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# Static, Yet Fluctuating: The Evolution of Batman and His Audiences

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STATIC, YET FLUCTUATING: THE EVOLUTION OF BATMAN AND HIS AUDIENCES

by

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ABSTRACT

The Batman media franchise (comics, movies, novels, television, and cartoons) is unique because no other form of written or visual texts has as many artists, audiences, and forms of expression. Understanding the various artists and audiences and what Batman means to them is to understand changing trends and thinking in American culture. The character of Batman has developed into a symbol with relevant characteristics that develop and evolve with each new story and new author. The Batman canon has become so large and contains so many different audiences that it has become a franchise that can morph to fit any group of viewers/readers. Our understanding of Batman and the many readings of him gives us insight into ourselves as a culture in our particular place in history.

INDEX WORDS:   Thesis, Batman, Audience, Reader response theory, Superhero, Batman canon, Comic book, Popular culture, American culture, Supervillains, Continuity

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DEDICATION

To my Dad,

The Strongest Superhero in My Life

I wish you were here to read this thesis. I can almost hear you say, "Daughter, I'm not sure the world is ready for you yet." I'll miss you.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To Dan, Marta, Debora, Lori, and Rachel

My Faithful Sidekicks

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# 1. Introduction

> Batman: I'm whatever Gotham needs me to be. [ . . .] You'll hunt me. You'll condemn me, set the dogs on me because it's what needs to happen. Because sometimes the truth isn't good enough. Sometimes, people deserve more.
>
> Gordon: He's the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now [. . . ] Because he's not our hero. He's a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a dark knight." (*Dark Knight*).

In the last lines of the *Dark Knight*, Batman and Commissioner Gordon try to explain Batman's decision to run to Gordon's confused young son who cannot understand why the authorities would want to persecute the city's hero. Their words explain to the boy (and to the audience watching that film) that upholding ideals of good is sometimes more important than facing the crushing truth. By describing Batman's different roles, Gordon essentially tries to define Batman's identity, an identity that many critics and scholars as well as avid fans have attempted to reshape and change in the last few decades. Under the cowl, hiding in the darkness of the Batcave, atop a skyscraper looming over Gotham, sitting in meetings in expensive business suits, designing new tools to fight crime – one man engages in all these activities, but the question remains the same: who is Batman? The man behind the mask captivates authors and audiences alike as they enjoy the duality of Batman – the duality of his character who can be two different men with opposing desires and a single man intent on one goal, depending of how the artists portray him. The man in the mask and the man out of the mask, both are the same man, and yet they are still fundamentally different, two identities in the same body. Because of the continuation of various writers and artists over seventy years, the character of Batman has developed into a morphing, mutable symbol with relevant characteristics that develop and evolve with each new story and new author. The Batman canon is so large and so vast and contains so

many different audiences that it has become a franchise that can adapt to fit any group of viewers/readers with an interest in superheroes. It is a franchise appropriate for a four-year-old-boy with his plastic action figures; it is franchise adapted to please male teenagers and young adults who want to see the gore and violence of a world torn apart by evil and a dark hero who stands against the evil in the midst of bloodshed; and it is a franchise which can be shaped into a substantial story of a loner hero fighting for the innocent while resisting his own shortcomings, the ultimate fight between good and evil and between order and chaos which most adult audiences can appreciate. Batman is the struggle of one man, unique in his time and place and therefore completely set apart from all other stories, and Batman is the universal struggle of all mankind to fight back against evil without falling prey to the looming darkness. To understand Batman is to understand his fluctuating audiences.

Beginning in comic strips by Bob Kane in 1948, the Batman franchise has evolved over seventy years through comics, television shows, books, and movies. Different artists have developed several different veins of the comics to chronicle the various histories of Batman: *Batman* (the original), *Batman Detective*, *Batman: Gotham Knights*, *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight*, all using the same characters (Bruce Wayne, Robin, Alfred, Joker, Catwoman etc.) to plot out storylines that further embellish the character of Batman and the supporting cast. In a larger frameset, some comics continue the story while other branches of Batman decide to go back to his origins and retell the story in a different way, creating yet another universe for the characters. With a few exceptions of straddling two eras, most of the comics belong to one of three eras: the Golden Age (1939-1956), the Silver Age (1956 - 1986), and Modern Batman (1986 - present). These three are the long periods of the comics, but a few shorter runs were written alongside the main comics to flesh out a story arc or a major villain (*Batman: Death and*

*the Maidens*). Sometimes a main run devotes five to fifteen issues of the comics to follow a particular story, incorporating the story into the main line of a major comic such as *Batman Detective* which has reached up to six hundred issues. Currently, DC has merged the different strands of the comic together, driving towards a climax that concludes with Bruce Wayne's death and the mantle of Batman being passed to another hero, Nightwing/Dick Grayson. However, another author could decide to restart the main line of the comics and return to Batman's origins, as Christopher Nolan did in his films: *Batman Begins* and the *Dark Knight*.

The Batman franchise has had to adjust, alter, and redefine itself in order to keep audiences interested enough to support the franchise financially. If the comics tried to keep the same feel and tone of the 1940s, they would fail because we have moved into a post-modern era that does not hold the same values of the 1940s, nor do the simplistic, weak storylines of the 1940s appeal to audiences of the new millennium. Because of the need for change and because so many writers and artists have contributed to the canon, Batman and his sprawling legend continue to evolve, spinning out multiple plotlines and characters that are reinvented in both comics and visual texts, including movies and cartoons. Each new author interprets the character of Batman differently and adjusts the character's persona to fit the author's perception of the superhero in the current age. The identity of Batman has developed from his early days, changing so drastically that he probably would not recognize his former, simpler self. The result of this simultaneous stability and fluidity creates new audiences that are subjected to new interpretations of the same plot or character. Each movie that capitalized on the subject of the deaths of Bruce's parents gave the murders a different emotional tone. Each artist imagined Gotham City and Wayne Manor and then tried to capture that look and tone on the paper, from the minimalist drawings of Mark Wagner to the panel-crowded pages of Frank Miller. Each new decade brought

about new authors' visions of how Batman would look, respond, and interact. After so many on-going storylines, Batman can be viewed in a variety of ways; he is a man with human needs, a superhero without any superpowers, an icon both to fictional people in his own world and to us as a vicarious audience living through his adventures, and an alpha male who inspires and intimidates people in his city. Batman's body has changed; his height, muscularity, and agility growing more and more impressive to the point of exaggeration and absurdity. Money and physical power serve as essentials in the formation of Batman as agency for his actions and authority; money works to serve the man by being channeled into the machines and equipment that he designs. His alter ego, Bruce Wayne, relies heavily on his inherited wealth and social position in the community of Gotham in order to access money to fund Batman's needs. All these aspects of his characters define him while he evolves.

Before the comics grew dark and overtly violent in the 1980s, becoming inappropriate and frightening for young readers and sensitive audiences, the television show of the 1960s portrayed the characters through camp and farce, careful never to become too serious or dramatic as it sought an audience of young, presumably innocent children. Later television shows explored more complex stories and characters through cartoons such as *Batman: the Animated Series* and most recently WB Kid's *The Batman*; both shows gave the characters a darker, more serious tone than the 1960s television show did, but the cartoons were not as bleak and depressing as the later comics of the 1980s and 1990s. A new animated series, *Batman: the Bold and the Brave*, features Batman teaming up with various, lesser-known DC superheroes; with a dry, ironic wit, Batman narrates this cartoon, offering new insight into the mindset of this usually-silent character. Each cartoon series targeted children as the primary audience, but children have changed over the last

twenty years, and the pacing of *Batman: the Bold and the Brave* is faster and more colorful with action sequences close together in order to engage the short attention span of today's children.

Several novelizations of Batman have been published in the last few years, such as *Batman: Inferno* and *Batman: Dead White*. Since the film *Batman* came to theaters in 1989, five other full length films have followed, most notably *The Dark Knight* which many movie critics consider Oscar-worthy and exemplary at showing a post-modern superhero. All these different media continue to evolve Batman's character towards a darker, grimmer, more threatening figure. He has changed from a positive, cheery, sometimes silly fellow wearing a cape and tights and speaking in melodramatic exclamations to a brooding, dark, self-destructive man wearing a reinforced black suit equipped with deadly assault weapons and speaking in a low growl. Some of the changes reflect the changing eras of American culture through the late twentieth century while other changes are influenced by the authors of Batman media. These authors develop Batman as they imagine him, drawing on the fundamental characteristics of the Dark Knight while spinning out their own impressions to satisfy their storylines or to create a different aspect of the superhero.

Scholars have done extensive research on Batman since his beginning in the 1930s, but most of the research centers on the suggested homosexuality of Batman himself along with his relationships to Superman and Robin. Because so much has been said regarding his possible preference for same-sex sexuality (though Batman has had many girl friends and relationships with women, he had been partners with Robin and very close friends with Superman for almost seventy years), I note that few researchers can point to concrete examples of open male homosexuality in comics, television, or films; most researchers point to implied or possible instances of homosexuality rather than actual moments of same-sex dating or intercourse.

Batman's relationships with Robin and Superman continue to push limits of accepted "straight"

behavior as his playboy demeanor is essentially a front. This front keeps Gotham citizens from

suspecting his identity as Batman, but scholars continue to suggest that the playboy front may

also serve as a straight front to protect a queer identity.

Most research on Batman delves into the forms of camp such as the 1960s biweekly

television show or the film *Batman Forever* in which the gay implications are so frivolous, so

entirely laughable in their absurdity of stereotypes and gay figures that they become dismissible

in their purpose. Batman and Robin together under the harmless concept of the television show

(and to some extent the cartoons of the 1990s as well) do not pose as dire a threat to the

heterosexual majority who feel obligated to control and censor content in children's

entertainment. Much of the campy tone results from Frank Wentham's attack on comics in the

1950s, *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he condemns Batman and Robin as homosexual,

using signs of their highbrow lifestyle, manners, and language as proof of their queerness. The

sheer silliness of camp lets the characters and the story lines play themselves out, without posing

any real threat to heternomativity, and mid-century parents permitted children to read comics and

watch the television series because the character of Batman seemed much more harmless through

the eyes of camp in all melodrama and farce.

Though Batman evolves and changes, the core of his character (mainly the drive to be a

superhero and fight crime) does not change, and it cannot change or Batman would cease to exist.

In an interview about *Batman* and *Batman Returns*, Tim Burton resolutely stated "These

characters are all fucked up. They are impurely pure. If Batman got therapy, he probably

wouldn't be putting on this bat suit, and we wouldn't have this weird guy running around in a

cape. So there is a form of things not being integrated that is quite appealing" (Breskin 635). To

some extent we wanted this "weird guy" to remain fucked up, crazy, and unable to help himself because once he does discover inner peace or a more appropriate way to handle his rage and guilt, the story ends. Once Batman no longer has the guilt, his story and identity cease to exist. Bruce hangs up the suit and seals off the Bat Cave forever before heading to his downtown office; Robin turns back into Tim Drake and goes out with his high school friends to pursue normal teenage activities; and Nightwing leaves Bludhaven to become Dick Grayson again, adopted son of a millionaire and pre-law college student. The story dies as the characters return to ordinary, everyday people living in a busy city with an extremely high crime rate. To keep the story alive, Batman must remain tortured and vengeful, forever a creature of the night who gives evil one hell of a dogfight.

As the comics darken and become more complex, the character of Batman adapts to his sinister world and grows far more complicated and in-depth than the character was at his origin. His world has changed because our world has also changed. With the movement from modern to postmodern in literature and art, the universe of comics has altered in order to accommodate and in some way explain a world of the dark and bizarre, reflecting our human evolution in its extremes and depravity, an understandable move after the horrors of WWII and Vietnam. The authors and creators of comics have adjusted their art to fit the current times, a move that forces comics to grow beyond their simple constructs and elementary language to reflect a maturity that embodies extreme violence, turmoil, and language.

Batman as a genre has morphed continually to keep itself alive and in print, ensuring that the franchise will continue though it may change tone and purpose for varying audiences. The Batman of the 1940s was outlandish, ridiculous, and silly in look and language, clearly written for children. This foolish Batman gave way to the campy TV show of the 1960s with its over-the-

top performances and melodrama. Camp seemed too silly for the culture of the 1970s, and the

Batman of the 1970s is too flat and simple for popular culture now. The genre defines itself by

the audience who is willing to pay for its entertainment, and thus this genre and therefore Batman

will become whoever the audience wants him to be. In the last two decades, the comics and now

the films have turned towards darker, grimmer expressions of Batman in which he regresses

deeper and deeper into the shadows, suggesting that he is slowly losing his sanity and his

humanity as his world mutates into a devastation in its depravity. Unlike *Watchmen* that is a

single graphic novel and therefore self-contained, Batman does not have containment or a fore-

seeable end. Batman was initially created for children, primarily boys, but over time his

audiences has shifted to include a host of different audiences that exist at the same time. Of the

1989 movie, *Batman,* Ellen Meehan notes that

> *Batman* has struck a chord deep in the American psyche. Certainly the temptation
> to speculate on the larger significance of *Batman* is strong given the irony of the
> dark, yet ultimately hopeful film being released at a time when the mythic Gotham
> of the *Dark Knight's Return* and the mythos of the American Imperium both seem
> to crack under the strains of social injustice and personal irresponsibility. (48)

In this case of art reflecting life and vice versa, the drive of Batman has been to keep current

while still maintaining some of its early values and comic book flare. But again, the drive is all a

matter of audience.

　　We as an audience pay for the R-rated comics, flock to the theater to see the agony and

angst and not the camp, and buy into a world of insanity and tainted morality because we have a

stake in this culture that imitates our own. Though these comic-book stories may frighten and

disturb us, on a deeper level they simultaneously illuminate the depths of cruelty and violence to

which mankind may sink and prove the heights of heroism to which we may aspire. They reflect

our humanity back to us, but it is a humanity distorted and twisted, a humanity that we may fear

and revile while we recognize its ultimate truth about us and our evolution. In this truth, Batman becomes our hero as he attempts to redeem and punish the crimes of his world, becoming a savior and executor as he tries to resist the allure of darkness that constantly tempts him. We rejoice in his victories just as much as we understand the vices that drag him back to the dark shadows of his self-constructed identity.

For the purpose of this thesis, the terms "audience" and "reader" will be used to describe those who engage with the texts. Audience will refer to a collection of people at given time for a certain genre, a collection receptive to the medium. Reader will refer to a single person who constructs his or her continuity in response to the narratives. An audience is a group of readers, each with a unique continuity of the Batman materials. I will discuss the contextual concept of continuity in great depth in Chapter 3, but for the most part, continuity will define not only the individual writer's mental collection of Batman texts as he or she creates yet another text, but also the reader's collection of material engaged that constructs the reader's image of Batman's story. Of course, there is the occasional reader who has experienced one text of Batman and has a single perspective ofnwhat the Batman world entails. However, as the franchise becomes ever more popular, these text-limited readers disappear and emerge as readers who have encountered multiple texts. Especially after the commercial success of the *The Dark Knight*, most Americans have at least a basic knowledge of Batman, even if they have accumulated their knowledge through conversation with an avid reader rather than reading the texts for themselves.

The Batman media/franchise is unique because no other form of written or visual texts has this many artists, audiences, and conflicting storylines. Understanding the various artists and audiences and what Batman means to them is to understand changing trends and thinking in American culture. The character of Batman has developed into a symbol with relevant

characteristics that develop and evolve with each new story and new author. The Batman canon has become so large, so vast, and contains so many difference audiences that it has become a franchise that can morph to fit any group of viewers/readers. Our understanding of Batman and the many readings of him gives us insight into ourselves as a culture in our particular place in history.

# 2. Six Characteristics of Batman

> They told me there was nothing out there, nothing to fear. But the night my parents were murdered I caught a glimpse of something. I've looked for it ever since. I went around the world, searched in all the shadows. And there is something out there in the darkness, something terrifying, something that will not stop until it gets revenge. *[pause]* Me. (*Batman Begins*)

As many comic book criminals have voiced, the question still remains "Who is Batman?" To understand Batman is to understand his audience, but he seems to be turning into a darker, sleeker, deeper character, but he is still the same character. He stays in the shadows, hidden from sight; he flies over Gotham for all to see. He helps the weakest victim in the hour of desperation; he herds hoards of villains back to Arkham Asylum on a regular basis. He receives no monetary compensation for his efforts; he never seems to run out of money. Often he does not earn even admiration from those he saves as his own city accuses him of crimes he did not commit. He is a superhero and an ordinary man without any superpowers; he is a hero and an antihero; he is your best friend and your worst enemy. He inspires thousands to greatness, yet cannot conquer his own nightmares and overwhelming guilt. With his parents' fortune and his thriving company, he has enough money to buy whatever he wants; however he uses that money to become a savior and a scapegoat, working to rid his city of scum and villainy while creating an alter-ego that functions more as a symbol than as a man. All these elements are fundamentals of the persona of Batman, but not all the elements are used in every Batman stories.

The entire franchise of Batman has become a mirror that reflects whatever an audience wants to see. Batman exists purely for its multiple audiences; though it has some internal consistencies that do not change, the rest of the franchise has fluidity in that it can morph and reshape to fit multiple stories for multiple audiences. Batman is unique in that all the stories are

canon, despite there being multiple reads or artists' interpretations of the same events or same

characters. No other franchise has this many authors, this many stories, and this many forms of

media. All the different storylines can exist simultaneously, different versions of the same events.

For example, in the main run of the comics, *Batman,* Bane breaks Batman's back in a fight

several years after Bruce adopted Dick Grayson (*Batman* #497). But in the TV cartoon, *The*

*Batman*, Bane breaks Batman's back a few years *before* he adopts Dick (Episode 2). Both

versions of the story are the same events told differently, but they both belong to the Batman

canon. The comic books may be held as the most original canon, but the movies, cartoons, and

novels are also considered canon by readers and writers.

However, many observers of Batman texts would argue that despite the changes in his

storylines, he is still Batman: the Dark Knight who fights the bad guys and saves the innocent. If

Batman stays the same, then there can be no significant shift in Batman texts and therefore no

change in audience. Because Batman has a range of audiences, I infer that he does change from

text to text; yet, I argue he does stay Batman to an extent. In order to explain (and then to

understand) this complex range of primary materials, I first must stress the fact that Batman's

character, like the franchise, is a paradox in that it continues to change while remaining static.

Every artist first finds a point to develop further and then ignores or brushes over the existing

other points that previous creators have used. Regardless of the medium (film, comic, book etc.),

certain features of the Batman franchise do not change. In order to illustrate this, I propose that

Batman/Bruce Wayne has six characteristics that remain constant for the most part, regardless of

the genre, and a number of fluid points that change depending on the intent of the artists. Those

six constant characteristics define his gender, physicality, wealth, mental capacity, background,

and superhero status: Batman is always an alpha male, tall with dark-hair, rich, highly intelligent,

guilty over the murder of his parents, and a human superhero without powers who designs his own tools and weapons. Most audiences familiar with Batman have come to expect these six elements in the franchise because they are all fundamentals of Batman; even a person who has only watched one Batman movie and never read a comic can recognize these six parts as vital components to Batman. These core building blocks work together to create a persona that remains constant, and any change to these parts would disturb the fundamentals of the character. Batman cannot be female, or short and blond, or poor like Clark Kent, or dumb, or free from guilt and living with happy parents, or developing powers from a bite by a radioactive spider. He has the aforementioned six characteristics because they have existed from his conception in the 1930s when Bob Kane imagined a human man capable of becoming a superhero.

Though the role of gender in comics has changed since Batman's conception to allow for more equality of the sexes, Batman's gender has allows been a core part of his character. In the early comics, he was a thoughtful, mild-mannered gentleman along with being a self-trained athlete, but by the 1980s, he began to develop aggressive male traits that made him more masculine than before. Despite being continually plagued by guilt and regret, Batman is an alpha male in every sense and construction of the word, and he continually works to perpetuate the identity that the term promotes. Though circumstances of his birth and inherited wealth helped to put him on top as the alpha male, he works diligently to ensure that he stays on top, dominant and in control. In their discussion of the alpha men as leaders, Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson surmise "Make no mistake: the world needs alpha males. When used appropriately, their courage, confidence, tireless energy, and fighting spirit make them natural leaders in competitive situations" (38). Though applied to the real world in a general sense, this statement also describes the inner workings of Batman's reasoning, his claim that he alone must fight the evil of the night

because no one else can as successfully as he can. He uses variations of language with his allies,

villains, and citizens of Gotham, but all the variations aim to intimidate and overpower others

who might stand in his way or not immediately obey Batman's commands. To further coerce

others into action, Batman talks in a low growl, dropping his normal voice at least an octave in

order to sound as scary and threatening as he looks, until he sounds animalistic and ruthless.

Like most comic book heroes, Batman's emotions are equated with weakness. Kaja

Silverman discusses the juxtaposition of men and masculinity: "The male subject, on the

contrary, cannot avow feminine masochism without calling into questions his identification with

masculine position. All of this is another way of suggesting that what is acceptable for female

subject is pathological for the male" (190). Though Batman sometimes confesses to having

feelings (usually confessing guilt to an attentive Alfred or his concerns about a dismal future to a

female love interest), those feelings appear in moments of quiet calm between turbulent fights.

Though these extreme changes in temperament (abject despair to willful destruction and back

again) seem to reflect a bipolar personality, the comics promote these sudden changes as a way to

engage the audience and flesh out Batman's character. Though a brutal fight will engage a comic

book reader, the reader needs moments of calm between fights to decompress and re-identify

Batman as a man rather than a killing machine. The extremes of Batman's character as well as

the dual identities of the Dark Knight and Bruce Wayne add dimension to him. "Pushing

variation isn't unusual in the strange world of the superheroes. In fact, excess is one of the

defining characteristics of the genre. They exist in a universe of pumped muscles, fluid bodies,

manly tears, and shorted, expositional soap opera" (Pedler 2). The feeling of exaggeration, of

stories bigger than life, plays a crucial role in comic books, and Batman works hard to perpetuate

exaggeration of himself, especially as a symbol rather than a man. As Bruce tells Alfred in

*Batman Begins*, "People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy and I can't do that as Bruce Wayne. As a man, I'm flesh and blood. I can be ignored – I can be destroyed but as a symbol, as a symbol I can be incorruptible, I can be everlasting." The symbol of Batman becomes bigger than the man in the suit; it becomes legend, unable to die or be destroyed simply because it endures.

The shape and stature of Batman's body have altered drastically over the last six decades. In the 1950s, he appeared in the comics as an average man – tall, well-built, imposing (especially when contrasted with Dick Grayson whose short, childish stature made Batman appear more masculine), but he was still a man in his thirties whose body appeared the same whether in the blue and gray costume or the straight-cut suits he wore to work. By the 1970s, Bruce Wayne's body stayed relatively the same in the business suits, but Batman's physique became bigger, harder, and taller, bulging with muscles as his face grew stronger and his chin squarer. In the comics printed today, Batman's body could be plastered on any gym poster, an overwhelming imposition of testosterone and massive masculinity. But despite these changes, Batman's body is still of interest to artists as they replicate it over and over again in comics, film, animation etc. Part of the superhero ideology resides in the superhero being able to fight – body against opposing body – should the enemy confront him. In his discussion of manipulated bodies in *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault states "The classical age discovered the body as an object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body – to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (136). Foucault focuses mainly on institutions that aim to control the body and make it work for the particular goals of the institutions, but the whole genre of the superhero

centers around the superhero's body and the way that it must be manipulated, shaped, and trained

so that it obeys the mind of the superhero.

Since the superhero's body stands as weapon, sometimes a weapon that uses even more

destructive weapons, the place of violence for the superhero is always tied closely to the image of

the body. Modern comic books constantly push images, violence, and athletic feats to the

extreme, and the entire world of the comic book morphs into a dangerous minefield of

impossible challenges to allow the superheroes room to push their extreme bodies to limits far

outside human capability. In his discussion of masculinity in art and culture, Peter Middleton

notes about Batman:

> His large muscular body strains and stretches as he fights the villains. [. . . ]
> Roundedness or fatness or any signs of effeminacy are all clear indications of
> weakness. [. . . ] Much the commonest form of the heroic male figure depends on
> almost erotic exaggeration of the male physique, especially in the superhero
> comics. (31)

The body images return to the concept of superhero masculinity: hard, violent bodies that can

withstand punishment and can deliver incredible devastation. Part of this "erotic exaggeration" of

male bodies appears in the lavish poses that these superheroes assume. They are poses of actions

with muscles nearly bursting through the tight spandex.

> The modern version of Batman is the closest to the mesomorph. But this wasn't
> always the case. And Batman's build had changed dramatically across the years. [.
> . .] We have observed that Bruce Wayne was a solid man, taller than average with
> a modest build. He wasn't starting from scratch, but he wasn't an all-star athlete
> either. (Zehr 10)

As comic book audiences came to expect surreal images in comics, Batman grew taller and

wider; his shoulders became wider and solid; his body filled the comic panels with its imposition

of muscle and might, power coursing through his enormous stature to make him bigger and better

than ever before. He needed the huge body and muscles to fight against physical threats almost as

he needed to let out his rage. His massive body allows him to externalize that rage without fearing physical repercussions, but this enormous body also assures readers of his capacity to win a physical fight against foe. Upon meeting one of Batman's enemies on screen or on page, the audience recognizes their own inability to overcome the enemy, even if this recognition is done subconsciously, but they have confidence that Batman's body will not fail him – or them. The audience knows that even if he does encounter a physical challenge that subdues him, he will retrain and return to fight again.

Along with being a tall, dark-haired alpha male, Batman is always rich. Batman will always have money: loads of money, lots and lots of accessible funds help to create his superhero persona, rooting both identities in a substantive, endless flow of cash that he channels into different funds to create personas for Batman and Wayne. The money becomes essential as Batman continues in his quest to rid the world of evil, implying that in the Batman world, money is not the root of all evil. He builds the Batcave as not simply a large room for training, but a three level facility that services all his research, holds all his weapons and machines, and allows him to endure brutal training sessions. Because he needs an endless flow of cash to sustain Batman, Bruce has to keep up the role of Bruce Wayne, CEO of Wayne Enterprises, to keep the money coming in for Batman. The money serves as a crucial facet of Batman's identity, a stable basis from the beginning of any story that continues to reinforce Batman's actions and decisions. If he has the money, he can buy the parts, and if he has the parts, he can build the weapon or tools to fight any foe.

Often fans of Batman have claimed that his money is his superpower. In corporate, capitalism-driven America, we esteem wealth as the greatest power, the pinnacle of prestige and importance. Superman may have cool powers with the flying, X-ray vision, and super-strength,

and Spider-Man can climb up skyscrapers of Manhattan and swing from webs, but when they resort back to their human personas, Clark Kent is a lowly newspaper reporter and Peter Parker is a free-lance photographer trying to make rent. Bruce Wayne is a successful billionaire who can throw money around with ease, confident in the power of his fortune. Clark and Peter can disappear in a crowd, but Bruce will stand out and be noticed because of the clout surrounding himself and his wealth. Finding Bruce in a Chinese prison, Henri Ducard/Raz al Goul comments "The world is too small for someone like Bruce Wayne to disappear, no matter how deep he chooses to sink" (*Batman Begins*). As Mr. Wayne, Bruce has recognition and prestige with the millions behind his name. *The Dark Knight* was the first movie to suggest that the money had a foreseeable end as a weasel of an accountant balks at having to rearrange the finances to keep Bruce Wayne's trust fund filled, but Lucius Fox insists that the accountant run the numbers until he finds extra money to keep the fund fluid. Should Bruce ever lose the money, Batman's continuation would be in serious jeopardy; Batman would still have his strength and training, but without intricate tools and fast vehicles, Batman's effectiveness as a superhero would become questionable at best and disastrous at worst.

Though Bruce's story begins with his love for his parents, Batman's story begins with the murder of the parents. Batman cannot exist without those murders; his identity as a superhero remains grounded by his guilt that he could not save the two people who mattered the most to him. In his research into Batman's traumatic beginning, Michael Brody argues that "Perhaps Bruce's premorbid personality was intact enough to bear any blow, hence his quick recovery. But the solution, because of it quickness (the creation of a Batman) indicated problems and perhaps a pseudo-recovery. It is both bizarre and psychologically over-determined" (173). Brody might be a bit too quick to dismiss the impact of the Waynes' deaths and jump to the assumption of Bruce's

recovery. Even in his adult years, twenty, thirty years after the murders, he is haunted by their deaths, driven by remorse to atone for their deaths. He becomes indeterminably stuck in the child stage, blaming himself for a tragedy which he could not stop. "Ultimately, however, the problem for Batman is that he remains an Oedipus who has not gone through the Oedipus complex" (Fisher par. 13). Batman has not even stepped into the first processes of the Oedipus complex: love of the mother, hatred of the father. Therefore he can not move forward into the later developmental stages – refusal of the mother and acceptance, then identification with the father – and remains in the pre-stages, unable to move past a child's self-blame as a way to cope with the frustration of losing both parents.

Throughout all the various structures and restructuring of Batman's stories, the Waynes' deaths reinforce Batman's emotional and psychological motivation to continue the fight. Muir notes about Batman's back story that

> If *Batman Begins* falters anywhere it is only in the sequences which regurgitate the murder of Bruce's parents. Almost note for note, the sequence was handled just as deftly in Tim Burton's *Batman*. They add nothing new to the legend, though admittedly it would seem difficult to reboot the franchise without this element of the tale depicted (97).

However, many of the storylines on Batman retell the story of his parents' murders, though rarely are the stories ever unique. These stories show the same sequence of events, but the audience must remember Batman's back story in order to understand his motivation. If at anytime the audience forgets and begins to question why a grown man would don a costume and go out into the night to fight crime, the character of Batman loses its drive and self-propulsion. The Waynes must stay murdered and Batman must stay continually guilty over their deaths for the motivation to continue and therefore for the stories to continue.

As the very first issue of the comics stated, Batman is highly intelligent. Most superheroes have above-average intelligence because they have to be able to figure out villains' nefarious plans, but Batman again proves himself superior as his analytic skills and facility for languages enable him to crack the crimes that villains commit and solve the intricate puzzles designed by criminal geniuses such as Riddler and Scarecrow. James Kakalios notes that Batman joins other ordinary, superpower-less men in their quest to become self-made superheroes. Such men face down

> supervillains armed with nothing more than a good right hook and the courage to appear in public wearing their underwear on the outside of their clothes. Of course Batman would try to even the odds somewhat by using his analytical brain, as highly trained as his body, to produce a fabulous array of crime-fighting weapons that he stored within his utility belt. (159)

His vast fortune may buy all parts needed for the tools and weapons, but it is Batman's intelligence that turns those raw materials into tools.

In the very first comics, Batman started as a detective, and his mental discernment, rather than base muscle and brawn, make him a superior hero. Not only can he fight and physically overpower opponents, but he can outwit them and unwind their schemes using his immense knowledge or in later films by designing complicated technology. Multiple computer operations, programs that would faze an IT graduate, and gadgets that resemble NASA equipment are always within reach to assist Batman, and he not only uses them, but creates and maintains them as well. Somehow, between running an ultra-successful business, patrolling the streets at night, and keeping himself in top (if not inhuman) condition, Batman has found time to build and rebuild his armor, weapons, Batcave, and vehicles. His mental capacity, like his physicality, appears to have no limits; he accumulates more and more knowledge and recalls the facts and details instantly to counter mind games with Scarecrow or the Riddler and sometimes the Joker. Batman

needs the muscle for intimidation and enforcement, but he had to have the intellect to understand what move the villains were going to take next as well as to discern their location, mode of crime, and devious intent.

Unlike other DC name heroes such as Superman and the Flash, Batman has no superpowers. He cannot fly, move at super speed, or see through walls. However, he compensates for his human limitations by creating weapons and tools that enable him to fight alongside other superheroes. He designs his capes to help him glide from tall heights, and he swings on steel cable from propelled batarangs; he uses the Batmobile on land, the Batboat on water, and the Batplane in the sky to move quickly to the center of action; and he uses hypersonic sound to hear conversations inside buildings or on cell phones. Batman trains his mind as well as his body simply because he cannot always rely on physical intimidation or advanced tools to overcome villains. Perhaps here he has the advantage over other superheroes because he understands his weaknesses and how to push past them in order to conquer his foes. Superman knows he can break an opponent into pieces and then fly away when confronted with a crisis so he does not have to plan extensively what to do after the fight; Batman knows he might be unable to defeat his foe and then make a hasty getaway so he must plan meticulously ahead of the fight to ensure he has covered every possible scenario and escape route. In *Batman: No Man's Land*, he explains to Clark Kent, "I have to be at least five moves ahead of my enemies, with contingency plans, and five backup plans for those contingencies at all time" (Rucka 126). After seventy years of texts, Batman audiences have become accustomed to him having a plan and surprising villains and audience with his foresight. A familiar trope of Batman is to have that twist of meticulous planning in the last scenes where Batman reveals to the villain (and therefore the audience) that he set up a trap or designed a new weapon or simply trained harder so he could

win. Then the audience has the pleasure of the twist as well as the satisfaction of seeing the

villain's despair at losing once again.

Batman's meticulous planning allows him to continue as a non-superpower superhero,

but it also allows the audience to connect with his character as they themselves have no

superpowers. "The superhero's powers are limited. If the hero were omnipotent, there would be

no possibility for conflict since no one could oppose him. Moreover, when a god is pitted against

another god the reader can identify with neither" (Browne and Fishwick 184). Though Batman is

a man who has driven himself to the farthest limits a human being can reach, he is still a man, not

a god. He does not have Superman's superpowers, the X-Men's mutations, or the Green

Lantern's ring. He must rely on his body, mind, training, and equipment to beat a foe, not an

alien power or scientific advancement. The individual readers can look at any form of Batman

and imagine themselves as Batman if they had the money and time to train. Because Batman is

fully human, Batman exists in the realm of possibility as far as readers imagine achievement.

As long at the artists include these six defining features, the fluidity of the Batman

franchise allows for the individual artist to change the minor details in order to fit his or her

interpretation of the story. These changes usually include Bruce's playboy image, the darkness of

Batman's character, his relationship with others, extremes of body image, the different looks of

the suits and vehicles, and the tools and gadget that alter Batman's performance on the job. This

open fluidity that allows for endless interpretations is one of the main reasons Batman continues

to thrive because writers can adapt him to fit multiple audiences. Noting the changes in Batman's

character, Philip Orr states "Batman/Bruce Wayne is not a do-gooder; nor is he, like Superman,

an embodiment of old-fashioned American values. What he is, literally, is a *split-personality*"

(170). However, unlike many with this mental disorder, this spilt-personality can communicate

between the two personalities, understanding both of Batman's and Bruce's motivations as well

as the dangers to both men. Batman has pushed himself to perfection so that, "what he's defined

as the peak of humanity is dangerousness and a lack of weakness. His relentless drive, though,

had made him (for all practical purposes) psychotic: he's a benign psycho but barely functional

as a person" (Wolk 97). This reading of his character as a benign psycho lets writers explore all

sides to his personality and then shape those sides to a particular audience. Batman is kind to

adopt Dick Grayson and to save him from foster care or an orphanage; that benevolent side fits

well with an audience of children watching a Batman cartoon. However, in the comics, Batman

can be exacting and borderline-cruel to Dick as he trains him to be Robin, a situation that

interests young adult readers who find the relationship between Batman and Robin to be an

exaggeration of tense parent-child relationships. Batman can also be very adult as he seduces

women and unleashes violence on criminals as the Modern Era comics show an older audience.

Batman's conquests are fodder for action-adventures movies; his motivation for fighting crime

would be a case study for any psychotherapist. He becomes a character that morphs all different

audiences while retaining all the six points that characterize him as Batman.

From these six characteristics, I move into the second part of my argument: the role of the

reader in establishing a continuity for him- or herself that assimilates all texts read into a logical

(though often internally conflicting) collection of knowledge about Batman. Wolfgang Iser

comments on the importance of assimilating texts into a somewhat organized continuum:

> Although tradition as a continual reshuffling of textuality preserves the
> accumulated wisdom of generations, it is, in the final analysis, constituted by this
> seemingly endless proliferation of narratives. It points to the deep need for
> continuity rather than continuity itself, the need to anchor practices and beliefs in
> something larger than the existing order. (26)

As I describe the task of putting Batman texts into order for the individual reader, I consider all forms of Batman media of equal importance for the reader. Film critics may compare and contrast Batman films to each to define artistic ranking, and comics book author push for complex, intricate stories, but the reader has the responsibility of assimilating the multiple texts into order to derive any meaning from them.

# 3. Continuity and the Reader's Response(ibility)

Most Batman audiences watch or read the various versions of the franchise because they want to see both the consistency and the fluidity of the stories – the stability and the interpretation. They enjoy the character of Batman, but they also want to see the different interpretations of him. Will he be cold and stern as in *Batman and Son* or warm and friendly with a good sense of humor as in the cartoon *The Batman*? Will he be developing his skill and struggling over his parents' deaths (*Batman Begins*) or confident in his abilities as a crime-fighter (*The Dark Knight*)? Will he be actively talkative and eager for companionship (*Batman Forever*) or reclusive and silent (*Batman Beyond*)? Though audiences may not consciously recognize that they are asking these questions, the interpretations of Batman help to keep the audiences' interests alive and the genre going. In his criticism of the *Batman Begins*, Julian Darius comments about the range of extremes in the Batman franchise:

> One extreme is the extreme is the 1960s television show. Indeed, certain 1950s and early 1960s Batman comics may be seen as even more unrealistic than the 1960s TV shows [. . .] On the other extreme is *Batman Begins*. [. . .] The previous four films each fall somewhere between the two extremes with 1989's *Batman* falling closest to the 1960s TV series. (Darius 149)

Though Darius is discussing the varying tones of the franchise – goofy and unrealistic vs. serious and grimly real – his focus on the extremes of Batman shows how the franchise can fluctuate to appeal to multiple audiences. To term the Batman audience as a confined audience at a single time would be erroneous as each text of Batman has a specific audience comprised of individual readers each with his or her own continuity.

I define continuity as a reader engaging a string of narratives, taking into account all the different storylines of any given franchise, and putting them together as coherently as possible.

For continuity in a show such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a reader would evaluate all seven

seasons of the television show, the post-show comic book series, and the novels written by

various authors as well as the original movie which predated the TV show, all media describing

the world created by Joss Wheadon. However, through reader response theory, a reader can

simply leave out or ignore whatever he or she chooses. If a reader enjoys the TV show but never

cares to read the novels or the later comics or watch the movie, then the story of Buffy, according

to this particular reader, begins and ends with the TV show. Whatever exists in the text of the TV

show constructs that reader's continuity, regardless of other forms of text about the same

franchise. Continuity becomes a means of each individual reader defining a franchise of limited

sources and deciding what he or she will allow as their own canon.

However, for Batman, readers cannot escape the need for an individual continuity because

they are unable for the most part to participate in the entire franchise. Can any reader ever hope

to read all the comic book issues since 1939, a number reaching well into the high 5000's? Since

the franchise has multiple storylines that essentially retell and redefine the same event (three

movies – *Batman* [1989], *Batman Forever*, and *Batman Begins* – have retold the murder of

Thomas and Martha Wayne, each with a different emotional emphasis and killer), continuity of

Batman must allow for differing versions of similar events. No truth exists as far as any

established storyline or canon would include; every reader can assimilate a unique view of

Batman, basing the continuity on whatever material the reader deems important or necessary to

him or her. An adult who has seen the last five movies of Batman develops a continuity

established on the films alone while a teenager who subscribed to the last five years of Batman

comics will have a vastly different approach to the franchise. One of the appeals of the Batman

franchise is that it offers its multiple audiences the opportunity to include or ignore whatever

storylines, characters, or events that do or do not attract them. As opposed to other franchises which have a set number of texts, Batman readers can pick and choose a continuity that best suits his or her individual personality and entertainment values.

The Batman continuity is always growing for the reader because every new text encountered must be assimilated into the reader's existing continuity or discarded as not legitimate for the individual reader. However, even discarded texts have to fit inside the reading experience because their content remains with the reader even if he or she ridicules the text as weak or worthless, as many Batman readers did for Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin*. In his writings on reader response theory, Stanley Fish argues that "everything a reader does, even if he later undoes it, is a part of the 'meaning experience' and should not be discarded" (4). Even a bad Batman text has a place in continuity. For Batman, there is not a set time when its continuity becomes finalized. The comics continue to climb in number of issues; new movies are created, new books written, and new cartoons designed. Though individual texts have a narrative arc (beginning, middle, and end) as *The Dark Knight* film or an episode of *Batman* the TV show does, the continuum of the Batman franchise keeps extending further and further without any planned conclusion as a whole.

Through Derrida's concept of *différance*, the franchise of Batman both defers any conclusive meaning and differs with individuals texts inside the franchise. Batman keeps adding new texts to itself and delays reaching any finalized meanings with its continuity. Meaning inside of any texts can never be final, of course, but with a franchise that does not end, most readers do not even consider the possibility of a finite number of readings, preferring the infinity of continuity. Yet, the growing numbers of texts also allow for the difference between the texts to engender binary opposites and compare differences inside the text itself. Batman will never have

a set number of meanings; it has grown too large and complex with too many texts for any conclusive finality of truth. Derrida writes

> Since language, which Saussure says is a classification, has not fallen from the sky, its differences have been produced, are produced effects, but they are effects which do not find their cause in a subject or a substance, in a thing in general, a being that is somewhere present, thereby eluding the play of *differance*. (64)

Because people create language in order to drive at some sense of meaning, language always represents things it cannot be. Meaning will never equal being as words can never become the objects they signify. The language of Batman works to signify two levels of meaning: the narration of the actual text and the interpretation of text into continuity. The narration signifies a story being told to the reader, a distinct voice that each reader filters through his or her own thoughts. In this process, meaning is tied closely to the reader's experiences for understanding of the text. After the reading process, the reader moves to the other level: assigning meaning inside the line of continuity.

Batman texts strive to represent a definition of meaning between the real and the imagined, the possible and the probable. Even with visual text of Batman's world (comics and film), readers still must create a world in which superheroes are not only possible, but also the norm. With each media of Batman and with each new artist, the reader imagines a setting that the artist begins and that the reader must finish. The artist gives glimpses on the worlds, but the reader must complete the picture. In *Batman Begins*, the audience is treated to several outside and inner shots of Wayne Manor, but the movie does not show every outside angle of the house or every room inside, leaving viewers to piece together their own pictures of Wayne Manor. Like physical surroundings, the Batman stories themselves have gaps which the audience must fill in using the text as a starting point.

> Taking these in turn, the location of the secondary world [. . .] is conceived as existing in the limbo between the reader's inner self and the words on the page. It is a sort of mental playground which the reader is aware of making and entering as part of the process of constructing meaning from text. The text is the regulator. It sets the limits. Beyond the textual limits lie states that are outside fictional experience. (Benton 28)

The regulator might work for the majority of fictional text, but for a franchise like Batman, the secondary world exists as an evolving form in which several texts have worked to construct a temporary world that can remain static or changing, depending on the whims of the reader. Though the individual Batman author helps to create a range of possible meanings, the reader puts his or her own interoperations of meaning into this secondary world.

To answer the question put forth to Batman artists – why continue to create in a franchise that so many artists have participated in rather than create completely original art? – the appeal of Batman for the artist resides in the familiarity; the artist does not have to create another whole character with a developed personality and back history. The Batman world has already been constructed, deconstructed, reassembled, fleshed out, and re-imagined. By realizing the six concrete characteristics of Batman, the artist knows that the reader will come to the new text with some understanding of Batman, whether primitive or matured. Because the six fundamentals of Batman stay largely the same from media to media, his character has the opportunity to shift as the artist concentrates on whatever he or she would like to include in the narrative. "The relationship between literature and the public encompasses more than the fact that every work has its specific, historically and sociologically determined audience, that every writer is dependent upon the milieu, views and ideology of his readers" (Jauss 87). This relationship takes on another dimension in the Batman franchise because the determined audience shifts, divides, and re-defines itself with each decade and change in American history. In his criticism "A

Humanistic Ethics of Reading," Daniel Schwarz states that "I believe that the close reading of texts – both from an authorial and resistant perspective – enables us to perceive more clearly. I believe in a continuity between reading texts and reading lives" (9). A connection between Batman and the real reader continues to appear through various texts, as readers map their preference of texts into a continuum that supports current America culture – a blend of both the fantastic and the real.

Until the emergence of comic books, most texts were limited to two specific media: the written and the visual. Many novels had illustrations to depict a scene, but comic books used pictures as narration, a way to advance the story when the written text stops. This blending of written and visualized text forces the reader to take the responsibility of not only reading the story but also deciphering the images. Commenting upon Iser's distinction between the voice of the text and the actual reader, Jerry Varsava argues in *Contingent Meanings: Postmodern Fiction, Mimesis, and the Reader,* "Along with the reader's own expectations, the implied reader determines the meaning. The implied reader is the textual perspective to which the real reader responds. The implied reader is a system of four main perspectives – narrator, characters, plot, and the fictitious reader" (66). Comic books are created in such a way that the artist expects the implied reader to put the two types of text together and to blend both into a narration that is different from words or images. The real reader must work to combine the two, using both to create new forms of meaning that, once again, work to shape the reader's continuity.

Until recently, academia has tended to ignore comics, often deeming them disposable art. This stance is understandable as early comics concentrated on their audience of children and thus had poor writing, melodramatic plots, and cheesy themes. Readers of Golden Age comics expected the fantastical in advancements of hyper science and extraterrestrial encounters, but to

non-comic readers, these comics are ludicrous and goofy. In his essay "Why are Comics Still in

Search of Cultural Legitimization?" Thierry Groensteen argues:

> Moreover, it is virtually certain that western civilization itself is in the process of changing its conception of the relation between text and image. [. . .] But this theoretical objection is often accompanied by an aesthetic condemnation. If the marriage of text and image is impossible, it would at least inevitably distort and weaken the both of them. (66)

With this debate in mind, intellectuals must examine comics and ask if that distortion and

weakening of text and image does actually happen and if it does, is the narrative weakened as

well? If the purpose of a comic is to engage the reader in the story and draw the reader into

absorption of the art, does the responsibility of interpreting words and images together as a story

deny the reader an aesthetic experience? It is a different kind of responsibility from the reader

who engages only written texts in literature, but deciphering images can be just as intellectually

stimulating as imaging mental pictures while reading strictly written text. In his research on

reader response theory, Stanley Coen notes that "Iser and Fish point out that stated intentions

establish expectations in the reader, draw responses, are part of the reading experience, and are

neither to be believed nor used as the basis of interpretation" (46).

As in the James Bond films where longtime fans argue that Sean Connery will forever be

Bond while newcomers prefer Daniel Craig, the Batman films offer a choice between several

actors who have each portrayed the Dark Knight. Again, audience plays a significant part of

evaluating each Batman: Adam West played him first, heightening the element of camp and

melodrama. Michael Keaton brought a much more serious demeanor to film, but his Gotham was

dark, nightmarish world with over-the-top villains whose cartoonish appearance worked more to

amuse the audience than frighten them. Val Kilmer and George Clooney played the two movies

directed by Joel Schumacher. Viewers and films critics alike have shredded both movies as weak

and pointless to the furthering of Batman canon. Schumacher would later apologize for his second film ("If there's anybody watching this that, let's say, loved *Batman Forever* and went into *Batman and Robin* with great anticipation -- If I disappointed them in anyway, then I really want to apologize" [*Batman and Robin*]), but he has contributed to the franchise nonetheless. The last two films feature Christian Bale who brought an intense presence of Batman to an extremely real world. Each of these actors gives Batman a different look and feel, and each reader then has a choice of which man best suits the character of Batman. This choice in film Batmans offers readers a unique opportunity take whatever they like and leave whatever does not suit them. Those who think Nolan's films are too violent and dark because of their realistic setting can watch Schamucher's film and enjoy the clownish sets and garish colors. The Batman films have different actors because they appeal to different audiences and generate enormous profits with each new film that targets a slightly different audience.

Though usually considered children's entertainment, the cartoons have their place of importance in the Batman franchise. Most of the artists who currently design comics watched the cartoons as children, an example of audience-turned-artist. *Batman: The Animated Series* had a profound impact on the franchise: it introduced two characters, Renee Montoya and Harley Quinn, who became part of the franchise and are now considered established characters in the comics. *Batman: TAS* also redefined the origins of Dr. Freeze, a redefinition that the film *Batman and Robin* would include in its portrayal of the villain. *Batman: TAS* was one of the first series to portray Bruce Wayne using a different voice (a deeper bass rather than his normal baritone) while being Batman. The subsequent films used the change in voices, especially *The Dark Knight* in which Batman's voice becomes an animalistic growl that is incoherent at times.

The look of Gotham changes as well for each form of media. *Batman* [1989] showed a dirty, crime-ridden Gotham: "Gotham City is a brooding, architectural pastiche combining a surreal Brutalism with neo-Gothic, Neo-Classical, and modernist elements" (Lowentrout 26). Compare this gloomy nightmare with the garish, neon-colored Gotham of *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin*, an urban scene from a music video from the 1980s with Kiss costumes and bright lights. This bizarre Gotham did not appear as threatening as the previous dark one, and the villains appeared silly and campy in such a bizarre place of glowing signs and absurd costumes. The Gotham of Nolan's *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knights* looks like a normal metropolis with tall buildings and busy streets. The normality of this Gotham makes its heroes and villains seem even more bizarre as their costumes and personality become freaky and psychotic against the setting of an average city. These interpretations of Gotham point to desire in artists to imagine and re-imagine the physical space of Gotham in order for different aspects of Batman to emerge and to reach different readers. The readers in turn can choose which Gotham suits their continuity of Batman.

Like the whole of Gotham, the Bat Cave undergoes new transformations for each movie. For *Batman Forever*, the Cave changes its dark look, "becoming much more an enclosed space, and losing the imposing, teetering character of its last incarnation" (Plouffe par. 23). By making the Cave more ordinary than before, part of the mystical atmosphere of the Cave dwindles away. The audience must always remember that Batman does not simply retreat to his Cave to create weapons like most men go down to the basement to build model cars or watch TV. Batman loses himself in the Cave, sheathing himself in the dark corners with the only noise the sound of bats flying. The Cave should be a place of solitude and quiet as well as a monument to the labors of the dark superhero. If at any time the Cave becomes too commonplace or ordinary, it begins to

lose its mystique. Batman may feel comfortable there whether working on new equipment, researching villains and crimes, or monitoring all Gotham via remote access, but viewers should understand that they are looking in on his private space almost voyeuristically as the camera pans over the dark crags of the Cave.

After the villains of *Batman Begins* burn Wayne Manor to the ground, the next movie, *The Dark Knight*, shows Batman without his Cave, forced to relocate to a large, bunker-like space under storage containers while his house is rebuilt. Though Batman functions adequately by having the right equipment to fight as well as the technology to track down the Joker and eavesdrop on the millions of Gotham, any movie of Batman feels lacking without the Cave and its intricate nooks and dark corners. The bright, white light of the underground work space makes Bruce look too normal, and though a Batsuit appears in one scene as Bruce stares at it in worried contemplation, the movie does not show Batman wearing the suit in the work space. If Bruce were to wear the suit there, the result would be laughable for the audience; Batman belongs in the shadows or atop buildings in the gloom of night, not in broad daylight or in a fully lit room. At one point, Alfred asks Bruce if he wants to take the Batpod to the hospital. "In the middle of day? Not very subtle" (*The Dark Knight*). Bruce understands that most of Batman's attacks and scare tactics work best under the cloak of darkness when he can appear and slip away with little warning. Even the face off with the Joker happens in a dimly-lit cell, first kept in darkness so Batman can make a surprise entrance – an entrance that catches both Joker and the audience unaware.

Batman obviously appeals to wide range of audiences, and his appeal does not seem to be in jeopardy as does Superman, whose alien powers and 1940s mentality continue to distance him from his narrowing audience. Batman's widening appeal is due mostly to his fluidity as a

character who can adapt to modern times; in the comics the artists have left off the melodramatic

exclamations and changed his language to a realistic verbalization of an early 21th-Century man.

The campy or hysterical dialogue of the 1940s sounds completely ridiculous to audiences who

have seen violent images of destruction and death and who want a hero that could stand up to

such devastation. Adam West wears a cloth Batsuit and engages in melodramatic dialogue that

sounds preachy and staged:

> Batman: It's a low neighborhood, full of rumpots. They're used to curious sights, which they attribute to alcoholic delusions.
> Robin: Gosh, drink is sure a filthy thing, isn't it? I'd rather be dead than unable to trust my own eyes! (*Batman* 1966)

This Batman could not engage with modern terrorists armed with automatic guns and destructive

technology, but Christian Bale in a Kevlar Batsuit and an arsenal of sleek weapons has credibility

in today's world. He not only has the weapons to fight contemporary enemies; he also has a grim

enough mindset that he can understand threats of the new millennia.

In his discussion of readers and texts in "From 'Literary History as a Challenge to

Literary Theory'" H. R. Jauss notes that

> If the horizon of expectations of a work is reconstructed [. . .], it is possible to determine its artistic nature by the nature and degree of its effect on a given audience. [. . .] The way in which a literary work satisfies, surpassed, disappoints, or disproves the expectations of its first readers in the historical moment of its appearance obviously gives a criterion of the determination of its aesthetic value. (86)

Every time new Batman material is published, readers have expectations about the text based on

current progress and trends in art and popular culture. Readers today have seen images of

annihilation and destruction that readers had not experienced thirty years ago. Contemporary

readers live in a post-Columbine, post-9/11, Mid-Iraqi war world. Images of the Two Towers and

torture photos of Abu Ghraib have been splashed on the front of newspapers; television networks

broadcast acts of inhumanity and disaster every night during the evening news. Readers today want a Batman that can not only witness such brutalities, but also keep faith in his mission to counteract them. From coverage of Katrina to reports of Iraqi war causalities, the American public has seen enough violence that audiences have become immune to depictions of violence. Rather than acting to prevent such cruelty, the American public has been desensitized. In opposition to the general public's desensitization, Batman must remain sensitive to the violence in his world; once he becomes desensitized to violence, he loses the fight, and the texts lose their potency. However, both the reader and the author of any current Batman medium must acknowledge the outside world and its impact on the text in question. To pretend that such violent acts did not occur is to deprive the text of current reliability and to ignore the circumstances of the modern reader.

In the early days of comics, superheroes provide an escape from real life with their fantastical stories. In recent years, superheroes have provided an answer to problems of a post-modern war: vigilante justice that works to address and rectify the helplessness of the average reader when confronted with the atrocities of current life. The general public's loss of empathy and growing callousness is reflected in current Batman medium; most of the comic book covers in the last decade show blood-splattered Batman, fresh from a mutilating fight that has torn his costume to shreds. Where *Batman* (1989) shows the Joker threatening to release poisonous laughing toxin over Gotham, the Joker of *The Dark Knight* heists a bank, blows up a hospital and designs a trap for two transporter barges to destroy each other. Audiences of the original *Batman* (1966) would have been devastated and traumatized at the extreme of violence in *The Dark Knight*. Current audiences have been able to adjust their psyches to today violence, and the art produced reflects that moving trend. Ultimately, as readers and viewers, we want this seemingly-

emotionless man as our hero because he can do what others cannot; he can act where we cannot and do what we cannot, letting us live through his actions. He can make the difficult decision as to who lives and dies, whether constructed idealism is more important than actuality and truth, and the choice to become a savior or a scapegoat. Emotions cloud judgment, and Batman can set aside his human side long enough act for the better good of humanity rather than his own personal wants. However, after setting aside those emotions long enough, he has repressed his feelings to the point that he rarely experiences emotions the way an average person (one without constant repression or exposure to horrific violence) would feel. Along with training his body and mind, Batman had learned to ignore normal emotions so that he will not cloud his reasoning when he fights, a decision that becomes a double-edged sword when Bruce begins to mirror Batman's emotionless front as well and struggles to cope with relationships as Bruce Wayne.

Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick argue in *The Hero in Transition* that audiences condone the hero's acts of violence, destruction, and negligence of social order and laws to serve a greater good: "The reader does not care how often the superhero transgresses man's petty lows, for the hero operates under a higher law that always has the ultimate good of society at its center" (185). If Batman deems himself above the law, above the restrictions and corruption that ordinary law-abiding citizens must contend with, then he may punish villains as he sees fit. If he roughs up one villain with a few punches and simply restrains another with ropes before hauling both to Arkham, no one dares to question his methods. He stands above the law, and his means of enforcing that law is at his discretion. Superman and Wonder Woman may pointedly tell him how to handle a villain, and Robin and Batgirl might suggest possible strategies for battle, but no one controls Batman's disciplinary actions. If someone were powerful enough to control him and actually stop him, Batman would most likely be occupying a cell in Arkham because in many

ways his actions are just as dangerous as the criminals, but since he outwits the authorities and avoids capture, he can continue to make his own judgments on how to punish the villains. The next part of my argument will center on four supporting characters who also change with the interpretations of the franchise and the readjustment of continuity that every Batman reader assimilates.

# 4. Supporting Cast

Batman's beginnings were quiet and contained as he was one of many superheroes to appear at the end of the 1930s. Ron Goulart commented on Batman's humble beginnings:

> There on the cover was a fellow called *The Batman*, swinging over the rooftops with an armlock around the throat of a hoodlum in a green pinstripe suit [. . .] For a costumed hero without a single magic power, he has managed to survive quite well while hundreds of latter-day competitors have fallen by the wayside. (45-47)

The capitalistic demands of the public might suggest that while the audience of comic books want to see daring deeds and magnificent feats of danger, that audience still wants a hero who remains, in some small part at least, human. In the last decade, Superman, the do-good alien sent to help mankind has continued to lose its audience while the interest in Batman and his human-based world has increased.

These four characters – the Joker, Superman, Alfred, and Robin – work to serve Batman by creating his strongest relationships: his arch-nemesis, best friend, father-figure, and sidekick/adopted son. Audiences would have trouble relating to Batman if he stayed by himself as a solitary loner, but through these relationships, audiences can see him interacting and talking to others, and Batman becomes relatable and sympathetic and even more complex as a character because he struggles with each relationship. Audiences want to see Batman fighting the Joker and struggling with the desire to kill him. In the comics, readers want to watch the evolution of friendship between Batman and Superman as they share many of the same traits, but remain vastly different at the same time. Alfred helps Batman realize his purpose and also remember that he is still human with human needs. As a sidekick and a son, Robin/Dick Grayson helps the

audience to see Batman as a mentor and a father figure who has invested in the future generation

to care on his present ideals into the years of tomorrow. These four characters exist in the Batman

media to develop his character further and relate to a wider audience base. In terms of reaching

multiple audiences, the Batman franchise has used a complex supporting cast to make itself

broader and more accessible to audiences outside of comic book readers.

As Batman's arch-nemesis and ultimate enemy, Joker is a monster with a clownish face

and no other alias or identity. A homicidal maniac and lover of anarchy, the Joker delights in

finding ways to torment Batman and in trying to shatter Batman's controlled authority.

Unmotivated by money, power, or revenge, the Joker exists simply to cause mayhem. In his

criticism of the first Batman movie, Calvin Thomas notes that "Whereas Batman is vulnerable on

the inside but invulnerable, because armored, on the out, Joker seems soft on the outside but

indestructible, because artificial, in his interior" (42). Though the 1960s TV show portrayed him

as a foolish prankster with a knack for bad puns, the Joker's character has steadily grown darker

and uglier, revealing a killer with no conscience or soul to redeem. In Alan Moore's graphic

novel, *The Killing Joke*, the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon in the back, paralyzing her from the

waist down and ending her career as Batgirl. Not satisfied with shooting her, the Joker takes

pictures of her bloodied body to show to her devastated father, Commissioner Gordon, who has

been beaten, held captive by the Joker's henchmen, and kneels naked and collared in a cage.

Though not stated explicitly, the panels of the graphic novel suggest that the Joker also rapes

Barbara while she lays bleeding and screaming. This Joker, like the Joker of the *Dark Knight*, is

sick, twisted sadist who enjoys making people suffer their deepest terror.

In the comics since the 1970s and the film *Dark Knight*, aimed at an older audience,

Batman knows the Joker is a killer; he knows that the Joker will eventually escape Arkham and

kill, torture, and terrorize yet again. Yet, Batman refused to kill the Joker, even though Batman realizes that the world would be a better place without the Joker and that no righteous soul in Gotham would blame him for the murder. Though the Joker sets the chain of events that kill Jason Todd, Batman still will not kill him. In the graphic novel *The Joker: Devil's Advocate*, the Joker is reported to have killed well over 2,000 people. "Batman's standard response has always been that if he ever kills, it will make him as bad as the criminals he fights, or that he will be crossing a line from which he would never return – though he is very open about his strong desire to kill the Joker" (White 8). After a gruesome fight with the newly-returned (and resurrected) Jason Todd, Batman confirms:

> For years a day hasn't gone by where I haven't envisioned taking [the Joker] . . . taking him and spending an entire month putting him through the most horrendous, most boggling form of torture. All of it building to an end with his broken, butchered and maimed . . . pleading – screaming – in the worst kind of agony as he careens into a monstrous death. (Winick chap. 6, part 3)

Though Batman's words reflect his own dark desires, he refuses to act upon those desires. The Joker is driven by his desires, propelled by a need to hurt and revel in other's pain. As stated in the previous chapter, audiences can relate to the violence of this Joker; Joker has become a terrorist who acts without logic or fear of recourse. He enjoys anarchy and pain, a sadist with a theatrical flare, but his clownish appearance and creepy smile provide audiences with enough surreal distinction so they do not feel as threatened as they would feel with the depiction of a realistic suicide bomber or serial killer. The tension between the real and the fantastic allows audiences to engage with his character and react with both fear and fascination.

Along with the connection to his enemies, the evolution of Batman in relation to his sidekicks is perhaps the most interesting aspect of his character. Created in 1938 by Bob Kane, Batman originally fought with a gun, but when DC editor, Whit Ellsworth, decided that he

wanted comics to be kid-friendly, Batman got rid of his gun and began rounding up criminals rather than shooting them. Early in the 40s, Batman got a partner to aid him in the fight against crime: "The Boy Wonder added dialogue to the comics and also readers a character their own age. Robin proved to be a wise move. The circulation of *Detective Comics* nearly doubled after the addition of the teen hero" (Gresh 34-35). Before Robin, Batman was too quiet, and the only way to access his thoughts and feelings was to give him a companion. Superman can remain alone because his cheerfulness brightens the comics and his dialogue is optimistic and hopeful whereas Batman broods in darkness and his language reflects a pessimistic view of life in general. "Robin seems to have little of the bitter angst that fuels Batman [. . .] Robin has Batman, a figure who has stood in his shoes, to help him alone through the difficult time ahead, to give him a purpose: in fighting crime in general, and avenging his loved ones' murders, in particular" (Fingeroth 65). Wolk notes that Batman's drive "is the kind that parents often pass on to their children; hence his parental relationship with Robin, whose symbolic value is as son trying to learn from his father's experience and wisdom without making his father's mistakes" (97).

However, though Dick has a life apart from his mentor, many of Nightwing's skills reflect Batman's mentorship and training, suggesting that Dick can never fully separate his identity from Bruce. Of the two conflicting characters, Rob Lendrum notes that "The current dominant reading of the relationship between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson is that of a tense father-son relationship" (70). *Tense* might be a mild way of describing their relationship as the feelings of faithful loyalty and hostile resentment seem to vie for possession in both men. The father-son struggle (pulling away from the father figure yet emulating him) parallels the ongoing battle that many fictional father/son pairs engage in: the authoritative and sometimes authoritarian father dominating the son, and the son rebelling and pull away, often leaving, but at

the same time the son remains loyal to the father and reflects the ideologies of the father in his

own decisions. Wolk notes that Batman's drive "is the kind that parents often pass on to their

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Children (the primary audience of comic books in the 1940s) enjoyed reading about a

child superhero and watching him go on one adventure after another, but when Frank Wentham

published *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1953 and accused the Batman comics of portraying a

homosexual context, the comics changed in response to the indignation of their audience and

concerned parents. Though Wentham appears stuffy and pompous by today's standards, scholars

have commented on the disturbing role of the young sidekick:

> Every formal convention of superheroes can be read as something on continuum
> between amusingly pervvy and genuinely sick: the skintight outfit, the mask, the
> double life, the incident in which one's true identity was formed, the way the first
> interaction with everyone of one's line is physical tussle, the kid sidekick. Oh,
> God, the kid sidekick. (Wolk 101)

In order to err on the side of "amusingly pervy" rather than "genuinely sick," the comics designed

various strategies to show that the relationship between Batman and Robin had no hint of

indecency for innocent children. An elderly Aunt Harriet moved in with the boys, a woman who

spent time at Wayne Manor in the comics and in the TV shows of the 1960s. The presence of a

matronly woman helped the worried audiences of that decade, and a few years later Dick was

sent off to college, leaving Batman alone. However, by the 1980s, Aunt Harriet was gone, and

the comics began to retell Dick's early years in the Modern Era beginning, but this time with a

different tone. Rather than the cheerful, naïve, plucky fellow he had been before, eager to tag

along on patrol and sing Batman's praises in fighting and detective skills with a bright smile, the

new Dick Grayson had his own thoughts and flaws, developing an independent identity outside

of Batman's. Dick was no longer Batman's shadow and echo; he grew into his own character

because now he had enough individuality to distinguish himself from his mentor. Along with this

new self-recognition, Dick became resentful of Bruce's authority and started to challenge

Batman's principles rather than following them blindly as he had before; this Dick still had

morals and ethics like his mentor, but he resembled more the teenagers of the 1980s rather than

the idealized, perfect children of the 1940s and 1950s. As long as Dick remained perfect and

idealized as a role model for children, he could not be anything more than a reinforcing extension

of Batman, simply a body to stand there so Batman would have to talk to someone.

For all his loner status, Batman works surprisingly well with a sidekick though he stresses

over and over again that he is the leader and one who will make all final decisions. As long as

Robin follows Batman's lead, their fighting is seamless and indestructible. Rollin makes the

distinction between Robin and Batman, noting how "Robin's boyish exuberance complements

Batman's mature energy" (442). They work best with each other, balancing out the other as they

fight with smooth efficiency. In a chapter titled "Is It Right to Make a Robin?" James

DiGiovanna asks keen, in-depth questions concerning Bruce's ethics in molding his sidekicks,

questions that often go unasked with most Batman audiences. Bruce seems overly benevolent in

offering his home to Dick Grayson, choosing to raise and care for the newly-orphaned boy rather

than force him into the foster system where he would suffer along with so many other unwanted

children. "But what about putting [the child] in a costume, training him to fight crime, and

exposing him to constant danger in the name of refining and improving his skills and character?"

(18). That question remains the crux of Batman's decision to bring Dick Grayson into his crime-fighting world. Audiences have an interest in the on-going argument between Batman and his adopted son, but at the same time, audiences need to see moments of reprieve when the character show the emotions that lie underneath all the fighting and bickering. Bruce cared about Dick, but Bruce also cares about Batman's mission, and when he has to choose between Dick and the mission, tensions arise to which the audience can relate.

This austerity clamps down on their relationships, making the teenagers loyal and diligent to Batman out of respect and fear, but unable to have a relationship with him that nurtures their unique personalities. They exist to further his cause, and in different strains of the comics, Batman casts them aside or ignores them when he feels he should fight villains alone. On several different occasions, he fights on his own and forgets his sidekicks altogether. In *Trinity* – a novel focusing on the teaming up of Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman to fight Ra's al Goul and a team of alien clones – Dick sneaks down into the Batcave to eavesdrop on Batman and Superman. Upon seeing Dick, Batman yells at him to go upstairs and stay there and then explains to Superman that "I've forbidden him from having any part in this. As soon as that super-powered thing entered the picture, you and your kind are far too dangerous, Clark" (Wagner 93). Superman retorts, "So he's only allowed to confront psychotics and madmen?" (93), but Batman turns away rather than justify his reasons for exposing Dick to any dangers at all. The ranking is crystal clear to him and to us as readers or viewers: the sidekicks' superhero statuses exist because Batman allows them to assume a second identity. They have no calling without him, and he not only expects obedience from them; he demands it.

At shown in the *World's Finest Comics*, Batman's closet friend and colleague is Superman. Batman's equal in almost everyway, Superman offers Batman something that the

teenagers and Alfred cannot: friendship of equals on the same ground mentally, emotionally, and physically. However, Batman's friendship with Superman extends beyond their work together as superheroes or their leadership of the Justice League. Bruce is close friends with Clark as well and visits the Kent farmhouse as the billionaire rather than the Caped Crusader. They share deep moments together as Bruce reveals thoughts and feelings that he keeps hidden from everyone else. In the comic issue, "A Better World" (2000), Superman finds a depressed Batman in the Cave, miserable over Jason's death and his own helplessness in preventing future crimes that destroy the people Bruce loves. Refusing to let Batman sink into despair, Superman grabs him and flies him to Kansas where the two men talk in an open field and later a ravine, sharing their worst moments and fears as they can understand each other's burdens and guilt. Superman reveals that he had recently fallen into a dark place and become "The kind of brutal hero I'd subconsciously decided I'd become. An identity modeled, in some ways, on you" (Kesel 138). To which Batman replies, "Brutal? Merciless? That's how I need to be perceived, but . . . I thought you knew me better that" (139). Batman needs a contemporary to discuss the stress of his double life and his guilt about those he could not save and his fears about the ominous future that looms ahead. Superman offers support and advice though he has trouble following Batman into the dark recesses of his psyche.

"It seems that, like Superman, Batman is a character that many fans meet early in life, and that they may return to from time to time when a particularly interesting interpretation is introduced by the publishers" (Bacon-Smith and Yarborough 96). Dubois comments on the striking differences between Batman and Superman, noting Superman's affable work with the government and the president. "Batman, on the other hand, remains a vigilante proper because he never compromised his crime-fighting methods to satisfy the government" (922). Batman

frequently works with Commissioner Gordon to aid in rounding up the scum of Gotham, but never for a moment does Batman work for the commissioner or the police or for anyone else. In the comics or cartoons in which they share scenes, Superman acts as almost a photographic negative image of Batman: cheerful where Batman is brooding, optimistic where Batman is pessimistic, Superman remaining the spirit of the team whereas Batman is the brains. Much like the Robins, Superman's exuberance and positive outlook make Batman seem even darker, and where Superman constructs his identity to help others and make their lives better, Batman identifies with others' pain and takes on that pain even as he rescues the helpless. They both act to make the world a safer place, but their personalities are vastly different. For the reader, the relationship between the two superheroes gives the audience a chance to connect with Batman through his identification with Superman. Batman's language alters when he talks to Superman, and the reader must add another development of Batman's character to his or her continuity.

The reader realizes that, even with alter-egos aside, Clark and Bruce seem to share few similarities other than height, muscularity, and dark hair. Bruce is wealthy and a prestigious businessman; Clark is a middle-class newspaper reporter who grew up on a farm. Bruce had a traumatic childhood with enough money to buy every luxury but without his parents; Clark had a normal childhood with loving, but poor parents who taught him core values. The difference in their backgrounds and personalities creates a striking contrast that all audiences seem to enjoy, even children who cannot quite grasp the socioeconomic distinctions. Writer and artists continue to design scenarios in which these two men must interact, forcing them to work together or even fight each other, resulting in stories whose tones are often humorous but at the same time reveal insights into Bruce's inner works as well as Clark's. Clark can physically outmatch Bruce, a fact to which Batman reacts by designing multiple weapons infused with Kryptonite in case

Superman ever goes evil. In most stories, Clark endeavors to cheer Bruce up, forcing optimism

and conversation upon him while Bruce would rather remain pessimistic and alone. Though

Superman works with Batman one-on-one and in the Justice League, Batman constantly pushes

their friendship aside.

> Much like the angry child whose time and energy is directed toward coping with a
> family trauma or living with challenges of a behavioral disorder or learning
> disability, Batman simply may not have the emotional resources or understanding
> to invest in membership with the group [the Justice League]. (Rubin 132)

Despite Batman's reluctance, Superman remains Batman's ally and close friend, but even happy

Clark Kent cannot endure Bruce's dark brooding and anger. Superman himself has his own fears

and inner doubts, but his character seems light and cheery compared to Batman.

However, most stories show that these personality traits simultaneously help and hinder

both superheroes in their work. In the graphic novel run, *Batman: No Man's Land*, an earthquake

cuts off Gotham City from the rest of America. Rather than try to save the stranded millions, the

US government turns its back on Gotham, leaving the city to collapse in on itself without any

communication with the outside world. Batman stays in the city with Batgirl, Nightwing, and the

youngest Robin to put a damper on the spiked crime rate and help the innocent that soon become

prey to gangs, cults, and supervillains. Upon hearing the news, Superman flies to Gotham and

offers his help to Batman, insisting that he can save the citizens better than Batman can. Batman

coldly replies that Superman cannot begin to understand what the hunger and desperation has

done to Gotham and that most people would not recognize a savior when they see one. Superman

refuses to accept that the average citizens have become as hard and jaded as Batman, and he

throws himself into work only to discover that the people reject his help and panic when he

appears. Dejected but wiser, Superman admits that Batman was right to which Batman tells him

that normal ideals have no place in the midst of anarchy and animalistic survival. Though he declares that he will return eventually, Superman leaves Batman to manage the city, knowing that the Dark Knight will be able to handle the ugly side of humanity that Superman for all his strength and invincibility cannot comprehend (Rucka, Puckett, Hama, and Harvey 1-26).

Studying the mythology of comics, Richard Reynolds writes in his chapter "'Angry All Your Life': Batman":

> What makes Batman so different from Superman is that his character is formed by confronting a world which refuses to make sense [. . .] All of Batman's most effective scripters and artists have understood that this madness is a part of Batman's special identity, and the protagonist's obsessive character links him with his enemies in a more personal way than, say, Superman. (67)

Reynolds taps into a key difference between Batman and Superman. When he wants, Superman can step back from his fight and remind himself that, though raised by humans and living in a society of them, he himself is not human. Superman can retreat to his fortress or to space and live as Kryptonian, even temporarily. Batman stays immersed in the insanity of humanity longer than he should because he can identify with his opponents to some extent. The Batcave is not a retreat from his job as crime fighter; rather it is a means to keep the struggle alive (along with himself) by building and perfecting more weapons as the guilt rages inside him.

After the death of Thomas Wayne, his biological father, Alfred steps in the authoritative role of rearing young Bruce, and in later years, along with his role of trusted family butler, Alfred serves as cook, maid, control man, doctor, surgeon, get-away driver, and back-up at various points. In the comics, his temperament has ranged from reluctant to eager in his assistance of the Batman, but he remains loyal to Bruce above everything else. The relationship between the two men is complex in the fact that it had to shift to the complete opposite over a span of fifteen years. At one time, Alfred acted as Bruce's guardian and had sole responsibility for raising him

until he came of age; however, as an adult, Bruce remains in control and confident and Alfred

acts as the family butler. Though he plays many roles, Alfred's language remains that of a

servant's, always referring to Bruce as Sir, Master Wayne, or even Master Bruce if Alfred feels

especially worried by Bruce's actions. However, though Alfred's language is formal, his manner

is often not when addressing his employer; Alfred does not hesitate to tell Bruce when both he

and Batman have made errors. The severity of errors range from snapping at allies to going

completely insane. In *Batman and Son*, Alfred informs a grim Bruce: "That growl in your voice –

the one you used to have to practice before you went out as Batman [. . .] you're doing it all the

time, sir" (Morrison 19). Alfred watches Bruce revert more and more into Batman, but often the

butler waits too late to act when Batman has already inflicted irreparable damage because Alfred

wants to keep the proper balance of class status and position between him and Bruce.

Alfred's formal language may also be the result of Bruce's influence on their relationship

rather than vice versa. Keeping Alfred in the role of proper family butler allows Bruce just

enough distance to disregard Alfred's concerns as to Batman's recklessness in the face of danger,

but at the same time, Alfred's loyalty lets Bruce call upon him when Batman needs help or

rescuing. Their close but formal relationship puts a strain on Alfred, not Bruce. Alfred is the one

sitting at home in the Batcave, waiting for an emergency call if Batman cannot escape dire

circumstances; Bruce has the freedom to go out as himself or Batman, confident that Alfred will

be available should the need arise. Once again, Bruce has arranged those closest to him to stay at

arm's length while supporting his mission; Batman determines the extent of their relationship

and how much he will share, and Alfred must either accept those terms or seek employment

elsewhere. Bruce may feel guilty in that he means more to Alfred than Alfred means to him, but

Bruce keeps his distance all the same, needing that space to keep secrets even from the man who

knows his most important secret. But the closeness of the relationship varies from one medium to the next. Despite the formal if not archaic language that Alfred uses, his words of counsel often push Bruce towards making the right decision and allow Alfred to remain the father figure, if only in his suggestions to Bruce. The Alfred of the comics looked to be in his late forties or early fifties and could be very prim and starchy though he could show his frustration during moments of tension.

Alfred was played by the same actor, Michael Gough, in the first four Batman films, and Gough played Alfred as a much older servant, slightly wheezy and appearing too tired to play com-man for Batman's daring missions. In the last two films, *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, Alfred (portrayed by Michael Caine) retains more of a father figure status than in the comics or cartoons. Bruce needs his moral compass to help him make the right decision for himself and for Gotham. Alfred helps to level out Bruce's wild emotional swings, reminding Bruce that he is still human, but also inspiring Batman at his darkest moments of despair and frustration. In *The Dark Knight*, Bruce feel utterly hopeless as he laments "People are dying, Alfred. What would you have me do?" Alfred replies calmly, "Endure, Master Wayne. Take it. They'll hate you for it, but that's the point of Batman, he can be the outcast. He can make the choice that no one else can make, the right choice**."** Despite his insistence that Batman can make the right choice, Alfred often has to step in and help Bruce see what exactly is the right choice. In *The Dark Knight*, Alfred keeps Rachel's letter from Bruce, knowing her choice of Harvey Dent over Bruce would damage his already-crumbling spirit. As a substitute father, Alfred offers care and advice, sometimes giving Wayne or Batman a deserved lecture. However, as the Batman audience realizes fully, Alfred can also be passively aggressive, punishing Bruce through cold

silences or muttering derisions about his employer even as he actively helps Batman on his next mission.

Though some of the comics explain Alfred's background – he served in the army as an MP – Alfred's doctoring skills sometimes surprise audiences when the proper English butler stitches up Batman after long nights of brutal violence, not flinching at the blood or gore. When Bane breaks Batman's back, Alfred tends to him, angry that Batman has put himself through such tremendous agony and torture that has left his body shattered and temporarily paralyzed. Despite the words of council from Alfred, both Batman and Bruce serve their own consciences, and their principled actions determine the fate of others, make both identities Godlike and nearly omniscient, especially when facing villains or wide-scale disasters. Though Alfred does speak out against Batman to voice his disapproval, his presence as authority often reflects a weak father-figure, a father who sighs over his son's poor decisions rather than actively instruct the son to change. Alfred's subservience to Bruce allows Batman the support he needs to continue his mission without fearing daily reproof from the father-figure for poor decisions. Because Batman acts as both a father and son with in his relationships with Dick and Alfred, the audience is offered a dual perspective on the family dynamic and the authoritative male roles.

As Batman evolved, his interactions became darker and grimmer as he pulled further and further into himself, but those interactions also helped to develop his character. Post-modern audiences find Bruce and Dick's quarrels with each other and blatant hostility more compelling and relatable than the early Dick who agreed with everything Bruce did or said.

> His world, as much as any superhero's, is one of mirror images and opposites. Robin's chirpiness and brightly-colored costumes contrast purposefully with Batman's appearance and personality [. . .] Even the weighty formality of Alfred the butler – who really is what he seems – highlights a contrast with his employer Bruce Wayne, who is in reality so much more. (Reynolds 68)

Because Batman's dual identities make him more than he seems, his allies help to ground him in the temporary, forcing him to consider the consequences and impact of his actions for those closest to him. Like Batman, they all change, offering readers multiple meanings and ranges of readings.

# 5. Conclusion

> "Sometimes, the truth isn't enough, sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes, people deserve to have their faith rewarded." (*The Dark Knight*)

What are the aims of Batman comics now? How do comics with all their marvelous characters, dastardly villains, and inhuman feats fit into Post-Modern America with a consumer-driven existentialism? Or if that becomes too big a question for any one person to attempt to answer, what are the aims of the Batman world and its vast number of characters, good, bad, and ugly? In his historical criticism of comic book, Joseph Witek states,

> A critical analysis of the comic book form is especially necessary now, when a growing number of contemporary American comic books are being written as literature aimed at a general readership of adults and concerned, not with the traditionally escapist themes of comics, but with issues such as the clash of cultures in American history, the burdens of guilt and suffering passed on with families, and the trials and small triumphs of the daily workaday world. (3)

While the readership of Batman has widened considerably since the days of its conception, the concept of burdens passed throughout the families continues to run strong in Batman. Though he seems reluctant to admit it, he continually seeks to build and rebuild a family. Despite his loner status, Bruce lives with Alfred, a steady father figure, and opens his home to one hapless orphan after another, keeping the child figure in the picture. For all his brooding in the Batcave, Batman has more company than Superman and certainly goes on more dates. In this view alone, can we as Post-Modern Americans identify with Batman/Bruce's predicament: surrounded by people, needed in a community, and yet feeling utterly alone? Often criticized by Alfred for his dangerous stunts and sometimes at odds with his wards (especially Dick Grayson who continues to butt heads with Batman after having left Wayne Manor years ago), Batman acts as the

estranged modern man, unable to connect solidly to another human being yet constantly searching for connection to someone else.

However, the personality of Batman does slightly shift with each medium that interprets him and his story. Always tall, handsome, and dark-haired, Batman and Bruce Wayne display different traits in the separate comic avenues, cartoons, television shows, and movies. Bruce Wayne was at his lightest, most cheerful in the WB Kid's *The Batman*. In the first season, Bruce listened to rock music while he worked in the Batcave, ate nachos and cheese, and joked to lighten up a dour Alfred. As the show progressed, Bruce became more serious with the arrival of Barbara Gordon – Batgirl – and Dick Grayson – Robin. The teenagers helped carry the cheery mood, teasing and kidding with each other, thereby allowing Bruce to grow stern and serious and often painting him as the weary adult referring between the sharp-tongued Batgirl and ADD adolescent Robin. This Bruce would let Robin glide around the Batcave and have fun, smiling at his adolescent antics rather than berating him for his lack of focus as the comic book Bruce often did.

Of course, the audience of *The Batman* was primarily children as the cartoon aired on Saturday mornings amidst other animated shows and toy-saturated commercials. A depressed Batman in all his blood and darkness, yelling at his sidekicks and wreaking pain on everyone in his path, would not have captivated young viewers as well as a cool Batman with a sense of humor and smart-mouthed sidekicks would. This cartoon's Bruce looked younger, barely more than a teenager himself, with friendly blue eyes and a winning smile, a direct contrast to Frank Miller's monster of a man, tortured, hunched, and ugly in *The Dark Knight Returns*. *The Batman*'s Bruce has an open, friendly way of talking and greeting others; he seems genuinely surprised when villains in their human alter-egos refuse to shake his hand or speak hostilely to

him. Along with violence, sexual attraction is also subdued and almost hidden in episodes of this cartoon. Catwoman finds Batman attractive and vice versa, but in an episode when the two become handcuffed together, the tone is comical, as they each try to run in opposite directions only to get yanked back together, rather than sexual at the close proximity of their bodies – Catwoman's skin-tight outfit tight over her curvy body and Batman's aggressive masculinity and growling voice. *The Batman* presents a more child-friendly view of the Dark Knight and his villainous world, and while the villains in each episode do threaten the safety of the superhero, they never reach the emotional or physical devastation of the comics.

A decade earlier, the cartoon the *New Adventures of Batman* showed another type of Batman, but still intended for a young audience. Still animated, this Bruce was more direct and adult, drawn in the style of the 1950s with similar mannerisms and dialogue. The characters all appear simple, less threatening, and more like the comics of the 1950s without as much action and striking colors. The creators of this cartoon wanted Bruce to exhibit behavior of a reliable adult and trusted that the antics of a teenage Robin would appeal to the younger audiences. However, Dick Grayson here appears cut-clean and clean-mouthed, never resorting to crude language or slang and resembling the Dick Grayson of the 1960s TV show: good, well-behaved, and always looking to Batman for guidance. The result of all this wholesome goodness is a cartoon with a superhero who seems tame and non-threatening to audience if not to the villains. Part of the appeal of Batman is his darkness, his regression into himself and his anger, but children may find a dark Batman too scary and sad.

In recent years, though, the movies for Batman have focused on an older audience. "By resisting the temptation to romanticize children's culture as utopian or historical moments in time, our argument is that camp has always been a part of children's culture [. . .] though

audience recognition or apprehension may not always have been as knowing as it is now"

(Mallan 9). Because comic books and, in some sense, Batman have been seen as children's

entertainment in all their silly, campy fun, the world of Batman has taken decades to legitimize

itself as a viable form of adolescent and adult entertainment. In the Post-Modern Era, comics

have strove to prove themselves as new sources of literature, interpreting superheroes as a stable,

yet evolving facet of American culture.

> By the late 1980s and early 1990s, most heroes were undergoing personality
> changes and character transformations. They ceased being superhuman and were
> shown to have problems in dealing with a darker, more corrupt world modern
> world. Also noticeable is the hint of amorality which started to surround some
> superheroes as they worked more and more on the borderlines of the law. (Bongco
> 145)

Not to be outdone, Batman writers shifted the tone of their comics in order to fit the new

audiences. Just as Batman has changed, save for his six constant characteristics, so has his comic

book audience morphed from its innocent childhood of simplistic ideals to the violence-craving,

action-hungry yearning of post-modern culture and youth. Sleek, cool, sexy, and violent subjects

are the demands of this younger generation, and artists seem more than willing to oblige.

      The Batman comics today have grown so dark and violent, interspersed with crude

language, that many people consider them no longer appropriate for any children. Readers who

shy away from gratuitous violence feel uncomfortable with so much blood and gore splashed

across the pages in tortured agony. Even more disturbing than the gore, the content of the comics

features death and killings so perverse that they serve to shock and horrify the viewer more than

relate a compelling story. In these comics, Batman himself seems strangely apathetic to the ever-

growing violence, almost desensitized himself in a world of kill or be killed. In *Batman and Son*,

Damien (Batman's illegitimate son from Talia, Ra's al Ghul's daughter) beats Tim Drake to

unconsciousness and proceeds to behead a villain without showing hesitation or remorse. Rather than insist that his son follow his own code of ethics in accepting help for others and never killing, Batman continues to work with the boy, giving Damien only a few words of reprimand. Batman's growing acceptance of the violence in his world seems more disturbing than Damien's murderous mindset. With this sinister progression of comics, one can only wonder if the comics will continue in their growing violence until they get so graphic that they become pornographic, nothing more than images of body in pain and screaming anguish without any of the characters batting an eye at such extremes. While torture-porn has grown into a sub-genre of horror in the last decade, such graphic depictions of gore and mutilation seem unnecessary in comics which primarily aimed to entertain children and adolescent with their daring feats of action and suspense as amazing superheroes faced off against dastardly villains. Because of the gratuitous violence, children can no longer read modern Batman comics, and if they continue in their graphic tread, they run the risk of becoming inappropriate for anyone to read.

Recently, all lines of the Batman comics have merged into one story line that centered on the death of Bruce Wayne. After a brief struggle for dominance (*Batman: Battle of the Cowl*, #1 - #3), the role of Batman was passed to Dick Grayson who became Batman and took on Damien as his Robin. A new series, *Batman and Robin*, began in the summer of 2009 and features Dick and Damien as the Dynamic Duo. Though some fans protested that the role of Batman belonged exclusively to Bruce Wayne, Dick's taking of the mantle proved that Batman was indeed a mask that could be assumed and passed on. Though the person behind the mask has changed, the six defining characteristics of Batman have not changed. Dick Grayson is also male, tall with dark hair, wealthy, extremely intelligence, guilty over the murder of his parents (the Graysons and Bruce Wayne), and a superhero without superpowers. As Dick becomes Batman, he also interacts

with the four supporting characters: the Joker, Superman, Alfred, and Robin. The role of Batman

has been passed to the son, and the audience can see the story of Batman begin yet again, this

time portraying a man other than Bruce Wayne, but continuing the legacy of the Dark Knight.

The audience will shift yet again as fans of Nightwing will see Dick Grayson step into the shoes

of his mentor.

Batman has changed yet again, but Batman still endures.

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