

# The curse of the comic books

by Fredric Wertham, M.D.

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Young reader, would you know whether the tendency of a book is good or evil, examine in what state of mind you lay it down. Has it attempted to abate your admiration and reverence for what is great and good, and to diminish in you the love of your country and your fellow creatures? Has it addressed itself to your pride, your vanity, your selfishness, or any of your evil propensities? Has it defiled the imagination with what is loathsome, and shocked the heart with what is monstrous? Has it disturbed the sense of right and wrong which the Creator has implanted in the human soul?

—Robert Southey

## I.

Do you know what Necronomicon is? Probably not. But for thousands of children, this is part of their education. They know that a Necronomicon is a creature that, of course, drinks people's blood and eats their flesh. Maybe you don't know either how one stops a man who is drinking a child's blood. That is easy: a man with a crucifix chants prayers while another man stabs the vampire through the heart. The comic book that imparts this lesson has an advertisement: "The way of the Cross leads home." Let me conclude this little quiz about what we give our youngest children to read with a last question. Why does a woman leave her husband? You may not know; but many little boys and girls could tell you: She is sexually attracted to a big, black gorilla—"I must go to him!" she says. "I must!". . .

When I first became aware of comic books (while I was director of the Bellevue Hospital Mental Hygiene Clinic, the largest mental clinic in the country) I paid no attention to them. My assistants and I studied children very carefully, and off and on we made the observation that children who got in some special trouble were especially steeped in comic-book reading. But at first we did not put these observations together. No child ever mentioned comic comic books as an excuse for delinquent acts. They took such reading for granted.

So, evidently—and without knowing the contents—did the adults. When I asked those who deal professionally with children about comic books they did not know, nor care, what was in them. They had no idea how much time children spent reading them. They assumed that since they were called "comic" books they must be humorous. Several years passed before I decided to study comic books systematically.

This turned out to be hard work. Comic books are badly printed, hard to read, on cheap paper. The drawing is mechanical and bad, the colors ugly, the language sparse and poor, the spelling often wrong, the intellectual and moral level unbelievably low. To study the effect of such "literature" on children we employed all the modern methods of child psychiatry and psychology. In my book *Seduction of the Innocent* I describe in detail the methods, with results and case histories. For this research I had the active assistance of psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists, teachers, probation officers, remedial reading teachers, speech experts and others. We had no preconceived notions—except that for a time we tended to underestimate the bad effects comic books have. Now, after study of a very large case material of every type of child, we know better.

Of course there are always people with a ready retort. They say that children have always had sub-literary trash and fare and that comic books have nothing new. They couldn't be more wrong. Comic books, says Kingsley Martin in the *New Statesman*, "amount to the most extraordinary experiment in children's education that the world has ever known."

## II.

Comic books are an entirely new phenomenon for three reasons. In the first place, their number is staggering. They have reached at times the number of 90 million a month. More money is spent on them than on all the textbooks in primary and secondary schools together! Their distribution by methods fair and not so fair is more efficient than that of any type of literature, ever. Comic books are to be found in stands and stores in every city, every town, and even in the smallest villages. Distributors are not only efficient, they are ruthless. When small store owners, from good sense or decency, try to refuse comic books they are apt to suffer from retaliation: they cannot get the good magazines they want at



The evil which Dr. Wertham identifies in the comic books of earlier generations, is today supplemented by even more pernicious multi-media effects: video games, television, computer simulations.

all, or they get them too late to sell. Of course the big distributors who make the huge profits try to deny this; but it is amply demonstrated all over the country. . . .

Secondly, the content of the majority of comic books is something new that has never happened in such concentration and profusion before in any children's literature. The ingredients spelled out, pictured and glorified, are violence, cruelty, sadism, crime, beating, promiscuity, sexual perversion, race hatred, contempt for human beings. A veritable devil's brew for the growing child! no other children's literature in the world's history can even approach it. Dime novels, sometimes quoted by the thoughtless, were practically the opposite as far as morality is concerned. . . . Some topics are characteristic for comic books: the injury-to-the-eye motif; the blood-sucking motif; the desecration of the dead by sex and violence (real necrophilia is illustrated in children's comics; there is even a "Miss Corpse 1954"); the tying-up-of-a-girl motif (especially tying of her hands behind her back); the stomping motif (kicking in the face); the branding motif (especially of girls); the slugging- or shooting-a-policeman motif. Nobody can understand the crime comic book problem if he does not make clear to himself that all these subjects, depicted in graphic detail, enter millions of homes, whether parents know it or not. There is a harmless little Teddy Bear in the Christmas number of a comic book. It belongs to a blind boy. The child's father rips out the Teddy Bear's eyes so that it cannot see either. "There's nothing wrong with

that!" say the comics publishers. "Have you read the end of the story?" I have. The Teddy Bear tears the father to pieces! That is the modern way to teach a child—a young child—that good triumphs over evil. . . .

The third reason comic books are a new phenomenon in children's literature is to my mind the most sinister one. In former times smut and trash were frowned upon in children's reading. Either it was actively combatted or it was minimized, curbed and barely tolerated. Nowadays it is not only defended, but is actually praised as being good for children! This is the circumstance that prompted me to accept the invitation to write an article on crime comic books for *Religious Education*, for what has happened in the field of comic books may happen in other fields as well.

Anybody who is unbiased and who really examines comic books will find something seriously wrong with them as food for children. . . . Yet the comic-book industry has found educators, psychiatrists and child experts who are willing to defend crime comic books with an array of high-sounding arguments. (In *Seduction of the Innocent* I discuss them in some detail.)

### III.

Perhaps the most insidious of these arguments, and the one deserving to be fought at every step, is the claim that only unstable children who are insecure, or otherwise predestined or preconditioned, are adversely affected by comic books. That gives adults complete leeway to corrupt children wholesale for commercial reasons. Obviously, one cannot make any hard and fast rule according to which children can be divided into *stable* or *unstable*. Every normal child is immature, growing, and to that extent unstable and vulnerable. And even if he does nothing wrong, temptation exposes him to emotional conflict and that coupled with other factors may do him subtle harm, immediately or late on. The first modern psychologist, St. Augustine, was well aware of this. He pointed out the effect of mass seduction by public spectacles on an immature mind, especially in the direction of unconscious fascination by sadism and violence. The neo-Freudian defenders of comic books would like to deny the important role played by *social* temptation and seduction, which St. Augustine was first to point out. They would like to restrict evil influences to the earliest years of life, failing to realize that the home is not only an influence but a target for outside influences. The home has to be protected as well as the children.

Sometimes I am asked: "Don't you think that the comic book problem is a complex one?" No, I don't think so. If you refuse to be confused, it is simple enough. In the beginning our research was a little difficult because it was something new. Now that our results are in and have been so widely confirmed, the problem is far from complex. A doctor has no right to compromise with anything that does harm. That, I believe, is part of the Hippocratic oath.

#### IV.

The most important harm done by comic books is in the field of *reading*. They interfere with elementary mechanisms of learning to read and with the acquisition of the essential perceptual techniques. Reading is a very high and difficult function of the brain. The child must learn to move his eyes *automatically* from left to right along a whole line, then move his eyes back again to the left, but just a little lower than the starting-point. And he has to repeat this process, line after line, paragraph after paragraph, page after page. If the reader does not know a word, or wants to stop for a moment to think, he must be able to do that and then resume automatically, from left to right. All comic books, regardless of their content, interfere with this. Children become picture-gazers, because they can get the main points of the stories from the pictures alone, without bothering to read the words—except perhaps a few scattered here and there upon the page. The text is always printed only in capital letters, and that is also a great hindrance to learning to read printing in a book. The text is massed in balloons with handles; there are no proper lines which have to be read clear across the page, from left to right. Arrows connecting one picture with another—in Superman-DC comics, for example—sometimes go from above down, or even from right to left—that is, in just the *opposite* direction from that which the child learning to read should follow. . . . From this point of view, therefore, *all* comic books are a plague to young children and lead directly to reading disorders. . . .

Reading disorders are at present enormously widespread. We find them in elementary schools, high schools and colleges. They are often not discovered. They are also apt to be hushed up, especially in colleges. They have different causes; but one cause is the comic book. So-called “good” comics are especially pernicious in this respect because they are “read” by the youngest children. Reading disorders are frequently diagnosed only after the child has struggled in school for years and years, after he has developed inferiority feelings and has failed in serious efforts to catch up in his studies.

We have found a new reading disorder caused directly by comic books, *linear dyslexia*—linear because the subject fails in reading lines quickly and regularly from left to right. Other symptoms are slowness in reading, poor spelling, language disorders, poor pronunciation and other defects. Linear dyslexia is widespread. . . .

On a higher level comic books harm children’s reading by destroying the appreciation of good literature. Reading crime and love comics creates a taste for the cheap, the vulgar, the shoddy, the violent, the immoral. More important, a whole series—Classics Illustrated—mutilates the good literature itself. In these “Classics” comic books, great books are processed in a very simple manner: All that makes a book really great is left out. The child gets the idea that he has read classical literature when in fact he has not. And he loses any taste even to read the real book. This deprives him

of one of the most important props for a good, socially well-adjusted life. It is a tragedy that this is not only permitted, but even defended. Recently I met a young teacher who had been brought up on comic books. When—as a *teacher*—she had to take an advanced course on Shakespeare, she read the “Classics Illustrated” versions because she “had no time” to read the plays themselves! That is how an evil spreads.

#### V.

I should say a word here on the subject of religious comic books. The idea that good comic books are a substitute for and will crowd out harmful comics has not worked out in all

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*Free speech does not mean—and never has meant—that you can tell and sell anything you please to a child.*

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these years. Children are conditioned to strong fare by the ubiquitous bad comics. In a recent study of the reading of 250 pupils in which the investigators had established very good and confidential relationships with the children, only one pupil was found who read religious comic books. The Bible in comics form is often quoted—by the comic book publishers. Not being versed in theology, I cannot discuss this from a theological point of view. But to the extent that the Bible is great literature, the comic book format in all its ugliness destroys it. Why should we give it to children in such degraded form? The Bible in balloons is sheer blasphemy. “It’s just in fun, Delilah!” says the comic-book Samson. Do you find in the Bible such familiar comic book expressions as “Take that for justice!”? . . . The story of temptation has this dialogue:

Eve: “Just one bite! That can’t do any harm!”

The Snake: “Ha! Ha! She’s tempted!” In the story of David and Goliath the emphasis is on Goliath’s cut-off head.

Comic books do widespread harm to children in the ethical sphere. Of course one does not find this if one looks only for crude immediacies. It is not true that a child reads a comic book one day, then does something wrong on account of that the next. Very often the child may not do anything wrong at all; but the damage—serious and lasting—is there nevertheless. There are psychiatrists who think the consideration of ethics is outside the sphere of scientific psychiatry. In the early Freudian era there was hope that a psychopathology could be built as a natural science without regard for ethical values. But this hope has not been borne out. You cannot understand the mental health problems of a child if you leave out the ethical aspects of his development. Undermine his ethics and you undermine his mental health.

## VI.

Much of what passes today as official child psychology is faulty for two reasons. In the first place it disregards ethical values, which can and should be taught, and which can be and are vitiated by outside influences. Instead of appreciating the role of ethics, it puts all the emphasis on the "necessity" for unbridled self-expression for the child. Secondly, it is obsolete because it disregards the enormous influence of mass media, especially comic books. One of the organizations most open to criticism in this respect is the Child Study Association of America which for years has defended crime comic books. To the reader of this magazine who wishes to understand how crime comics have been able to come upon us and what still sustains them, I suggest a simple test which will permit him to use his own judgment. Let him look at the illustrations in *Seduction of the Innocent*. Then let him compare them with the section on comics in the new book *Your Child's Reading Today* by the Consultant on Children's Reading of the Child Study Association of America (published by Doubleday and Co.), and with the section on comic books (and similar subjects) in the *Encyclopedia of Child Care and Guidance* by the former director, now consultant, of the Child Study Association of America (also published by Doubleday). . . . How can we expect the average mother, who is doing her best, not to be misled and confused by these endorsements and this questionable child-guidance literature? . . .

## VII.

The connection between crime comic books and the more violent forms of juvenile delinquency is now well established. There are enough cases in *Seduction of the Innocent* to remove any doubts about that; but new ones have been coming up so constantly that the case is proved to the hilt. As Walter Lippmann writes in his piece on "The Young Criminals," "The comic books are purveying violence and lust to a vicious and intolerable degree. There can be no real doubt that public exhibitions of sadism tend to excite sadistic desires and to teach the audience how to gratify sadistic desires." . . .

It is not pleasant to have to prosecute these misguided youths while the psychological instigators and accessories, the comics publishers and the large distributors and printers, evade justice. At a recent meeting in Cincinnati, the National Association of County and Prosecuting Attorneys—comprising the district attorneys of all the states in the Union—passed a unanimous resolution stating that comic books are "a contributing cause to the problem of juvenile delinquency and the alarming increase in crimes of violence among the youth of today." They recommended legislation designed to prohibit the sale of crime comic books to children. Should not the moral and religious teachers of the country give their open and public endorsement to such a well-informed group, instead of falling for the false alarm about "free speech"

raised by the Civil Liberties Union with regard to comic books? Free speech does not mean—and never has meant—that you can tell and sell anything you please *to a child*.

## VIII.

In the light of all this, the recent public indignation about some particularly violent crimes by youngsters in New York seems to me to be sheer hypocrisy. Nothing that those teenagers did was new. We adults have been teaching it all to them, over and over and over again, in easy lessons in innumerable comic books. A man is kicked in the face—or stomped in the face—and killed; girls are whipped for sexual pleasure; a man is drowned; victims are branded with cigarettes or soaked in gasoline and burned; Negroes are attacked. These are crime comic plots. And they have been presented to children in fully illustrated and glorified form for years. As I pointed out in a chapter on advertising in comic books, even the whips for beating the girls can be bought by mail from comic book ads. Aren't we adults accomplices and accessories in all these crimes? We have permitted—and are still permitting—their teaching. . . .

Ruthless violence and unscrupulous shrewdness combine to form the ideal of crime comics, whatever their variety or disguise, from *Crime* does not pay to *Superman*, jungle, Western and space comics. These are the means with which to get power, money, girls, cars, sex, and with which to evade any personal or social responsibility. Brutality is supposed to be manliness. As Kingsley Martin sums it up: "Comic books teach that everything that Christ taught is 'sissy.'" . . .

Where do people think sexual perversions come from, especially those like sadism which are socially dangerous? We know that they come from early influences on the child and the adolescent. Comic books for years have been providing a constant stream of images associating sex with violence and sadism. This we continue to permit right now to influence the minds and the imaginations of children. Dr. William Wolf writes in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*: "Comic books distort, exploit and vilify the normal sex drive . . . so that ordinary sex life becomes a pale, wan and ridiculously tame experience." . . .

## IX.

Frequently I am asked by moral and religious teachers, ministers, clergymen, priests, what they can do about the corruption of children by comic books. Once a child has gotten into trouble, a lot can be done. I am a great believer in psychotherapy, both by psychiatrists and by others who are trained to give it. Most delinquent behavior is transient. The overwhelming majority of juvenile delinquents—I would say almost all of them—could be fully rehabilitated. The same is true of all kinds of emotional maladjustment.

The question of prevention is different. I assume I can express myself frankly on this vital matter in this magazine. Comic books are the greatest indictment of American educa-

tion. That includes moral teaching. When we ask what can be done now, we must first face the question of what we have done—or not done—up to now. It is my belief that to have permitted this comics corruption for years, and to continue to permit it, is the great guilt and responsibility of all the moral and religious teachers of this country. For it is going on right now and is reaching into every pore of our society and into every hamlet in the land. Never before in the history of civilized countries have moral teachers been more deficient in their duty to the young. They have talked about morality being a matter of the home, about well-brought-up children not going astray; they have repeated the pseudo-morality and pseudo-science about children needing “release for their pent-up aggressions.” . . .

The modern child’s real operative environment is larger than the home. The present-day, well-trained child meets outside influences early in his life. Often he encounters comic books when he is only 3 or 4 or 5. He may not understand all the specific implications, but seeds are sown nevertheless. Even in many “good” animal comic books the animals glorify violence and delinquency. In a recent Disney comic book, published by Dell, two fires are set, one involving a schoolhouse, and we learn—believe it or not, five times that little Pinocchio suffers from chronic gonorrhea! When the child is a little older he gets the full course, of crime, love, sex, horror, jungle, Superman comic books.

The public has been grossly misled about these things. One of the most misleading pamphlets (which is saying a good deal) was published by the Public Affairs Committee and written by a paid agent of a crime comic book publisher who is also an official of the Child Study Association of America. . . .

It is a historical fact that when the New York Joint Legislative Committee to Study Comics proposed a comics control law—and even before the Legislature could act on it—the New York State Council of Churches, instead of coming out against the moral corruption by crime and sex comic books publicly denounced—the proposal of the committee. This is no isolated instance. It has happened again and again at PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] and other meetings that a minister got up and said that of course we know that normal children are not affected by comic books. *How* do we know that? Whatever the relation between religion and science may be, moral teaching can certainly not bear fruit if it bases itself on currently fashionable unproved tenets of neo-Freudianism (according to which only the first few years of life count). The building of character is a long process, and social conditioning plays an enormous role.

It would be wrong to say that moral and religious leaders have done nothing about comic books. Thoughtful sermons have been preached in churches of different denominations, and in synagogues, warning parents against the trouble comic books are causing. The magazine *America* had two outstanding articles on the cultural and moral threat of comic books.

The magazine *Episcopal Churchnews* had a long and outspoken editorial; so had the *Catholic World*. And there are other similar examples. What has been lacking is action, especially action on a national level—the only level on which real, lasting results can be achieved. . . .

Some actions that have been taken are well-meant but ill-conceived—the comic book evaluation lists, for example. . . . They are faulty. If a comic book character does not occur on the cover of a comic book he is not listed. That is true, for instance, of the unhealthy, violent and Lesbian Wonder

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Woman. Nor do the lists show that all the comic books that depict crime in any form, whether urban, Western, adventure, war, jungle, space, Superman or whatnot, are *crime comics*. I made that term to cover comics that I scientifically defined: *crime* is defined by law, not by arbitrary classification. The bad and harmful features of crime comics appear in all these crime comic books. The comic-book list of the National Organization of Decent Literature prepared by the Chicago Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women is inadequate and far too complacent, though I am sure it is well-meant. It mentions “acceptable,” Classics comics, disguised crime comics like Westerns, and—worst of all—Superman, which is morally among the most harmful comic books. Even now Superman-DC comic books (endorsed by the Child Study Association of America) have premium advertisements of “.22 Cal. rifles.” We teach the Superman conceit and supply the weapons to act it out. The whole Superman concept is the worst suggestion one could give to a child’s imagination. Father John B. Sheerin, editor of the *Catholic World*, sums this up clearly when he writes: “The character Superman is a law unto himself, beyond good and evil.” . . .

## XII.

According to my studies it is erroneous, and at present no longer honest, to assume that a child in Sunday school or

a similar place of moral training is a *tabula rasa* coming directly from an ethically sheltered home. The seeds of evil have been sown in these children. What is remarkable to me is not that delinquency is high, but that children are so resistant, that not more of them are affected by all the glorification of vice and violence to which we expose them. Do I seem to exaggerate? The unbiased reader can form his own judgment. If we take only outspoken crime and horror comic books—which is by no means all the harmful comics—the industry produces and distributes some 15 to 20 of them a year for

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every single teen-ager! . . . I just bought an Autumn 1954 comic book in a little country store. Children come in here and buy ten at a time. Amidst violence galore is a story where a boy kills his younger brother because he has “an undeveloped brain.” As he hits him “again and again and again and again (sic!) with a blood reddened stone” he says: “Killing poured out of me like music.”

The lesson in violence is completed by an alluring premium advertisement of a “.22 Cal. Rifle.” A half-page advertisement says: “Be Lucky in Love! Will your next move be the smart thing? Don’t be a Faux Pas!” (sic!) Underneath this is another half-page advertisement in screaming letters: “With God all things are possible!”

I would like to ask the readers of this magazine whether they could imagine any better and surer method of causing moral disorientation, moral confusion and moral disillusionment.

Do I need to give more examples? An ordinary comic book (also Autumn 1954) has the story of a 16-year-old girl who is raped. The sheriff arrests an innocent youth, beats and tricks him into a confession. The youth is lynched and beaten to death—“crunching crushed bone.” In the end it turns out that the sheriff was the raper; he threatened the girl with death so she wouldn’t tell and he can continue his career

as sheriff—and raper. Whom is such a story intended for? The name of the publisher is Tiny Tots, Inc. . . .

### XIII.

One of the most extraordinary statements I have heard moral and religious teachers make is that after all in comics good triumphs in the end over evil. This is what comic-book apologists have been saying all along. The former director of the Child Study Association of America has written in a national magazine: “The morals of the comics are above reproach” (sic!) and “Goodness and Right always triumph over evil.” Nothing could be farther from the facts, as I have shown in my book. Quite apart from the questionable endings in murder, shooting, suicide and other violence, there are many stories—and whole comic books—in which every story ends with the criminal, the raper, the murderer, going triumphantly scot-free. What remains in the child’s mind is that they lived happily every after. . . .

### XIV.

The comic-book industry is both aggressive and belligerent. It inserts pages in millions of comic books which set child against parent, child against adult. Some time ago a minister objected to the display of lurid comic books to children in his neighborhood. Immediately a comic-book publisher threatened him with a lawsuit. The minister gave in, feeling he could not run such a risk for the sake of his family and his church. This is one of the incidents where comic-book corruption wins over decency that prompted me to write this article. There are many instances showing the efficacy of these actual and potential legal threats and the far-reaching influence of the industry. Another example: When I testified before the Hendrickson Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, I stated that the Book of the Month Club had selected my book *Seduction of the Innocent* for distribution in June, and had signed a contract to that effect with my publisher. I added that this would be a good test to show the influence of the comic-book industry. Would the Book of the Month Club stick to its own decision and distribute the book? Now I can tell how this test came out. They suddenly reversed themselves, failed to print the illustrated announcement which they had already prepared and did not even mention the book’s existence when time for its distribution came. This should be a lesson for every thoughtful person who believes that the Book of the Month Club is an American institution beyond the reach of Superman. It should also give pause for thought to those with so much to say about free speech for children. . . .

### XVI.

Just now we are facing the latest grand-scale maneuver of the industry, the appointment of a “czar” and the announcement of a new code. What does that amount to? The industry will give us on some comics a “Seal of Approval.” Can we give our approval to their seal?

If one looks into the facts, this is not a step toward any real change; it is an attempt to save what can be saved. I have known for some time that the industry, in anticipation of legal regulation, was looking for a prominent person of stature to represent them. Evidently they could not find one. . . .

Associated with Judge Murphy in his new job as "czar" is the "chairman of the association's code committee." What are his qualifications? He is a crime comic-book publisher with a long record of defending comic books. His latest product, on the stands right now in October 1954, is *Tales of Horror*. "Tales of Terror" "Guaranteed to make your hair stand on end." From the comic book itself it is clear that it is addressed to the youngest boys and girls. It emphasizes, one might say salaciously, suggestively drawn girls. It is definitely what children call a "headlights" comic. In the very first story evil triumphs in the last panel. It romanticizes all kinds of superstitions. Torture is featured: "His arms will be wrenched from their sockets!" (two illustrations, one close-up). There is a close-up of a big knife thrust into a man's face. There are murders galore; etc. This type of phony health advertisement completes the picture: "Don't be skinny!" "New kind of pleasant homogenized liquid super rich in calories. . . Gains of 20 lbs. in 6 weeks. . ." (sic). Innocent children cannot be blamed if they fall for this kind of thing. But have responsible citizens the right to fall for this "chairman of the association's code committee"?

The publishers, and some large distributors, have made fortunes by corrupting the morals of minors. Now, as *Newsweek* expresses it, they have "launched a desperation bid." "Formerly," again quoting *Newsweek*, they "banded together" as the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers; now they, practically the same people, have set up again as the Comics Magazine Association of America. The comic books with the Seal of Approval were, if anything, more vicious and harmful than those without it. But editors, news commentators, clergymen and women leaders all over the country fell for their promises of a "code." Now are they going to make the same mistake again, again betraying the children they are supposed to guard? . . . Judge Murphy is not a "censor"; he is an employee of the industry. He receives more money than his predecessor, but that is the only difference. And with all the money it is taking from children, the industry can well afford his salary of \$40,000 a year and its expense account of \$60,000 for the same period. . . .

Whenever people begin to show signs of doing something themselves about controlling crime comics, the publishers come out with a "code" or something to divert attention, and avert action. You do not need a code to leave out harmful ingredients from comic books. All you need is to *do* it. All this talk about "codes" is just misleading. No new principle is needed so that children will not be shown pictures where a girl is about to be raped with a red-hot poker. Judge Murphy said the new code would be "strong and effective." No code is effective by itself. Effectiveness depends on the power to enforce it, and such power is absent from the present set-up. . . .

The new "czar" has also stated, according to the *New York Times*, that he has never had a case of juvenile delinquency which he or any official of his court could attribute to the reading of comic books. Considering that he sat in the wrong court for that sort of cases, in a minor adult magistrates court, and never in a juvenile or adolescent court, this is a most astonishing statement to make. Probation officers in his court, even if they had had time, did not inquire at all into comic-book reading of defendants. Moreover, it is known that he personally told probation officers in the past not to talk against crime comic books, that it is wrong to think they can do any harm or have anything to do with juvenile delinquency.

Judge Murphy has chosen to come out especially against horror comic books, so-called. That is the present alibi of the industry. It is not a good one. Horror itself would not be the worst thing, if it were presented in a decent moral setting and relieved afterwards. There is horror in Shakespeare and in Classical Greek plays. These comic books are wrongly named. They should be called *depravity* comics, because depravity is what they preach and teach. Straight horror comics are, of course, most offensive to adults. But for children they are not the most dangerous. What threatens children's development most is the violence, and detailed description of literally every conceivable crime, the sadism, the morbid sexual stimulation of love comics, the race hatred, the contempt for work and family and authority, the other hate- and fear-producing features that are not so obvious. Superman, Bat Man and Wonder Woman are among the worst, and it must be remembered that publishers of "good" comics have been in the forefront of those defending all comic books, crime comics included.

## XVII.

From personal experience I know that there are many moral and religious teachers who would like to do something about comic books. They know from their own observation that this is an industry which indoctrinates with evil. They wish to help to stop it. But there is an obstacle, something holds them back and prevents them from being really effective. They do not want to soil their hands by joining in the actual struggle. (There have been notable exceptions.) That I can fully understand. But it seems to me that whether we are physicians or moral or religious teachers, condemnation is not enough. Eventually there has to be a public health law forbidding the display and sale of the comic-book smut and trash to minors, to children under fifteen. No other measure has brought, or can bring, results. . . .

Mammon is at the root of all this. The comic-book publishers, racketeers of the spirit have corrupted children in the past, they are corrupting them right now and they will go on corrupting them unless we actively prevent it. Of course there are larger issues in the world today, and mightier matters to be debated. But maybe we will lose the bigger things, if we fail to defend the nursery.