The year is 1970. Somewhere in the ghetto, an altruistic superhero, Green Lantern, comes upon a man being brutally beaten by a thug. Not stopping to ask questions, Lantern uses his extraordinary powers to capture the young assailant. He then turns to the watching crowd and says, "There's no need to thank me, people. I was just doing my duty." At these words, the crowd begins to pelt Lantern with cans. Fellow hero, Green Arrow, arrives on the scene and tells a confused Lantern the man he rescued is a corrupt slumlord who is about to evict his poverty-stricken tenants. Arrow then takes Lantern on a tour to "look at how the other half lives—if you can call it living." During the tour, a poor, feeble, elderly black man confronts Lantern. He says, "You work for the blue skins...you help out the orange skins. And you done considerable for the purple skins. Only there's skins you never bothered with—the black skins. I want to know how come? Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern." Demoralized, Lantern hangs his head and says, "I...can't."  

This scene from Green Lantern #76 illustrates a common theme in superhero comic books of the late 1960s and early 1970s: the American establishment, while allegedly devoted to safeguarding freedom in foreign countries, was blind to the reality of a homeland where injustice was rampant. Political rhetoric of the early 1960s portrayed the cold war as a grandiose battle between good and evil. Americans were on the moral high ground in a black and white clash of the titans where the very survival of freedom was at stake. The reality of the situation, however, was not black and white. Rather, the country was in a morally ambiguous conflict where the ends justified the means, and heroes blurred into villains. Initially, superhero comic books served as a forum in which the rhetoric of black and white morality was endorsed. But by 1970, superhero comics surrendered to shades of gray. Instead of supporting the illusion of moral certainty, comics began to echo the frustration of an increasingly disillusioned people.

Penred by writer Dennis O'Neil, Green Lantern explored Americans' growing dissatisfaction with society through the auspices of two disparate superheroes, Green Lantern and Green Arrow. O'Neil established a dichotomy between the two characters in order to comment on the ills of society. While Arrow represented the common masses and held highly liberal political views, Lantern symbolized a confused establishment who was unaware of the problems beset upon society.

Much of the cynicism present during the late 1960s was in response to the Vietnam War. Since taking office in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson had dramatically increased the number of troops in Vietnam. The war, he continually promised Americans, was going well. However, American soldiers were still being sent to Vietnam, and there was no end to the war in sight. Opposition to the war steadily grew, and by 1968, Vietnam was the hot-button issue in the presidential election, and in the streets. Many Americans complained that the establishment should not meddle in the affairs of foreign countries, and that instead, the government should turn its attention inward. According to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., however, "the United States is perceived as a chosen nation anointed by Providence to redeem a fallen world." This logic was supported by the fact that America had proven itself during World War II. The country had subverted Hitler, and had kept Europe from becoming enveloped by fascism. According to Alan Brinkley, "the
establishment's foreign policy rested on the assumption of America's right and obligation to play a leading role in world affairs and on an almost unquestioned faith in the moral and practical wisdom of the nation's values. In essence, America not only had the right to police the world; it had the duty.

With his high omnipotent power, profession as a pilot, and elitist attitude, Lantern represents the ultimate authority figure. Because his duties often take him to remote parts of the galaxy, Lantern is, for all intents and purposes, above the petty problems of his home planet. O'Neil says, "Lantern was, in effect, a cop—an incorruptible one, to be sure, with noble intentions, but still a cop, a crypto-fascist." Taking his marching orders from a distant, alien authority, the Guardians of Oa, Lantern has an almost unquestioning faith in the system. However, he represents a system that, while well-intentioned, is blind to the injustices around it. Lantern hearkens back to the ideal of patriotism found during World War II. War-era characters such as Superman and Captain America embodied this sense of nobility and absolute confidence in America. They, like Green Lantern, represented the establishment and stood by its values. However, Lantern's unshakable faith in the system was incongruous with an era predisposed to question authority. In a time that was suspicious of ideal heroes, Lantern was little more than an enforcer for the establishment.

In November, 1967, General William Westmoreland, the commander of American armed forces in Vietnam, delivered encouraging news to the American public. According to Westmoreland, an end to the war was in sight. The adversary, he said, was "increasingly resorting to desperation tactics." In light of such heartening rhetoric, the Tet offensive was a sudden and eye-opening shock. On January 30, 1968, Vietcong soldiers attacked and briefly occupied the American embassy in Saigon. Westmoreland's words now rang empty. Newsman Walter Cronkite echoed the feelings of many Americans when he asked, "What the hell is going on?" According to Charles Kaiser:

Tet's fame would be renewed as the moment when the illusions of American omniscience and omnipotence, so carefully nurtured by Lyndon Johnson and all other post-atom bomb presidents vanished in the smoke that simultaneously enveloped Saigon, Da Nang, Ben Tre, Quang Tri, Hué, and almost every other population center and military base in South Vietnam.

According to William Chafe, "the most immediate impact of the offensive was to widen the administration's 'credibility gap' into a yawning chasm." Prior to the Tet offensive, Americans had been bolstered by news of how well the war in Vietnam was going. Now, they were troubled by "the disparity between administration optimism about the war and what was actually taking place in Vietnam." In short, "Tet had brought home the crushing reality that America was embarked on a hopeless cause.

News of the Tet offensive was a blow to American confidence. Since the end of World War II, Americans had based their collective identity on the fact that the United States was stronger, wiser, and more capable than other countries. Americans took comfort in the fact that the country could handily defeat whatever menace lurked across the seas. Prior to Tet, political rhetoric and press releases perpetuated this belief. Now, Americans began to question the false assurances that had been spoon-fed to them by the administration. According to Kaiser:

the administration’s florid optimism was perceived as a political necessity. But instead of winning the hearts and minds of the American people, Johnson’s cheerful words ultimately had the opposite effect. They created an atmosphere in which a seemingly suicidal Communist strategy became an extraordinary psychological defeat for the United States.

Within six weeks of the Tet offensive, Johnson's approval rating "slipped from 48 percent to 36 percent, and the favorable verdict on his handling of the war plummeted fourteen points, to 26 percent." America had lost faith in its own identity, and in the competence of its administration.

This crisis of identity is reflected in the character of Green Lantern. After seeing the dismal state in which the people of the ghetto are living, Lantern attempts to appeal to the corrupt slumlord's humanity. The slumlord, Jubal Slade, scoffs at Lantern. He says, "you got to be kidding. I mean, I got the law on my side. I can do anything I want with that property. You expect me to pass a fat profit "cause a lot of worthless old geeks are gonna get rained on?" Lantern, in his naiveté, believes Slade will see the error of his ways and rush to make things right for the poverty-stricken tenants. What he discovers, however, is that, for all his powers as Green Lantern, he is...
unable to fix the situation. While he possesses the ability to fly through outer space and the power to stop a meteor from hitting a planet, Lantern cannot convince one selfish landlord to show compassion. In frustration, Lantern explodes, physically attacking Slade.

The Guardians of Oa witness the attack and recall their champion to outer space, where they forbid him to involve himself in the fight to aid the tenants. Instead, the Guardians order Lantern to prevent a meteor shower from colliding with an uninhabited moon. Lantern dutifully marches off to complete his mission, but as he dispatches the meteors, he thinks, "The Guardians sent me on a useless mission. Why?" Lantern reflects, "I've always had total faith in their wisdom. And yet...I've had it with the 'blue skins' and their high and mighty order-giving. I'm going where I'm needed." Lantern is beginning to question the very fabric of his beliefs. Previously, he had been content to follow the orders of his superiors; now, Lantern is beginning to realize the establishment he represents is flawed. In an attempt to help the soon-to-be-evicted tenants, Lantern teams up with Green Arrow to apprehend Slade. Lantern disguises himself as one of the Slade's henchmen, thereby tricking the slumlord into confessing his crimes. In short, Lantern finds himself defying the very establishment he represents.

When they learn of Lantern's actions, the Guardians rebuke their champion: "You have been insubordinate. You disobeyed our orders." Shamed, Lantern backs down from his beliefs and apologizes. "I...I'm sorry," he says. Arrow, disgusted with Lantern's blind devotion to a blind system mocks, "that's right, Lantern! Apologize! Grovel in front of that walking mummy! You call yourself a hero. Chum...you don't even qualify as a man. You're no more than a puppet." Arrow sees Lantern for what he is—a mouthpiece of the establishment. But he also sees a moral man in Lantern, one who is ready to step out from behind the shadow of the narrow establishment and truly make a difference. Thus, he challenges his friend: forget about chasing around the galaxy, and remember America. It's a good country...beautiful...fertile, and terribly sick. There are children dying, honest people cowering in fear, disillusioned kids ripping up campuses. On the streets of Memphis a good black man died. And in Los Angeles, a good white man fell. Something is wrong. Something is killing us all.

Arrow begs Lantern to help him address the problems facing the country, and to help mend a troubled system.

Arrow's diatribe comes less than two years after the deaths of both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. To many, these men were the last bastions of hope in a seemingly hopeless world. They represented the chance that the system could indeed be fixed. Both Kennedy and King were vocal opponents to the war in Vietnam. Both were advocates of civil rights. And both felt society could be transformed if enough people dedicated themselves to that purpose. In an age of moral ambiguity, Kennedy and King were voices of clarity and integrity.

Kennedy believed the system "could be reshaped and redirected by any set of beliefs powerful and well organized enough to make themselves felt." In fact, Kennedy himself was a testament to that idea. During the presidency of his brother, John, Kennedy had supported the administration's policy regarding American involvement in Vietnam. Kennedy's "very recent past as his brother's chief lieutenant...made his transformation into one of the war's most vocal opponents particularly dramatic." When Kennedy spoke of transformation and change, he was not merely paying lip service to the idea; he was a product of it. In 1968, Kennedy's beliefs spurred him to enter the Democratic presidential race on an anti-war platform.

King took his own moral stance against the war. As he became increasingly vocal about his opposition, King began to receive criticism for focusing too much effort on the war, and too little on the civil rights movement at home. King, however, could not separate the two issues. In fact, King "was one of the first leaders to make the rather obvious connection between the violence in Vietnam and the growing unrest in the ghetto." King believed he could not speak out against violence at home while remaining silent about violence occurring in Vietnam.

In Kennedy and King, some sense of moral certainty still seemed to exist. Hope still seemed to exist. However, by the end of 1968, the notions of moral certainty and hope would die along with the men who represented them. In April, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was slain in Memphis, Tennessee. Suddenly, the burden of inspiring the nation fell on the shoulders of Robert F. Kennedy. Kennedy had been scheduled to deliver a campaign speech to a largely black audience at a rally in Indianapolis. En route to the rally, Kennedy was informed of King's
assassination. When he received the tragic news, Kennedy lamented, "Oh God. When is this violence going to stop?" Advisors to the Senator urged him to forgo the rally because they feared a violent response to King's death. Kennedy, however, was determined to keep his commitment. When he arrived at the rally, he delivered an off-the-cuff eulogy for King. Here is what he had to say:

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort...we have to make an effort in the United States to understand and get beyond...these rather difficult times...what we need in the United States is not division. What we need in the United States is not hatred. What we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom and compassion toward one another.  

Kennedy's words seemed to resonate with the hope that America, despite all its troubles, could still be mended. Two months later, America was dealt a final, crushing blow when Kennedy, who had just given an acceptance speech for his victory in the California primary, lost his life to an assassin's bullet. His loss devastated an American public who had seen entirely too much death. A student summed it up when he confessed, "It really was like the last straw—that there was no longer any reason to hope for anything; that the world was now just totally off its rocker, and that evil was ascendant, and was going to be..." Suddenly, many began to believe that hope was gone, and that the system could not be changed.

These feelings of despair and cynicism are illustrated in the character of Green Arrow. For all his ranting about justice and equality, Arrow is no more enlightened than Lantern. Rather, he suffers from the same tunnel vision as his conservative friend. Arrow was a wealthy philanthropist with a teenaged ward, Roy. As superheroes, both Arrow and Roy (Speedy) fought against injustice, while Arrow used his vast fortune to fund a myriad of causes. When he lost his fortune to corrupt businessmen, however, Arrow ceased to be the confident playboy with a large wallet and contented son. Now he was a broken businessman who suffered from an identity crisis. Arrow and Roy were forced to move to a threadbare ghetto apartment. Rattled by the changes in his personal life, Arrow began to take a closer look at the world around him. Stunned by the appalling inequalities he witnessed, he became a champion of the people. Passionate, confrontational, and ruled by ideology, Arrow saw a world that needed to change, and felt he was enlightened enough to change it. His sterling principles, however, would soon fail him. After learning Roy is addicted to heroin, Arrow is forced to confront, not only his own responsibility for Roy's problems, but the collapse of his ideological foundations, as well.

One night, as he walks down a dark street, the hero is ambushed by a group of drug-crazed teenagers, and is shot in the shoulder with an arrow. After being treated for his injury, Arrow realizes the projectile with which he was shot is one of his own. Because he is unable to locate Roy, Arrow suddenly becomes concerned and calls Lantern. He says, "I can't help being worried because I haven't seen my ward, Speedy, in a month." He admits, "I haven't paid much attention to him lately." Although he has raised the orphaned Roy as his own son, Arrow treats the boy like a soldier in his ideological crusade. He does not concern himself with the boy's disappearance until he is unable to ignore it.

Having no other clue to Roy's whereabouts, the heroes decide to track down the boys who assaulted Arrow. Their investigation finally leads them to Chinatown, where they discover Roy with Arrow's attackers. The two heroes arrest the attackers, paying no concern to the obviously strung-out Roy. When the young man sees his foster father, he asks, "you plan to lock me up too, Green Arrow?" Roy, desperate for Arrow's help, hopes he has finally forced the older man to notice him. Arrow, however, takes Roy aside and says, "Speedy! I'm not surprised to find you in this hole...when you vanished, I knew you had to be on the trail of the baddies. I figured you were playing undercover agent." Disillusioned, Roy says, "Sure. Secret-operator Speedy—that's me." Arrow, sworn to aid those in trouble, refuses to see Roy's problem.

Is this, then, merely the story of a parent who is in denial, and is unable to accept responsibility for his son's problems? Perhaps the answer to that lies in an examination of the New Left and its response to liberalism. One of the criticisms of the younger generation was that liberalism had become stagnant. After World War II, liberalists embraced the notion of reform. They felt if they worked with the system, it could be made better. Liberalism had "confidence in American goals and...American values." The new generation of politically-minded young people,
however, saw a deficiency in these ideals. In his book, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Todd Gitlin says, "Liberalism stood for equality, but lacked the means, or the will, or the blood-and-guts desire to bring it about." In short, the old order of liberals talked a good talk, but got little done. Out of the dissatisfaction with the "glaring discrepancy between promise and performance," the New Left was born.

Roy's disappointment in his foster father grows when Arrow finally realizes the boy is using drugs. After leaving his attackers at the police station, Arrow is confronted with something he is unable to ignore—the sight of his son shooting up heroin. "Dear God!" Arrow exclaims, "you are on drugs! You're really a junkie!" Now forced into awareness, Arrow finds his ideological foundations challenged. However, Arrow is unable to cope with this test. Rather than offering to help his son, Arrow punches the teenager, and shouts, "You're a lousy junkie—no better than the rest of the sniveling punks." For all his outcries against injustice, and for all his screaming about equality, Arrow does not see fit to save his own son. Arrow belittled Lantern for refusing to see the social injustices around him. He pontificated about Lantern's responsibility to help those in need. Now, given the opportunity to stand by his own beliefs, Arrow fails his son utterly. Rather than reaching out to Roy, Arrow turns him away. Roy, disheartened by Arrow's response, says, "a big man like you doesn't need drugs, does he? You get high on your own self-righteousness." Arrow's inability to reach out to Roy only confirms Roy's suspicions that his elder would not stand by his beliefs.

The New Left, some thought, was a product of the generational divide. According to Irwin Unger, in his book, *Recent America: The United States Since 1945*, "Many of the first wave of radical[s]...were the children of liberal, or formerly radical, parents and had acquired ideals of equality and social progress at their parents' knees." Roy grew up the ward of a crusading, radical superhero, and was raised hearing about equality and justice. Like many of his generation, Roy expected his father to live up to an ideal that Arrow could not maintain. According to Alan Brinkley, "Never before in history had so many people come of age expecting so much of their world." When Arrow's actions ceased to mesh with his words, Roy became angry and disillusioned.

This, perhaps, sums up the conflict between the generations: regardless of what they said or what they did, Arrow and Lantern could not live up to the expectations of Roy's generation. After learning of Roy's addiction, Lantern asks the boy, "didn't you realize the danger?" Roy responds, "I had the sermons thrown at me. But Lantern, your generation has been known to lie, dig it? You've told us war is fun, skin color is important, and a man’s worth is the size of his bank account. All crocks. So why believe your drug rap?" Here was a generation that was a frustrated generation, one that found it difficult to reconcile the words of their elders with their actions. Lantern considers Roy's challenge and says, "I wish I could answer you. But anything I can say would be a crock." While he wants to reach out to the boy, Lantern realizes that Roy's mistrust of his elders makes that impossible.

After his withdrawal from heroin, Roy confronts his father, saying, "drugs are a symptom. And you, like the rest of society, attack the symptom, not the disease." Arrow is quick to condemn Roy and his fellow addicts for their actions, but he is unwilling to examine the problem. This was one of the major complaints of the new, idealistic generation about their impotent elders. According to *Ideologies and Modern Politics*:

the New Left criticized the power structure not only because of its values, but also because it failed to live up to those values. "The system," the New Left held, was always prepared to compromise. It persisted in asking the wrong question: Can our policy prevail? It shied away from asking: Is it right? Arrow is devoted to his concept of equality and righteousness. When Roy betrays that ideology by using drugs, Arrow does not see him as a boy in trouble. Rather, he vilifies him. In short, Roy represents a challenge to Arrow's principles that Arrow cannot meet.

Lantern and Arrow, while dedicated to conquering evil and injustice, fail to recognize the true perils facing their society. Both hide behind their personal concepts of morality. They try to convince themselves that the world is black and white, and that dangers are clearly defined. However, both heroes, when confronted by a threat to their ideologies, fail to meet the challenge. Rather, they, like many Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s, find their systems of beliefs lacking. In a country that had witnessed years of a violent, unproductive war, and that seen two of its beloved leaders slain, idealism seemed to be an outdated concept. The illusion of moral
certainty was gone. In a world of ambiguity and hopelessness, Lantern and Arrow find themselves doing battle with a foe that cannot be beaten—
their own failings.

Notes

2Ibid, 4.
3Ibid, 6.
10Ibid, 60.
11Chafe, 336.
12Ibid, 336.
13Ibid, 337.
14Kaiser, 67.
15Ibid, 62.
17Ibid, 11.
18Ibid, 12.
19Ibid, 21.
21Ibid, 21.
22Brinkley, 244.
23Kaiser, 12.
25Kaiser, 137.
26Ibid, 137-38.
29Kaiser, 189.
31Ibid, 12.
33Ibid, 13.
36Ibid, 60.
38Dennis O’Neil, “They Say It’ll Kill Me But They Won’t Say When,” Green Lantern no. 86, October-November 1971, 1.
39Ibid, 2.
41Brinkley, 220.
43Ibid, 11.
44Ibid, 25.

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