the death instinct theory. Comic books play on this instinct alone. But it is questionable whether this instinct should be permitted to achieve gratification if we want society to function, and whether it might not be wiser to use the entire power of education for the strengthening of the life instinct and the blunting of its antagonist.

It would appear that if violence and suffering, individual and social, are but an expression of an innate instinct, they are also inevitable, and any attempt to prevent them seems useless. Freud's pre-death-instinct theories provide a more fertile soil for research and a much brighter outlook for the future. I feel that the Freud who described conscience as "dread of the community and nothing else" (2) can better help us to get at the root of the problem of violence. I choose to base my thoughts on the assumption of two groups of instincts, the instincts of self-preservation and of sex, that is, of hunger and of love.

There are experiments pointing to a connection between frustration and aggression. Most workers in this field proceed from this assumption pointing out that aggression occurs wherever there is thwarting of an instinct. There is no unanimity as to the nature of instincts, and there is confusion also in the definition of aggression. Aggressiveness, aggressive acts, cruelty, sadism are used synonymously. Clarity can only be achieved with proper classification.

We must distinguish between action and the psychological soil from which action emerges. What is commonly termed "aggression" is a state of readiness to commit an act of cruelty, that is an act intended to cause pain in others and/or oneself. Where does this readiness to commit acts of cruelty or, to use a term coined by Dr. Wertham, this "free-floating hostility" come from?

We can assume that it occurs on the basis of frustration, that is, when we are unable to do what we want to do. Frustration creates a conflict—this conflict leads to tension seeking release in action against the frustrating force. The primary aim of reaction to frustration is to overcome the obstacle so that we may be able to do what we want to do. Destruction and pain which may occur

during this process are not the primary aims. To experience joy in destruction and pain alone, and not in attainment of the goal, is a sign of illness in either the individual or society.

The sources of frustration are twofold, stemming either from persons we know or from the (anonymous) society: one is connected with the singular individual and his immediate environment; the other, appearing more remote, with the plural, with society.

Without thwarting of direct gratification of a child's drives there can be no growth, that is no growing into any society. The genius of Freud has traced this necessary transformation of drives through the different stages from infancy and childhood to maturity. He has shown how the power for sublimation develops on the basis of the Oedipus situation via the different stages of narcissism with the help of the superego. From the beginning of life the child has to be inhibited from carrying out many wishes—he would not survive otherwise. Frustration is necessary for the child's protection as well as for the security of others.

Observations have been made showing that it is beneficial to encourage small children in acting out to a certain extent their feelings of hostility created by the thwarting of their instincts. What children seek primarily, though, is love and achievement and not destruction. They have to learn through experience and identification what pain is and how it is inflicted, and that their originally investigative destructiveness may make construction impossible. The wisdom of education consists in helping pave the way for sublimation which is the basis of civilization, and also in providing outlets for the gratification of instinctual desires. This is how anxiety and hostility can be kept at a minimum.

The advocates of comic books are unanimous in saying that there is an aggression *inside* the children which has to be brought out—none mention that aggression may be something the children are confronted with, something which is carried into them. Anna Freud states as follows: "In actual life it is as a rule, far more important to protect the child from the father's anger than the father from the child's hostility" (3).

A socially caused frustration is also a potent source of free-floating hostility in children. Children live in a hostile world, indeed. In our country, a country which has not suffered from the ravages of war, a recent survey showed that one out of every

ten school-age youngsters is physically underfed. And not only Wright's *Black Boy* (4) but many other youngsters have to take a stick when they go out on the street, not as a symbol of their masculinity but for the protection of their lives.

Thwarted action can be channelled in different ways: the child can, *in his fantasy*, create a world which permits him to do the things he wants to but is unable to do in reality.

Fantasy-making is a normal process in the development of children. It is particularly vivid and intense during the pre-puberty period, the age when comic books are read most prolifically. This is a time when there occurs an intensification of the sex drive and, at the same time, the process of dissolving of the Oedipus situation goes on more rapidly. The incorporation of the parental values, that is, the formation of the superego, has been accomplished to a large extent, and the child is now in need of an ego ideal which, as a rule, is sought outside the family. The child wants to and must assert himself as a person inside the family and, to a certain degree even against it. At the same time, he has to assert himself in society and here, too, largely against it. He longs to be taken into a group, to identify with it. He needs this for the purpose of strengthening of his ego as well as for his own protection and, furthermore he needs it for the development of his conscience.

In our individualized society he rarely finds this ideal setup, and so he has to fight for himself. This is quite impossible without a flight into fantasy and day-dreaming. What he seeks is release from tension, acceptance and happiness. The energy for fantasy is largely provided by thwarted action; fantasy, on the other hand, is stimulated by some current impression capable of arousing an intense desire. From there the mind wanders back to a time when this desire was fulfilled, and then the image of fulfillment of the wish is projected into the future.

When asked about comic books, the children without exception state that they select one picture, look at it for a long time, and "imagine that it is real." As Alex, age 12, one of my patients at the Lafargue Clinic, expressed it: "I look at them hard and keep looking at them. Every time I look at a picture I imagine I am in it. Every time someone gets hurt or shot I can feel that in the place where the person gets hurt or shot at. . . . And I feel also like I have the gun in my hand and pull it and it jacks when I shoot. I feel both at the same time. I always like to play it, too,

make believe I am the crook, sometimes I play the cop—but I do more of the shooting. I try to play it exactly the way it is in the comic book. My sister plays an actress getting captured. We make her walk on the street, then we catch her, take her to the basement, tie her up. Then we sit at the table and make plans how to get rid of her. In the meantime she is trying to escape."

I have selected this one case for it is characteristic of the responses we found in the children we examined. The scenes used by children are all similar, they actually have no choice. Thus day-dreams and plays are stimulated, all of which have as their content violence. This violence is not a true reflection of the one children are confronted with in their daily lives. Comic book violence is individualized and highly specialized. People are being hurt in all sorts of ways, with all sorts of weapons and in all sorts of settings.

Children's fantasies, stimulated by comic book pictures, make them imagine violence as *the only way out*. For even as the "good" conquers the "evil" it does so by violence only. No one ever lives happily ever after.—Alex turns the page and knows there will be a new story with the same people solving the same problems by slightly varied methods of direct and bloody violence.

Children also find ample material for sex fantasies. And here another serious misdirection of their fantasy lives and actions occurs. Science has shown that sexual realism is important for healthy development of children. For, as Freud first pointed out, delayed training of the sexual instincts in the observance of reality predisposes to neurosis. If we assume that sexual aberrations, such as sadism and masochism, are symptoms of immaturity and expressions of a fixation on a very early childhood level, then the mass exhibition of such scenes is particularly bad for children.

Let us assume that Freud is correct in his theory that each child has to go through stages of development which include something like sadism and masochism, before he can be oriented toward enjoyment of sexual pleasure through the organs of sex proper, and also that these infantile stages have to be repressed if maturity and normal functioning are to be achieved. Comic book pictures with their repetition of sado-masochistic scenes constantly bring to the fore this repressed material and thus work against a healthy character development.

Where is the advanced concept of femininity elaborated upon



by the experts? Most comic book women are "phallic" holding weapons ready for use not only in defense but also for attack,—a picture giving rise to or confirming remnants of castration fears in boys. It is well known that this "phallic" concept of women is thought by Freud to be traumatic and a possible cause for the development of neurosis. Added to this is that women are portrayed either in typical sadistic or masochistic attitudes.

I have made a distinction between cruelty and sadism. We can formulate it in saying that cruelty is aggression connected with the ego instinct, whereas sadism is aggression connected with the sex instinct. The violent acts shown in comic books are all linked with sex. I mean to say, that the free-floating hostility, present in most children of our society, in the comic book stories and pictures appears transformed into aggressive acts which are linked with sex, and the female sex at that.

Children do carry out their fantasies. Our case demonstrates this very well. The road from day-dream to action is much shorter in children than in adults. One reason is that their fantasies are more vivid and life-like. This may be connected with the far greater frequency of eidetic disposition in childhood which disappears after puberty (5).

The child in his normal development has to test reality constantly. This is his most important way of finding out about the world. Children at the age when they read comic books are particularly prone to testing and experimenting, for they have begun to be suspicious of adults, to doubt the truth of what they are told, of what is printed in their books. We must not forget that comic books are produced by adults, and children know this very well. This doubt is a part of the process of self-assertion and freeing from parental authority described above.

The setting in which comic books fit into the causation of crime can best be expressed with the following quotation from *Dark Legend* (6): "It seems to me just as inexact to say fiction has no influence at all on people's actions as to blame crime on such fiction. Apparently anti-social impulses do not originate in that way. But when they once exist, added impetus may be given them by way of identification with a fictional scene." Our case shows clearly that children do identify themselves with the comic book characters—all of them: the "good" and the "bad."

It has been claimed that comic books help children solve their

problems. To be inspired to a play of strangling girls or killing boys seems a poor solution to the indeed pressing problems of children. Children ought to be given a chance to grow to maturity happily, to find gratification and to achieve sublimation. Comic books do not make this task easier for them.

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#### THE CHILD'S CONFLICT ABOUT COMIC BOOKS

PAULA ELKISCH, PH.D.\*

Philadelphia, Pa.

At the outset I would like to say that, when Dr. Wertham asked me to join the Symposium on the "Psychopathology of Comic Books," he made it clear that this suggestive title should by no means color the point of view of this study. Perhaps I might find something to the contrary of psychopathology. Instead of making a deductive study, I decided to find out from children directly what their reactions were to comic books.<sup>1</sup> While this project was under way I learned of an evaluation of comic books made by 230 students of a college in California.<sup>2</sup> This evaluation represents additional material that has been supplementary and corroborative of the findings of the data I have obtained from the children. Now, after all these data have been collected, scored and evaluated, they reveal material that is less than that on pleasure books?<sup>3</sup>

\* With the assistance of Gertrude Resek, Community Service Society of New York.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my thanks to Miss Clare Dewsnap, Principal of Germantown Friends Lower School, and to Dr. William E. Burkard, District Superintendent, Board of Public Education, Philadelphia, Pa., for their help and interest in my obtaining the data of the following study.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted for the material of the college students to Dr. John Otto Reinemann, Director of Probation, Municipal Court of Philadelphia, Pa.

<sup>3</sup> The designation "pleasure books" refers to any reading other than comics.

In this study, eighty white and Negro children, boys and girls between eleven and twelve years of age, were made the subjects of an inquiry on the topic of comic books. Their school teachers put six questions on the blackboard and asked the children to write down the answers. They were told that unless they answered these questions truthfully, there was no sense in answering them at all. They were also told that they did not have to sign their names if they did not want to.

These were the questions:

1. How much time do you spend per week on comics? Is this more or less than on pleasure books?<sup>3</sup>
2. What kinds of comics do you like? Why? What kinds of comics do you not like? Why?
3. Do you prefer pleasure books or comics?
4. What are the best things about comics?
5. What are the worst things about comics?
6. Do you think parents and teachers should encourage or discourage you in reading comics?

Here are some of the results of the children's reactions to these questions. All the children spend some time on comics. It varies from what they called "very little" to 15 hours a week. Out of the 80 children only 18 admittedly prefer comics to pleasure books; 57 children prefer pleasure books; and five cannot decide. 16 children feel that parents and teachers should encourage children to read comics; 37 suggest discouragement, and 25 are undecided. The "best things" about comics, according to the children, are the pictures, the excitement, and that comics are "funny"; the worst things about them are: murder, crime, that they are misleading and tempting, and that they put bad things in your mind.

The most interesting feature in these responses is the fact that, out of the 18 children who prefer comics to pleasure books, 9 children feel that reading comics should be discouraged. Such inconsistency definitely points to a conflict, a conflict that can be found in many more responses though not as obviously as in these nine cases. Five of the nine children list crime, murder, and bad influence as the "worst things" in comics, and since these children prefer the reading of the comics to the reading of pleasure books and yet would like to be discouraged from reading comics, they must feel threatened by, at least, these "worst things." Perhaps they find pleasure in being threatened, which means in this case being drawn toward their primitive impulses. But as soon as they are confronted with the rational question, as to whether they want to have more of this kind of "pleasure," they seem to feel guilty and would rather be protected from it.

But before going into the content of the conflict that the children have expressed, it is worth our while to look at the evaluation of the comics made

by the college students which I mentioned before. This evaluation represents in the form of an abstract the opinion of 230 students on 74 popular comics. These comics are equally divided in two groups; (1) the objectionable, (2) the unobjectionable kind. There are 37 in each group; but among the objectionable kind there are still quite a number which are characterized as "mildly objectionable" or even "very definitely objectionable" if they were given to children. Now with regard to the findings about our 80 school children it was striking to see that the 230 college students have characterized 18 comics out of 37 as "*motivating dangerous imitation*." The number 18 refers only to those evaluations where the definite statement "*motivating dangerous imitation*" had been made, although each evaluation of the objectionable kind implies the "danger of imitation." The students, either through empathy with the imaginary reader or through memory of their own reactions, have put their fingers on the same point which is a crucial one: imitation.

What does imitation mean?

Imitation is a mimicry reaction. It is one of the most primitive expressions of man's need for protection. If he is different, distinguishable, he will be "discovered" by his "enemy." But if he is like the others, if he wears a uniform, he feels safe, secure. It is a sign of maturity if one can relinquish the uniform, or his gang, or his tribe, and afford to be distinguishable, an individual in his own right. But such maturity cannot be expected of children. In fact, for them the desire to be like the others, to herd or to gang, hence the aping and imitating, is perfectly normal.<sup>4</sup> But here the question arises: whom and what do they imitate? They imitate each other—certainly the uniform pattern of comics-reading can partly be explained through imitation—they imitate their parents and teachers, and those whom they want to be like. By and large, they want to be like those who are in authority, who have "the power." They want to be like those whom they are attached to in love, in fear, in hate. Imitation is the outer act of the inner defense mechanism "identification." And it is this inner defense mechanism about which the children are concerned and which is the content of their conflict.

The process of identification and its role in the formation of the ego and the superego has been widely explored in psychoanalytic literature, in the works of Freud, Federn, Fenichel, Deutsch, Aichhorn, and others. To go more fully into these explorations, or interpretations, would require a study in itself. Therefore it cannot be done here. But there is one concept that has grown out of these explorations, a concept we cannot dispense with, since it is basic to our understanding of the peculiar conflict the child

<sup>4</sup> The term "normal" is used here as a statistical concept, distinguished from the teleological or idealistic concept of norm (cf. Edmund Mayer, "Zellschädigung und Mitose," Virchow's Archiv 1930, vol. 275, pp. 114-134).

dren seem to be caught in, in relation to the effects of comic books: it is the concept of the *identification with the aggressor*.

Whereas identification with a beloved person has a socially desirable, constructive function in the child's mastery of his instincts, under certain circumstances identification appears in a perverted fashion, as it were, causing the child to side with objects or persons which threaten him. Anna Freud has pointed out that identification with the aggressor, or with aggression itself, impersonation into a person that is a threat to the child, is one of the most natural and widespread modes of behavior on the part of the primitive ego and has long been familiar to those who have made a study of primitive methods of invoking and exorcising spirits and of primitive religious ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> A child introjects some characteristics of an anxiety-object and so assimilates an anxiety experience which he has just undergone. The child's conversion from the person who has been threatened into the person who makes the threat is accompanied by the experience of a deep conflict. One aspect of this conflict is related to the assimilation of the anxiety-object as a source of release and pleasure and the awareness that such assimilation represents a "bad," that is a socially unacceptable, act. This act therefore is being felt, or registered, by the child with guilt.<sup>6</sup>

If we now look at our data in terms of the child's defense mechanism of identification in general and of identification with the aggressor in particular, and the experience of conflict that is inherent in that identification, we see the children's responses to the questions about comics in a new light. It is an inherent characteristic of any conflict-situation that it exerts fascination over the individual through the pull in two divergent directions. Being pulled in two directions is being trapped, paralyzed. One cannot decide. Everything is in suspense. There is an everlasting excitement going on about what way to turn—if any. It is a highly conflicting, an ambivalent excitement, an admixture of lustful pleasure and guilt that arouses the children who identify themselves with aggressive forces of the type they are being exposed to in the comics. This excitement is of the most primitive kind. Educational guidance of the child's ego aims at protecting him from his own primitive impulses. But these very impulses are stimulated and appealed to in such excitement.

Appeal to primitiveness is the effect that is at the basis of the influence comic books have on children. The child's primitive impulses, instead of being gradually transformed into socially desirable behavior and attitudes, are constantly being stirred up. These attacks, however, are made not from one side only. They are made in the disguise of "content" as well as in the disguise of "form." Whereas the conflict of identification with the

<sup>5</sup> Anna Freud: "The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense," p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> The defense mechanism of the ego that is at work here is a rather complicated one. See Anna Freud, *loc. cit.*, p. 128.

rather doubtful "heroes" of the comic plot refers to the *content* of the child's experience, there is an experience related to the *form* of the presentation. Form is expressed, for example, by means of language. But what kind of language is the language in comic books? If one would make a study of the semantics of comics or of their style, one would probably find that their language, as far as there is any, expresses crudest primitivity. Actually, however, comic books are picture books. They are written in picture language rather than in word language. Expression and communication through pictures is older and even more primitive than expression and communication through word language. The reading of picture language must instigate thinking in pictures which, according to Freud, "is only a very incomplete form of becoming conscious. . . . It approximates more closely to unconscious processes." Approximation to unconscious processes means appealing to the child's primitive impulses. If we would carry this consideration further and evaluate the contents of the pictures as well as of the word language, with regard to their effect on the child, we would realize that either of these form expressions must be both attractive and repulsive to him. It is well known that children indulge in "bad" language and yet are repelled by it, particularly during latency. The same must be true of the children's reactions to the utterly crude, violent, and, frequently, sexually stimulating "picture language" of the comics. Again and again the child is exposed to conflict. Different methods aim at the same goal, the goal of primitivation, enhancing vice-versa their fascination over the child.

### THE PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE BAD INFLUENCE OF COMIC BOOKS

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The term comics is a serious misnomer. The modern comic is indeed a far cry from its prototype, the humorous parodies on human behavior and situations, which are still seen in some of the newspaper cartoon strips. The vicious monthly magazine type publications which flood the local newsstands and neighborhood candy stores and hit tremendous sales records have great appeal to a certain type of adult as well as to children.

The child and, even more so, the young adolescent living in the penumbra of an adult world of half-revealed secrets of life, and half-understood causes and results of violence, war and crime, have their curiosity whetted by the plots and pictures in comic books. Comic books, furthermore, awaken the sado-masochism which lies dormant in children.

Where does the harm exist in such outlets? Let me briefly indicate that to you from my clinical experience as a child psychiatrist. First of

all, while a child's natural curiosity should not be curbed, it need not be whetted. A child's questions should be encouraged by parents and teachers by inspiring confidence in the child. These should be answered within the ability of the child to comprehend, and the scope of the answer should frequently be limited to the scope of the question. Comic books raise conflicts and disturbances in the child's mind which they answer in false and often terrifying fashion.

The child, no less than the adult, is influenced by the printed word, and especially the printed picture. Thus, he experiments in thought—and what I want to emphasize especially—in action with the violence he sees in the comics. There are rather frequent newspaper accounts of brutal slayings of children by their playmates, many accomplished in comic book fashion with binding, beating and torture, and with little or no motive.

Just as with justice triumphant over crime, the comics smother violence with more violence, so when they attempt to battle social prejudices their emphasis and appealing sadism is so strong that the triumph of right at the end is a weak anticlimax.

Well-adjusted children with adequate satisfaction and outlet for their emotions may perhaps less easily become absorbed with comics, but even they cannot help being influenced and harmed by them. Today, with our increased pace and tensions of living, the juvenile group of the population is rapidly becoming infected with the neuroses of its adult "rulers." It is this ever-increasing number of neurotic and emotionally deprived children who are the prolific comic readers, and who are most suggestible to the bad influence of these publications. The comics are an ill wind which blows good for the publishers. This unfortunately still proves to be a stronger argument than the welfare of the public.

#### DISCUSSION

*Johann G. Auerbach, M. D.:* The "training" of the child, is a training to conformity. Only to the extent to which the wishes of the child coincide with those of society, are they allowed expression. This training involves suppression and frustration, reason enough for the development of aggressive trends!

At an early age the child is made to learn that he ought to control sexual desire and hostile feelings. The means by which he is taught this are altogether punitive, consisting in corporal or mental punishments, withholding of desirable objects or of love. The child has no choice in the matter. If he does not want to incur punishment, he must refrain from sexual activity, and from aggression against his educators.

Thus a need is seen for some permissible outlet for the forbidden tendencies. The question is, do bloodthirsty and sexy books provide such a harmless outlet? Do they by their appeal to the fantasy of the child

prevent him either from living out these trends in reality, or from becoming neurotic through repression? Is the fantasy the right locale in which undesirable desires should be "worked out?"

The answer is that such a representation of the function of comic books demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of repression, neurosis, and the analytic approach from which these terms derive.

Our objections are:

1. There is little left to the fantasy by the over-realistic presentations of cruelty and sex (and their combination) in comic books, other than the easy task of substituting the heroes and victims in the books by persons in the child's environment, including himself.

2. Instead of "satisfying" the undesirable impulses, instead of giving them a substitute outlet, they only stimulate the desire to translate fantasy into reality. I wonder if a woman on a reducing diet likes to leaf through her cookbook, hear about meals in fine restaurants, stand in front of window displays of her favorite delicacies, in order to find a fantasy-outlet for her food cravings?

Or to put it another way, if our adult repressed aggressive tendencies could be assuaged by constant talk of war, atomic weapons, bacillary bombs.

Stirring up the fantasy to cruelty and sex can never be considered an outlet; it never does away with them even temporarily, because the last stone in the structure is missing, namely, real life experience. Looking at turkey will not satisfy hunger, and looking at partly naked girls will not satisfy sexual desires.

What then about fairy tales, and their illustrations? Why does the picture of Hansel and Gretel pushing the witch into the oven create no desire in the child for vindictive action against those who boss *him*? How does the bloody cutting open of the wolf's belly to let out Red Riding Hood's Grandma differ from the knife attacks depicted in the comic books? Why do fairy tales help the child to get rid of his feelings of aggression, when comic books obviously fail?

I believe the answer lies in the fantastic element of the fairy tale, which depicts a world far removed from reality. The child may identify himself with the persons or animals in this fantasy world, which he makes his own. There he may allow his fantasy to soar as he wishes: it is his private empire in which *he* reigns. He knows the difference between the real and the imaginary; there is no attempt to bridge the gap.

Another helpful characteristic of fairy tales is their poetic form, even in prose, which also tends to remove tragedy or mischief from everyday life. (For instance, Mother Goose.) The less fairy tales obey these two laws, the more they are apt to instil in the child anxiety, or a desire to translate fantasy into reality. Unfortunately, for the neurotic child the fairy tale provides the danger of escape. But it is only the child who is

not equal to the pressure of his environment who will take advantage of the opportunity to all but retire to a fairy tale world.

Dr. Wertham has emphasized that violence in juvenile delinquency has increased in direct proportion with the spread of comic books among the youth of this country. We have offered one possible explanation of this phenomenon. If aggressive trends are undesirable, there should first be the greatest possible elimination of authoritative demands on our children. In their place, we should offer love and increasing cooperation, thereby reducing the causes for hostility. If there is little cruelty in the handling of our children, there will be little need for their revenge and aggression.

Furthermore, if our society feels that it cannot tolerate early activity, the least it can do is to protect the child from sexual stimulation. What a diabolic practice, to permit the child to be actively stimulated by comic books and then to punish the child for succumbing to the constant temptations thrown in his face.

Surely the SPCA would bring a person to court who made a practice of letting a pet go hungry, then putting his food in front of him, only to punish him if he ate it. The Pavlov experiments proved that hunger is stimulated by the show of food. In the same way, aggression and sexual desire are stimulated by the presentation of such comic book pictures.

Aggression can largely be eliminated by careful educational methods. Whatever is left of it through the inevitable frustrations of culture should be allowed to be expressed directly in real, if mitigated, civilized forms.

Mr. Charles Biro, an editor of comic books, stated vigorously that comic books are getting better.

Mr. Alden Getz and Mr. Harvey Kurtzman suggested that comic books should be improved and made educational.

Dr. Augusta Jellinek discussed comic books from the point of view of reading and denied that it was possible to "make comic books educational."

Mr. Harold Straubing, Comics Editor, *New York Herald-Tribune*, defended comic books. "Whether the responsibility for a delinquency rests with the comic book influences is doubtful, because we are exposed to so much crime, violence, conflicting ideas and social problems in life and other mediums of expression."

Mr. Albert Edwards discussed comic books and the problems they present in reformatories. He stated that some supervisors resorted to comic books just to keep the boys quiet. He had observed that "when it came to drawing, the boys drew pictures from the comic books that showed violence or a preoccupation with unhealthy sexual attitudes."

Mrs. Edward Flemming, Mr. Alfred Feingold, Mr. Henry Bark and Mr. Charles W. Collins also participated in the discussion.

## CURRENT LITERATURE

### BOOK REVIEWS

WINFRED OVERHOLSER AND W. V. RICHMOND. *Handbook of Psychiatry*. Lippincott Company, 1947, 252 pp., \$4.00.

At a time when the layman in his drive for a better understanding of psychological problems, is easily misled by incompetent popular books, by sensational movies and distorted press reports, the edition of a handbook which rests on a sound basis and is written in part by so outstanding a psychiatrist as Overholser, is a laudible task. The book is destined "for the college student, the nurse, the average man and woman who has mentally ill relatives or friends," and its purpose, according to the editor, is "to clear the fog of misconceptions surrounding psychiatry."

The character of this handbook is not different from that of a brief textbook of descriptive clinical psychiatry, books which are sometimes worth to be read even by psychiatrists. The reviewer feels, however, doubtful whether the current handbook will satisfy the needs of a wider circle of lay readers. Very little space has been given to the dynamic and the psychoanalytical viewpoint, and the case histories in most chapters are too brief to serve their purpose. It appears that the sincere and anxious desire to be factual and scientific induced the authors to write this book in a rather academic and clinical fashion. Its appeal to the layman, therefore, may prove to be limited. Also the lack of pictorial material diminishes, in the reviewer's opinion, the value of the book which is intended to give enlightenment to the layman.

The handbook deals with the position of psychiatry within the realm of psychology, with the causes of psychosis, with the general principles of treatment, and with the services rendered by mental institutions. In a series of chapters the authors give a clinical description and classification of psychosis.

Psychoneuroses should have received a longer presentation owing to their central position in psychiatry and their importance in our time. To the revolutionary contribution which psychoanalysis has made toward the understanding and therapy of neuroses not more than two pages have been devoted. Excellent are the chapters dealing with alcoholism, psychopathic personality, criminology, military psychiatry and psychiatric disorders in childhood.

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