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The Mythic Symbols of Batman

by

John Jefferson Darowski

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Comparative Studies

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

The Mythic Symbols of Batman

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Batman has become a fixture in the popular consciousness of America. Since his first publication in *Detective Comics* #27 in 1939, he has never ceased publication, appearing in multiple titles every month as well as successfully transitioning into other media such as film and television. A focused analysis of the character will reveal that Batman has achieved and maintained this cultural resonance for almost seventy years by virtue of attaining the status of a postmodern American mythology. In both theme and function, Batman has several direct connections to ancient mythology and has adapted that form into a distinctly American archetype. And as a popular cultural symbol, he has shown remarkable malleability to reflect the attitudes of his contemporary culture. An examination of Batman's enduring and changing characteristics will reveal insights into American values, culture and history during the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

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Chapter 1

Legends of the Dark Knight

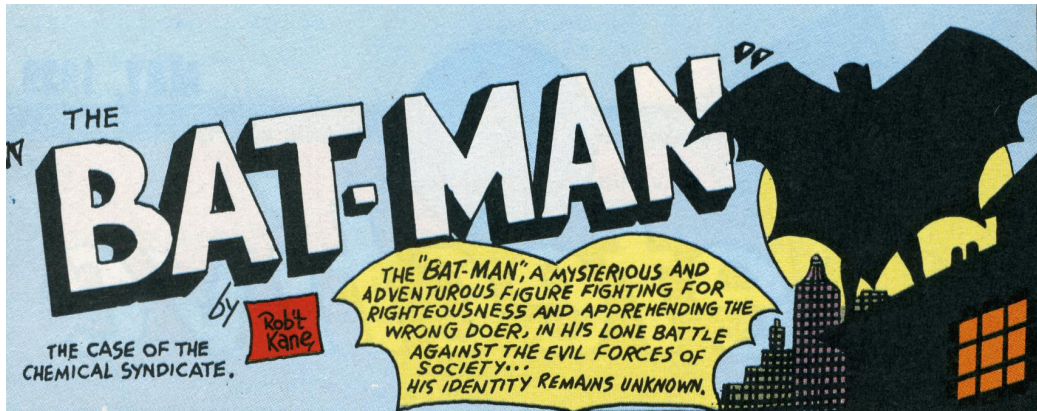


Figure 1 The first appearance of Batman. *Detective Comics* # 27, May 1939.

With this panel from the opening of 1939's *Detective Comics* #27, the world was introduced to Batman. In the seven decades since his first publication, Batman has become an internationally recognized figure, his distinctive logo one of the top five recognized symbols in the world (*Batman: Cover to Cover* 206). He remains one of the top sellers of comic books, appearing in multiple titles, and various creators have parlayed that success into other media such as film and television. But the secret to his cultural resonance remains an elusive mystery that has not been duplicated.

How can a figure that has alternatively been portrayed as a detective, a father figure, a boy scout, a comedian and a dark avenger have gained a prominent place in the psyche of popular culture? Comic book scholars such as Roger Reynolds and Peter Coogan have explored Batman and the superhero community as a continuation of the mythic tradition in their respective works, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* and *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, speculating that it is the continuation of

archetypes which has led to superheroes's enduring popularity. Alternatively, Will Brooker in *Batman Unmasked* analyzes how different aspects of Batman's complex personality are emphasized during distinct American time periods, reflecting the contemporary culture and leading to his continued cultural relevancy. I find that Reynolds's and Coogan's approach is too broad, drawing on classical myth as a whole instead of examining the unique themes that characterize individual heroes, while Brooker's approach is too narrow, relying on new historicism at the detriment of additional critical approaches that would provide additional enlightenment. To comprehend the superhero's power in the popular consciousness, one must have a singular focus on an individual hero, such as Batman, while maintaining the broad perspective on mythological and historical sources. By analyzing the timeless themes from classical and American mythology as well as the malleable nature of a national culture, it will be revealed that Batman's continuing popularity is the result of his status as a postmodern American mythology.

In order to discuss Batman as American myth, one must have a foundational understanding of the comic book genre and its history. Part of the reason that superheroes such as Batman have been able to create a postmodern American mythology is because they were created for a postmodern American art form: the comic book. The combination of pictures and words has long been a part of literary tradition, but no one would confuse comic books with illuminated manuscripts. That is because the comic book, and its predecessor, the comic strip, are a sequential art, visually drawing much more from cinema than from painting. As Batman creator Bob Kane put it, "Comic books and films are both highly visual media, the comic book panel a condensed version of a film frame" (Kane 143). Because words and images have to work together, neither can stand out, be

too “great,” or they would detract from one another (McCloud 49). So the early history of comic art is predominated by simplistic images and stories. However, this type of sequential storytelling best served the multiethnic United States at the turn of the century, being easily interpreted by most anyone in addition to reflecting the ideals of the nation. As Thomas Man wrote, comic books reflect “the infusion of the aristocratic spirit of art into the democratic spirit of the cinema” (16).

The American history of comic art begins with the comic strip of the late 1800s. The comic section was one of the most popular parts of the newspaper, with the adventures of characters such as *The Yellow Kid* and *The Katzenjammer Kids* being followed by millions of devoted readers. In the early 1900s, serials of these popular characters were collected and reprinted in a cheap, pamphlet format, thus creating the comic book (Goulart 7). It wasn't until 1935 that the innovation of creating original material for comic books was begun. Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson was the first to experiment with original material with *New Fun* (Jones 103). The major's efforts weren't successful and he was soon bankrupt, but others kept on with the idea. In June 1938, DC Comics published *Action Comics #1* with an original lead feature by two boys in Cleveland entitled “Superman.”

With the creation of the superhero, the comic book genre came into its own. Superman was an original concept with the visual punch of a film, but none of the budgetary considerations (Reynolds 17). With the level of special effects in the 1930s, Superman would have looked ridiculous on screen, but comic books could depict him with “perfect realism” (Coogan 167). And when the sales numbers for *Action Comics #1* came in, everyone wanted a superhero for their own comic book.

Vin Sullivan was the editor of *Detective Comics* at the time. He had created *Detective Comics* to be the equivalent of the pulp magazines, featuring stories in one genre (Jones 120). He wanted a Superman, but it would have to fit into the crime-solving theme of the magazine. Sullivan talked to artist Bob Kane and, showing him how much money Superman's creators were bringing in, convinced Kane to switch from his standard slapstick stories to superhero. Sullivan asked for a superhero on a Friday. Kane had one by Monday (Kane 35).

Sadly, the true history of Batman's creation has been lost to time and Bob Kane's hyperbole. For years, Kane claimed sole credit for creating Batman, excluding writer Bill Finger. Kane once wrote, "To the victor belongs the spoils. I am assured that in the folklore of legendary comic history of our times, I know that Bob Kane will be remembered as the creator of 'Batman' and no one else" (Jones 307). He even forged sketches of a "Batman" figure that he drew "at the age of thirteen" in order to avoid infringement on the Birdmen characters in the *Flash Gordon* comic strip (Jones 149). But the truth is that without the aid of Bill Finger, Batman would have been a much different character and probably not have achieved the mythic status he enjoys today.

It is true that Kane began working on Batman alone. He took Superman's design and sketched various costumes over it. For inspiration, he looked to Leonardo da Vinci's quote, "And your bird shall have no other model than a bat" (Kane 36). The result looked much more like Batman's eventual sidekick, Robin. Named Birdman, the character wore a red and black outfit with a domino mask (Kane 41). Over that weekend, Kane met with his friend, writer Bill Finger, at Edgar Allan Poe Park, an unintentional homage to the creator of the detective story. Finger suggested several changes, including adding gloves,

a cape, a hood which didn't reveal the eyeballs and changing the color scheme to a more nocturnal gray and black (Kane 41).

Even with a distinctive costume, Batman would not have lasted long in the competitive marketplace without a powerful backstory. Though his origin wasn't told until six issues after his debut, Finger was the one who determined that Batman should be driven by the pain of loss, hardened into rage (Jones 155). From *Detective Comics* #33, Finger wrote:

Legend: The Batman and how he came to be! Some fifteen years ago.

Thomas Wayne, his wife, and son, were walking home from a movie...

"W-What is this?" "A stickup, buddy! I'll take that necklace you're wearin' lady!" "Leave her alone, you. Oh..." "You asked for it!"

"Thomas! You've killed him. Help! Police...Help!" "This'll shut you up!"

The boys eyes are wide with terror and shock as the horrible scene is spread before him. "Father...Mother!" "...Dead! They're D...Dead."

Days later, a curious and strange scene takes place. "And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals." As the years pass, Bruce Wayne prepares himself for his career. He becomes a master scientist. Trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats.

"Dad's estate left me wealthy. I am ready... But first I must have a disguise." "Criminals are a superstitious and cowardly lot. So my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible...a...a" As if in answer, a huge bat flies in the open

window! “A bat! That’s it! It’s an omen. I shall become a BAT!” And thus is born this weird figure of the dark... This avenger of evil, ‘The Batman.’

With the costume and origin, the Batman archetype was established. But what inspirations did Kane and Finger draw on while creating this Dark Knight Detective? First and foremost was the image of Superman. But, while other superheroes of the time had sought to imitate Superman, Batman was the first created in reaction to him. Where Superman was an alien with extraordinary powers, Batman was mortal. Where Superman was garbed in a bright costume of primary colors, Batman clung to the shadows in a costume of gray and black. And where Superman could be considered a modernist, seeking to fix or replace societal institutions, Batman responded to the gaps in modernist thinking. This response drew on strands of thought that would eventual become postmodernism, though this would not be allowed to fully develop in Batman until the 1970s.

Superman was only the immediate inspiration behind Batman. Kane and Finger also drew on many other sources from different genres in creating their hero. Comic book historian Les Daniels puts it best: “Batman came out of the darkness, out of the collective unconscious where visions of avenging angels dwell, but he also came out of the shadows cast by imaginary heroes who had gone before” (17). Kane and Finger drew on two main sources for inspiration: society’s collective consciousness, as revealed by the popular culture of the time, and the portrayal of heroes from other media.

Batman tapped into the zeitgeist of the 1930s. Bats were a popular motif in revenge stories and detective tales. Bob Kane cited the 1931 mystery film *The Bat Whispers* as an important influence, most notably for the bat costume the murderer wore

and the bat-signal he used to announce his next victim (Kane 38). Various bat-themed characters also appeared in the pulps of the era. Two characters named “The Bat” appeared in *Black Bat Detective Mysteries* and *Popular Detective*, respectively, in the mid-1930s. A villainous figure named “The Bat Man” appeared to trouble pulp hero The Spider in 1935 (Kane 43). *Detective Comics* publisher Harry Donenfeld had previously published a “Batman” story in *Spicy Mystery Stories* in 1936, though this story involved a man having his brain surgically placed in the skull of a bat (Daniels 19). Another bat-costumed detective, the Black Bat, appeared in the pulp *Black Book Detective* only two months after the publication of *Detective Comics* #27. Remarkably similar in appearance to Batman, the Black Bat could have become a legendary hero if it had been published first. As Bob Kane admits, “A scant sixty days made the difference between Batman’s becoming a new superstar in comics and being consigned to oblivion” (Kane 43). That Batman and the Black Bat were created independently and simultaneously can be taken as proof that bats were a symbol in the popular consciousness of the time.

The other source that Kane and Finger drew on for inspiration was the popular portrayal of heroes in film, radio and literature. Kane cites Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in *The Mark of Zorro* as a huge influence. The film told of a bored Spanish count who dressed in a mask and cape at night with a distinctive Z as his mark (Kane 1). Equally important as the character of Zorro was the acrobatic flair Fairbanks brought to the role. Fairbanks’s movements certainly inspired Batman’s physical prowess and the influence of the film was so important that it was later decided that Bruce Wayne and his parents had attended a showing of *The Mark of Zorro* the fateful night of Thomas and Martha’s murder. Nor was this the only influence Douglas Fairbanks Sr. had on the Batman mythos. His portrayal of

Robin Hood later served as inspiration for Batman's sidekick, Robin (Daniels 38).

Zorro may have led to Batman's acrobatics, but it was horror and gangster films that influenced the appearance of Batman's world. Horror films such as *Dracula*, with its weird camera angles and long, dark shadows, were the cinematic style Kane sought to imitate in his panels. And the portrayal of organized crime in gangster films of the 1930s led to the visual style of Batman's early criminals (Kane 111). In fact, Batman's earliest enemies were gangsters and a vampire known as the Red Monk.

While the cinema helped Bob Kane create the visual language of his comic books, Bill Finger looked to other sources for inspiration in crafting Batman's narratives. Finger had literary aspirations and saw Batman as a combination of the adventurous D'Artagnan from Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* and Doyle's great detective Sherlock Holmes (Daniels 23). But Finger could not imitate those writers' polished prose, nor would it have been appropriate in a comic book, so for style he listened to a radio show about another crime-fighting figure, *The Shadow* (Kane 41). From these sources, Finger was able to create action-packed detective stories that turned Batman into a postmodern archetype.

Drawing on so many disparate sources, one can question how Batman is able to bring them all together into a coherent whole. Umberto Eco presents one answer: "Forced to improvise a plot, the authors mixed a little of everything, and everything they chose came from a repertoire that had stood the test of time" (qtd. in Collins 169). Even though Eco was referring to the film *Casablanca*, the same logic seems to hold true for Batman.

When Kane and Finger "mixed a little of everything," they did more than just draw on recent stories. Batman's lineage goes back much further than rich idlers who put on masks, such as Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel (Fieffer 25). Even comparing Batman to

such characters puts him in an extra-textual continuity, part of a chain of literary characters that go back to mankind's earliest stories (Reynolds 43). The inspirations for Batman go back to tales that truly have stood the test of time, back to the ancient myths of Odysseus, Oedipus and Orestes. If Batman is part of such a distinguished lineage, does he have the same meaning as those ancient predecessors? Does Batman function as a myth, or does he fall into another related category such as icon, archetype or folktale?

First, let us begin with icon. An icon has been defined as "a social marker that taps into a number of generic western values" (Parson 84). Throughout history, icons have predominately been visual images, such as the religious icons of the Middle Ages. Batman is certainly a visual figure and does represent certain western values, such as justice, as well as darkness and fear, as seen in his origin. He also embodies less generic values, in particular an existential cynicism about mankind's progress.

Icons also exist in a state that is free of both history and personality (Parsons 84). They cannot be tied to a particular moment in history and can only express values, not their own opinions. Their state is similar to the Platonic Ideal, and Batman does not fit that mold. As will be seen in later chapters, Batman's stories are tied to particular historical moments, with the characterization and backdrop changing to reflect the times. He also does not solely represent certain values, but is a well-rounded and fully-fledged character. While certain images in Batman' comic books may be called iconic, he is not, in and of himself, an icon.

Is Batman then an archetype? Carl Jung defined an archetype as "an inherited memory represented in the mind by a universal symbol and observed in dreams and myths" (qtd. in O'Neil, Viper 22). As a link in the chain of literary characters, Batman

can be seen as an inherited memory observed in myth. While the distinctive costume and emblem may not have appeared in the past, the character type parallels figures such as Orestes, Hamlet and Zorro. And, as Joseph Campbell points out, archetypes appear in different costumes according to the historical conditions and environment (*Power* 61).

But what could he symbolize? Richard Reynolds argues that Batman is the symbol of all superheroes (103). Indeed, the essential superhero conventions were first and most fully realized in Batman: operating outside the law; the dual identity under constant threat of exposure; helpful authority figures like Commissioner Gordon and Alfred the butler; and the secret hideaway, the Batcave (Coogan 157-8). Batman's power as a symbol is also reinforced when such conventions are transplanted to other times and places in Elseworld tales (Daniels 161). Such "what if?" stories show that the Batman legend need not be tied to modern America, but that the motifs can function throughout history.

Though Batman may be considered the symbol of the superhero, he is also unique among superheroes in that he does not have any superpowers. While he may have attained the peak of physical and mental fitness, he is still only mortal. As such, Batman may be viewed not only as a symbol of superheroes, but of all heroes. As will be discussed later, moving Batman into this wider pantheon will be helpful in seeing Batman as an archetype by comparing him to other heroes, both ancient and modern, and finding his place among the hierarchy very close to myth (Reynolds 69).

It should also be noted at this juncture that an archetype may function in many the same ways as a meme, an element of culture that is passed on by external means. Memes capture values and ideals that work within society and passes it from generation to generation, adapting its methods according to the needs of the time (O'Neil, Viper 25).

One way to pass this information on is through story. Stories such as those told in the Batman comics teach how to behave in society, such as using criminals to show negative behavior. The different inflections of Batman's personality over the years show the character's ability to adapt to the needs of the time.

But the memes's reliance on external devices to pass on cultural information implies that they can be controlled by the dominant voice in society. This cultural authority would decide what information gets passed on to subsequent generations. But, as will be discussed, Batman has rarely successfully been the tool of society's dominant voice, and the attempts to subsume Batman to such a use often result in a loss of popularity.

While Batman can be considered an archetype, this designation need not be his only definition. Longtime Batman writer and editor Dennis O'Neil considered Batman to be part of American folklore:

Batman and Robin are part of our folklore. Even though only a tiny fraction of the population reads the comics, everyone knows them the way everyone knows Paul Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln...Batman and Robin are the postindustrial equivalent of folk figures. They are deeper in our collective psyches than I thought. Because the characters have been around for fifty years, everybody in the country knows about them. They have some of the effect on people that mythology used to and if you get into that, you can't avoid the question of religion. (Brooker 40-1)

Joseph Campbell would support O'Neil's stance, stating that myth is for spiritual instruction while folktale is for entertainment (*Power* 71).

While Batman is certainly geared towards entertainment, O'Neil's argument ignores the source of folktales. Folktales, as the name implies, are tales from the folk, the masses. Legends about Paul Bunyan or Abraham Lincoln begin as spontaneous stories in an oral tradition that are changed and embellished before they are ever put into print form. Such stories are controlled by the popular consciousness rather than any dominant cultural voice.

As seen above, Batman's origin does not follow such a format, being the creation of only a few individuals drawing on the collective cultural memory and being immediately published. While Batman has been divorced from his original text and authors, he is not controlled by the popular consciousness (Brooker 9). Rather, his continued popularity is due to a complex series of cultural negotiations between creators, the dominant cultural voice and the popular consciousness.

Lastly, we must ask is Batman myth? According to Campbell's judgment, myth should have some level of spiritual instruction, and Batman is not a religious figure. However, as superheroes came into existence in an increasingly postmodern environment where religion had lost much of its meaning, perhaps Batman does not need to offer spiritual instruction to be considered a postmodern myth. As William Slater Brown, writing in 1940, points out "[superheroes], beside affording entertainment for the romantic young, seems also to fill some symptomatic desire for a primitive religion" (qtd. in Jones 173). Though not an overtly religious figure, Batman and other superheroes fill that void left in postmodernism's wake.

Nor is spiritual instruction myth's only function. It also serves to instruct on societal standards and create a sense of inclusion. Such instruction is crucial for the

development and sustaining of any society. Myths serve as a type of rite of passage, teaching the dos and don'ts of a particular group and acting as social cement, a common bond of knowledge and understanding within the group. When myth was tied to religion, such a bond would have been much more universal. But with the fragmentation and subsequent loss of power within religion, myths have come to form bonds in much more specialized groups. Knowledge of the Batman mythos offers inclusion within the community of comic books fans. Comic book shops then become a sort of sanctum for this group, into which the uninitiated are not welcome.

Still, without the spiritual component, Batman cannot be said to fulfill all the functions of myth. Perhaps he is best described as a mythic archetype, in particular a mythic American archetype. My thesis will examine Batman as this archetype, first exploring his connection to ancient myth, in particular those of the Greco-Roman tradition, and how he continues their timeless themes. I will then discuss Batman as an American archetype, showing how he has helped to develop and continue new myth for a new world. And finally, I will look at how Batman has reflected the zeitgeist of several eras by examining the cultural negotiations that have occurred between Batman's creators, consumers and the dominant societal authority.

Chapter 2

Batman and the Greek Way

“History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.”

-attributed to Mark Twain

The history of literature can be viewed as a set of themes and motifs continually cast in new guises. While Joseph Campbell’s reduction of literature to a single monomyth may be overly simplistic, there are elements which appear frequently enough to form a “rhyme scheme,” linking humanity’s earliest literature to the most recent. As shown in the previous chapter, Batman’s literary roots can be traced directly to the detective pulps and film. However, his thematic heritage, on topics as diverse as death, virtue and revenge, can be traced further back through classics such as *Hamlet* and on to the legends of the Greco-Roman tradition, creating a direct link between Batman and ancient myth. However, this rhyme scheme of theme is not the only source of Batman’s status as myth. It is also achieved by his stories’ fulfillment of one of the role which myth has in society, namely functioning as a type of social cement, initiating the reader into the unwritten rules which bind a society together. These rules, designed to produce the good in society, are a progressive fusion of enduring principles and contemporary cultural values (Schenck 36). In this chapter, I will discuss, through a comparison with Greco-Roman mythology, how the tales of Batman create their own mythology by fulfilling one of the core functions of myth and continuing the enduring themes of the role of death in the origin of the hero, the nature of revenge and the necessity of virtue within a society.

The Function of Myth

“I think you’re determined to create your own mythology,’ she said. ‘Isn’t that apparent from your behavior?’”

-Henry Selsar, “Bats”

In *Caped Crusaders 101*, Jeffery Kahan and Stanley Stewart describe superheroes as “social engineers, imposing order, teaching lessons, and then calling that order or those lessons natural or commonsensical” (126). The implication of this social engineering is that said order is not only natural, but that it has also been constant and timeless. In reality, social orders are in an almost constant state of flux. However, the role of the hero has endured the test of time. While heroes like Batman can directly enforce order on their fictional landscapes, their stories can be used much more subtly to reinforce the existing social order. Myths accomplish this through a ritual of costume and battle which tests and evaluates the written and unwritten rules of a community, adapting new values as they become valid and discarding the old as they prove obsolete (Jones 208). For example, this may be achieved through means of praise and punishment (Greenblat 226). Here, the reader is able to enjoy vicariously the praise and reward that the hero receives for enforcing societal boundaries, whether those boundaries are the law, sexual mores or even proper manners. Inversely, such stories may also allow the reader to vicariously experience the taboo of breaking these boundaries, as well as the consequences, and see for himself or herself that such deeds do not benefit the individual or the community.

While keeping cultural values intact is an important task of myth, it is not its sole duty. It also offer answers to the ultimate questions of human existence, using metaphors and symbols which the dominant culture can interpret to offer possible answers to such

enduring questions as man's reason for being and the nature of a good society (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 517-8). It is perhaps for this reason, more than any other, that myths have stood the test of time and are constantly reinterpreted for contemporary audiences.

Whether through the reinterpretation of a classic myth or the creation of a modern hero like Batman, myths are still used to keep cultural values intact and to probe the deeper questions of existence (Friske 325). But for whom are these myths being kept alive? They are kept to instruct new members of the community, in particular the youth. This is because adolescents are the most in need of being initiated into the rules of a society as they are transitioning from childhood to becoming full members of the community. According to anthropologist Victor Turner, this initiation into society is enacted through three stages: separation, transition and reintegration (Oropeza 7). This is remarkably similar to the hero cycle which Joseph Campbell put forth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which consists of separation, initiation and return (30). Those heroes which follow the Campbellian cycle are examples and guides for teenagers on how to gain membership into their society. Without powerful stories to pass on society's morals, youths would be free to create their own initiations and morality, often leading to destructive acts against the dominant culture (Campbell, *Power* 8-9).

An ancient example of the initiation pattern is set forth in the story of Telemachus in *The Odyssey*. As *The Odyssey* begins, Telemachus has grown up for twenty years without his father, Odysseus. Having come of age, Telemachus sets off in search of his father. The search takes him to various courts of kings and rulers who fought with Odysseus during the Trojan War. As a prince, Telemachus is welcomed and receives training in his duties in areas such as etiquette and combat. He also exhibits the virtues of

persistence and determination. When Telemachus is finally reunited with his father, he is able to stand as an equal and together they are able to slay Penelope's suitors and restore order to the city.

While the initiation pattern is represented in Telemachus's story, there are elements which do not reflect the values of contemporary America, notably achieving manhood through violence, specifically killing. There needs to be an updated version of this mythic type for modern audiences. One such example is found in Batman's sidekick, Robin. Bob Kane wanted to give Batman a companion so that, instead of always printing his thoughts, Batman could have someone with whom to talk (Kane 46). Kane originally envisioned a character straight out of mythology named Mercury, but ended up with something much more American with the story of Robin (Jones 153). When Dick Grayson's acrobat parents were murdered, Bruce Wayne adopted the boy as his ward. After showing an abundance of courage, Bruce, as Batman, trained Dick in both combat and teamwork so that he could join in fighting crime. Moreover, with the aid of the butler Alfred, Dick received the finest education as well as instruction in how to act in high society. Ultimately, Dick moved on from being Robin and established his own identity as Nightwing, one in which he is treated much more as Batman's equal than his subordinate. And in doing so, he sets an example for American young men about their own transition to adulthood.

As evidenced above, superheroes like Batman function as a modern mythology. But superheroes have also helped resurrect several tropes dating back to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the world's first recorded story. Gilgamesh was, in many ways, the world's first superhero, as his narrative contains elements of superhuman powers, a sidekick,

Enkidu, and a battle between good and evil (Coogan 118-20). These tropes continued in the ancient world until they received a perfect form in Heracles, a figure whose legend was retold and added to by multiple writers (Danna 68). In addition to keeping traditions alive, the legend of Heracles also had an important role in making the frontier of an ever-expanding world safe for domestication (Shwartz 42). Thus, while the first versions of legends about him had Heracles traveling barely beyond the borders of Greece to battle monsters, centuries later those same labors had him traveling beyond Spain. As the world became known and settled and the monsters of the frontier disappeared, the need for such tropes lessened and the myths moved to mortal heroes such as Odysseus and Oedipus. Centuries later, the tropes disappeared almost completely as some of the values taught by Greek myths were deemed outdated and were replaced by new ideas and new religions.

So why did these tropes return in the twentieth century? One reason is that these tropes and archetypes form a narrative shorthand that quickly establishes new characters in the readers mind. Archetypes are not necessarily an image etched into the collective unconscious. Rather, through repetition over thousands of years, they have been ingrained into the popular consciousness, making the full cultural knowledge of a character instantly accessible based on something as simple as a two page origin.

Another reason was the creation of new frontiers in the twentieth century. Even though the physical frontier of the world was closing, science was opening a new frontier in outer space, a place where mythical monster could live again. A social frontier was also being created between the growing middle class and the criminals of the lower classes. Superhuman monster-slayers were needed again. The first modern superhero, Superman, was an alien from the stars, sent to Earth to protect it from other aliens. The second

superhero, Batman, focused on the social frontier, making the world safe for the middle class. Both heroes fought to make their frontiers safe for expansion and in doing so, brought back the tropes of superpowers and sidekicks and epic confrontations between good and evil. Therefore, as Harold Schechter aptly put it, “The new gods are caped crusaders, men of steel...” (qtd. in Lansdale vii).

However, superhero comics are only one source of information on social rules and roles for a modern audience (Parsons 82). Anciently, one system of myth was able to support a whole community. But as the world moves to a global community, a single system can no longer create the necessary social support structure. The result is several mythic systems which support smaller groups within the community, all of which function to create the good in society by teaching the same values. Currently, superheroes are largely supported by a group commonly referred to as “fanboys.” However, with the growing number of superhero movies and TV shows slated for the next decade, Batman being a leader in this movement, it is possible for superheroes to become one of the dominant mythic systems of the current generation through increased mass media exposure.

Death and the Origin of the Hero

“...who, among mortals,
can boast of being
born to fate immune from harm?”

-Aeschylus, *Agammenon* 1531-1533

If anyone was born to a life which should have been immune from harm, it was Bruce Wayne. He had a loving and wealthy mother and father and his every need was

seen after. But that all ended with a random act of violence in a dark alley, when Bruce's parents were shot. While tragic, such an event is not uncommon in the life of a hero. An encounter with death, either directly or through a loved one, usually the father, is often part of the origin of a hero. It marks him apart from society because it is a brush with the great unknown. He has seen into what Shakespeare described as "The undiscover'd country from whose bourne no traveller returns" (*Hamlet* 53). A confrontation with death has been a literary motif since Gilgamesh, though the terms of the encounter have changed to reflect the beliefs of the contemporary society. But when examining ancient myth and modern comic-book heroes, it becomes evident that something remarkable occurs in this encounter which allows the individual to become "super." By surviving a brush with death, the hero is able to overcome the fear of it and gain a sense of invulnerability or immortality, which allows him to step into the patriarchal role of protector and provider.

The origin of the hero is usually marked by two events: the confrontation with death and the loss of the father. This often happens when the hero is an infant, a pattern begun in Greek myth. Heracles, a demigod, was raised without the presence of his father, Zeus. He also faced death when Hera sent two serpents into his crib, which he strangled with ease. Achilles was dipped in the river of the dead, Styx, by his mother when he was an infant and then raised by a centaur. In both cases, the infants grew into adulthood with a literal feeling of invulnerability, which let them go into battle without fear of dying.

Even when myth centered on more vulnerable and flawed heroes, the pattern of confrontation and loss remained. Oedipus, due to a prophecy in which he would kill his father and marry his mother, was left to die of exposure by his father and then raised by

surrogate parents. Interestingly, Oedipus gained a sense of immortality because he could not die until the prophecy was fulfilled. Oedipus also established the pattern of what Freud called the Oedipal complex, as well as what Joseph Campbell termed “atonement with the father,” a topic I will discuss in more detail later in this section.

As Christianity came to dominate society, the encounter with death had to take a different form. It became less plausible that God would smite a child with serpents or that it was possible to travel to the underworld. Instead, the confrontation became a vicarious experience through the death of the father. This is illustrated by one of the great plays of the English language, *Hamlet*. In the play, Claudius has killed Hamlet’s father in order to marry the queen, Gertrude, and claim the throne. Such an action could have easily involved slaying Hamlet as well, as he would have a legitimate claim to the throne.

This pattern of confrontation with death and loss of the father perhaps reaches its apex in Batman, where the events are combined into a single instant. Once again, Bob Kane continued a mythic pattern without realization, as he was only looking for a motivation sufficient to make a man fight crime while dressed like a bat. As Kane explained, “Bill and I discussed it, and we figured there’s nothing more traumatic than having your parents murdered before your eyes” (Daniels 31). Young Bruce does not have a vicarious experience like Hamlet, but faces down the barrel of the gun that killed his father. He is also left alive for no rhyme or reason, thus creating at least a subconscious sense of invulnerability, which lets him swing from rooftops and face well-armed opponents with nothing but a batarang. In following the orphaned Superman, Batman established this pattern, leading to the preponderance of orphans in superhero

fiction (Reynolds 16).

These often-tragic encounters with death are what give the heroes's motivation to act. Their actions often dramatize the Oedipal complex, or Campbell's "Atonement with the Father" (Reynolds 61). While the Oedipus complex has lost credence within many psychiatric circles, it still remains a functioning pattern within a closed, fictional narrative. Freud's Oedipus complex is based on Sophocles's play *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus fulfills the prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother. Freud posited that every boy fears his father and has the desire to replace him and marry his mother. Campbell carries this further by having the hero go on a quest to become "at one" with the father by becoming the father (*Power* 208). As many of the heroes were children or infants when they lost their father, they have no real sense of who he was or how to fulfill the patriarchal duties of protector and provider. Each is a tabula rasa who can only learn to be like their father by questing after him (Fingerroth 69-70). By completing the quest, the heroes may then become successful patriarchs.

Many of these heroes are responsible for being patriarchs to more than just their immediate families. Oedipus stepped into the role of king of Thebes, first protecting the city by defeating the Sphinx and then by hunting down the cause of a disease plaguing the city. Tragically, Oedipus himself was the cause of the plague due to the sin of incest and had to banish himself from the city. Hamlet was the prince of Denmark and had to defend his people from the machinations of his uncle Claudius and would have become king, with his mother as queen, if he had not died at the end of the play.

Bruce Wayne, however, comes from American society and therefore cannot be royalty. But he is upper class and comes from old money, which is the closest America

comes to royalty. And while Peter Coogan argues that Batman had outgrown the Oedipal stage when his parents were murdered, being seven or eight years old, he still dramatizes the Oedipal scenario perfectly (104; Medhurst 160). What must be realized is that, with the trauma of his parents' murder, Bruce's emotional growth was not only stunted, but probably regressed. As it was put in one story, he developed an "infantile fixation combined with a Messianic complex" (Kamisky 4).

In addition, it should be remembered that Bruce's mother died that night as well, denying the possibility of protecting and providing for his mother as Oedipus and Hamlet had. Instead, he had to find a surrogate mother for whom he could enact these duties, and he found one in American society (Muir 2). As an orphan, Bruce Wayne was a special case. He apparently had no relatives to whom he could be sent but did not spend any time in foster care. Instead, he was allowed to remain at Wayne Manor in the care of the butler Alfred. In a sense, American society, through Gotham City, replaced his mother and became his ad hoc parent and he became Gotham's "native son" (Miller, *Year One* 3). And, completing the Oedipal complex, he is able to become the protector and provider of Gotham City in his dual identities. As Bruce Wayne, he is head of Wayne Enterprises, which provides employment for many citizens as well as contributing to numerous charities to help the city's underprivileged. Moreover, as Batman, he is Gotham's dark avenger, defending the city from the criminals and supervillains which would do her harm. Bruce Wayne/Batman imparts security, stability and happiness, the same virtues which his father, Thomas, imparted to him (Coogan 104).

The Oedipal scenario is further illustrated by the fact that Batman never worries about whether his mother approves of his actions, but fears his father's disapproval. This

concept is brilliantly brought to life in the *Batman: The Animated Series* episode “Nothing to Fear.” In the episode, the Scarecrow uses his fear gas to induce Batman’s greatest fear, which turns out to be his angry father decrying Bruce’s actions. Bruce has no concept of his father’s approval because of Thomas Wayne’s absence (Reynolds 61). He is only able to overcome this fear through Alfred telling him that his father would be proud of him because Alfred, his father figure, is proud of him. But Batman never fears his mother’s disapproval of his lifestyle because he already has the tacit approval of Gotham City herself.

In enacting the Oedipal cycle this way, Batman is denied any chance of a normal family life. Even though he has gathered a group of compatriots who are often referred to as the Batman Family, consisting of Alfred, Robin, Nightwing, Catwoman and Oracle, they can only remain part of this inner circle as long as they fit into his mission of defending Gotham City (Morris 115). Whenever they do not contribute this mission, as has happened several times, they are forced out of Batman’s circle and the city. And even though Bruce Wayne has had a series of beautiful and smart girlfriends, including Catwoman, he has never been able to make a commitment to one of them. In some of Batman’s early adventures, he did have a fiancée, Julie Madison, but she was written out after two adventures, not only because sexual renunciation is key to keeping a hero pure, but because such an event would effectively end Batman’s adventures by annulling his “marriage” to Gotham City (Fox 41).

The Revenge Cycle

“Justice done is punishment for wrong committed. Punishment is retribution. Retribution is revenge, is it not?”

While the actions of heroes like Hamlet and Batman may take the form of the Oedipal complex, this is by no means the only motivation for their actions. Many times, the quest for atonement with the father can only be achieved through avenging his murder. This cry for vengeance, whether it is the will of a ghost from beyond the grave or a personal vow, functions as Campbell's "call to adventure," setting the hero on his heroic path (*Hero* 51). But the path of revenge, even in the name of justice, often leads to a cycle of murder that can only logically conclude when everyone is dead. This has been an issue addressed by authors since ancient times. From the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus, and continuing through *Hamlet*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Batman*, authors have addressed an audience's fascination with revenge and introduced various means of breaking the vicious cycle.

Wish-fulfillment fantasies have long been a staple of popular literature. As readers, we enjoy the vicarious thrill of living out our power fantasies, including those of revenge. As each of us has had some personal injury occur in the course of our lives, we want to experience some retribution against the perpetrator. As Danny Fingeroth aptly put it: "Who doesn't want payback for injustices committed against oneself?" (64). As revenge is a common emotion within humanity, it has become a popular motif in literature. But such literature often serves as a cautionary tale, warning that revenge in and of itself will not bring about justice.

One of the earliest surviving tales of revenge is the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus. First performed in 455 BC, it is sole tragic trilogy that survives in complete form (Burian 1). The tale begins in *Agamemnon*, revealing how Agamemnon, upon his return from the

Trojan War, is killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, in revenge for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia at the beginning of the war. In *Libation Bearers*, Agamemnon's son, Orestes, returns home to avenge his father's murder by killing his mother. This brings about the curse of the Furies, bound to torment any child who spills his mother's blood. It is only through the intervention of the gods in *Eumenides* the curse is lifted and the cycle of blood vengeance finished.

The theme of revenge is visited again in *Hamlet*. As already stated, Hamlet seeks to avenge himself on his uncle Claudius for his father's murder. However, in the course of events, Hamlet accidentally slays Polonius. This leads to Laertes challenging Hamlet to a duel, enacted in the play's climax. *Hamlet* is one of the few stories that do proceed to the logical conclusion and everyone dies at the end. Though the end results are quite different, it is perhaps in Hamlet that we find the closest classic parallel to Batman. In fact, Adam West compared his performance in the 1960s TV show to "a modern-day Hamlet" (Booker 202).

One of the literary masterpieces of revenge is *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas. Falsely accused of a crime, Edmond Dantes is sent to prison, where he spends twenty years before he can escape. Once free, he finds the fortune of a fellow prisoner and, using this fabulous wealth, creates a new persona as the mysterious Count of Monte Cristo. As the Count, Edmond begins an elaborate plot of revenge to bring about the financial and personal ruin of those who sent him to jail. In this case, revenge turns out to be a hollow pursuit. It gains Edmond no satisfaction in return, as death and ruin does not truly equal justice for his lost twenty years.

Batman himself has become the great modern symbol of revenge. As stated in

one story, “Vengeance was a living need within him; it defined the Batman” (Castle 360).

Batman’s course of vengeance may seem obvious, but it has actually had many changes over the years. Originally a senseless act of violence, Thomas and Martha Wayne’s murderer was eventually identified as Joe Chill. To give the murders more meaning, it was eventually decided that Joe was not a random mugger, but was acting on someone’s orders. In the comics, it has been attributed to mob boss Lew Moxon, whom Thomas Wayne was about to testify against (Wein). In the recent film *Batman Begins*, the culprits behind the scenes was identified as Ra’s al Ghul and the League of Shadows, trying to destroy Gotham City by stopping Thomas’s reclamation work. Alternatively, in the Andrew Vachss novel *Batman: The Ultimate Evil*, the target was actually Martha Wayne, who had been investigating a child-slavery ring. Whatever the reason for the killings, Batman’s motive for vengeance is the same. No matter whom the criminal may be, “When Batman punches a foe, he sees the face of the man who killed his parents and left him- both mercifully and cruelly- as a seven-year-old wailing to the unheeding emptiness of the Gotham City night” (Fingerroth 64).

It is interesting to compare some of the oaths of vengeance that these heroes offer, as it reveals a consistence of human nature over the centuries. In *Libation Bearers*, Orestes offers this oath on his father’s tomb:

But I swear
with god’s help, with the help of my own hand,
she’ll pay for having
done this to my father. Just let me kill her,
then I can die myself. (499-503)

Hamlet responds to his father's ghost's demand for a reckoning:

And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven! (27)

And while Bill Finger is no Shakespeare, his creation of Batman's oath is equally effective: "And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals" (Finger 63). Even though markedly different in wording, each vow is at heart similar in meaning. Each character vows to personally pursue revenge for their parents' death without distraction until it is completed. Through this, we can see that the power of revenge has remained remarkably consistent for thousands of years.

Of all these stories, only *Hamlet* follows through to the logical conclusion of the revenge cycle, the death of all involved. With the others, we must ask, as Aeschylus did in *Libation Bearers*: "Where will it end? When will it all/ be lulled back into sleep, and cease, / the bloody hatred, the destruction?" (1215-1217). These stories each offer different solutions to the dilemma.

Aeschylus used the *Oresteia* trilogy to dramatize the transition from blood vengeance to the rule of law in ancient society (Burian 5). After the revenge cycle began, society began to descend into chaos and it is only through the intervention of an outside source that the cycle can be broken. In *Eumenides*, Orestes, who should have inherited the throne after Agamemnon's death, is instead constantly trying to outrun the Furies. On the advice of Apollo, he pleads with Athena to take away the curse of the Furies. Rather than countermand the law of the gods that constrained the Furies, Athena set up a trail by

jury in order to determine if Orestes was justified in killing his mother. The jury determines that Orestes was justified in seeking vengeance and was absolved of any guilt. The events also establish a new order based on the rule of law and trial by a jury of peers to mete out justice rather than relying on gods or a more violent systems of revenge (Punter 110).

While the Orestes trilogy established the role of justice in overcoming the revenge cycle, *The Count of Monte Cristo* demonstrated how Christian values of mercy, forgiveness and love can achieve the same results. By the end of the novel, Edmond Dantes's pursuit of revenge is nearly complete, but has left him increasingly hollow. His life has no meaning beyond revenge. It is only through the pleading of his former fiancée to remember the love they once shared that he his able to forgive the last targets of his vendetta and begin a new life and a new love with his servant, Haydee. This act illustrates a move away from absolute justice in society and towards more merciful judgment that allows the guilty party the chance to atone for their deeds.

This is the sort of justice in which Batman believes. He does not seek to murder criminals nor to make their punishment fit the crime, but rather allows the justice system to determine the proper debt to society. Despite this, he is not able to break free of the revenge cycle, but continues to enact it for several reasons. Firstly, his is not a vendetta against one person or a select group. Batman did not vow to catch only his parents' killer, but rather to war against all criminals. If he was after only one criminal, then eventually his duty would be complete and he could retire, something which continuing publication can not allow (Reynolds 74). Secondly, Batman does not kill, thus avoiding eye-for-an-eye blood vengeance. Instead, his is an enlightened rage that he puts to

constructive use for the benefit of society (Fingerroth 132). This, in a sense, does break the revenge cycle, but results in an unending and escalating cycle of violence which only Batman's vow never to kill prevents from descending into chaotic vengeance (see Figures 2-7). Even when the Joker killed Jason Todd, the second Robin, Batman only sought to bring the Joker to justice, not to kill him. And lastly, Batman's revenge is never complete because he cannot avenge himself of the person he truly blames for his parents' deaths: himself (Coogan 105). Batman is trapped in survivor's guilt, where the randomness of his parents' murder, as well as his survival, can only lead him to ceaselessly wonder if it is his fault for not preventing it (Fingerroth 65). In the end, he can only hope to prevent crime from destroying someone else's life as it did his.

The Virtuous Few

“A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action...”

-Roger Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*

It can be argued that those heroes who act out of a need for revenge are only acting on a selfish motivation. As readers, however, we can see that the results of these actions are greater than petty gratification in that they bring order to society and set a moral example (Giordano 8). Batman acts in a way becoming of the Greek idea of the virtuous few. In Greek thinking, when a society faced a crisis or came under threat, the virtuous few would rise up to defend the community and then step back into obscurity until they are needed again. Mythic heroes are constantly called on to protect a society and in doing so both define and embody those virtues which should be passed down from generation to



Figure 2 Death of Thomas and Martha Wayne. Cover of *Batman* #404, Feb. 1987.

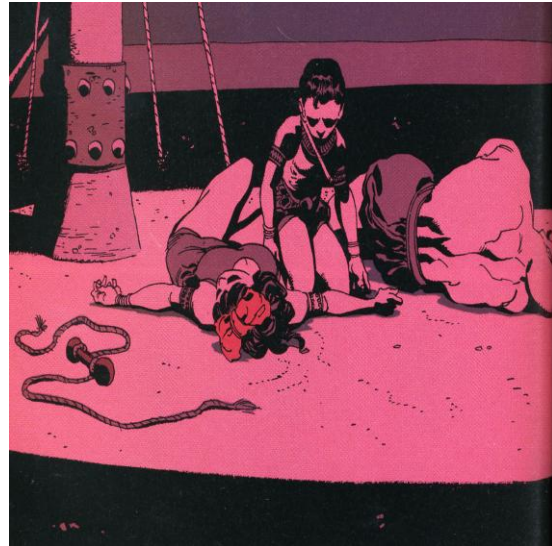


Figure 3 Death of Dick (Robin I/Nightwing) Grayson's parents. *Batman: Dark Victory*, 2001.



Figure 4 Death of Jason (Robin II) Todd. *Batman: A Death in the Family*, 1988.



Figure 5 Maiming of Barbara (Batgirl) Gordon. *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 1988.



Figure 6 Bane breaks Batman's back. *Batman* #497, July 1993.



Figure 8 Death of Tim (Robin III) Drake's father. *Identity Crisis*, 2005.



Figure 7 Death of Stephanie (Spoiler/Robin IV) Brown. *Batman* #633, Dec. 2004.

generation; virtues such as self-discipline, sacrifice and courage (Loeb and Morris 16).

In the Greco-Roman tradition, the embodiment of this concept was Cincinnatus. In Roman government of the time, during a period of crisis, a citizen could be granted sole power as a dictator. Cincinnatus was a small farmer who was granted dictatorship in order to save the consular army from surrounding enemy forces. Cincinnatus was able to accomplish the task in a single day. But that is not why he was perceived as a paragon of civic virtue by his fellow citizens. It was because, instead of seeking glory, he received fame for stepping down as dictator after that day and returning to his small farm (Lawrence and Jewett 130).

The early history of the United States was also defined by a man who is part myth and part fact: George Washington. He has been called the American Cincinnatus because he acted with the same resolve and determination as the ancient leader during a crisis not once, but twice. First, during the American Revolution, Washington commanded the continental army to victory against overwhelming odds. But rather than stay on as commander, after the war he returned to his estate at Mount Vernon. Then, when he was asked to be president of the United States, he was given the option of serving as president for life. Instead, he chose to serve for a duration and then retire again to Mount Vernon (Feidler 132).

Washington set the example for all our nation's leaders, and it is an example that has been extended to America's mythic heroes. Batman also does not seek for power, but only offers his services when the situation calls for it. And as Gotham City seems to be in almost constant crisis, his abilities are regularly called for. He is a volunteer, using his own resources to protect the good in Gotham City. But, to make him a more interesting

character, his services are not always welcome as he works outside the law. As Bob Kane explained: “I always thought it would be more exciting for Batman to work outside the law than inside it. I guess growing up in the Bronx, we used to be vigilantes to survive” (Muir 71). But if he works outside the law, how can Batman be looked upon as an exemplar of virtue? It is because he holds the high moral ground (Reinhart 11). Batman’s moral code is actually more strict than society’s laws, a topic which will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.

As Batman works to defend society from chaos and evil, it is important to ask what exactly is he trying to protect. If he is sacrificing himself for the good within the community, of what does that good consist (Campbell, *Power* 156)? One way to find out is to look at the heroes’ moral opposite, the villains. Villains usually act out of selfishness, trying to achieve personal gain at the cost of others. They are looking out for a personal and individual good. The inverse of this would then be that the hero looks out for the good of the community as a whole, or what will best benefit the collective. And often what best benefits the community is the status quo. Change is hard, especially with the combined inertia of a group. And so heroes like Batman cannot be activists, trying to enable change. They will only support change after it has been decided that the new ethics are in the best interest of the group, and they will then become the champions of the new virtue.

Chapter 3

Batman and the American Way

“...fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way.”

-introduction, *The Adventures of Superman* radio program

Though the above statement is inextricably linked to Superman, the sentiment can be applied to all superheroes. Truth and justice are enduring principles which heroes have defended since the birth of civilization. The American way, however, is a modern concept, and a nebulous one at that, but one which is part of American mythology. As a fairly young nation in terms of world history, the United States has had several disadvantages in terms of creating its own mythology. Its birth was a distinct moment in history, so there is no mythic origin to the nation, despite the many attempts to create a narrative out of colonization and the Revolutionary War. And though America is considered a melting pot of ethnicity and had been able to borrow from several Old World mythological systems, it has been hard-pressed to create several archetypes which reflect its regularly evolving national character. In addition, at its inception, American was a print culture, meaning that its legends did not pass through the refining process of an oral tradition, being transferred almost immediately to the printed page. This results in national archetypes which live in a mythic present rather than a mythic past.

Despite all these adversities, the United States has managed to create a large body of national myths which make up for their lack of coherence through an excess of popularity (Muir 1). One of these lines of myth achieves its end in Batman and the

superhero. In addition to drawing on Old World mythic traditions, Batman also encapsulates a New World archetype of the rugged individual, containing the contradictory elements of the American Dream, through the ideals of the self-made man and faith in society, and the American Nightmare, through the Gothic.

American Myths, American Dreams

“The myth is the public dream, and the dream is the private myth.”

-Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

The mythology of a nation reveals its national character (Slotkin, *Regeneration 3*). The national character of the United States, and subsequently, its myths, has long been defined by its relation to one of its most prominent features: the frontier. Though myth is often used as a way of preserving civilization for later generations, frontier myths were equally concerned with creating said civilization out on the raggedy edge. Even after Frederick Jackson Turner declared the physical frontier of the West closed in 1893, America has continued to create new frontiers in the realms of society, politics and science, as well as constantly revisiting the location in literature and film. This relationship with the frontier has led to uniquely American strains of myth. For example, the concept of the American Dream, wherein an individual could begin a new life in the United States and achieve success and wealth, was the great advertisement for settling the frontier. And the frontier community's relationship with the vast and indifferent landscape also led to a variant on Joseph Campbell's monomyth which John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett have termed the American monomyth. The American monomyth and the American Dream reveal a national character of rugged individualism in which an individual can succeed in conquering any frontier through courage,

determination and sheer will power.

In addition to passing down virtue and knowledge to succeeding generations, myths are also able to summarize a civilization's history. Myth dramatizes the whole historic experience of a people into a single narrative event (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 269). The history of America, beginning with the earliest English settlers, has never been the monomythic story of an individual's rite of passage to discover the cure for society's ills. It has rather focused on the threatened community and its restoration to a paradisiacal state (Coogan 261). As Lawrence and Jewett explain in *The Myth of the American Superhero*, in the American monomyth:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (6)

The idea of America as a new Eden began with the Puritans in Massachusetts, who wished to establish a "city upon a hill." This mentality has been passed on until today, when many Americans view the nation's status as the only superpower in the world as fulfillment of this original mandate. But, as the literature of the United States lives in a mythic now, the savior charged with restoring paradise through the epic battle between good and evil must reflect the times (Oropeza 4). The earliest embodiment of this myth is found in the frontiersman and the pioneer, such as Natty Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. As the frontier moved further west, so did hero, transforming into the cowboy and then, on the urban west coast, the hard-nosed detective.

The character then moved to a completely fictional realm with Batman and other superheroes, and can still be found today in the form of the anti-authoritarian doctor on hospital shows like *House*.

The American version of the monomyth is able to answer at least one of the flaws of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, namely what happens with a continuing heroic narrative, such as the one offered by Batman comics? While Batman's origin takes the form of the classic monomyth, the thousands of subsequent stories cannot all be journeys of initiation. Since Batman has already learned the tools to defeat crime, it becomes a narrative of applying those tools to each crisis within Gotham City.

A sprawling metropolis like Gotham City may hardly seem like the place to restore paradise. However, the mythic Eden is not necessarily found in pure nature or in the urban landscape. It is a place absent of the internal chaos of lethal violence (Lawrence and Jewett 22). The past of Gotham City is viewed with this nostalgia for the absence of violence. It should be remembered that prominent citizens like Thomas and Martha Wayne once felt safe to walk through even a darkened alley at night. But the lethal violence they encountered destroyed that Edenic atmosphere, as illustrated in the Dennis O'Neil and Dick Giordano story, "There is No Hope in Crime Alley" (Detective Comics #457). It is revealed here that the area of the Waynes's murder, once a center for the arts, has become Crime Alley, one of the most dangerous and crime-infested areas of Gotham. This story also reveals the failings of the American monomyth when coupled with a continuing narrative, in that even though Batman regularly patrols the area-especially on the anniversary of his parents's death- he cannot restore Crime Alley to its former paradisiacal state, as that would pose a threat to the continuity of his stories.

While Batman's actions are able to dramatize the American monomyth, his character embodies the myth of the American Dream. The American Dream is often associated with immigrants, but its wish-fulfillment fantasy affects the hopes of all Americans. There are two sides to this fantasy. One is that the individual can succeed through hard work despite his background. The other is that the individual can succeed through natural attributes because of his background. As comic book superheroes are perhaps the ultimate wish-fulfillment fantasy, they often dramatize both ideals. Batman comics are able to achieve this through the characteristics of both Batman and Bruce Wayne (Caniff iv).

Batman is the perfect self-made man. As an orphan, Bruce Wayne was in many ways free from his family history and able to forge his own identity (Fingerth 55). Knowing that he wanted to wage war on all criminals, he studied criminology, chemistry, psychology and law at the university level, perfecting his mind to the utmost level. He also trained his body to Olympic-level perfection, studying fighting techniques until he mastered all forms of unarmed combat (Wein). Through will power and determination, Batman has been able to achieve the highest mental and physical capacity a human being can, making himself and equal to super-powered beings like Superman and Wonder Woman. Batman has achieved the American Dream of success through hard work and has set a mythic example for a modern audience.

Batman's alter ego, Bruce Wayne, is an example of success through natural traits. In this case, those natural traits mean an inheritance of wealth and business. Wayne embodies the fantasy of the wealthy lifestyle, inheriting a fortune and a mansion, waited on by a servant, Alfred Pennyworth, and able to live as a bachelor playboy. He works as

the head of Wayne Industries, but does not have to and often leaves the day-to-day work to others. But this lifestyle is not shown as fulfilling, as Bruce Wayne is often described as a layabout who has not achieved his potential. Of the two forms of the American Dream, Batman shows that the life of the rugged individual is preferable.

The Rugged Individualist

“Through the medium of the scout, who served for years afterwards as a link between them [the Delawares] and civilized life,…”

-James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*

Expounded by Theodore Roosevelt, the character of the rugged individual has come to be identified with the savior-hero of the American monomyth. The evil which threatens the harmonious paradise often takes the form of the savage Other coming from beyond the frontier. Since normal institutions are ill-equipped to handle the threat, what is needed is an outsider who can fight like a savage on behalf of civilization. As Richard Slotkin explains:

“...the frontier hero stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, ... as civilization’s most effective instrument against savagery- a man who knows how to think and fight like an Indian, to turn their own methods against them.” (*Gunfighter* 16)

The rugged individual is a median figure caught between society and savagery, defending a world of which he can never be part.

The rugged individual is a type of the noble savage espoused by the French philosopher Rousseau. Rousseau envisioned the ideal man as being educated and well mannered, but free from the corrupting tendencies of civilization, such as greed (Kahan and Stewart 75). The rugged individual embodies such freedom by becoming a willing exile from civilization. By cutting himself off, the hero is able to retain the virtues of civilization while learning the virtues of the savage, or the Other, at the same time avoiding the vices of both (Coogan 13). In this way, the Outsider is able to embody the contradictory duality of the American hero: simultaneously a hunter and gatherer, wanderer and citizen, explorer and cultivator (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 367). In times of peace, the Outsider is able to be accepted as a citizen, contributing to the community as a valued member. However, when times of fear and insecurity come, the citizen must

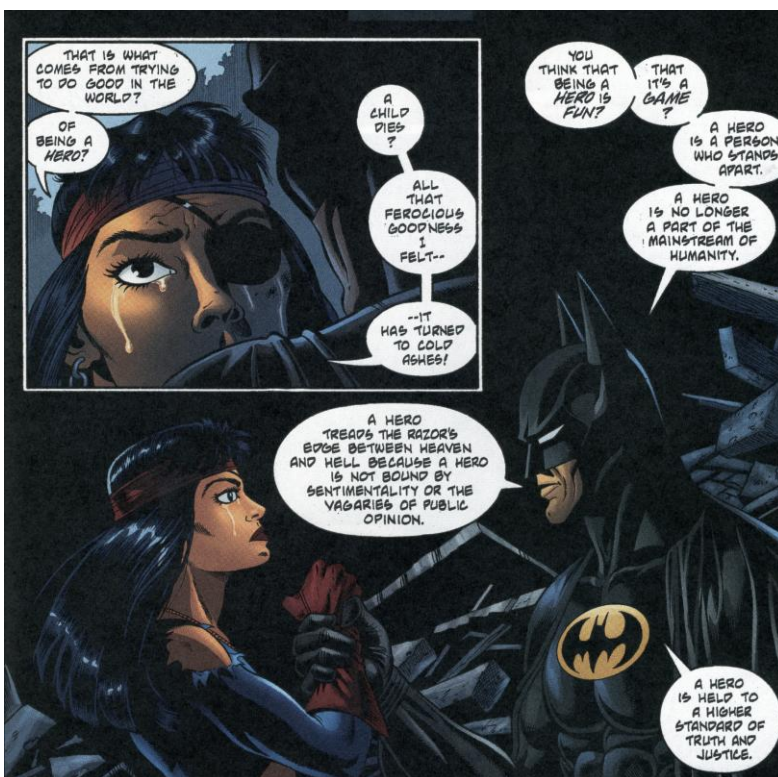


Figure 9 Batman explains the existence of a hero to Lynx. *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* # 90, Oct. 1999.

become the hunter, a symbol of strength, to defend the community (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 50).

Unfortunately, the hunter is often no longer welcome in society after the citizens have seen his actions.

What is it about the savage Other that society

fears and the Outsider may channel? The Other is a being on whom a culture may project its fears as well as blame for any failings within the system. In doing so, society is able to sublimate and expunge any guilt they may feel for their failings. It also creates a system of moral absolutes which is comforting in times of crisis. Once the blame is placed elsewhere, be it Indian, gunslinger or criminal, it is easier to purify society of the Other's influence and its threat of apocalyptic doom.

Fiction can reduce the complexities of real life into a simple narrative, and the paradigm of the rugged individual has been a part of American literature since its inception. Richard Slotkin traces the progression of this character type through his series of books, *Regeneration Through Violence*, *The Fatal Environment* and *Gunfighter Nation*, beginning with one of oldest story forms in the United States, the Indian captivity narrative. These narratives were ostensibly based on true accounts, often of an innocent girl who is kidnapped by Indians and lives with them until her rescue (Lawrence and Jewett 26). The tales established a narrative pattern which informed all subsequent American literature. It contained the elements of civilization versus savagery, the hero caught between worlds, the powerless authority and apocalyptic violence (Coogan 127). Of course, once the actual threat of the Indians had been removed from the frontier in later decades, it became easier to mythologize such stories without the intrusion of reality (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 356-7).

The narrative events established in the Indian captivity stories were codified in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of frontier romances by James Fenimore Cooper (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 15). In stories such as *Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*, Cooper's hero, Natty Bumppo, established several literary conventions which so captured the

popular imagination that they continue to this day (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 468). They continued the Indian-captivity theme, with chaste maidens captured by savages and in need of rescue. The stories also raised the level of apocalyptic violence by having large raiding parties attack settlements (Lawrence and Jewett 27). And most importantly, Natty Bumppo firmly established the character type of the rugged individual as a self-made man skilled and competitive in the forest, but without the loss of his civility or self-possession (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 161). Bumppo often reveals himself a skilled tracker while at the same time waxing philosophical about the differences between Indians and settlers in their approach to nature. He is a natural philosopher not by education but by observation.

Cooper's hero also established several tropes that may have parallels to Batman. Natty Bumppo often sheds his rather awkward Anglican name in favor of a series of alternate identities, such as Deerslayer, Pathfinder and Hawkeye. Also, in *The Last of the Mohicans*, the conflict between Magua and Hawkeye descends to a battle of vengeance (Coogan 65).

The motifs of the rugged individual continued west and was transformed into the cowboy. Popularized by the dime novels of the late nineteenth century and then in the films of the 1950s, the traits of the Western hero have been summarized as follows: Puritan virtues, skill with weapons, prevailing against numerous foes and the glorification of individual exploits (Lawrence and Jewett 57). These are the same traits which Natty Bumppo exhibited, merely transported to a new location. However, where Bumppo was at home with the Indians in the wilderness, the cowboy does not share the same familiarity with the gun-slinging outlaw. The cowboy is often conflicted about the use of violence, not wanting to descend to the level of criminals. And as the West is a more desolate

frontier, being part of a community is preferable to the outsider existence of the lone gunman.

This increased complexity in the rugged-individual archetype is highlighted in the film *High Noon*. Will Kane has just married and is about to retire as sheriff when word comes that the outlaw Frank Miller, whom Kane has arrested, has escaped from jail and is coming for revenge. Kane knows that Miller and his gang will also destroy the town, but normal institutions fail when he is unable to find volunteers for the defense. Rather than heed the townspeople's will that he leave, Kane chooses to stand alone against Miller and his gang. After the successful battle, Kane and his wife leave due in equal parts to his disgust at the failings of civilization and his new status as an outsider within the community.

The complexity of the rugged individual increased as he moved to an urban setting in the guise of the hard-boiled detective. The modern detective story is an American invention, created by Edgar Allan Poe in his tales of Auguste Dupin. However, Dupin was an intellectual detective, reasoning his deductions through ratiocination and never actually confronting criminals. Poe's detective worked within the system, solving crimes at the invitation of the police, and never as an outsider. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new frontier emerged that was defined by economics and class. As Americans began to lose hope in government to solve their problems during the Great Depression, a new type of detective emerged, a self-reliant avenger-vigilante who operated according to his own code of honor (Reynolds 18).

This new rugged individual was darker than the previous incarnations. Where Natty Bumppo was a saint from the woods, the hard-boiled detective was burdened by his

knowledge of criminality. And where the cowboy was conflicted about using his gun, the detective was unafraid to use violence (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 139). He also worked more on gut instinct and luck than detection, as Dupin would have. If the archetype had become more complex, his world had actually become simpler. The hard-boiled detective existed in a world of moral absolutes, with a permanent line between criminals and law-abiding citizens (Coogan 188). This created a class frontier which the detective must protect less lawlessness and chaos overrun the city.

The myth of the hard-boiled detective is dramatized in the film *The Maltese Falcon*, based on the story by Dashell Hammett. Sam Spade and his partner are hired by Brigid O'Shaughnessy to follow a man. That night, Spade's partner and the man turn up dead. The police suspect Spade may have been involved, establishing that Spade is working outside the system. Spade is then visited by Joel Cairo, who wants Spade's help in tracking down a sculpture of a bird. Based only on gut instinct, Sam senses a connection between O'Shaughnessy and Cairo as well as his partner's murder. This leads Spade to Mr. Gutman, who reveals that the bird statue is the legendary Maltese Falcon, worth millions, and that several people have already died for it. The Falcon mysteriously arrives in Spade's hands, and, lest it causes more deaths, he uses it to play all parties against each other until they reveal their guilt and are arrested. Though the ins and outs of the plot are complex, the tropes of the hard-boiled detective are well established; immunity to the temptations of love or greed, the detective is concerned with vengeance for his dead partner.

As shown previously, Batman's creators drew inspiration from the hard-boiled detective when formulating Batman's character. In many ways, Batman is the detective

combined with the tropes of the superhero, such as a costume and super-gadgets like the Batmobile. Batman is a willing exile from society marked by his costume. He works outside the system, picking up the slack when the authoritative institutions are ill-equipped to battle supervillainy. As Commissioner Gordon explains: “Yes- he works ‘outside the law,’ as you call it, but the legal devices that hamper us are hurdled by this crimefighter so he may bring these men of evil to justice...” (qtd. in Vaz 4). He fights an unending battle against the criminal class, trying to prevent the apocalypse from descending on Gotham City. As Batman himself observed, “Without him the city slides into chaos” (Dixon 3).

But what happens when the apocalypse does come? This is the narrative issue at the heart of the year-long storyline *Batman: No Man’s Land*. After Gotham City is ruined in massive earthquake, the U.S. government chooses not to rebuild but rather to cut the city off from the nation as a No Man’s Land. Those who chose to stay behind are faced with a landscape in chaos with no law and where supervillains established themselves as leaders. So what does Batman do? He continues to fight for order. He waits several months, learning what new order this ragtag society will establish, and then fights to protect it, even when it means fighting alongside those who were once villains. Eventually Gotham City is rebuilt and brought back into the United States, but that would not have been possible without Batman fighting for civilization’s survival.

One question which must be asked is, if Batman is an Outsider, why does he surround himself with a “family”? It is because Batman, as a rugged individual, is able to embody the duality of American culture. The Puritans wanted to be a “city upon a hill,” an example of how a society should work. But they needed to be an example to somebody. The Puritans could set themselves apart, but they could only be effective as

part of a larger community, fulfilling both individual and group needs. As Danny Fingerroth explains: “We need to be lone gunslingers, and we also need to belong to the Lone Gunslingers Club and hear the gossip about all the other gunslingers” (98).

Existentialism

“[My parents] showed me that the world only makes sense when you force it to.”

-Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

An important question to ask about the rugged-individual archetype is why he makes himself a willing exile from society. While the rugged individual may not always be welcomed in a community due to his knowledge of the Other, he also purposefully sets himself apart as an outsider. The key to understanding this lies in the hero’s motivations. The rugged individual becomes the savior-hero when societal institutions fail to halt evil and the hero is only able to understand that need because those societal institutions have failed him in the past. For Batman, this moment came when the police were unable to prevent the murder of his parents and then failed to capture the murderer. Next, religion failed to offer a greater meaning to the deaths. In that moment, Bruce Wayne could no longer trust in any societal institution, be it secular or religious. He instead developed his own stricter moral code as well as a separate belief system based on justice.

Though Batman was created during the era fo modernism in America, there had been a general loss of faith in both government and religion as a result of the First World War and the Great Depression. Batman, reacting to these sentiments through the rugged-individual archetype, illustrates the importance of belief for the continued functioning of society.

The trail of the rugged individual through the history of literature reflects the

increased secularization of society. Cooper's Natty Bumppo came from a society where religion was still central, and he would often reflect and discuss religion both with settlers and natives. By the time of the cowboy, religion became more implied. There was usually a church in town, but the cowboy would rarely be seen attending regularly, preferring to commune with God in nature. The urban setting of the hard-boiled detective and Batman is almost devoid of religion. This does not just reflect an increase of secularization, but also a multireligious society without a single, unifying faith (Fingerroth 23). And since myths are meant to be universal, the religious context has been dropped while still allowing for depictions of the power of belief. The truth is that even a secular culture which questions the meaning of existence requires a belief in foundational values in order to function, even if it must choose those values for itself. This is an existential philosophy, and one to which Batman adheres. But even in this sphere of thought, the need for redemption has not disappeared. It has only moved to more human agencies instead of religious ones and superheroes have replaced saints (Lawrence and Jewett 44, 83).

Batman embodies the existential philosophy firstly by confronting a world which refuses to make sense. The murder of Bruce Wayne's parents was a senseless act. Even though authors have tried to attribute a conspiratorial motivation to the mugger, such motivation would only be discovered later in Batman's career. For young Bruce, the act was without purpose and also showed that the police were ineffective in enforcing the law. Instead, Batman would have to create his own moral code, one based on his ability to enforce it (Fingerroth 69-70).

Bruce Wayne created meaning in his life through bringing criminals to justice.

As Batman writer and editor Dennis O'Neil explained:

Everything with the exception of his friends' welfare is bent to the task he knows he can never accomplish, the elimination of crime. It is this task which imposes meaning on an existence that he would otherwise find intolerable. (Uricchio and Pearson 186)

In this way he is like Sisyphus, repeating the same action over and over without being able to complete it (Uricchio and Pearson 195). There will be no end to crime and evil in Gotham City, not just for the sake of continuity, but because it is a reflection of the real world. At least the iteration of saving the world is more glamorous than rolling a boulder up a hill (Lawrence and Jewett 244).

Batman embodies the existential philosophy secondly by denying societal institutions. Despite working with the angel Zauriel, the demon Etrigan and the embodiment of the wrath of God, the Spectre, Batman does not profess any religious faith. For instance, in Batman's vow, there is no mention of God or forgiveness, only of his parents and revenge (Robertson 55).

Batman also does not believe in the law. What gives meaning to his life is the pursuit of justice. He devotes himself to this with, well, religious fervor (Campbell, *Power* 151). Batman's devotion to this cause also highlights the struggle between societal and individual interpretations of justice. Batman and the villains he fights are good examples of individual philosophies pursuing power (Fieffer 36). But the police, who are meant to represent society, come across as honest but inept, as they never seem to hold on to their prisoners and Arkham Asylum empties out every other day (Warshaw 65).

Despite this, Batman still fights to defend societal institutions. Even though police

and religion have failed him, he does not seek to destroy them and replace them with his beliefs. Instead, he supports and defends them, leading to an interesting dichotomy in the character. There are two reasons why Batman defends these institutions. One is that he fights for order, and the loss of such institutions would lead to chaos. The other is that he does not wish others to confront the meaninglessness of the universe as he has. He did not come back from the confrontation completely sane, and others would return less so.

Lastly, Batman embodies the existential philosophy by denying the absurd.

Absurdism and existentialism begin at the same point, that the universe is meaningless, but arrive at vastly different conclusions. Existentialism adheres to the concept that an individual can create meaning in their life. Absurdism says that life is a cosmic joke and any attempt to find meaning will result in failure. And in the DC Universe, the absurdist philosophy is dramatized by Batman's archenemy, the Joker.

"The Joker is Wayne's intellectual opposite. Chaos in place of order. Nonsense in place of deliberate action. The ardent versus the frivolous. No wonder they are archenemies" (Dixon 13). As Batman's opposite, the Joker also embodies a mythic archetype, the Trickster (Schwartz 43). There has been a universal tradition of casting the antagonist as a clown (Campbell, *Hero* 294). In Christian beliefs, the Trickster is the Devil. In an existentialist world, it is the absurd.

Like existentialism and absurdism, the origins of Batman and the Joker begin at the same place: confronting a meaningless universe through the death of loved ones. For Batman, it was his parents; for the Joker, his wife and unborn child. As illustrated in Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker wants everyone to confront a meaningless universe, and he will force society to any way he can. "I've

illustrated there's no difference between me and everyone else! All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day." (295). The fact that, as an audience, we cheer for Batman is evidence that as a society we believe in order built on foundational values, wherever those values may come from.

American Nightmare: The Gothic

"Get him from every angle, boys' the Joker urged. 'Don't scrimp on his best side. You do have a best side, don't you?'"

'Yes. My dark side.'"

-Will Murray, "Bone"

The creation of detective fiction is not the only debt which Batman owes to Edgar Allen Poe. Poe also defined and popularized the American branch of the Gothic genre, stories which explore the dark side of human nature. Gotham City, whose very name is related to Gothic, is a city of extremes-- extremes of wealth and poverty, law and crime, light and dark. Such extremes make it the perfect landscape in which to investigate cultural boundaries and taboos through the sublime and the terrifying (Lloyd-Smith 5; Botting 10). Like the rugged individual, Batman also embodies a Gothic hero, reinforcing these cultural limits by punishing those who break them. And the villains and monsters that break those taboos are able to embody the fears and anxieties of their contemporary society (Hogle 4). In America, these anxieties are often the result of the failings of the American Dream (Savoy 167). Through techniques such as doubling, atavism, and atmosphere and landscape, Batman becomes a liminal figure guarding against the Gothic's dark chaos.

The Gothic is much like the detective story in that both allow the reader the vicarious thrill of transgressing societal taboos while providing closure by restoring order at the conclusion (Lloyd-Smith 5). The Gothic allows the protagonists and the reader to enter an exciting world of adventure and violence where we again encounter the Other. And onto the Other can be projected the negative values of a culture, thus defining the positive by what remains. When the Other is defeated, it results in a heightened sense of morality and social order (Botting 7). As a genre, this type of story has been recognized as being cyclical in nature, arising in a time of crisis and then disappearing once the crisis is resolved. This is because the definition of a social transgression differs with each generation, resulting in new fears and anxieties and a need to reinforce the cultural limits each time (Hurley 193-4). Batman reveals this as the Gothic aspect of his character is emphasized at different points of his career, and pushed to the background during others.

American Gothic came into being soon after the original British version, but was defined by different concerns. While the British had a rich history into which they could set their stories and project their fears, America had to concern themselves with the present and a different landscape (Savoy 174). America's limits were defined by Puritan values and their fears were the result of the savage frontier and racial anxieties (Lloyd-Smith 4). These fears gained expression through doubling with the savage Other and human regression as well as the frontier landscape, elements which are still used today to express the Gothic.

Superhero comics may seem like an odd place to find the Gothic, as superheroes and horror are diametrically opposed. The Gothic uses terror and horror to portray helplessness while superheroes are a fantasy about power and self-reliance (Klock 74).

But, like the outsider and the Other, there is a dualistic affinity where both genres use the same tools to achieve different ends. One cannot have a sense of power without having felt helplessness.

Batman encountered this feeling of helplessness through the Gothic early in his history, in the confrontation with the vampiric



Figure 10 *Detective Comics* #31, Sept. 1939.

Monk in *Detective Comics* #31-32 (Brooker 50). In the story, the Monk kidnaps Bruce Wayne's fiancée, Julie Madison, and Batman follows them to Europe, where he rescues Julie and kills the vampire with silver bullets (Fox 39-60). Interestingly, citizens of both Gotham City and Europe are as terrified at the appearance of Batman as they would be at the sighting of a vampire (Figure 10).

The dualistic affinity of the outsider and the Other creates a fear of doubling. Batman and criminals are both antisocial and use fear and violence to achieve their goals (Peptone 217). The only difference is that Batman wants to achieve virtuous ends while the end goal of the criminal is vice. But in American Gothic, there is always the fear that in order to defeat the savage, one must become the savage (Lloyd-Smith 44). And worse yet, that such a savage nature is already lurking within the individual, just beneath a veneer of civility (Lloyd-Smith 86). For Batman, that means that only his strict moral code prevents him from becoming like a criminal. Such was the case during the *Knightfall* saga, where an injured Bruce Wayne was replaced by Jean Paul Valley as Batman. Valley found himself using increasingly violent means in order to fight crime,

eventually allowing the cannibalistic Abattoir to fall to his death (Moench, *Batman* #508 20). Having crossed this line, Valley was no longer worthy to wear the mantle of the bat and was forced by Bruce Wayne to retire the title.

Batman also embodies this doubling by being both a Gothic hero and a Gothic monster. He is a liminal figure, not having an integral identity but splitting his time between man and bat (Hurley 190). As a hero, he is the last of a “noble” bloodline living an isolated existence in a remote mansion. He was tragically orphaned in a moment frozen in the horror of having to confront his own mortality (Botting 75). He is also a creature of the night, using violence and fear to get his way. Batman is not only the guardian of the line between the human and the grotesque, the sane and the insane, he is the demarcation. The split between mask and face marks an incomplete transition into either the rational or the irrational (Coogan 107). Those who act within Batman’s moral code are citizens, while those who work outside those bounds are marked as criminals.

Another mark of the Gothic story is, as Fred Botting explained, “the disturbing return of pasts upon presents” (1). Batman is a man haunted by the past. First and foremost is the death of his parents. In this case, he mourns the loss through imitation (Bruhm 268). Thomas Wayne was actually the first person to wear the Batman costume, wearing it to a charity costume party (Wein). Bruce uses the costume to honor his father. The other event that haunts Batman the most is the death of Jason Todd, the second Robin. It represents Batman’s one true failure to protect the innocent. And that past returned during the *Hush* storyline. Batman was plagued by a villain known as Hush who knew Batman’s identity as Bruce Wayne and used it against him. In one of the most shocking moments in Batman history, Batman was able to confront Hush, who revealed himself to

be Jason Todd, returned from the dead. It was later revealed that this was actually the shape-shifting Clayface, but for that moment Batman and the readers could not escape the terror of the dead returning for revenge.

Doubling also creates a fear of atavism, that the regression into the savage Other will also result in the regression of the human into a more primal form. While Batman again represents this boundary, able to go between man and bat, several of his rogues' gallery do not have such freedom and remain atavistic grotesques. But their atavism does not take the form of regressing to apes. Instead, characters like the Penguin and Killer Croc reveal the horror that man may not have descended from simians, but other animals. But the most horrific of this type is perhaps Two-Face, a character inspired by *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* who is both human and monster. Once District Attorney Harvey "Apollo" Dent (originally Kent), half his face was horribly scarred when a criminal threw acid on Dent during a trial (Daniels 45). This resulted in a violent and repressed side of Harvey's psyche, the Other lurking just underneath, being released and perhaps revealing that such a monster lurks within each of us.

The idea of a terrible secret lurking just beneath the surface of the psyche is mirrored in the environment of Gothic tales. The Gothic often takes place in an antiquated sphere, where secrets from the past are easily accessible (Hogle 2). Readers may not even be realize this trope in Wayne Manor, since everyone is aware of the hidden cavern beneath the home, the Batcave, where Bruce keeps his secret identity of Batman. Of course, this is actually an inversion of the classic Gothic trope. In the Gothic, the secret place beneath the dwelling would hold a secret from the past. But the Batcave looks to the future, with its advanced technology and machinery. It is Wayne Manor which holds on

to an aristocratic past (Schwartz 42).

Wayne Manor is only one setting in Batman stories, and not the most popular one. Most of the action takes place in Gotham City, whose urban landscape takes the place of the Gothic's traditional dark forests and mountains (Botting 64). Instead of caves which bandits use for hideouts and ominously shaped trees, Gotham City updates the effect for a modern city, with enormous skyscrapers forming canyon-like passageways and abandoned buildings functioning as hideouts. And while Gotham City is meant to be all cities, its look is inspired by New York City, which was Batman's home for his first few adventures. But as writer Bill Finger explained:

Originally, I was going to call Gotham city 'Civic City.' Then I tried Capitol City, the Coast City. Then, I flipped through the phone book and spotted the name Gotham Jewelers and said, 'That's it,' Gotham City. We didn't want to call it New York because we wanted anybody in any city to identify with it. Of course, Gotham is another name for New York." (Kane 44)

Gotham City does not achieve its Gothicness solely through its appearance, but also through its color. Gotham is a city of darkness, and Batman's artists rely largely on blues, grays and blacks to illustrate it (*Batman: Cover to Cover* 157). Batman's costume matches his environment, allowing him to slip in and out of shadow easily and yet is another mark of his embodiment of the line between man and monster (*Batman: Cover to Cover* 79).

Batman is a Gothic hero, an archetype related to the rugged individual. Both types fight on a frontier to protect society from evil, reinforcing the moral boundaries that

provide order. As novelist Eric van Lustbender wrote: "...the Batman remains essentially the same, which speaks volumes about his lasting power as a symbol of elemental fear and of protean protector against the encroachment of night's dread anarchy" (qtd. in Uricchio and Pearson 207). He fights the night's encroachment by being a light, shining on the individual's potential as described in the American Dream. It seems contradictory that one man can contain the American Dream and the American Nightmare, but such duality makes Batman all the more human and all the more fascinating.

Chapter 4

Batman and the Outsiders

“Every generation of comic book readers deserves to have the comics belong to them, not their older siblings or parents.”

-Marv Wolfman, introduction to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*

Batman has been one of the most enduring superheroes created and will soon be celebrating his seventieth year of publication. Part of this continued popularity is due to Batman’s ability to appeal to successive generations of audiences on their own terms (Collins 180). Each generation deserves its own myths, and so each generation receives its own Batman, one which emphasizes the aspects of Batman myth which will appeal to the contemporary audience and pushes his other aspects into the background (Brooker 10). But, as Danny Fingeroth rightly points out, other myths have not been able to make such a transition. “There is no ‘Moses for the 1940s,’ no ‘John Henry for the 1950s,’ no ‘swinging sixties Gilgamesh.’” (20). Why is Batman able to continue as a modern myth while others get left in the past? Part of it is that Batman has no primary ur text. He is not set in one canonical story set in a specific period, but has appeared in several equally valid texts over the years (Uricchio and Pearson 185). This allows Batman to remain a popular myth reflecting the here and now (Fiske 334). As a result, he is partly a fluid signifier, with some unchangeable aspects of his mythos but with the freedom to adopt the cultural values of each generation (Brooker 39). This adaptation is not just the result of the constant stream of creators who write the adventures of Batman. The adaptation and

subsequent popularity of Batman is the result of a series of cultural negotiations of the creators responding to the consumer demands of the readers as well as the response of the dominant cultural authority.

It should be remembered that superheroes are geared towards the rising generation, not the one in power. As a result, Batman, despite his recognition as a cultural icon, is only afforded the position of a second-class citizen in the arts, outside the domain of the dominant culture. But this is the position in which he can be most effective. Just as Batman the character works outside the law to effectively create order, Batman the comic book works best outside the dominant culture, where it is able to pass on cultural values without the preachiness of an authority figure. In effect, each generation feels that the comic book belongs to them. But when the dominant authority or creators attempt to subsume Batman for their own purposes, the stories lose their potency and become ineffective.

A brief look at the recent series of Batman films, beginning with Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989, will illustrate this point. The 1989 film defined Batman for a generation. Dark, moody and with a new take on the origin, this was not their parents' campy Batman. But the only way the studio, the dominant authority, was able to convince Tim Burton to return for *Batman Returns* was to give the director almost total creative freedom (Reinhart 47). The result was not dark and moody, but gloomy and depressing, with an almost directionless plot that did not serve the title character. Fans demanded a change, and the studio responded by taking control and replacing Burton with Joel Schumacher. Schumacher promised to make *Batman Forever* "a living comic book, and I think the word comic is important" (qtd. in Daniels 186). The new film was a brightly-

colored extravaganza with comedic villains and audiences seemed to want more. *Batman and Robin* was rushed into production, and while Shumacher ostensibly had more creative control, the studio demanded more product placement and merchandise potential. The result was a film which mistook image for actual message and failed at the box office (Campbell, *Hero* 20). After several years, a new generation of viewers received their Batman in 2005's *Batman Begins*, a film which responded to the failings of the previous films, the creative vision of the director and the demands of the studio by returning the gothic atmosphere while offering a coherent and serious story. This new series was made for a new generation in that it was a new take on Batman's origin and, as will be seen in the upcoming *The Dark Knight*, reinterpreting villains such as the Joker and Two-Face.

As seen with these films, and will be seen with the comic books, Batman goes through what Umberto Eco described as a closed causal chain. Where normal events go from A to B to C and so on, superheroes go from A to B to C back to A, reestablishing the mythos for each generation of readers (155). The result is that, as editor Jordan Gorfinkel explained, "Batman naturally goes through an evolution every decade or so" (qtd. in Daniels 197). These "evolutions" result in comic book "ages." While there is some controversy over how to define each age of comic book history (see Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* and Klock's *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* for conflicting accounts), I choose to define the ages in terms of these generational evolutions, resulting in a new age approximately every fifteen years. A close analysis of these ages, here identified as golden, silver, bronze, dark and contemporary, will reveal the negotiations between text and cultural institutions which define Batman for each era (Greenblat 226).

The Golden Age

“Well, kids, there’s your proof! Crooks are yellow without their guns!- Don’t go around admiring them.. rather do your best in fighting them and all their kind!”

-Bill Finger, *Batman* #1

The golden age of comic books began with the creation of Superman and ended with a Senate hearing concerning alleged links to juvenile delinquency. It was a period marked by the greatest sales of comic books and the most vehement accusations by the voice of authority. It was also the period that witnessed the most changes in Batman as creators sought to define his myth, swinging from avenger-vigilante to father figure in a few short issues (O’Neil, Viper 26). It was an age that defined everything Batman would become.

Just as each generation deserves their own myths, they each deserve a unique form of expressing said myths. Before comic books there were dime novels, film and radio, and afterwards television, rock’n’roll, video games and the internet. But for the children of the 1940s, the genre was the comic book (Jones 144). Superheroes, of course, reflected the interests of their time, and while Superman pointed towards science fiction, Batman reflected an interest in criminals and monsters. Those were popular themes in Hollywood at the time and, as seen before, remarkably similar in theme (Brooker 49). Both types were cautionary tales, glorifying and vilifying the actions of these self-determined individuals (Boichel 7; Jones 94). Batman allowed the best of both worlds, glorifying that type of action while condemning the gangsters and monsters.

Batman was initially a hard-boiled detective in a costume. He relied as much on luck and instinct as actual detection to solve the crimes. He was also unafraid to use lethal

violence, at one point threatening: “Your choice gentlemen: Tell me! Or I’ll kill you!” (Fox 22). This was also the first trait changed by the dominant culture. Parents quickly noted the popularity of comic books among their children, and were duly concerned when they saw such heroes gunning down criminals. In order to avoid controversy, DC set out to turn their vigilantes into role models for their readers (Jones 171). This resulted in the creation of an in-house code of acceptable behavior for heroes, which included that no hero could knowingly kill (Jones 165). It also resulted in the creation of Robin, a character to whom young readers would more immediately relate. There was some initial concern about the reaction of parents to Batman taking a child into battle, but the matter was settled by reader response as sales of Batman comics skyrocketed. Batman quickly received a second title and was firmly established as a father figure (Brooker 59).

The next step in establishing the Batman brand came from outside the comic book field. The entertainment industry was quick to pick up on the popularity of these new superheroes and rushed into production radio shows and movie serials. Batman never received his own radio show, but he and Robin made regular appearances on *The Adventures of Superman*. He was, however, the first superhero to have a movie serial, most likely due to the fact that Batman was an easier character to translate to screen than his effects-heavy compatriots. Nineteen forty-three’s *Batman* also created some of the final elements which established the Batman brand: the Batcave and the butler Alfred (Reinhart 15).

There was a synergy between movies, radio and comic books at this time, where each felt free to make adjustments to a character, which would then be adopted by the other media (Fingerhuth 39). Hollywood felt it important to create a comedic-relief

character as well as a home for Batman for the movie serial. Upon hearing this, Bob Kane and Bill Finger were quick to add them to the comic book. While the Batcave was easy to envision, Alfred was not. Originally portrayed as portly and bald, they had to quickly adjust the character to match the thin and balding screen version. The serial also marked one of Batman's few involvements in World War II, as he battled, albeit unknowingly, a Japanese saboteur. In the comic book, Batman's involvement in the war was mostly confined to selling bonds (Brooker 76-8).

After the war, the dominant culture became increasingly concerned with the effect comic books were having on their consumers. Readers's tastes had changed, moving away from superheroes and on to crime and horror comics. Social commentators and psychiatrists, notably Dr. Fredrick Wertham, were afraid that comic books were stunting intellectual learning and leading to criminal and deviant behavior. Marya Mannes compared comic books to "intellectual marijuana," saying, "Every hour spent reading comics is an hour in which all inner growth has stopped" (Heer and Wocester xvi). Critic Dorothy Parker wrote:

For a bulky segment of a century, I have been an avid follower of comic strips- all comic strips; this is a statement I make with approximately the same amount of pride with which one would say, "I've been shooting cocaine into my arm for the past twenty-five years." (35)

Batman was used to addressing the anxieties of the time, but what happens when he becomes the anxiety? DC Comics reacted by moving its heroes into line with the dominant culture. Batman was not only a father figure, but became an honorary member of the police force, working inside the system, and a leading citizen, able to walk the

streets of Gotham City during the day without its citizens fearing him (Kane 45). DC also established a review board to approve their comics before publication. These moves did not improve sales, but rather sent them into a slump as the image of the superhero lost its potency.

It also did not prevent Dr. Fredrick Wertham's 1954 attack on the industry in *The Seduction of the Innocent*. Dr. Wertham had worked for many years with juvenile criminals in Harlem, noting that the majority of these criminals read comic books. What he failed to realize was that 90 percent of the children in America were regularly reading comic books at this time. Dr. Wertham attacked every aspect of comic books, but left his longest diatribe for Batman and Robin (Daniels 84):

They constantly rescue each other from violent attacks by an unending number of enemies. The feeling is conveyed that we men must stick together because there are so many villainous creatures who have to be exterminated...Sometimes Batman ends up in bed injured and young Robin is shown sitting next to him. At home, they lead an idyllic life. They are Bruce Wayne and 'Dick' Grayson. Bruce Wayne is described as a 'socialite' and the official relationship is that Dick is Bruce's ward. They live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases...Batman is sometimes shown in his dressing gown...It is like the wish dream of two homosexuals living together. (qtd in Fieffer 52)

Dr. Wertham's assertions do seem incomprehensible, and Batman's creators actively denied fashioning any such fantasy. But it must be remembered that there were no images of homosexuality at this time, so gay men had to practice bricolage, drawing

out such images wherever they could (Medhurst 153; Brooker 126). Such a reading of Batman and Robin's relationship is possible.

The issue of any connection between comic books and juvenile delinquency came to a head at Senate hearings in April 1954. A Senate committee had been formed to investigate the growing number of juvenile crimes, and while they were concerned with many possible sources, they did spend three days in New York examining the comic-book industry. The committee's results were ultimately inconclusive, though they did warn comic-book publishers to create a self-censoring code or the government would create one. The industry chose to censor themselves.

The Silver Age

“Yes, Robin, I've become a human 'fish!'”

-cover of *Batman* #118

The silver age, lasting from 1954 until 1970, is, in many ways, the nadir of Batman's history. The Comics Code Authority crippled creativity, setting strict standards for the portrayals police, criminals and romance, and preventing any scenes of horror and the Gothic. Many publishers closed house, and Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman were the only superheroes to survive the purge and remain in publication. But their stories became derivative and formulaic and could not compete with the growing medium of television. Batman became what Dennis O'Neil described as a scoutmaster and then a comedian to try and drum up sales (Pearson and Uricchio 19-20). But by the end of the silver age, it was television that came to Batman's rescue and made him popular again.

Due to the Comics Code, Batman was stripped of his power as an outsider and became a tool of the dominant and conservative culture. Since the Comics Code

prevented any crimes that were imitable, Batman could no longer face off with his classic rogues' gallery (Daniels 85). Instead, he went through a "monster fad," addressing the concerns about atomic energy and scientific exploration through alien encounters, bizarre transformations and time travel (Vaz 63).

Creators also addressed the homosexuality issue by creating potential love interests for the duo in the form of Batwoman and Batgirl. Batwoman was really Kathy Kane, a former circus acrobat who used her inheritance to imitate Batman. She was eventually joined by her niece, Betty Kane, as Batgirl. Despite being crimefighters, this female duo still showed the conventional signs of womanliness. Instead of utility belts, they had

purses filled with "flashy feminine tricks," such as lipstick filled with tear gas, a compact of sneezing powder and a hairnet net (Daniels 91-3). The romance that these female characters pursued was decidedly one-sided, however, resulting in a screwball comedy as Batwoman and Batgirl pursued an uninterested Batman and Robin (Reinhart 22). While the romance was played for comedy, it was still used to create a faux family around Batman. In addition to Robin, Batwoman, Batgirl and Alfred, there was

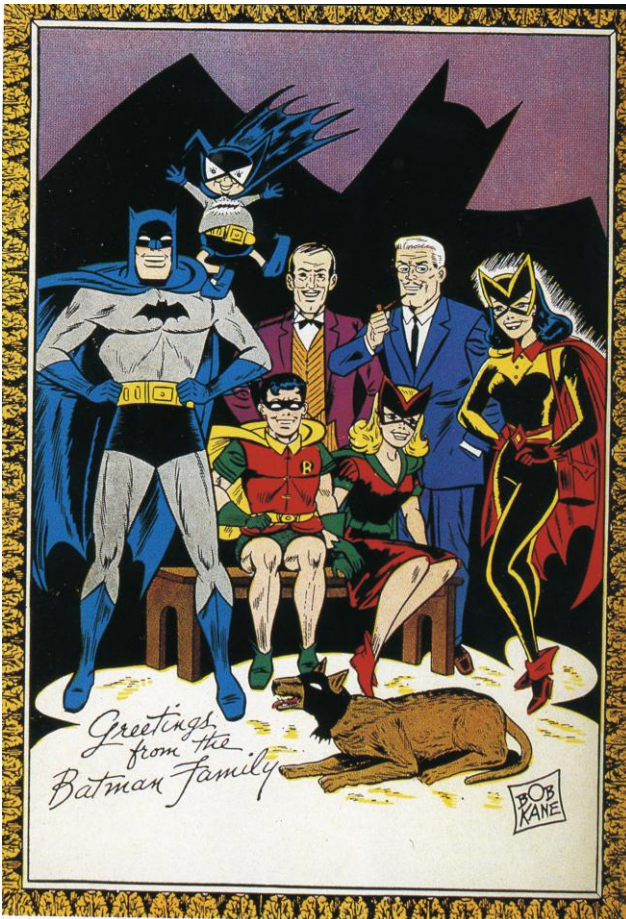


Figure 11 Batman's Silver Age Family: Batman, Bat-Mite, Alfred, Commissioner Gordon, Batwoman, Robin, Batgirl and Ace, the Bat-hound. Daniels 92.

the family pet in Ace the Bat-Hound (Figure 11). Creators stretched credibility even further with the introduction of some odd “relatives,” such as Bat-Mite, an alien from either outer space or another dimension, and Mogo the Bat-Ape (Daniels 93). These last two in particular reveal the level of desperation to which Batman’s writers and artists were forced by catering to the establishment.

Despite the flashy gimmicks and new characters, Batman still struggled to sell in the post-Comic Code era. Creators increasingly turned to humor as the answer, turning Batman’s adventures into a series of one-liners and slapstick action. But this failed to achieve results and Batman was approaching cancellation. DC decided to bring in editor Julius Schwartz in 1964 to take Batman in a new direction. Schwartz had already had success revamping several golden age characters to the silver age, and DC was hoping the same magic would be transferred to one of their enduring brands. Schwartz first move to create a “new look,” marked by the appearance of a yellow oval around the bat symbol on Batman’s chest. This marks a streamlining of the character, as all references to science fiction were removed and the dependent members of the Bat Family were jettisoned (Daniels 97). Schwartz also created an alternate solution to the homosexuality issue by killing Alfred and replacing him with Dick Grayson’s Aunt Agatha (Vaz 47). Finally, he began to reintroduce the classic villains and criminals to the stories (Baichel 14).

This new-look Batman may have resulted in the return of more classic elements from the golden age but for the pop-art phenomenon of the late-60s. Pop art and its related field, camp, raised comic books to the level of art. *Life* reported: “Pop art and the cult of camp have turned Superman and Batman into members of the intellectual community, and what kids used to devour in comic books has become a staple of avant-

garde art” (Spigel and Jenkins 123). Comics latched onto this respectability and used it to launch Batman’s career to new heights through a 1966 television show (Brooker 182).

Batman’s live-action TV show was the definition of camp. It followed the maxim of Susan Sontag, who first put forth the theory of camp as “serious about the frivolous and frivolous about the serious” (qtd. in Brooker 220). In some ways, Batman has always been campy, as it took seriously a man who dressed like a bat (Medhurst 156). The producers of the show added another layer to the paradigm through overly-earnest performances and a self-mocking wit (Brooker 220). This attitude of being hip by being square helped make the show an instant success, earning an Emmy nomination for outstanding comedy as well as a theatrical film between the first and second seasons (Brooker 195).

The success of the television show meant that comic books had to reflect this camp worldview. Batman once again became the comedian, only this time much more self-aware of this status. The show also necessitated other changes, including the return of Alfred and, for the third season, a new Batgirl, this time Commissioner Gordon’s daughter, Barbara.

The show’s success also led to renewed debate about the effect of superheroes on children. Critics commented on the shows portrayal of police as dimwitted stooges and the social carnage of the violence. Ironically, such commentators referred back to the golden-age Batman as a shining example of what a comic-book hero should be, despite the previous accusations of promoting juvenile delinquency (Spigel and Jenkins 131). It is just an example of different portrayals of Batman in each generation. The critics did not have to worry long, though, as the camp fad passed in just a few short years. Part of the appeal

of camp was a cultural object's lack of awareness of its camp status, and Batman's self-awareness lead to the show being cancelled after three seasons. But the popularity created by the show allowed Batman's comic books to remain in print and redefine the character for a new generation during the bronze age.

The Bronze Age

"I'm sure we didn't give that a second's thought. I just wanted to make it Gothic and spooky. I was influenced by writers like Lovecraft and Poe, and I didn't think about Gotham City."

-Dennis O'Neil on setting a story outside Gotham City

The 1970s marked a return to Batman as an outsider. The Comics Code was revised, allowing more relevancy and maturity to enter into superhero stories, as well as a return of the supernatural. The artistic control over Batman was also lessened. Previously, artists had to imitate the style of Bob Kane, but suddenly they were free to express their own interpretations of Batman's design and creative teams began to receive recognition from fans. By the 1980s, Batman showed actual growth as a character, with Dick Grayson transitioning in Nightwing, the creation of a new Robin, and a new awareness of his position in the cultural landscape.

With cancellation of the television show and the revision of the Comics Code, Batman ceased being controlled by the dominant culture. His comic books were also being read less by casual readers and more by a devoted fan-base who wanted to see a change in Batman's characterization. No one found the comedian Batman funny anymore, but there was an appeal for the anti-authoritarian avenger, reflecting the growing discontent with dominant cultural authority (O'Neil, Viper 27). Batman once again

returned to his Gothic and detective roots in the hands of writer Dennis O'Neil and artist Neal Adams.

The O'Neil/Adams stories marked an immediate shift in the Batman paradigm. In their first story, Batman traveled outside Gotham City to confront vampires. This move allowed Batman to become much aware more of the world around him. Dick Grayson also moved out to attend college, allowing Batman to move into Gotham City and once again be a solo hero, with only the occasional team-up with Robin. These elements allowed social commentary and relevancy to be added to the character. The creative team eventually created a new foe to be added to the rogues' gallery in eco-terrorist Ra's Al Ghul, whose concerns over the state of the world's environment reflected America's growing awareness of the effects of pollution and industry.

Subsequent creative teams, addressing topics such as drugs and government corruption, carried on this social awareness. Such stories addressed the anxieties of the consumers in a more profound way than the dominant culture, especially with the rising distrust of the establishment during the Vietnam War and Watergate. No longer was the American Eden corrupted by savage Others, but within through corrupt leadership (Lawrence and Jewett 152). The image of the outsider took on new meaning as the negative aspects of society were no longer projected outward. The outsider then becomes a symbol of rebellion, a rallying point for the restoration of the classic virtues which create an organized society. But Batman was not an active agent of change, since the dominant culture would not allow such a threat to exist. Instead, the rugged individual merely serves as an example of man's potential, leaving the choice of how to change up to the individual.

Interestingly, this dynamic is illustrated in the relationship between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson. To Robin, Batman is the voice of authority. As Dick moved on to college, he began to disagree with some of Batman's tactics. Batman had not become corrupt, but Dick no longer thought that he embodied the best of human virtues. So Dick quit being Robin and established his own identity as Nightwing, taking the best of Batman's training and combining them with his own ideals.

Part of the Batman mythos is defined by the dynamic duo of Batman and Robin. As Dick transitioned into Nightwing, Batman sought out a replacement for Robin. He found one in a homeless orphan named Jason Todd, who tried to steal the tires off the Batmobile. This new Robin marked another shift in tone, beginning a downward descent into more dark and violent territories.

The Dark Age

"I'm certain Biggsley's interest in the Batman franchise centers on my dark creature of the night persona, so I doubt the film he intends to make will...address my academic interest in slapstick comedy."

-Howard Chaykin, *Batman: Dark Allegiance*

Beginning in the latter half of the 1980s, Batman reached new heights of popularity due to cross-media exposure in his film series and television cartoon. Batman himself had four comic-book titles, and various members of his "family" also received their own books. This was also a time marked by a great deal of darkness in the narrative, expressed by grim and gritty violence, a gloomy atmosphere and a general tone of pessimism. Surprisingly, this popularity and tone can be directly linked to one man: Frank Miller. Through the seminal works *Batman: Year One* and *Batman: The Dark Knight*

Returns, Frank Miller explored Batman's origin and ending in a way that defined the rugged individual for the end of the twentieth century.

In 1985, DC Comics streamlined its forty-five years of continuity through the event *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. This marked a clean break with the previous comic ages that allowed all of DC's superheroes to be redefined for Generation-X readers. The most successful of these revamps was Batman, ironically because it didn't change anything at all. Frank Miller realized that Batman was an American legend, and did not change any of the previous work of Bob Kane and Bill Finger (Daniels 157). Miller merely expanded on Batman's origin, exploring Bruce Wayne's first year as a crime fighter. *Year One* is consequential because it shows how the elements of classical and American mythology came together to build the Batman mythos.

Even more important is Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, one of the first comic books to be considered art. It achieved this high status because it disrupted preconceived notions of superheroes's narrative and visuals (Howe 47). *Dark Knight* was a deconstructionist work, analyzing the superhero and society in terms of politic, media, psychology and violence. Set in a dystopic future of street violence and ineffectual government, this Gotham City was a projection of 80s society run rampant (Fingerth 131). Into this setting returned an aged Batman, who showed the need for an outsider to provide structure for a safe society. Throughout the work, Batman portrayed almost every form of the rugged individual in Americana, from muscle-bound superhero to military patriot to even the horseback-riding cowboy (Collins 175). In each mode, Batman was shown creating order and passing on civic virtues which had been lost. The most notable evidence of this comes after an electromagnetic pulse wiped out all electronics in the

United States. Rather than see his city descend into chaos, Batman enlists an army of gang members to provide order. The result, as reporters announced: "...New York, Chicago, Metropolis--every city in America is caught in the grip of a national panic--with one exception. Right, Tom?" "...That's right Lola. Thanks to Batman and his vigilante gang, Gotham's streets are safe--unless you try to commit a crime..." (186).

The success of *The Dark Knight Returns* convinced movie executives to go ahead with a live-action Batman movie. The tone of the film would match the dark atmosphere of Miller's comics and be as far away as possible from the campy television show. Unfortunately, Tim Burton only adapted the style of the comic and not the substance, failing for the most part to bring any of the deeper meaning to the story, and with each subsequent film moving farther away from the core of Batman's character.

The comic books which followed Miller suffered from much of the same style-over-substance epidemic. Miller had been given creative control over Batman for those projects, and subsequent creators tried to imitate that freedom from the dominant authority without the creative vision. As Miller stated, the only thing learned from *The Dark Knight Returns* seemed to be the extreme level of violence presented (Klock 30). The comic-book creators felt that it was the violence that sold *Dark Knight* and that consumers wanted more. And the death of Jason Todd, the second Robin, seemed to back that up. In 1988, DC ran the "Death in the Family" storyline, part of which was a phone-in poll by readers to decide whether Jason Todd should live or die. The final tally came up against Jason by a mere twenty-eight votes (Daniels 161).

Through the years after Jason's death, Batman faced a series of crises of increasingly apocalyptic violence, including riots, plagues and finally a devastating

earthquake. Batman also faced personal trials, such as having his back broken by Bane and the maiming of Barbara Gordon/Batgirl by the Joker. About the only bright spot on this bleak landscape was the introduction of Tim Drake as the third Robin, whose youthful enthusiasm somewhat counterbalanced Batman's increasing gloom.

The growing sense of doom and gloom in the comic books was indicative of the increased anxiety over the approaching end of the millennium. But this was not the only fear addressed during the Dark Age. Concerns over the role of technology in society were also addressed, in particular during the *Knightfall/Knightquest/KnightsEnd* storyline.

Bane, a villain who used designer drugs to increase his strength, defeated Batman and broke his back. Bruce Wayne handed the Batman identity over to Jean Paul Valley, who built a technology-based Bat-armor to defeat Bane (Figure 12). Valley himself was a product of technology, having been programmed since birth via hypnosis to be a warrior in the Order of St. Dumas. Valley's actions became increasingly erratic as he battled his



Figure 12 Jean Paul Valley in the tech-based bat costume. *Batman* # 500, Oct. 1993.

programming and depended more and more on technology to fight crime. After Valley allowed a criminal to fall to his death, Bruce Wayne returned to reclaim the mantle of the Bat and forced Jean Paul to overcome his programming as well as his dependence on technology (O'Neil, *Knightfall*).

Despite the pessimistic attitude, Batman's Dark Age was ultimately about hope. During each crisis, Batman was able to triumph through determination and

will power. Jean Paul Valley was able to overcome his programming through his human will and, in the storyline that closed out the century, *No Man's Land*, Gotham City was able to be rebuilt due to the determination of the earthquake's survivors. And it is this aspect of hope that has increasingly defined Batman during the contemporary period.

The Contemporary Age

“All this comic book stuff is way too high brow for me. I collect tribal art, schizophrenic painters, ‘outsider’ work, I believe they call it... There’s a message here somewhere. I know if I just stare hard enough...”

-Grant Morrison, *Batman* #656

Batman’s modern age, beginning in 2000, can best be described as an amalgamation of all his previous incarnations. He returned to his original costume design, sans yellow oval, as well as his detective roots. And, while maintaining relevancy and realism, he has begun to show a sense of humor again. While continuing to address the anxieties of the modern generation, this latest incarnation of Batman shows great hope for the progress of humanity in the twenty-first century

The dawn of the new millennium was marred by the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. This tragedy sent the United States into a state of fear and paranoia. It was a time when people were in the greatest need of heroes. But superheroes lost their potency in the face of this real crisis. What good were superheroes who never lost a battle, who would have stopped such an attack, when real people were risking their lives to save others? The answer was to emphasize superheroes’s weaknesses and failings, to make them more human. For Batman, that meant analyzing his humanity, both as Bruce Wayne and as one of the only mortals among superhumans.

During the *Bruce Wayne: Murderer?/Bruce Wayne: Fugitive* storylines, Batman abandoned his alter ego after Bruce Wayne is accused of murder, seeing his humanity as a liability to his war on crime. But without the regular human contact that his other identity provided, Batman began to lose perspective and act irrationally towards his “family,” eventually realizing he was less effective without the safety valve of Bruce Wayne to release his tension. Once Wayne was exonerated, Batman embraced his alter ego, no longer as a façade, but as a man with a life of his own.

Embracing his humanity also made Batman more aware of the potential threat of the superhumans around him. Just as the world has become concerned over the United States’s position as the sole superpower, Batman became concerned over his fellow heroes’s abilities to act unilaterally and without oversight. It is the classic question of who watched the watchmen. And the answer for the DC universe was Batman. During 2005’s *The OMAC Project* and *Infinite Crisis*, it was revealed that Batman had created a failsafe, the Omni Mind and Community, so that humanity could protect itself if any superhero ever went rogue. The OMACs represented the ultimate paranoia of the outsiders against a dominant authority, a plan which backfired as the OMACs were subsumed by Alexander Luthor during an attempt to rewrite the universe and had to be defeated by Batman.

In the last two years, Batman’s comic books have seemed to combine his status as an outsider and authority figure in the superhuman community. There has been a continued move to a synthesis of Batman’s history, as seen by the return of Jason Todd as the Red Hood and of Batwoman, ironically as a lesbian. There has also been a marked increase in hope of mankind’s progress, as demonstrated by the reformation of several member of Batman’s rogues’ gallery, most notably the Riddler, who has set himself up as

Gotham City's premier private detective. Even Frank Miller has returned, though his work on *All-Star Batman and Robin* seems more of a parody of his seminal works.

It is too soon to comment in depth on Batman's contemporary age, as we have only reached approximately the middle of the cycle. So far there seems to be a successful balance in the negotiations among creators, consumers and the dominant cultural voice. In fact, comic books in general are making great strides into mainstream culture while maintaining their independent voice, perhaps marking a new type of outsider/authority relationship. But Batman is not a predictor, only a reflection of society. As the pendulum of his character has swung between establishment tool to anti-authoritarian, only time will tell which direction it swings next.

Conclusion: Shadow of the Bat

"It started with an idea that he suggested. Then he came back with pages of this new character. And it looked pretty good to me. It seemed like an interesting character. I don't think anybody realized it would develop into what it has become today. In fact, I'm sure they didn't."

-Vin Sullivan discussing Batman's origin

By 1941, two years after Batman's debut, superheroes were already being equated with a modern mythology. Psychiatrists Laretta Bender and Reginald Lourie saw the parallels between the omnipotent supermen of today and of years past, with the transition from magic to science merely being a cosmetic change to express basic ideas in contemporary terms (Nyberg 16). One radio host interviewing comic book legend Stan Lee referred to superheroes as a twentieth-century mythology, with "an entire contemporary mythos, a family of legends that might be handed down to future

generations” (qtd. in Coogan 117). Batman’s legend has lasted for five generations so far and shows no sign of stopping. Superheroes form a postmodern mythology so universal they can be recognized at a glance (Fingerroth 169). Yet they are so complex a single character can be a father figure, a comedian or a vigilante and not contradict himself.

The continuation of the Batman mythos is unique in the history of the world. Richard Slotkin argues that true myths should be developed on a sub-literary level, passing through an oral tradition before being printed (*Regeneration* 4). But comic books are one of the first mythologies developed on a post-literary level, using the mass media formats of comic books, film and television to indoctrinate a mass society in the values and ideals of postmodern America (Feidler 125; Muir 3). As an artifact of popular culture on a monthly printing schedule, superheroes have a developed malleable exterior ideally suited to adapt quickly to the needs of successive audiences, while their existential core provides stability for long term publication.

Because of their adaptability, comic books have also become historical documents. As shown beforehand, they reflect the attitudes of society in a historical moment, offering insight into the thoughts of a culture. But, despite the fact that superheroes are only a reflection and that “Batman and all those costumed maniacs had dwelt and battled within a mythic realm far removed from the workaday world...,” they can sometimes have a direct influence on reality (Tam 508). The Batman story “Seduction of the Gun” led to changes in Virginia gun laws in 1992. Batman has also addressed controversial issues like child abuse in “Night Cries” and land mines in “Death of Innocents” (Daniels 173).

But such stories are the exception to the rule of mythology. They do not offer real solutions; only present the problems for consideration. In fact, most of Batman’s stories

do offer only illusory solutions and gloss over the more troubling aspects of history (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 550). But sometimes we need that. We need a form of escapism that takes our everyday worries and anxieties and turns them into joys (Jones 231). That is perhaps Batman's true legacy. No matter how bad the situation, and Batman's creators have thought up some diabolical situation, he always triumphs. And as Batman is the embodiment of human potential, that should create hope in each reader that he or she can overcome their trials (Fingerioth 14). However, this message is tinged with a warning about the darker aspects of human potential which have turned Batman into a brooding and obsessed loner. While Batman embraces all human potential, he also shows the reader that he or she should search out and emulate only the positive elements.

And as long as man needs reminding of that lesson, the myth of Batman will endure, just as the myth of Odysseus and Hamlet and Sherlock Holmes. Even if the comic book were to cease print, he would live on in the popular consciousness, just as those other heroes (Brooker 331). After seventy years of publication, Batman is an establish figure in the pantheon of cultural memory, an evolving symbol of American values and enduring virtues.

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