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Capes and the Canon: Comic Book Superheroes and Canonical American Literature

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CAPES AND THE CANON:

COMIC BOOK SUPERHEROES AND CANONICAL AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The primary trajectories for this dissertation research project are to expand comic studies' definition of the comic book superhero, explore the American literary influences from the early nineteenth century through the early twentieth century on the comic book superhero genre, and look at ways the genre has evolved since its inception. Within this framework, I suggest possible answers to the question of what makes so many contemporary comic book superheroes uniquely American—or at the least, perceived to be so. Special attention is paid to ways literary movements starting with the American Romantics and moving up to the Modernist movement laid the groundwork that early comic book creators would build upon as they established this relatively new literary medium, which continues to inform the national discourse on American values in contemporary times.

Research activities will primarily consist of analyzing a broad survey of both conventional American literature in addition to comic books from the superhero genre and reporting on the different influences of the former on the latter. Critical works from writers such as Grant Morrison's *Supergods* and Peter Coogan' *Superheroes: Secret Origins of a Genre* will further inform this project as it seeks to historicize the superhero genre in relation to its literary antecedents from American literature, and providing a thorough understanding of the genre and its key conventions will prove essential.

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I would first like to acknowledge my wife, Lisa, for all of her love and support during this intensive endeavor without whom I would have never been able to accomplish this monumental task. This dissertation is a result of both of our efforts. I also want to thank my parents for all of the love and support they provide me in numerous ways: From my mother continually pushing me to demand more from myself both in school and in life to my father bringing me to the store and putting the very first comic book I would ever read into my hands. I was raised in a home where reading was prioritized, and it affected me profoundly. For that, I am deeply grateful.

Without a doubt, I would not have gotten this far without the support and the lessons learned from my past professors. While my dissertation about American literature and comic book superheroes may be very different from the literature I studied in some of those classes in my undergraduate and master's degree programs, the process of doing research, thinking critically about various sources, and effectively communicating my ideas is a direct result of my work with them. In particular, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Peter Schwartz, Gary LaPointe, and Candace Barrington whose examples in academic professionalism, scholarly research, and pure passion for literature and their students continues to inspire me every day in my own classes.

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Finally, I want to dedicate this book to my two sons: Noah and Caleb. I hope you never stop believing that a man can fly.

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INTRODUCTION

Comics—particularly the superhero comic genre—is not only an emerging literary medium, but it is also a field that is growing in popularity and respect throughout mainstream and even academic culture.[1] Evidence of this can be seen in the increasing number of college campuses including comics on course reading lists as well as offering full courses on comics, in addition to the numerous shelves of comics and graphic novels in both retail bookstores and public libraries across the country. These comics represent a plethora of themes and topics, but what is especially interesting about comics foundational superhero genre in particular is the way in which it has participated and continues to engage in the cultural discourse over what it means to be American. Thanks to Cleveland natives Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Americans and comic readers throughout the world were introduced to the foremost superhero of this period: Superman—the character whose first appearance kick started this four-colored movement and who would later be joined by characters such as Batman, Wonder Woman, and later Spider-Man all whom helped create and define the superhero genre.

While the comics medium as a whole continues be recognized in mainstream culture as a respectable realm of art and literature, there is still a lingering notion of juvenility associated with what is easily the most well-known genre within the greater medium: superhero comics. This dissertation argues that, in the face of much criticism

[1] The definition of what comics are and are not is still debated by comics scholars even today. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term "comics" or "comic books" to refer to all forms of the medium. Serialized stories published on a monthly basis are noted as "issues." When comic book issues are published in collected form, they are referred to as being "trade paperbacks." Stories first published as standalone narratives in long-form are referred to as "graphic novels."

since their inception, the comic book superhero genre actively participates in the greater American cultural discourse over individuality and independence—concepts embraced by writers and readers in America since the country's early beginnings.

While superhero comics often serve as a powerful vehicle for depicting the unfulfilled wishes of many readers from a white, heterosexual, male demographic, the genre is showing signs of breaking from its patriarchal origins. With more women, persons of color, and LGBT persons gradually finding representation both in comics and as creators of comics, the field is finally becoming more representative of the greater cultural conversation in which it was originally engaged.

Rationale

A question many people ask me in response to my decision to write about characters such as Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man in relation to more traditional American heroes is "Why comic book superheroes?" It is a fair question. Why would someone choose to write about a genre that continues to be associated with children's reading material[2]? Since I fit the younger male demographic most likely to be found reading comic book superheroes, however, perhaps it is of little surprise I would choose to write about this topic. After all, there is a strong appeal within Western culture for narratives focused on brave men and women who are imbued with abilities above and beyond those of the common person and who use those powers to right many of the wrongs of the world.

[2] This is actually an inaccurate assumption, however; the vast majority of superhero readers are between the ages of 22-40 years old, according to a 2011 Nielsen survey of DC Comics' "New 52" reader demographics.

On a personal level, it is this appeal to be more than I could otherwise be that lead me, in part, to join the military and do my part to bring a little more peace into the world. It is this same appeal that motivates me as a teacher to help empower others so they will not be held in bondage to the "dastardly powers" of ignorance and uncritical thought. Comic book superheroes can motivate us to rise up and do more with ourselves—not in spite of their colorful campiness, but because of it. We want to think of ourselves as greater than what we are, and these superheroes provide us with not only a vehicle for wish fulfillment through escapism but also a model of how to fulfill our highest wishes of who we want to be.

So how is it that comic book superheroes relate to the American literary traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Many of the early writers within the American literary tradition were motivated, in part, by the notion of using literature as a means of providing a vehicle for early Americans to envision the possibilities of who they could be. Not only would these works of literature provide a model for self-determination but they would also inform the greater cultural discourse in the creation of a sense of national identity. Forming a literary canon as a means of building a cultural identity is hardly an uncommon concept either as this process continues to take place event today. Twentieth-century lesbian feminist theorist Bonnie Zimmerman advocates the need for lesbians to form their own literary canon as a means of articulating and reinforcing their collective sense of identity in order to differentiate themselves from the greater hegemonic, phallologcentric culture. Discussing the concept of understanding racial identification through the lens of the process of grief, Anne Cheng points out "The history of American national idealism has always been caught in this melancholic bind

between incorporation and rejection" (10). Likewise, early Americans felt a similar compulsion to create an American literary canon in order to both differentiate themselves from and set themselves as equals to that of English culture and Europe as a whole whom they viewed as the dominant culture of the time. The dark irony is, as Cheng points out, that in spite of early Americans' awareness of having lived under imperial rule and subsequently championing "its unique proposition that 'all men are created equal,' then one of America's ongoing national mortifications must be its history of acting otherwise" (10). In spite of the lack of awareness on the part of early American culture in their adoption of what were arguably even more oppressive and damaging behaviors towards the racial other, this process of culture building through literary discourse underscores the way that writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman expostulated on who the American individual was and could be while other writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville delved into the darker facets of the American hero, highlighting conflicts of a natural and spiritual nature as well as locating fantastic origins for their protagonists.

While reading Hawthorne's little-read short story "The Gray Champion," I began to see similarities between this character and the heroes of the pulp era from the early years of the twentieth century, such as Robert E. Howard's Solomon Kane and Walter Gibson's The Shadow. And any comic fan worth his or her salt knows how these early pulp heroes and detectives were direct inspirations for Bill Finger and Bob Kane's seminal creation, The Batman. Here, in my mind, was a connection worth pursuing.

Criteria for Inclusion

There are hundreds—if not thousands—of comic book superheroes who contribute to the genre in one fashion or another. For practical purposes, however, only a few, select superheroes provide the sort of subjects best suited to my analysis. My criteria for inclusion are as follows. First, I primarily limit my discussion to the superheroes from the DC and Marvel Comics. These two companies are the longest running publishers of superhero comic books and continue to hold sway over the genre as they have for the past fifty to seventy five years. As such, confining the majority of my analysis to "The Big Two" is the most logical choice.[3] From these two companies, Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man stand out as the preeminent examples of the superhero genre above all others.

The second trait I take into account while selecting the most influential superheroes is comics sales figures. While I am not suggesting that popularity alone cements a particular character as one of the most important, sales must be accounted for given the unique relationship between that comic's readers, creators, and publishers. Because most comics are published on a monthly basis, publishers typically decide whether a title will continue based on the number of readers who continue to purchase issues from that series. Since the early days of comic publishing, creators have needed to be sensitive to the interests of their readers if they want to continue selling more of their work. That does not mean that stories are strictly told to cater to the interests of the masses. However, the general trend in comics shows that readers vote with their dollars.

[3] Within the comic book publishing industry, both DC Comics and Marvel Comics are often referred to as "The Big Two"—a phrase that will be used throughout this dissertation.

This makes it reasonable to gauge both a superhero's short-term and long-term popularity through monthly and yearly sales figures.

The third and most important criteria for selecting those characters who serve as the primary subjects for this analysis is the extent to which each character was able to break out of the niche of comics culture and work his or her way into other venues of mainstream popular culture. In my definition of what constitutes a superhero in Chapter One, I lay out my framework for how to define a superhero—one that follows Coogan's work rather closely. According to Coogan, a superhero is a figure who transcends the comics genre and effectively enters into the greater culture's modern mythology. Although there are a good many characters whose creators use them to great effect within the canon of comics at both DC and Marvel, and whom will no doubt live on in fan boy discussions for generations, most still go unrecognized by most casual patrons at the local bookstore or movie theater. For example, Jason Todd's return from the dead and reemergence as the Red Hood—first as a foe and then friend to Batman—took many fans by surprise. Red Hood's death helped form the present day characterization of Batman, and the "retcon" of this past moment undercuts many past stories. However, if one of these same fans were to ask a non-comics reader who Red Hood is, the most likely responses might suggest he is instead the heroine from one of the Grimms' fairy tales. Therefore, to understand how a superhero engages in the discourse of a broader range of interests, we must then look at those superheroes whose appeal has been so broad as to make them readily identifiable outside of their given genre, let alone the comics medium. And so, it is with this criteria—longevity, popularity, and mainstream appeal—that I began to look through the superheroes of mainstream comics.

First and foremost, Superman is the most logical hero to begin such a discussion about the ways superhero comics have engaged in the discourse of American literature. Fans and comics scholars widely recognize Superman as the first superhero to appear in comics, and certainly he is the most successful when taking into account the early print runs from DC Comics. Although the early 1940s saw Fawcett Comic's Captain Marvel standing toe-to-toe with Superman during the Golden Age of comics and even surpassing the Man of Steel for a time in sales and popularity,[4] DC's subsequent buyout of Fawcett and torpedoing of its franchise character thereby eliminates him from consideration. Although Captain Marvel would later emerge, it was only ever in a position subordinate to Superman, and he never regained the same stature as he enjoyed in the earliest years of comics.

Batman presents the next most logical choice for analysis given the close proximity of his initial foray into comic book crime-fighting (1939) relative to the first appearance of Superman (1938). His psychological makeup and origin story have proved highly influential on later superhero creations, from traumatized superheroes to popular anti-heroes. Moreover, Batman exerts a significant influence over mainstream culture through his numerous comics, cartoons, television shows, video games, toys, and movies over the decades since his first appearance in *Detective Comics* No.27. A study about the close relationship between American literature and culture that fails to include the Dark Knight would be a glaring oversight.

[4] There are generally five to six eras in comics: The Golden Age (1938-1945), The Atomic Age (1945-1956), The Silver Age (1956-1969), The Bronze Age (1970-1982), the Copper Age (1982-1992), and the Modern Age (1992-Present). However, considering no other time period is more than 12 years in length prior to the Modern Age, and for reasons that will be later discussed, I argue that those years from 1992-2001 serve as an age distinct from 2001 until the present day.

Finally, this study needs to deliver an emphasis on a newer superhero in addition to those from the genre's earliest beginnings, particularly one from the onset of the Marvel Age of comics during the early 1960s. Marvel inducted a new breed of superheroes that came into prominence not long after the United States' emergence as a world nuclear power following World War II. Additionally, these Marvel comic book superheroes ran against the ultra-conservative Red Scare and provided another way for the Civil Rights movement to voice its rising concerns over equality for all members of society. With all of this in mind, the third selection would have to be a character who exemplified the growing interest in unfixing the social boundaries that had long been held by the dominant conservative patriarchy. While a female, LGBT, or person of color would better satisfy this concern, the reality is that the superheroes being published during the 1960s still generally reflected the dominant white, heterosexual paradigm. Still, there is one character whose identity challenged stereotypical depictions of the hegemony of the years in which he was published and whose daily conflicts and concerns overlap with the growing anxieties over nuclear power and technology during the Cold War. The choice is clear when also taking into account those factors of popularity and mainstream appeal: The Amazing Spider-Man.

One of the reasons for Steve Ditko and Stan Lee's success in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, a title which continues to be one of the most popular and well-known over fifty years since the web slinger's first appearance, is its non-traditional literary representation of male anxiety over identity formation and performance. Peter Parker was born to a poor, white family, and while he is successful in the classroom, it is painfully clear he is shy and unpopular—a target of derision for the jocks and an object of female

scorn. Following a bite from a radioactive spider, however, Parker is imbued with superpowers enabling him to become Spider-Man. This alternate persona serves as the ultimate form of wish fulfillment, providing him the opportunity to shine in wrestling rings and in front of television cameras—a clear example of focusing his powers on physical, aggressive masculine power. Parker tragically learns about balancing the different aspects of his personality when he over-indulges in his Spider-Man role—or the hypermasculine persona as it is originally portrayed in the wrestling ring—and allows a criminal to escape, who in turn would kill his Uncle Ben in a failed burglary soon thereafter. Yet, he does not allow this trauma to overtake and ruin him. Instead, it is through creating a second persona that he is able to overcome his initial failure: as I have written elsewhere, "The cure to Peter's trauma is found through this cathartic reenactment of the role he *should* have performed the fateful evening at the wrestling arena, and it is through this continued performance of his costumed-self that Parker can reach his full potential as he continues on the path towards adulthood" (Helvie 152). When Peter is able to restrain his hypermasculine persona within a more moderate masculine identity, he is able to use his powers to become the strong, brave, and selfless Spider-Man who has endured for generations. Thus the rationale for my selection of Peter Parker, the Amazing Spider-Man, as my final primary superhero. Could I also consider one or more prominent superhero corps from the Marvel Age in my analysis? Certainly, but these famous superhero teams are less suitable for the project envisioned here. Although the Fantastic Four were Lee and Jack Kirby's inaugural hit from Marvel, "the House of M," this analysis aims to focus on individual superheroes. More importantly, however, these superheroes have yet to fully establish themselves apart from comics

culture. While there are two films recently released where they play the lead roles—*The Fantastic Four* and *The Rise of the Silver Surfer*—neither are considered to be mainstream blockbusters. Marvel does produce successful superhero teams, as seen with the X-Men, who have been involved with a number of highly successful cinematic releases. Yet it is worth noting that their sales dropped off significantly and entered a five-year period where Marvel was merely reprinting previously published content from 1970-1975. This recycling signifies a notable drop-off in reader interest during a time when the *Amazing Spider-Man* was producing significant popular storylines. From the Nixon-administration-sponsored anti-drug storyline in *Amazing Spider-Man* Nos.96-98, to the deaths of both Gwen Stacy and Green Goblin in issue Nos.121-22, and the introduction of Frank Castle as the fan favorite, the Punisher, in No.129, *Spider-Man* provides a clear-cut example of a successful stand-alone superhero comic. Furthermore, the most prominent characters from within the X-Men films are those first introduced in 1975, with the reboot of the series by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum (later replaced by Chris Claremont and John Byrne). For these reasons, the X-Men are not viable candidates for inclusion, in spite of their mainstream success and storylines that resonate with many marginalized peoples during the Civil Rights era and beyond.

Lastly, there are three other early Marvel superheroes that I did not select for analysis that should be mentioned. First, there is the Incredible Hulk—listed alongside Spider-Man as one of the thirty most influential individuals on college campuses as reported by *Esquire Magazine* in September, 1965. However, this is yet another example of a character who simply is not reaching the same levels of mainstream exposure over the decades since his first arrival on the comic book scene—through film, television,

video games, let alone the number of titles in which he played a starring or supporting role—that Spider-Man continues to enjoy over the decades following his first appearance. Likewise, both Iron Man and Thor do not provide the sort of long-term influence over the genre, in spite of their recent surges in popularity. While both characters maintain ardent fan bases, many comic fans and critics largely understand that both played secondary roles until the recent spate of films from Marvel, which have brought about a heightened sense of recognition from both comics and mainstream fans. In part because this popularity is likely to be fleeting, neither Iron Man nor Thor seem to possess the right traits for this dissertation.

Perhaps the most difficult and problematic of all my decisions was to exclude Wonder Woman from this analysis. The most obvious concern with not including Wonder Woman is the simple fact that Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man are all heterosexual, white men, and comics have continued to struggle with saturating the genre with this demographic since these comics were first published. While more superhero comics are finally beginning to feature persons of different gender, color, religion, and sexual orientation, the genre is still a long ways away from providing readers with a more fully socially representative narrative. In spite of the fact that Wonder Woman provides the best and most easily identifiable female superheroine and continues to demonstrate widespread appeal to readers since she first appeared in *All-Star Comics* No.8 in 1941, her sales and representation in media outside of comics still finds her in a distant third place to Superman and Batman.

Publishers are a large part of the reason for a lack of representation of women and marginalized people in comics today. Because a comic title's commercial success is

determined by how comic readers vote with their dollars, catering directly to reader demographics means that mainstream superheroes continue to fill newsstand every week. In a recent survey conducted by the Nielsen organization in conjunction with DC Comics' "New 52" initiative, over 93% of the fans actively reading issues from the company-wide reboot were male, and white readers were also most prevalent (Phegley). Knowing this, publishers continue to print comics that reflect the interests and appearance of the largest number of people who continue to buy their comics.

In an interview with Chief Creative Officer at Marvel Comics conducted in the wake of the success of the 2012 record-smashing movie blockbuster *The Avengers*, Joe Quesada commented that he'd "love to make a tent pole movie with a female lead, but that he really doesn't think there is an actress right now who could carry it, or a character that would work either" (Hieatt). This comes from one of the most well-known persons in the superhero publishing industry, and it speaks to the approach "The Big Two" still take to what can and cannot draw audiences. As Kelly Thompson aptly puts it: "[T]his sentiment from Quesada manages to both insult all of Marvel's female characters and all actresses everywhere in one fell swoop" (Thompson).

Looking at the increasing number of female comic book readers and the success of movies such as *The Avengers*, which features strong female characters, it is clear there is a place for women and other marginalized people in the comics canon. Comics no longer sell to over 250,000 readers on average as they did in recent decades, let alone to 750,000 readers as they used to over fifty years ago; instead, they tend to see print runs of less than half the previous average for the top-performing titles (J. Miller). And white male heterosexuals are hardly the only group driving the box office for these superhero

films. Therefore, it hardly makes sense to allow these narratives to be driven by such a narrow demographic when it is clear that superheroes of all ages, gender, race, and sexuality appeal to a much broader spectrum of fans. Still, in spite of the evidence that indicates a clear need for further discussion about the non-white, non-male superhero, it is also abundantly clear a discussion needs to take place about why there continues to be such a fixation on the white male as the default setting for who a superhero must be. This is a topic of primary interest to me, and it is for this reason that I decided to focus on these three famous, albeit predictable, superheroes. However, I do include female superheroes in my discussion such as Wonder Woman as well as Batwoman, whose recent reimagining the increasingly expanding notion of who can be a superhero.

So while there are a number of highly important superheroes whom I could justifiably include in a work such as this, practical constraints make it impossible to do so. Through implementing the criteria above, however, I do believe the choices made are valid ones and not arbitrary. The connections Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man have to the American literary tradition further support my argument over their inclusion over other comic book superheroes, and as the three most identifiable and enduring superheroes—all of whom fit within the white, heterosexual masculine male paradigm—they certainly provide the strongest foundation for this study on comic book superheroes and their relationship to the formation and perpetuation of a white, male, masculine identity within American literature and culture.

Literature Review

Modern Mythology

Given my contention that comic book superheroes provide contemporary readers with a type of modern mythology, there are a few writers whose works prove helpful in creating a context for the comic book superhero as an agent of myth. Both of Joseph Campbell's classic works on mythology—*The Hero of a Thousand Faces* and *The Power of Myth*—set the context for the cultural dialectic of mythology in which the early comic book superheroes, such as Superman and Batman, also participated. Additionally, Campbell's work—while often misapplied in attempts to universalize his claims—does provide a useful framework for better understanding Western notions of Masculinism.

Comics, especially superhero comics, provide a sort of contact zone between myth, science, and the fantastic, as Michael Drout focuses on in his research. Drout provides valuable insights into the field of modern mythologies with his various lectures: "From Here to Infinity: An Exploration of Science Fiction Literature" shows how science fiction informs multiple facets of popular culture, and "From Here to Infinity: Rings, Swords, and Monsters: Exploring Fantasy Literature" provides an in-depth exploration of fantasy literature and the ways in which J. R. R. Tolkien's extensive influence on mythology and those who would follow after him—including many comic creators. Finally, in what is one of the earliest critical examinations of comics and traditional literature, Roger Rollin's "From Beowulf to Batman: The Epic Hero and Pop Culture" provides the kind of links between comics and the canon that this dissertation will expand upon.

Comics Studies

In the greater field of comics studies, there are a number of critics whose work greatly informs this dissertation. Arguably, one of the most informative sources is Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book.* This book provides a historical lens with multiple first-hand accounts from the most significant persons involved in the comic publishing industry, from the publishers and editors to the artists and writers. Jones provides detailed accounts of the creation of Superman and Batman, as well as outlining the cultural influences that informed Siegel and Shuster as well as Finger and Kane as they brought, respectively, Superman and Batman to the public.

Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* also discusses the development of the comic book medium, with a close focus on the superhero genre. *Comic Book Nation* differentiates itself from other sources in the field through its interest in the ways the medium informed the development of youth culture in the U.S. As I do, Wright sees the superhero genre as a form of discourse where both comics creators and American culture interact with one another to produce visual literature. Because I believe, there are many national influences—not just American—on the development of the superhero genre, I look at Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men*, which provides an overview on the history of comics from a European perspective. In particular, Gabilliet looks at a number of different prototypes for the comic book superhero, which American critics often overlook, and Gabilliet lays claim to what he believes to be the first prototype for Superman in the French novel *Nyctalope of Mars*.

Finally, because I do spend a great deal of time conducting a number of close analyses of different comics from different periods of time, I find such the perspectives of studies such as Scott McCloud's ground-breaking *Understanding Comics* and Douglas Wolk's later *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* to be highly valuable in examining the function of comics at both micro- and macro-levels.

Superhero Studies

Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* provides what is arguably the definitive definition of the superhero genre and the conventions it employs—both in the comics medium as well as in other forms of media (television, film, and so on). However, I am more interested in making the argument about the ways in which this genre arose (in part) from American literary discourse, rather than laying out the parameters of the genre as Coogan does. Preceding Coogan, however, is Umberto Eco's 1972 article, "The Myth of Superman," which provides significant critical insight into Superman's contribution to Western mythology. Furthermore, his article constitutes one of the earlier examples of traditional literary critics turning their gaze to the comics medium and finding it capable of rewarding the same level of critical analysis as "high" literature does.

While Grant Morrison's *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human* generally falls in line with many other comics scholarship entries, I find it useful in my research. He continues to be one of the leading writers in the medium after nearly thirty years in the field, serving for instance as the head writer for multiple Superman and Batman titles. Likewise, Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch: What Our Superheroes Really Tell*

Us About Ourselves and Society provides further information about the roles superheroes play within mainstream culture from his perspective as a veteran comics writer and editor within mainstream and independent comics publishing.

Postmodern Superheroes

In 2012-13, there were a number of online articles published that have been especially germane to my research for Chapter Three, in which I discuss the development of the postmodern superhero. Pádraig Ó. Méalóid's articles published on *The Comics Beat* website provide numerous first-hand accounts from writers like Alan Moore and Morrison about the deconstructionist period of comics in the mid-1980s. Likewise, Sequart's online magazine has proved useful to a similar line of discussion, as epitomized in Peter Sanderson's serialized book *1986, The Year That Changed Comics* and Colin Smith's *Mark Millar, Deconstructionist*. Peter Y. Paik's print book *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* provides yet another example of academic discourse that explores how comics embodied the height of the postmodern era of comics in 1986.

Superheroes and Nationalism

Jeffery K. Johnson's recent *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present* covers a broader range of subject matter as he provides a comprehensive look at the past and present cultural contexts in which comics exist. Likewise, Matthew J. Costello's *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* offers readers a look at the historical context for comics

from a post-World War II perspective up to the fall of communism—from a more focused perspective of comics as cultural litmus tests for the people who read them. Finally, Andrew Terjesen offers an intriguing argument in "Is Superman an American Icon?", where he examines Superman's real loyalties and implicitly challenges the fundamental Americanness of the values of the Man of Steel.

Trauma and Superheroes

One of the key elements in the makeup of the postmodern superhero is the impact of a traumatic event in his or her life and the direct influence that that trauma has had on his or her decision to enter the world of fighting crime. Although the connection between trauma studies and superhero comics is new, the recent *Iron Man* films (most recently *Iron Man 3* from 2013) have highlighted the traumatized superhero, and my research attempts provides one early attempt at exploring this link. In this vein, my dissertation includes material from a previously published article of mine discussing how the trauma Peter Parker experienced led to his becoming Spider-Man. This work fits in with that of Shawn Gillen and Robert Weiner's entries in *Captain America and the Struggles of the Superhero: Critical Essays*. My expanded discussion here blends \ literary and medical studies of trauma, invoking literary trauma theorist Michele Balaev as well as medical studies from Sandra Bloom and Terr Lenore, all of which help reinforce the discussion of the hero's wound from Campbell's mythology of the hero.

American Literature and Cultural Studies

I begin my review of American Exceptionalism and nationalism in the United States through an examination of the Republican National Committee 2012 platform for this concept, which embraces a belief system that I argue, is one of the roadblocks to greater representation and diversification in comics today. In this way, I join the conversation with which Bruce Gronbeck engages in his article "The Visual and Narrative Rhetoric of Redemption: American Culture Responds to 9/11." Earlier, prior to 9/11, Seymour Lipset also discusses the concepts of "Ideology, Politics, and Deviance."

My dissertation also brings together a number of Frank Norris's essays of literary criticism from the turn of the twentieth century that discuss both popular and "high" literature. Norris makes the argument that "good" Romantic literature can take multiple forms, and he claims that the search for the "Great American Author" is a futile attempt for the nation to lay claim to a greatness that more properly belongs to world literature—a claim I also make regarding the superhero's global appeal.

Epitomizing the culturally conservative effort to establish a sense of "American-ness" at the height of World War II is F. O. Matthiessen's highly influential *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. This text was a broadside of canon-building in the field of American literature and, by extension, the continued formation of national identity. In addition to providing many useful insights into the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville, Matthiessen also reflects the culture in which he was writing. Published only three years after Superman's first appearance, *American Renaissance* signifies how a "high" view of the

literary canon opposed yet paradoxically also gave inspiration to the creators of merely "popular" comic books.

Finally, Richard Slotkin's cultural studies on America's long-standing interest in the heroes of the late nineteenth century dime novel (protypically the frontiersman, the cowboy, and the private detective), *Gunfighter Nation: Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, provide an important context for what I argue are the influences on and the prototypes for the comic book superhero.

Theoretical Approaches

In many regards, this dissertation does not follow the traditional trajectory in which a solitary author or literary work is singled out for scrutiny under the lens of a given theoretical approach. Instead, I am singling out particular genre in which a certain kind of literary character (superheroes) appear within a broader medium of literature (comics). Moreover, rather than a single theoretical approach, I employ multiple theoretical perspectives in order to trace the ways in which this specific genre of superhero comics engages in a sort of cultural discourse that both reflects and responds to historical events and changes in collective beliefs of American culture. The most notable of these is what has now become known as the American literary canon. Because American culture was and remains a multi-faceted entity, it seems useful to employ a variety of different approaches to analyzing both traditional forms of canonical literature and popular forms like comics. Comics are a literary medium, and tracing the influences from canonical literature of the past within superhero comics is one way to demonstrate

how these visually driven works are informed by other contemporary literary discourses and also add their own unique twists to age-old conventions and themes of literature.

In Chapter One, I make some use of mythological and cultural studies, especially stemming from Joseph Campbell's work on explicating the traits of the hero of myth and the journey he or she undertakes. Because I am seeking to set the comic book superhero in a greater cultural context, Campbell proves especially helpful in this chapter and throughout the dissertation to connect these costumed characters to the heroes of more conventional literature. I also make use of Coogan's research on the superhero genre in order to provide my own definition of the superhero, using Superman as the exemplar. I then go on to show how future superheroes either conform or break from the conventions initially established in *Action Comics* No.1. And like many sections of the dissertation, I reference other aspects of popular, mainstream culture, such as film and television, in my analysis to support some of my broader claims.

In Chapter Two, I focus on my own close readings of similarities between canonical American literature from the Romantic period—including both American Transcendentalist and Gothic writers. My rationale for this is that there is little critical work that seeks to draw comparisons between comic book superheroes and these traditional works of American literature. Articles from Roger Rollins and David Leverenz are some of the only examples of this kind of comparative analysis, and thus my dissertation aims to expand on these attempts.

I make some allusions to postmodernism and deconstruction in the third and fourth chapters, but my focus is again primarily on a close analysis of the superhero subjects and the ways in which they both recognize the old superhero conventions and

begin breaking away from them. Moreover, I move away from the traditional literary comparison I employ in the first two chapters to try to highlight some of the innovative conventions of these later generations of superheroes. For instance, I conduct an in-depth analysis of Peter Parker through postmodern notions of trauma theory in order to support my assertion that, via Spider-Man, Marvel more completely embraced the notion of the flawed superhero á là Batman, whose own childhood traumatization did not become much of a factor in his characterization and retelling of his origin story until well after Spider-Man's successful entrance into the field of superhero comics.

Finally, in Chapter Five and in my conclusion, I make use of some of the work being done within cultural studies to help craft my arguments about the ways in which American Exceptionalism continues to inform public understanding of who superheroes are and what they represent. It is also worth pointing out that while these sections do not make explicit use of either feminist or post-colonial criticism, I share their concerns about the ways in which different facets of culture can be used to oppress and marginalize groups of disenfranchised people.

Chapter Summaries

Throughout my dissertation, I try to show a number of different ways in which the comic book superhero genre is not only informed by American literature, but also participates within the greater cultural discourse of those written works of the past . In Chapter One, I introduce readers to a working definition of the superhero genre within the comics medium. I make connections to some works of popular literature—both American and European in origin—from the years just prior to Superman's first

appearance to show the cultural context for the development of the concept of the superhero. Towards the end of the chapter, I move from establishing Superman as the archetypical superhero whom all others are essentially cast to demonstrating his continued relevancy in a postmodern world, referencing his contemporary cinematic exploits and Morrison's critically-acclaimed *All-Star Superman* maxi-series.

Chapter Two looks at Batman as the "Re-envisioned American Hero." This chapter is where, I believe, the strongest ties to American literature of the past can be found. I look specifically at the Romantic writings of Transcendentalist writers, such as Emerson and Thoreau, in addition to those of the Gothic tradition, such as Hawthorne and Poe, and compare them to a variety of classic and contemporary iterations of the Dark Knight. Moreover, unlike any scholar to date, I make a specific connection between Batman and Hawthorne's short story, "The Gray Champion" through an intermediary writer, Robert E. Howard and his "Solomon Kane" pulp magazine short stories. I believe these literary antecedents were key influences on Batman's creation –a connection that Morrison's work makes especially clear.

Chapter Three examines "The Postmodern Superhero," particularly in the wake of Marvel Comics' rise to prominence in the 1960s and following. In adapting the archetype of the superhero first ushered in with DC Comics' Superman, Marvel introduced new elements to the type that would subsequently usher in the deconstructionist movement in the superhero comics of the 1980s. One element of particular interest is the flawed or traumatized hero, whom I argue is most memorably introduced in the form of Peter Parker—the Amazing Spider-Man. It is this superhero made imperfect who then opens the doors for the contemporary rise of the comics anti-hero, which I examine in-depth

throughout Chapter Four. This new convention provided the impetus during the 1980s for creators to begin publishing such new and foundational stories as Moore's *Watchmen* and Dave Gibbons and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. Following this analysis, I begin looking at the way the comics began being published by independents, outside of the mainstream industry.

Finally, I begin Chapter Five with a look at one of the major problems facing comics studies today—the inaccurate but long-held belief that comics are a uniquely American creation and a bastion of American ideals. First, I explore the concept of "American Exceptionalism," in addition to looking at the ways in which this belief—and a belief in Manifest Destiny—informed American writing of the nineteenth up to the early twentieth century: from Crockett's autobiography to Burroughs' popular *Tarzan Series* and Jack London's *The Call of the Wild,* as well as additional texts by the Romantic writers from Chapter Two and by later literary critics such as Norris and Matthiessen. I also look at contemporary examples American Exceptionalism, such as the period following the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11th. I look to bridge the discussion of American Exceptionalism to comics through contextualizing the culture in which the early comics creators lived and reinforcing the popular literature and myths prior to and during their coming of age.

I conclude the dissertation through suggesting how Superman and superheroes in general, once thought to embody American Exceptionalism, have become far more international entities. Tellingly, there are several contemporary characters who heroically embody a level of diversity and multiculturalism that has long been missing from mainstream superhero comics. The most notable of these are 2011's Ultimate Spider-

Man—the now African American and Hispanic Miles Morales—as well as Batwoman, who, since 2006, has arguably been the best known homosexual superhero and title character of a superhero comic book.

CHAPTER ONE

SUPERMAN AND THE SUPERHERO

This dissertation is largely concerned with demonstrating the ways in which comic book superheroes both reflect and engage their culture, and one of the primary means I use to accomplish this is through tracing similarities between traditional literature—another commonly accepted vehicle for cultural discourse. However, before launching into this exploration of the parallel lines between this colorful, visually driven genre and the various works of American literature from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it is essential to first understand what makes certain heroes *super*. The superhero follows a similar trajectory to the archetypal hero, but there are key differences of which one must be aware. Failure to ground this dissertation first in a framework of what a superhero is and is not might cause one to overlook the creative and yet culturally significant contributions comic writers and artists added to the archetype. As a result, I generally eschew comparing Superman to canonical American literature in this first chapter. That direction of analysis is reserved primarily for Chapter Five, in my discussion of Superman and his role in American Exceptionalism.

Superman: The First Comics Superhero

Many fans of comic book superheroes consider 1938 as the year in which the superhero was born. When *Action Comics No.*1 appeared on newsstands in June with a strongman draped in the new famous primary-colored costume, it generated a response that was almost wholly unexpected, as eager young readers grabbed up millions of

copies.[5] Here was an individual who was able to perform feats of strength and bravery that no mortal man could hope to match. He not only set himself apart from the common man through his innate abilities, but he also physically marked himself as a type of superior human—though we find out later that he is not human at all, but an alien orphan—through his use of a costume and alternate identity. And readers living in a highly nationalistic society found this comic book character was one whom they could safely look to as a role model thanks to his selfless service to uphold the moral pillars of society, such as truth, justice, and the American way—a slogan that would later be attached to Superman during the late 1940s radio program, *The Adventures of Superman.* While there were many other heroes in novels, pulp magazines, and the emerging mediums of television and cinema before Superman's appearance in *Action Comics* No.1, no others had so successfully combined the characteristics of superhuman powers, multiple identities, and pro-social agendas as successfully as Siegel and Shuster had when they created and published their Superman. Their creation gave way to a powerful and dynamic genre, and a literary movement was born.

When readers look into the backstory of Superman's creators, Siegel and Shuster, few would contest that the Man of Steel emblemized the opposite of these two young Cleveland natives during the height of the Great Depression. Gerard Jones describes the adolescent Siegel in the following way: "He didn't standout academically, didn't mix well, and didn't go much for extracurriculars" (63). Jones further recounts how Siegel told him "I had crushes on several girls who either didn't know I existed or didn't care I

[5] *Action Comics #1* had an original print run of only 200,000; however, later issues would exceed over one million copies printed per issue after the initial success of Superman's first appearance. It should also be remembered that each issue might change hands multiple times as children would often trade and read one another's comics.

existed" (65). Shuster was not in much better social standing than his counterpart was: "Joe was short and scrawny as a boy, badly nearsighted, cripplingly timid…Joe had trouble, falling behind in school and failing to make friends" (67). For both Siegel and Shuster, the creation of the Superman character provided these adolescent boys with an outlet for putting into words and pictures what each most wanted to become in life: strong, empowered, quick-witted, and the exemplar of heterosexual masculinity. Even today, it is not hard to see these same traits as typically emblematic of an idealized male heterosexual. Superman's red bloodedness still courses through the literary veins of many of today's superheroes as well.

Given his alien, Kryptonian heritage, Superman was also unique among many of the pulp fiction heroes who served as his inspiration. It is no accident that the bumbling, shy, and all-too-human Clark Kent was, beneath his shirt and tie, really Kal-El, a foreigner. Gary Engle suggests that,

> Superman's powers… are the comic book equivalents of ethnic characteristics, and they protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in which he lives in the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture linguistically, artistically, economically, politically and spiritually. (2)

Later critics, most notoriously Frederic Wertham, criticized Superman for employing fascist-like displays of force to preserve his notions of social justice. "Superman has long been recognized as a symbol of violent race superiority" Wertham stated, and yet the Jewish creators of Superman and numerous other comic superhero icons knew that their creations "were the fantasies of *real* Jews, the daydreams of kids who'd been made to pay

personally, by Russian programs and Irish fists, for their Jewishness" (Jones 274). Jeffery Johnson also points out how "Superman is quick to separate himself from both Hitler and Friedrich Nietzsche's superman by declaring himself a non-Aryan" (321-22). This is not only a practical means of Siegel and Shuster playing into the growing sense of American nationalism and outrage against the dictatorial forces within Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union; it also served as a nod to their own Jewish heritage. While Superman provided a clear vehicle for wish fulfillment for young, disempowered adolescents, he also provided the disenfranchised and marginalized members of society with an alien who was not only accepted within his society but also recognized as its social defender.

When it comes to looking at an example of the definitive comic book superhero, there is perhaps no better place to start than the appearance of the first major player on the field: Superman. Appearing in *Action Comics* No.1 in 1938, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster ushered in the era of the Golden Age of Comics with the story of their superman's arrival from a distant and doomed planet. He is described as being able to "leap 1/8th of a mile; hurdle a twenty-story building…raise tremendous weights…run faster than an express train…and that nothing short of a bursting shell could penetrate his skin" (Siegel and Shuster 4). He is draped in a red cape and wears red, blue, and yellow leotards with a red "S" emblazoned across his chest. Although contemporary readers often poke fun at the depiction of Superman's "red underwear on the outside," Shuster is clearly giving a nod to the early-twentieth century depiction of the archetypical muscleman best represented by well-known body builder, Barnarr MacFadden, who

served as the visual inspiration for not only Superman but also Tarzan (Jones 70). Superman was thus originally imagined as *the* definitive muscleman.

The suit of primary colors also highlights the primal nature of Superman's inner identity—he is a new Adam, the primary man reborn for the twentieth century, the actualization of the *Übermensch*, which Nietzsche described in the century before. As Walter Kaufmann states in the editor's note to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Part One*, *"Mensch* means human being as opposed to animal, and what is called for is not a super-brute but a human being who has created for himself that unique position in the cosmos which the Bible considered his divine birthright" (115-16). Interestingly, Siegel and Shuster's early renderings of their super man were far more in line with Nietzsche's understanding of the *Übermensch* where he used his powers to menace and rule mankind. While Siegel and Shuster's fully realized creation was a similarily super-powered being, the Superman readers have come to know and love is no brute, as his actions of restoring peace and serving justice indicate a higher mission. His powers and motivations mark him as nearly divine, and the identity we see depicted clearly indicates the inner character of the Man of Tomorrow who "was a hero of the people… a bold response to Depression-era fears of runaway scientific advance and soulless industrialism…. He made explicit the fantasies of power and agency that kept the little fellow trudging along toward another sunset fade-out" (Morrison 6-7). This is absolutely essential to understanding the early success of Superman. The meek and mild-mannered Clark Kent was someone whom young readers could identify with: he was pushed around by seemingly stronger men like Butch, and emasculated by beautiful women such as Lois Lane. But just below the surface was a means of empowerment: the cape and the power to become a superman.

As Umberto Eco states in his analysis of Superman, "the positive hero must embody to an unthinkable degree the power demands that the average citizen nurtures but cannot satisfy" (929). For children and young adults facing a lack of agency in the post-Great Depression world that was hurdling headlong into the greatest war of the modern era, this new hero was the answer to the collective wishes of Americans of all ages. Is this preeminent superhero from the past still suited to continue on as the banner carrier today? I will attempt to answer that question, positively, later in this chapter.

The Heroic, the Superhero, and Superman

It is necessary to create a working definition of the superhero, especially as the convention is used within the comics medium, before setting out on a discussion of individual superheroes. Having this framework in place will then allow for a better understanding of how these comic book superheroes participated in the evolution of the American hero. To begin this discussion over what constitutes the superhero, we start with the question of how can one differentiate between a *super* hero from his or her more typical heroic counterparts? To accomplish this, we must first come to some understanding of what it means simply to be a hero.

Heroes take many forms. They are based in both reality and fiction; they also concern themselves with the mundane and the epic—so where does one draw the line? One baseline is that a hero in literature, or other cultural outlets, is also the protagonist; however, there are times when heroes can be secondary characters as well. Joseph Campbell suggests, "There is one archetypal mythic hero whose life has been replicated in many lands by many, many people" (*Power of Myth* 166). Samson, Hercules, King

Arthur, Othello, Sherlock Holmes, and Tarzan are all examples of fictional heroes spanning hundreds of years of Western literature who are the characters that readers or other characters within the text aspire to be like. Yet, there are other protagonists in literature and film readers may root for but who do not seem to fit the conventional notions of being a hero. Holden Caulfield from J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is a character whom many readers may identify with to some extent, and whom they desire to see succeed, but his behaviors as the novel's protagonist are often less-than-admirable and are far from heroic—even if the struggle against the turmoil he faces could be seen as "heroic" in a sense. An even more extreme example is Al Pacino's Tony Montana, the drug kingpin in Brian De Palma's *Scarface*. The protagonist of this mob movie classic murders anyone standing in his way in the Florida drug trade—friend or foe alike. His methods are ruthless and gruesome, and he is clearly someone whom viewers would not—or at least, should not—want to emulate. And so, while it is important that hero be a central character within a given narrative, it becomes equally clear that simply playing a significant role in a given story is insufficient grounds for being considered a hero.

A second point to make about heroes is that they are often viewed as being inherently admirable persons and capable of performing amazing feats. Fingeroth suggests about heroes "[t]hey could be one of us, if we really worked hard to maximize our potential" (15). There are two important points here that Fingeroth makes. First, there is some sort of direct relationship between the common person and the hero. He or she provides a sort of bar, by which the rest of society's members can measure their physical, mental, or emotional capabilities. This individual thereby serves to inspire those around him or her to reach even greater personal heights. Examples of this can be seen in the

firefighters or police officers who provide daily service to society, in turn inspiring new generations of public servants who will go on to protect people and property from harm.

This leads to the second point Fingeroth makes, regarding the abilities of the hero. Whether pertaining to the physical attributes which allow the performance of remarkable feats, or a certain type of moral fortitude of acting under extreme duress, the hero possesses the ability to do that which the common person either cannot accomplish or chooses not to face. The legend of John Henry—the steel drill worker who raced a steam-powered drill and won, but at the cost of his life—is one such example of a hero. His exceptional strength and endurance continues to serve as an inspiration to American workers as an example of the "[e]veryman who struggles against insurmountable odds and wins" (Nikola-Lisa 51). Even today, there are examples of Henry's influence in the many folk songs and stories told about him as well as the more recently inspired comic book superhero, Steel, in the Superman mythos.

A third important characteristic of the hero is his or her desire to effect positive change for the good of others and apart from him or herself. The hero's journey of quest, perhaps Joseph Campbell's best known concept, represents one such sacrifice. Campbell claims all heroes must undertake "this first stage of the mythological journey … [that] signifies destiny has summoned the hero" (*Hero* 58). Moreover, Campbell points out, when this "call to adventure" is refused, it is "essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest" (60). Not only that, the hero also ends up forgoing the interests of the common good. Heroes often have a pro-social mission, one that he or she must pursue unless they risk possible "disintegration of consciousness," or what may be better understood as a loss of self-realization (64). Likewise, Fingeroth again points out

that the hero "does the right thing. Perhaps more importantly, *he* [or she] *knows what the right thing is*" (17). Heroes seem to be imbued with this hidden knowledge of universal truth and the desire to act upon it for the good of others. As Morrison states: "When a god elects to come to Earth, he has to make a few sacrifices" (*Supergods* 16). Therefore, we might conclude that a hero not only inspires those around him or her to greater levels of performance, but they also reinforce the most positive attributes of society by adopting a mission that directly benefits their community.

What we have then is a rough definition of the hero: A character of importance within a narrative, who may or may not necessarily be the protagonist, who possesses a set of unique traits—physical, mental, or emotional—that allow this individual to perform remarkable feats that the everyday man or woman would otherwise be unable to do. Moreover, while heroes "are by and large not upholders of the letter of the law" (17), they do inspire those around them to persevere in upholding the greater values of the society in which they exist. So then, what makes a superhero different from "regular" hero?

Superheroes, in the formalist sense of the word, do adhere to the aforementioned definition of the traditional hero. However, there are some key differences between the "regular" hero and his or her "super" counterpart. A useful framework for understanding this difference will primarily concern itself with three primary traits that mark a character as a superhero: superpowers, multiple identities, and pro-social missions.[6] Regarding multiple identities, I will also provide an examination of identity construction and performance as it relates to the superhero's public and private personas. This includes

[6] Peter Coogan's critical examination of the superhero, *Superhero: Origins of a Secret Genre* (2006), provides an extended discussion of this subject.

some biographical contextualization of the creators—many of whom were Caucasian Jewish men who sought to hide both their ethnic heritage as well as the jobs they performed for fear of public scorn from family, friends, and associates. This context is highly relevant when taking into account the ways public and private personas become one of the defining characteristics of the superhero. Finally, I introduce a fourth and final trait that differentiates standard superheroes of the genre from those who are able to transcend the comics medium and have a lasting impact on mainstream culture—characters such as Superman, Batman, and later, Spider-Man.

Before defining the superhero, however, it is important to establish the terminus post quem for this literary character. An interesting fact that many fans may not be aware of, and a growing number of comics scholars are discovering, is that Superman was not the first superman in pop culture. Coogan, like Jim Steranko before him,[7] points to Hugo Danner—the protagonist of Phillip Wylie's novel *Gladiator* (1930)—as a prototypical superman. Danner is depicted as "fairly bullet-proof" in addition to possessing "super-strength and super-speed" (Coogan 32). In this light, Danner possesses superhuman traits akin to Superman—a hero eight years senior to the Man of Steel. And Danner is not the only superhero prototype to help lay the groundwork for Siegel and Shuster's superhero. One need only look to the pulp magazines of the early 1930s and the heroes from these publications such as the science fiction-driven Flash Gordon or the mysterious Shadow as other prototypes who helped lay the foundation for the superheroes' arrival in comic books. These individuals possessed powers that distinguished them from the mere mortals whom they fought to protect. Flash Gordon had access to a variety of futuristic technology to aid him in his battles against the evil Emperor Ming. The Shadow

[7] Jim Steranko, *History of Comics*, vol. 1 (Reading: Supergraphics, 1970), print.

possessed the uncanny sleuthing skills necessary to uncover any mystery he faced, and he would later gain the power to cloud the minds of men, further cloaking himself in mystery. The pulp heroes even possessed the ability to break from the bonds of the gravity as seen on the cover of the August issue of *Amazing Stories* (1928), when Buck Rogers flew across the skyline using space-age technology.

Other early examples of super-powered beings who served as prototypes for the superhero can be seen in Robert E. Howard's pulp heroes Solomon Kane (1928) and later the more famous Conan the Barbarian (1932). Howard wrote about seemingly super-human protagonists whose pulp adventures brought readers tales of supernatural fantasy and wrongdoers being brought to justice. Solomon Kane was an American hero of Puritan descent who scoured the American wilderness of its demonic influences while Conan immersed readers in a fantasy world in which the barbarian fought not only to upend the sinister forces of the world, but also to satisfy his own desires for riches, women, and glory.

Even earlier than Howard's pulp fiction was Edgar Rice Burroughs, who is best known for his *Tarzan* series, which was first published in 1914. Less popular with present day readers but arguably more influential on Superman and the superhero genre as a whole, however, is Burroughs' earlier series, *John Carter of Mars,* from 1912 on. The title hero was originally an officer in the Confederate Army who is transported to the planet Mars. He discovers that, due to differences in gravity, his strength and fighting prowess are amplified, making him a superman among Martians. Like Kal-El, who follows him over two decades later, Carter is an alien whose powers set him apart from

the planet's natives, and he adopts a superheroic mission of restoring order and preserving social justice on the Red Planet.

And while the similarities between Superman and John Carter are intriguing, there are still other earlier influences on the superheroes of the Golden Age—most notably the French writer Jean de la Hire, with his *The Nyctalope on Mars* series from 1911.[8] The Nyctalope was a hero who blended crime fighting and science fiction—a generic combination that would be reenacted in superhero comics. Equipped with high-tech gadgets, hypnotic abilities, night vision, and (as later revealed) a mechanical heart, the Nyctalope trod the same ground as later pulp and comic book heroes. While the superhero genre (and comics medium as a whole) is often viewed as a uniquely American invention, this earliest known prototype of the superhero makes it clear that the genre was informed and shaped by more than just its American contributors, even if those creations from the United States have often demonstrated greater longevity and long-term influence.

Ultimately, what all of these examples point to is a commonality of superheroes possessing some sort of power—either innate or equipped—that differentiates them from the common man or woman. A superhero's unique powers and abilities can originate from many sources: an alien origin; alien or futuristic technology that is either given to or invented by the hero; genetic mutation; magic; or a variety of other causes. The important point to note is that, for one reason or another, the superhero has access to a certain skill or ability set that the typical human does not otherwise have. Simply possessing superpowers, however, is not sufficient to make a heroic protagonist a superhero. After

[8] Jean de la Hire was the pen name for the Count Adolphe d'Espie (1878-1956), who was a prolific writer of popular fiction during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

all, even villains are often super-powered, but few would identify them as superheroes—though a few delusional super-villains may mistakenly believe themselves to be true heroes, even if it is only within the scope of their self-perceived grand narrative.

A second component necessary to becoming a superhero relates to the superhero's double identity. The superheroic identity provides the superhero with a means of being readily identified by foes, the general public, and readers alike. It is for this reason the superhero adopts an iconic costume. This emblem provides a sort of rallying point for the masses to recognize and follow their superhero, and it is an important distinction from the standard hero. One of the strengths of the typical literary hero—or even the heroes we encounter in our day-to-day lives—is that they are "one of us," common men and women who accomplish extraordinary things. These men and women serve as exemplars of mankind through their outward displays of bravery and action, which often serve to inspire similar—if less epic—acts from the general population. Superheroes, however, are *not* one of us, even if they share some similar life experiences. Their abilities and skills set them apart and beyond the reach of normal men and women, and so they become more than an example of the common man at his or her best. Instead, these superheroes serve to inspire the common man and woman to exceed their personal limitations and point to the possibilities of the future for mankind.

Further, this second identity—made manifest through the iconic costume—provides a sort of "connection of name to inner character" (Coogan 32) that allows these same groups to understand something about who that particular superhero is. Pointing to Doc Savage as an early example of linking name and identity, Coogan states: "Doc Savage's name combines… the skill and rationality of a doctor and the strength and

fighting ability of a wild savage" (32-33). It is important to note with this prototypical character, however, that his costume lacks the sort of iconic imagery that would otherwise more readily set him apart from the crowd. When we see a large red "S" emblazoned on a diamond-shaped shield of yellow, we are meant to think of Superman. The blue and red costume with its yellow lozenge on the chest is directly associated with the Superman identity, just as a black bat placed against a yellow oval clearly brings to mind the Batman identity which Bruce Wayne constructed. It is through the use of such iconic costumes that heroes best "emblemize the character's identity" (Coogan 33). While Coogan differentiates (to some small degree) between the heroic identity and the costume, I see the latter as merely an outward expression of the former and therefore, there is little reason to separate the two in many readers' minds.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that there are some superheroes who do not adopt as iconic a costume as Superman, Batman, or Spider-Man but who are superheroes nonetheless. Many of the members of superhero teams, such as the X-Men or the Fantastic Four, have changed costumes on a regular basis. Wolverine was often seen without his traditional yellow outfit in his on-going solo series; however, no one would argue this title was somehow not a superhero comic book. Still, even these less-costumed superheroes have some defining characteristic that physically marks them: Wolverine's unique haircut and claws, Storm's shock of white hair, and Johnny Storm's stylized flaming body all serve as iconic cues to the identity of the superhero, regardless of their attire.

As mentioned before, simply possessing superhuman abilities and constructing a second (or third) identity is not sufficient to make a character as a superhero. Otto

Octavius was a brilliant experimental scientist who, after a freak radioactive accident, was psychically bonded to his four robotic arms. Instead of continuing to make a name for himself in the world of science, however, he created his better-known villainous identity—Doctor Octopus—and became famous for being the first villain to defeat a very young Spider-Man. So too did Erik Lensherr (also known as Max Eisenhardt) forgo his civilian identity as a Jewish Holocaust survivor and adopt the identity of Magneto, the evil Master of Magnetism. Shaped by his experiences in World War II, Magneto fought to punish the world for injustices he faced. Unlike his close friend, Charles Xavier, Lensherr opted to use his awe-inspiring mutant powers to engage his enemies with violence and not diplomacy. He sought to change the world as well, but instead of creating a world of tolerance—as the X-Men sought to achieve—he aimed to recast it so "homo superiors" ruled over homo sapiens. Although later stories would reimagine Magneto as a more heroic individual, his original comic book appearances were far more villainous in nature. Therefore, one must consider what a character does with his or her superpowers upon constructing a second identity in order to determine whether he or she will walk the path of the superhero or the supervillain. With this in mind, then, the ultimate determinant of the superhero is that the character's mission must be predominantly pro-social.

Thus the third and final component of the conventional superhero is the mission that he or she espouses as the driving force of their superhero (and even civilian) activities. Venom, the popular villain of Spider-Man, possesses significant powers, and his identity and costume all express his inner character and superhuman abilities, yet his stories hardly portray him as a superhero. In fact, the alien symbiote is shown to have a

malignant influence on its host, as seen in both the comic and cinematic representations. Consequently, it is the mission of the superhero that truly differentiates him or her from other super-powered characters. At its core, the superhero's mission is one that upholds peace, supports justice, and protects the individual. It is fitting that the foremost of all superheroes, Superman, would put it best when he responds to the Flash's question about why humankind needed superheroes:

> Flash: "…What's the point? Why should they need us at all?"
>
> Superman: "To catch them if they fall." (Morrison 293)

What Morrison suggests here about the role of the superhero is that he or she serves as a safety net for humanity. In discussing both Superman and superheroes in general, Umberto Eco points out that while "each of these heroes is gifted with such powers that he could actually take over the government, defeat the army, or alter the equilibrium of planetary politics," he also reaffirms the significance of the superhero's mission where "these characters [are] profoundly kind, moral, [and] faithful to human and natural laws" (Eco 22). Although Coogan provides one of the most comprehensive definitions of the superhero, one aspect that the most-established and best-recognized of these comic book characters possess is the ability to provide "the world with a frame through which our best and worst impulses could be personified in an epic struggle across larger-than-life, two-dimensional canvas upon which our outer and inner worlds, our present and future, could be laid out and explored" (Morrison 3-4). Although this is most likely not the main intent of the writers characters during the formation of their characters, it is a vital component that the creative teams behind such superheroes as Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man did incorporate into the mythos of these superheroes.

Is Superman Still Relevant in a Postmodern World?[9]

Superman. The name alone conjures up images of capes flapping in the skies over thriving metropolises, walls exploding as a rock-hard fist punches through them, and criminals quaking in fear before a hulking mountain of a man. Just about everyone knows who Superman is and what he stands for. When fans of comics and non-comic readers alike are asked to define what it means to be a superhero, the Man of Steel is likely to be the preeminent example. Considering that he has been around the longest—over seventy-five years now—I have argued that it is more than fair to associate him so closely with the genre as a whole. When people think of superheroes, they more often than not think of Superman.

Ironically, however, it has been quite some time since Superman sat atop the heap of superhero comic books sold in the North America. In sales figures dating back to September 1996 showing top-selling single issues over the course of the month ("Top Comics"), Superman has, over those 200 months, earned the most sales only seven times. Moreover, in one of those months his comic was tied with another title (*X-Men* No.59, Oct. 1996), and four of the other sales leaders were part of a series he shared alongside Batman (*Superman / Batman)*. This means that, on his own, Superman has independently carried a month just 1% of the time. Batman, however, has solely carried the month approximately 16 times, for a total of 8% of all months within this seventeen year period. (This includes titles such as *Batman and Robin*, where Batman is the avowed lead character, but does not include shared titles such as *Superman / Batman)*. So what do all

[9] An earlier version of part of this section can be seen in "Is Superman Still Relevant in a Postmodern World?" published by Sequart.

of these statistics mean? While people in North America may know *of* Superman, it seems apparent that they are not coming out in droves to get to know Superman further.

Unfortunately, it is not just in the medium comics where Superman is finding himself less super than his counterparts. Superman enjoyed far-reaching popularity during the conservative 1940s and 1950s: there was the release of the *Superman Adventures* radio show, which ran for eleven years in this timeframe; the *Superman* animated series by Fleischer Studios, which produced animated shorts from 1941-43; two theatrical releases, in 1948 and 1950 respectively; and the black-and-white television serial, *Adventures of Superman*, which ran from 1951-58. Although Batman enjoyed some similar successes during these same years, the Dark Knight could not match the pervasiveness of the Man of Steel during that period in U.S. history. Admittedly, the United States was still feeling the pains of the Great Depression when Superman creators Siegel and Shuster first committed their imaginations to pen and paper. Not only was the country looking for deliverance from hardship in the form of real world heroes—whom they found in political figures such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt—they were also looking for an escape from their world of hardship to one where order was maintained by persons of extraordinary ability who would not allow the innocent to come to harm. It did not matter that the illusion was a temporary one and that it cost a dime. War in Europe was on the horizon, and in a culture that prioritized truth, justice, and the "American Way," Superman arrived on the scene in the nick of time, and carried the flag when war broke out. But with the onset of the 1960s, a different sort of war started being fought. There were protests against the United States' military involvement in Viet Nam, and the once trusting population began to openly challenge nearly every facet of mainstream

American culture—including its superheroes. Since that time, outside of occasional successes in cinema and television, the Man of Steel has never regained his central place in the pantheon of American popular culture, often falling to a distant second place at best behind the Batman. Typified by the infamous "Death of Superman" comic storyline from 1992, the Man of Steel has now taken a back seat to the superheroes of the postmodern age.

So, then, how does one square this contradiction of a character who defines the best-selling genre in the comics industry, and yet fails to sell anywhere near as many books as other superheroes? Is this simply a case of a culture loving the *idea* of Superman but not actually loving the Superman who is delivered to comics stores every month? Kal El may not be the superhero of today, but there is a reason he is known as the Man of Tomorrow. And given the multi-media events of summer 2013, it seems likely tomorrow is now here.

Throughout the decades since Superman first caught the public's eye, the Man of Steel has seen temporary resurgences in various outlets of popular culture. In 1978, Richard Donner's classic cinematic release of *Superman* made millions believe a man could fly, and he followed up his superhero hit movie in 1981 with *Superman II*. Although Bryan Singer received a lukewarm response when he resurrected the franchise in 2006 with his film *Superman Returns,* Zack Snyder's far more polarizing vision for Superman in 2013's *Man of Steel* would go on to become one of the summer's biggest blockbusters. This seems to have signalled a rebirth in the public's interest, as Superman movies are now in the works for 2014 and beyond. Additionally, Superman has appearred in cartoons such as Bruce Timm's *The Adventures of Superman* as well as various Justice

League titles. Moreover, Clark Kent saw two popular runs on television: First, he appeared in *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, which aired from 1993-97, as well as the popular Emmy-winning television series *Smallville*, ran for an impressive ten years from 2001 to 2011.

In June of 2013, Scott Snyder, arguably DC's hottest writer, along with artist and DC co-publisher Jim Lee, took the helm of the newest Superman comics series: *Superman Unchained*. Lee has made a name for himself in the world of comics for consistently strong sales of whatever comics titles he works on, and in the few years Snyder has been in the industry, he has shown the same propensity for success. Yet, while it may be fair to argue that many savvy readers will be drawn to the title because of its the creative team rather than the superhero on the cover,[10] Snyder argues that Superman and Clark Kent's continued appeal is a driving force. In an interview with the NY Post, Snyder states:

> I think he's incredibly relevant […]. I mean, to me, Superman is sort of the character in comics, or one of the great characters in literature, that inspires us to be better, you know, than we think we can be.
>
> Because ultimately even though he flies and he is an alien and he has this incredible power set, the magical thing about that character is he's the most human, I think, of all of us. You know, like, everything about him is because of the Kents. And so the thing that makes him special when you kind of boil him down to his core or you really look at him as a

[10] Given the fluctuations in creative teams and inconsistencies in *Superman* and especially *Action Comics* since the beginning of DC's "New 52" reboot from 2011 to the present, this line of argument is worth pursuing elsewhere.

character, isn't so much his power set. It's his ethical compass. (Greenfield)

Gambling on a seventy-five year-old hero seems to have paid off: according to end-of-month sales for the first issue of this new series, it garnered in excess of 250,000 copies sold—and this does not include digital sales, which would likely increase that figure to just short of 300,000, putting it head and shoulders above every other comic sold that month. Additionally, the second issue also garnered the top spot for July, besting the second-place seller, *Batman*, by almost 34,000 copies. While these are short-term gains, when paired with the success of the film *Man of Steel*, it does suggest there is a strong appetite today for superhero narratives that are aspirational and uplifting, along the same lines that Superman has often represented.

After all, one of the major tag lines to the blockbuster *Man of Steel* (which came out the same week as Lee and Snyder's new series) is "You will believe a man can fly." This simple line speaks to the fundamentally aspirational nature of Superman, which Snyder argues inspires fans to "be better" and reach higher. It is a truly romantic notion of the superhero—the belief in the common individual, transcending his or her own limitations, all to become something greater, something… super. Earlier, American Transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, as well as Margaret Fuller all believed in the strength and potential of the individual to accomplish great things and to transcend mortal limitations to become something greater. Fingeroth suggests that "[w]hen Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman, they stumbled onto a metaphor system that everyone in modern society could understand with a glance" (169). It is a

metaphor earlier American writers understood, and it is one that Siegel and Shuster worked into the story of their super man with great success.

There is something about Superman that speaks to certain aspects of the human condition, the belief in something transcendent, or, at the least, in the potential for such greatness to exist in our world. Similar stories have been since antiquity. The ancient world had the gods who roamed the earth. World religions profess God, made manifest in Christ, to have walked among us while His greatest prophet, Mohammed, labored to bring the light of Islam to the world centuries later. King Arthur—born amidst questionable circumstances—rose from obscurity as an orphan to bring a golden age of peace and order to war-torn England. Along with his Knights of the Round Table, which would go on to inspire generations in the centuries to follow. At the earliest beginnings of the United States, there was a similar need for larger-than-life heroes, whether historical or legendary, who embodied the spirit of its people. This is seen in the celebration of the likes of Lewis and Clark, Crockett, Daniel Boone, Paul Bunyan, Molly Pitcher, Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok, Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill Cody, and John Henry.

In spite of science's unveiling of the mysteries of the world over the past few centuries and the rise of postmodernism over the past half-century, people still seem to have an even greater need for supermen and superwomen. While many contemporary superheroes were "created *expressly* to deconstruct the genre and show what superheroes would 'really' be like if they existed," the general public has yet to "get tired of the more simplistic view of [classical] heroes and villains" (Fingeroth 157; original emphasis). Out of the recent crop of dark and brooding superhero films, it was the far more upbeat and hopeful *Avengers* that broke nearly every box office record in 2012. While fans and

critics alike have heaped praise on Christopher Nolan's cinematic Batman trilogy from 2005 through 2012, there is still a strong desire for less gritty and more romantic depictions of the superhero. Given his iconic appeal to the potential of the human spirit, it is no wonder then that Superman has become arguably the best-known superhero over the past seventy-five years.

Superman's mission to champion the values of society and his continuing victories over the forces of evil—whether the greed of the Lex Luthors of the world or the nigh-undefeatable Doomsdays of everyday life that threaten to consume us—represent the hope that there is triumph in store for his readers and viewers. Though the Man of Tomorrow's popularity may wane at times, history has shown that it continues to carry forward and grow with each succeeding generation both in the United States and abroad. One recent example is Morrison and Quietly's *All-Star Superman.*

All-Star Superman: A Case Study in Defining the Superhero for a Postmodern Age[11]

Looking at a more contemporary iteration of Superman—Morrison and Frank Quietly's collected series *All-Star Superman* volume 1—we can see how Superman can be convincingly recast for a postmodern reader. Morrison and Quietly do this primarily by appropriating certain elements of the science fiction genre, in addition to incorporating beautiful computer-driven artistic elements.

Although there are some early prototypical science fiction works from the nineteenth century such as Poe's "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaall," often being cited as the first within the genre, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which

[11] An earlier version of part of this section can be seen in "Grant Morrison's *All-Star Superman*: Science Fiction or Science Fiction Appropriated?" published on Sequart.

was actually published seventeen years earlier than Poe's work, the genre largely came to maturity during the twentieth century. Given the close proximity between the rise of science fiction and the birth of comics, it is not surprising the two genres have continued to intermingle. During the Atomic Age of comics,[12] many creators were preoccupied with interplanetary adventures, futuristic technology, and other tropes from science fiction—and Superman was no exception. Even today, current scientific knowledge and discoveries can often be observed in the comic books being published by both Marvel and DC Comics as well as those of many independent publishers.

Contemporary comics readers might not think to pair Superman with science fiction; yet there are many elements from comics' flagship superhero that do—arguably—place him within the science fiction (SF) genre. According to Michael Drout, a work can be viewed as SF when it concerns itself less with answering questions of mystery and the unknown with magic and instead aims to provide logical, scientific, or technologically based responses to these problems. The more concerned an author is to provide answers grounded in hard science and explain the mechanics of how certain technology works, the more the work is considered "hard" SF; the fewer details provided, the more that particular work is considered "soft" SF (Drout). While Morrison does not have the background—and I would argue the interest—in providing readers with a mainstream comic series that blends superheroes and hard SF, he does make use of soft SF techniques to provide a stronger appeal to realism for his retelling of the Man of Steel's origin.

[12] This period is generally taken to have run from 1945 (the end of World War II) to 1956 (following the establishment of the McCarthy-era Comics Code).

The first page of the “Faster” episode is broken down into four panels, which immediately cue the reader into the other-worldly nature of Superman: the destruction of an alien world (“doomed planet”); a distressed couple—“desperate scientists,” no less—dressed in foreign garb reminiscent of 1930s modernism; a space shuttle hurtling away from the exploding planet carrying Krypton’s “last son”; and finally, the image of Jonathan and Martha Kent looking over (what we know to be) the orphaned infant: “kindly couple."

Fig. 1. Superman's Origin in *All-Star Superman*. Grant Morrison and Frank Quietly, *All-Star Superman* (New York: DC Comics, 2008) 1. Print.

As if there were any doubt about Morrison’s interplanetary interests, the double-page spread that follows presents Superman flying against a backdrop of the sun. Only a few

pages later, we in a laboratory where we are told that Superman's cells are like those of a solar battery that soak up the energy and power him, providing a rudimentary scientific rationale for what makes Superman so super. On the other hand, there is no real explanation as to how this process works biologically. Again, it is important to Morrison that readers know there *is* science behind the amazing fiction they are reading, but this is clearly softer SF, since he does not seem interested in going any further in describing it. And we should not fault Morrison for this either. His aim is to tell the reader a story about Superman—not create an in-depth scientific treatise of how Superman's biological makeup allows him to be the super person that he is. He provides just enough detail to explain the relationship of Superman to Earth's sun without overloading his reader with the hard science of it all.

In a nod to the "biopunk" movement in science fiction, Morrison uses Lex Luthor as the conventional "mad scientist" who threatens Superman and the crew of a solar research space vessel with a living fusion bomb smuggled aboard the ship. Biopunk, like cyberpunk of the 1990s and earlier, positions biology as a form of technology that can be manipulated to the needs or interests of science (Drout). In this light, we can see how Luthor's living bomb is a biological weapon of mass destruction—in this instance, jeopardizing the space machine and luring Superman into a potentially lethal trap: "I'm a genetically modified suicide bomb in human form. Death. Courtesy of Lex Luthor!" (Morrison 14). As Luthor expected, Superman forces the fusion monster into the sun moments before it explodes. Here his understanding of the science behind Superman's biology allows the ability to create a situation in which the sun's stellar radiation oversaturates Superman's cellular bioelectric absorption, thereby threatening to kill him.

It seems to be just the sort of insidious machination one would expect from the evil genius… only it is never explained to the reader just how this will happen. Further, the situation that Morrison concocts overlooks the humans' inability to travel so close to the sun without being incinerated, let alone to attempt to harvest elements of the sun. Soft SF allows Morrison to move the plot along without being bogged down by the technical details. After all, he is not trying to show readers the process of harvesting material from the sun; instead, the incident is merely a plot device used by Luthor to kill Superman.

Throughout the first volume of *All-Star Superman*, it should become clear that while Morrison is interested in adapting some science fiction elements into his retelling of Superman's origins, his true focus lies in weaving the Superman story into the fabric of world mythology. The most obvious example of this ambition is the allusion to the Twelve Labors of Heracles from Greek myth, refashioned as Superman and the Twelve Challenges—the first four of which are presented in volume one. However, it takes more than one parallel to the past for Morrison to cement his Superman as a member of the modern mythological tradition. As mentioned before, Coogan discussed certain key elements of the superhero, and many of his points transfer readily to past conceptualizations of mythic heroes. Recalling those three primary characteristics that set the superhero apart from all others: mission, powers, and identity (77), one can see how Morrison's Superman plays up this model. The "All-Star" Superman certainly possesses powers not only above and beyond the normal man but also beyond every other superhero. This is made clear when Superman is juxtaposed against two strongmen from the biblical and classical eras: Samson and Atlas. These two "heroes" are formidable, as evidenced by their handy defeat of invading lizard men, but they fall far short of

Superman's strength, mental prowess, and moral judgment. When placed opposite of Superman, readers quickly recognize Samson and Atlas's reckless use of powers, as Superman flies into space to save the lizard prince who had been flung into orbit (Morrison 64). We also discover these two "would-be conquerors" (66) instigated the lizard man's appearance in the first place, by encroaching upon their territory beforehand.

Finally, neither braggadocio figure is manly enough to win the girl in the end despite much bravado: "Look, I'm genuinely flattered, guys—but you'd have to go a long way to outdo Superman" (67). Sure enough, Superman handily defeats both strongmen simultaneously in an arm wrestling match where both losers have their arms broken. And of course, Morrison provides examples of Superman saving men, women, and children throughout the entire volume—either as background filler (e.g., while attempting to disclose his secret to Lois) or as major plot points, such as subduing the Chronovore and saving the astronauts on their mission to the sun. Morrison's Superman not only possesses significantly greater powers than other heroes do—mythic or contemporary—but he also understands that these powers must be used responsibly, unlike his legendary counterparts Samson and Atlas, who create more strife than social stability.[13]

Morrison's work also underscores Coogan's assertion about the interconnectedness of the superhero's identity with his or her iconic costume. We see this when Superman imbues Lois with his powers for a full day and presents her with a special costume of her own. Readers only need one glance at the red cape, the inverted insignia (complementing Superman's icon) reflecting a yellow "S" on a red background, the blue leotard, and the red boots to realize exactly whom Lois is modeled after. We

[13] The theme of power and responsibility is often associated with Spider-Man since the 1960s, and did not originate with Lee and Ditko's famous creation, though their formulation is certainly the most memorable.

know she is now a superhero—even if for only 24 hours—because she is obviously fashioned as "Superwoman."

The art is another essential postmodern element of *All-Star Superman*. While I have already alluded to a number of examples of how Quietly's artwork combines with Morrison's storytelling to establish Superman's place at the dawn of the mythological age of superheroes, there are various additional artistic aspects of this comic that reinforce Superman as the Man of Tomorrow. One of them deals with Jamie Grant's use of computer-generated colors throughout the maxi-series. Grant incorporates light effects and strong primary and secondary colors (warm yellows and reds as well as the cool and crisp blues and greens), creating an atmosphere that both hearkens back to the simpler pulp-printed instantiations of Superman while also producing eye-popping scenes that bring each panel vividly to life. The palette of colors and textures available in today's printed comics is much more extensive than in the past, and Grant takes full advantage of this. Moreover, the ways in which Grant transitions from one shade of a color to another through use of the computer creates an ultra-smooth texture on the page, so that the various surfaces seem almost unworldly—rather fitting given the SF subject matter.

Lastly, *All-Star Superman* nods to the early days of postmodern art on various splash pages at the beginnings of each issue, where enlarged Ben-Day dots appear in extreme close-up shots. Interestingly, each of these opening splash pages is a small sliver of a panel that can be found elsewhere within that particular issue. This intriguing graphical technique effectively marks this series as typically postmodern in its self-reflexivity, while still recognizing and celebrating its mythological roots within and outside of the comics medium. It is difficult to know whether Morrison or Quietly

initiated these artistic decisions, but creative collaboration itself is a common mode of postmodern production. These comic creators' collaborative efforts have jointly produced what is widely considered to be one of the premier Superman stories for a postmodern audience.

Ultimately, Morrison brings readers to the sun, to the moon, and back to Earth to showcase the interplanetary appeal of Superman for his contemporary, postmodern audience. We experience the advanced science of the P.R.O.J.E.C.T. moon base through the eyes of Jimmy Olsen, and see how the technological wonders create a Doomsday replica through a simple injection as a "Superman fail safe." Despite the appeal to science, however, there is no substantial attempt on Morrison's part to engage in true scientific discourse. Instead, Morrison uses elements of science fiction writing—predominantly soft in nature—to help bring a heightened sense of realism to this fantastic collection of stories. The result is that he provides new ways in which Superman can continue to be identified as a modern superhero myth for comics fans and mainstream audiences throughout the world.

But there is more to it than just that. It is true that the scientific elements of the story allow Morrison to show Superman truly is the Man of Tomorrow while the allusions to classical myth reinforce his place in the pantheon of heroes of old. However, the ending of *All-Star Superman* employs a similar ending to the medieval legends King Arthur – the once and future king – who received a mortal wound from Modred but not before putting an end to the usurper and his quest to steal the crown. Shortly after, the legendary king of England is brought to Avalon to return at some unspecified day when his people needed him most. In this way, Arthur is both a mortal man and yet, also an

immortal hero. So too does Superman's arch-nemesis, Lex Luthor, deal him a fatal blow. Like Arthur, Superman defeats Luthor before he flies into the sun where readers see a classical image of the definitive superhero performing his twelfth labor – rebuilding Earth's sun with the promise that one day, he may return. As Jor-El tells his son just before Kal El succumbs to death: "You have given them an *ideal* to aspire to, *embodied* their highest aspirations. They will *race,* and stumble, and fall and crawl…and *finally*…they will *join* you in the *sun,* Kal-El" (Morrison, *All-Star vol.2*). It is this point that underscores Morrison's greatest success in this series as he is able to create a sort of bridge between the iconic superhero of modern myth to the greater humanity whom he lived to serve …and the readers who continue to hold him up as the gold standard whom all other heroes are measured.

CHAPTER TWO

BATMAN: THE RE-ENVISIONED AMERICAN HERO

This chapter's dual focus is to demonstrate how closely Batman reinforces the archetype of the superhero that Superman first established one year earlier, and, more importantly, to illustrate the many parallels to canonical American literature from some of the most influential writers of canonical nineteenth-century literature. While numerous comics studies scholars have taken great pains to contextualize the origins of superheroes, few have looked at the ways in which other literary periods and genres might have influenced the development of this comics genre, and it is in Batman that I see the greatest evidence of this adaptive process taking place. Whereas Superman provides the initial benchmark for the comic book superhero and a direct link to many traditional mythological heroes, it is Batman who provides the strongest instance of how early comic book superheroes engaged readers and creators in a dialogue about American mythology. To show this, I will draw examples from both the early years of *Detective Comics* and *Batman* as well as more contemporary iterations of the Dark Knight.

When looking at various instances of canonical American literature, it becomes clearer how the creators involved in this new comics medium were participating in and responding to the national discourse of what American literature could be—something their contemporaries who wrote in more socially acceptable mediums (sometimes including themselves as well) may never have considered in relation to comics. In a lecture to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Cambridge in 1837, Emerson claimed, "this confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by

all preparation, to the American Scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" ("American Scholar"). This intellectual "call to arms" spurred many United States writers in his time and beyond to engage in a meta-discourse about what traits best represented the "American Scholar"—or hero.[14] For this reason, I begin with an examination of the works of the two most recognized Transcendentalist writers of the Romantic period: Emerson and his close friend and student, Thoreau, who provide the backbone to my discussion of the developing notions of the "American Hero."[15]

In the second half of the chapter, I look at the works of Poe and Hawthorne, two of the preeminent authors of the American Gothic tradition, whose influence would ultimately inspire Finger and Kane in the development of their Batman. Besides overhauling the horror genre, Poe helped develop both the science fiction and detective genres, all of which would inform future writers of all things fantastic and mysterious. Meanwhile, Hawthorne helped established a set of uniquely American literary tropes and conventions not only unique to gothic horror but also to American literature in general. Further, I bring to light the connection between Batman and Hawthorne's lesser-known but significant short story, "The Gray Champion," which provides a gothic archetype of the superhero for the early pulps and superhero comics. These writers eschewed (some more violently and vehemently than others) the high ideals of the Transcendentalists and probed the darker depths of the human mind and soul. Such attention to the darker side of

[14] Throughout this chapter, I will use the terms "individual" and "hero" interchangeably because the person who behaved *as* an individual in the eyes of the Romantics—especially the Transcendentalists—was a type of hero to be admired.

[15] Whitman, Fennimore Cooper, Crockett, and Louisa May Alcott are other nineteenth-century writers whom I examine in Chapter Five in order to see some of the ways in which they contribute to growing notions of what it meant to be American, and how these ideas would later influence twentieth-century thinking.

existence can ultimately be traced to the deconstruction of the superhero with Miller and Moore in 1986 and the rise of the anti-hero.[16]

Batman's Contribution to the Superhero Genre

Hot on the heels of the explosive success of Superman in *Action Comics*, DC Comics immediately cast about for another superhero concept, and it found its next megastar in Finger and Kane's Batman. Whereas Superman appealed to the "loftiest aspirations of our species … hurtling down from imagination's bright heavens" to address middle class concerns over Depression-era anxiety, as Morrison contends (15), Batman emerged from the deep dark of society's underbelly, in response to the crime that often infested the streets of urban America. Finger and Kane's Batman was not a true *übermensch* in the vein of Siegel and Shuster's Superman, though later creators would draw elements from Nietzsche into their depictions of Batman. Instead, they drew upon early influences from pulp mystery men such as The Shadow and The Bat, in addition to the cinematic, flamboyant, swashbuckling hero, the masked Zorro. Although Bruce Wayne lacked the superpowers of Superman, readers discovered in his first adventures that he more than made up for this in his uncanny sleuthing abilities (uncovering the chemical syndicate murders); his base of scientific knowledge (as we discover some of the many crime-fighting tools created for his confrontation with Dr. Death); and his ruthless fighting prowess (leaving villains to fall into vats of acid, choke on deadly gas, or be nearly burned alive).

[16] While this chapter primarily focuses on Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, and Hawthorne, examinations of the other American writers mentioned can be found in Chapter Five.

Despite being introduced as "a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrong doer, in his lone battle against the evil forces of society," it was clear from Batman's first appearance in *Detective Comics* No.27 (1939) that he not only looked far different from Superman but employed questionable methods that would eventually even put him at odds with the Man of Tomorrow. Here was the "dark twin" to the "ur-god" that Superman represented (Morrison 3), dressed not in primary colors but in black and darker shades of gray.[17] Instead of Superman's handsome, smiling face, there for all the world to see, Bruce Wayne concealed his identity below a pointed mask, fashioned in the sake of his namesake, in order to strike fear into the denizens of Gotham's underworld. Clearly, the costume of each serves as an exterior manifestation of each hero's interior identity. Where Superman's cape was rounded, bright, and flashed in the air as he bounded across the buildings of Metropolis, Batman's scalloped cape served as a shroud, concealing him among the shadows of the alleyways of Gotham City. And while Superman provided a vehicle for wish fulfillment of a more innocent sort, where readers could vicariously experience a positive kind of empowerment through the meek Clark Kent, the birth of Batman in the tragedy of Bruce Wayne (his parents being murdered in Crime Alley, no less) encouraged a very differently charged form of reader-character identification. In Bruce Wayne, readers found someone who experienced traumatic loss, like so many readers in World War I and the Depression, and soon to come in World War II. But instead of allowing himself to become a victim of this crime, Bruce Wayne swore "by the spirits of [his] parents to avenge [their] deaths by spending the rest of [his] life warring on all criminals" (Finger

[17] Only in later years would Batman begin to be seen with a blue cape and cowl along with the yellow background on his iconic chest emblem.

and Kane 63). While both superheroes let readers experience, albeit temporarily, a new life, Superman's world was informed by his ever-present foster parents, Jonathan and Martha Kent. On the other hand, Bruce Wayne was shaped into the Batman by the ever-present absence of his parents, Thomas and Martha Wayne. Not surprisingly, then, these two heroes implied two very different perspectives on how to address the world's needs.

Taking into account the four-part framework of the superhero convention discussed in Chapter One, Batman, like Superman, is a clear-cut exemplar of the genre. As stated before, Bruce Wayne may not have the superpowers of Clark Kent, but he does possess unlimited wealth that enables him to equip himself with all the tools necessary to overcome nearly any obstacle in his crime-fighting path, from his technologically advanced Batcave—fully-equipped with a state of the art computer and forensic laboratory—to his fleet of Bat vehicles allowing him to dominate Gotham's land, air, and water. And while Bruce Wayne may not possess superhuman abilities, he is perhaps a more fitting example of an *übermensch* because he is actually an earth-born human, unlike Superman, who was born on another planet and orphaned on Earth. Wayne is continually shown to be at the peak of physical and mental health, and while readers often question the damaged psyche of the man bent on a quest of vengeance, his emotional fortitude is unquestioned as he continues to confront sociopaths such as Joker, or horrific monsters such as Killer Croc, without the signs of mental or emotional breakdown that a normal person might otherwise experience. Whereas the life of Superman is simply beyond the reach of the everyday person, under the right circumstances, it is conceivable that a Batman could really exist.

In addition to possessing superhuman-like mental abilities and economic resources, Bruce Wayne exhibits the second component of the superhero: the dual identity of his public persona, as the Batman, versus his private persona, as the billionaire playboy. In ways that prefigure notions of deconstruction and identity performance, where individuals can exercise multiple representations of self, Wayne constructs a second identity as the Batman—an identity that is, arguably, just as nuanced and developed as his private persona. He adopts the accoutrements of a crime fighter and detective and, more importantly, he recognizes the need for his performance to appear as authentic as possible in its appeal to fear when he states: "my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible… a… a... a bat! That's it! It's an omen. I shall become a BAT!" (Finger and Kane No.33, 63). Prior to the retelling of Bruce Wayne's brush with death and the events leading up to his decision to don the cape and cowl, little is told of his life. In the first year of publication of *Batman*, the private persona is secondary to the more dynamic public superhero, suggesting that this individual's identity is far from fixed. Wayne's adoption of his superhero persona demonstrates how certain aspects of a person's self can be readily absconded in favor of a very different set of character traits and psychological motivations.

In fact, fans, critics, and even the creators involved with writing Batman rarely agree on who the "real" person is: Batman or Bruce Wayne. This ambiguity reinforces the argument Judith Butler and other postmodern theorists interested in identity construction and performance espouse about the ultimate absence of any "true" self. Butler argues every persona is a social construct, and is performed by the individual;

some of an individual's personas are just present more often than others, which can lead others to mistakenly interpret this representation as the "real" self. Butler would argue against any such natural persona, and this frame of thinking about the mutability of individual identities does help readers to come to grips with the Bruce Wayne-Batman dichotomy. Whether or not one subscribes fully to Butler's notion of there being no one primary and natural identity, it is helpful to consider her concept of the plasticity of identity construction. If Bruce Wayne was the socially constructed identity that Batman used to facilitate his crime-fighting operations, it raises the problematic issue of why there is no mention of his existence during the years prior to Thomas and Martha Wayne's murder. Even if one were to argue it is a newly adopted identity in wake of the trauma of his parents' deaths, this would not hold. As psychologist, Travis Langley argues: "People can have problems and personality shortcomings without fitting a psychiatric diagnosis" (267). He adds that Batman "is driven—haunted—but we can no more label that drive a mental illness for him than we can for the revolutionaries who stand up to tyrants or the activists who fight against great odds to make this world a better place" (269). In spite of how easy it can be to mistake the private Bruce Wayne's construction of the publicly known Batman persona as evidence of a dissociative disorder, such a diagnosis is simply the reader's inability to relate to Wayne's unparalleled dedication to fighting crime and preventing tragedies similar to what happened to him.

Bruce Wayne's adoption of the role as crime-fighter therefore illustrates the third characteristic of the superhero as one who champions a pro-social mission. In spite of the ways Batman's persona has changed over the years from the more campy iterations

during the 1960s, through his deconstruction of the 1980s-90s, up to the present moment, this element has not changed. As Bruce tells Alfred in the 2013 retelling of Batman's origin story in the *Batman* "Zero Year" story arc,

> Alfred: "Just answer me this, please. To what end, Master Bruce?"
>
> Bruce: "How can you ask that?"
>
> Alfred: "Easily. You do all this for what?"
>
> Bruce: "Dammit, Alfred—so no has to go through what *I* did that night, right there in that alley outside! That's why. That's the mission." (Snyder 14)

While many superheroes, notably Spider-Man, struggle under the weight of the superhero's mask and, at times, step away from their roles as protectors of the common good, this passage underscores the decades of passion and borderline obsession that marks Batman's dedication to fight crime.

Finally, as to the fourth qualification of the superhero, there can be little doubt that Batman has broken out of the comic book niche market and established himself as one of the best-known entities in popular culture. One need only look at the various television live-action and cartoon shows, the cinematic blockbusters,[18] the record-selling video games, and the clothing racks at major department stores, let alone the hundreds of millions of comic books that feature Batman, to recognize how thoroughly he has permeated the collective conscious of mainstream culture.

[18] It is not just fans who have taken notice of Batman, but critics as well. While superhero films have largely gone ignored by the academy, the Batman franchise has garnered the most Oscar awards, and is the only one to have earned an Oscar in the artistic direction and acting categories (1989's *Batman* and 2008's *The Dark Knight,* respectively).

Batman and the American Romantics

Batman's exemplification of the superhero paradigm are clear; however, his participation in the dialectic of what constitutes an American hero also links him to the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his article "The Last Real Man in America: From Natty Bumppo to Batman," David Leverenz discusses the similarities between James Fennimore Cooper's character and Finger and Kane's comic book superhero. He pays particular attention to the ways in which these characters (along with a number of other literary and pop culture characters) create and reinforce a kind of masculinist American character type. Until recently, however, these literary boundaries would have never included the comic book. However, this medium "that was once solely the province of children's entertainment now fills bookshelves… [and is] discussed in the sort of tone that was once reserved for exciting, young prose" (Wolk 3). So how is it that characters like Batman are distinctly American, within the broader context of American literature?

In order to answer these questions, one can look back to the American Romantic works of literature from both Transcendentalist and Gothic writers. Writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, and Hawthorne, as well as many other writers of the early-to-mid nineteenth century, provided a foundation for comic book superheroes like Batman. The literary works that did this themselves appealed immediately to mass audiences upon their initial publication and have remained influential to this day.

Emerson's "Self-Reliance"—an essay that may capture better than any other the nature of the "American" spirit—focuses on the importance for the individual self to develop resistance to the on-going pressures that society exerts to conform to the

majority, for good or ill. Emerson states, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members… [and] self-reliance is its aversion" ("Self-Reliance" 261). According to Emerson, American citizens must decide whether they will stand up for what is right (in this case, self-determination), or simply follow along with the crowd and give up their sense of individuality. He further declares, "whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (261). Clearly, the exemplar for the Emersonian Transcendentalist is someone who goes against the grain, and does so because he or she desires to "gather the immortal palms" (261). Therefore, this figure is a hero who does not achieve victory through traditional and conventional methods, but instead through his or her consciously self-determined actions. Emerson also raises an interesting point when discussing the concepts of good and evil—the latter being a topic he does not often address. He states that "[g]ood and bad are but names readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution" (262). Emerson posits that goodness or that which is right is inherently known to each man, and therefore, the only true evil would be to act contrary to this inner knowledge.

Of course, Emerson's position is a kind of relativism, a point many of his critics, past and present, are quick to raise. One might even argue that many sociopaths believe themselves to be acting entirely within a completely moral framework and to be completely within the "right," while not recognizing that their behaviors place them in direct opposition to guidelines of society. How then does one discern what is evil, then, if everyone is free to define good according to his or her own set of beliefs? It is an area where Emerson's ethical philosophy comes up short, and it is a problem that the villains in Batman's rogues gallery regularly highlight.

Lastly, as he discusses in his essay of that title, Emerson's ideal hero is someone who possesses a direct connection to "Nature." Emerson famously states, "in the woods, we return to reason and faith… I become a transparent eye-ball: I am nothing; I see all" ("Nature" 10). This link with natural surroundings renews the hero, and observing nature brings a truer sense of connectedness to the world around him or her. For many religious believers, this may be akin to the spiritual transformation that takes place when one gives up his or her worldly desires, embraces a religious faith, and experiences a sort of "oneness" with the Divine. In particular, Emerson's transparent eyeball is similar to Buddhist notions of becoming one with the universe through the act of meditation, which means emptying of one's self of any thoughts and concerns in the present moment. Given Emerson's encounters with Eastern philosophy and religion, the parallels are not surprising. In line with these well-known concepts of Emerson, there begins to emerge a sense of the hero's commitment to his or her own sense of right and wrong, and a valuing of the self's impulses and observations over society's. In this growing conception of the American Romantic hero we find the ideas from which the Batman could emerge.

Looking at Bruce Wayne as Batman, we also see there are some very clear similarities between this comic book superhero and Emerson's image of the self-reliant individual. Parallel to the Emersonian transferability of the terms "good" and "bad," Batman strictly lives and acts by a specific code of ethics of his own creation, such as not killing anyone or making any use of firearms. Still, according to this same code of his, there are other violent actions that do not trouble him, and which he engages in almost enthusiastically, and he is often ethically rewarded: the result is that he typically wins over the bad guys. Certainly, these acts are not evil to him, and he continues to gather

those “immortal palms” of victory, acting independently of both the police and their conventional (and less successful) methods of crime fighting.

Society keeps laws in place to guide the general public and maintains police who enforce these rules, but Bruce Wayne continually observes how social constructs of peacekeeping are bound to fail. The construct requires individuals to simply accept the conventional methods of improving society, and they do not always work (or rarely, in Gotham City). As a result, Bruce Wayne dons the cape and cowl of Batman and creates his own means of achieving the greater good. We never find Batman reading a criminal his or her Miranda rights; instead, we see him beating criminals and leaving them for the police to put behind bars. He employs a variety of questionable information-gathering techniques—holding thugs out over the ledges of buildings, threatening to continue to beat them, and so on—which blur the lines of what is generally considered ethical and moral. But for the Emersonian hero, such means are justified because that hero seeks to help the common person escape the regime of fear under which the criminal elements of Gotham would keep them. Dubious methods nearly always result in Batman’s successful thwarting of criminal attempts by such masterminds as the Joker, Two-Face, Catwoman, and many others. Not surprisingly, peace and order are restored, if only temporarily.

Where one problem arises, however, is that many of Batman’s enemies seem to reflect the central flaw in Emerson’s notion of the transferability of good and evil. They serve as murderous examples of how their criminal behaviors are viewed as “good,” given a different point of view. Of course, certain nemeses are quite clear about which side of good and evil they fall on: the Penguin relishes his position atop Gotham’s mafia, while the Joker revels in his self-styled title as the Clown Prince of Crime. Because these

villains espouse no higher values other than greed and love of chaos, there is little confusion as to where they fall on the spectrum of good and evil. Other villains, however, are less able to recognize themselves as criminals, and this complicates the question. Many of Mr. Freeze's crimes are committed in order to find a cure for his wife, who is cryogenically frozen and in need of continual medical treatment to remain on life support—a costly venture to be sure. Therefore, he justifies his crimes because they serve a higher, altruistic purpose of saving his comatose wife. Mr. Freeze's dilemma recalls a classic case that is invoked in the teaching of ethics, whether it is ethical (even if illegal) for a man to steal unaffordable cancer medication from a pharmacy for the sake of his dying spouse. Likewise, as the villain Poison Ivy, Pamela Isley commits numerous crimes including theft, eco-terrorism, and murder. Yet she engages in these criminal activities largely from the perspective of seeking to protect the environment—an admirable cause, even if she takes this mission to felonious extremes. Since these individuals are acting out of a desire to uphold a higher cause, can these characters not be viewed "good" from an Emersonian perspective, even though most contemporary readers would quickly dismiss their actions as crimes? The uncomfortable answer is yes, they could be seen as good, and this might be part of the reason Emerson himself often skirted the issue in his day. Like Batman, some villains are not wholly good or wholly evil; however, unlike the Dark Knight, they cross lines that he will not. As a result, readers are able to recognize that, as the adage goes, the path to hell is paved with good intentions, and these villains are ultimately no less hell-bent than either Penguin or the Joker.

Finally, we recall the point Emerson discussed earlier with his conceptualization of the individual's connection to Nature as Batman presents his own unique (and darker)

twist on this relationship of humanity and the exterior world. In one scene from the animated series from the 1990s, Batman declares, "I am vengeance! I am the night! I am Batman!" (Reaves). This is eerily similar to Emerson's remark, "I become a transparent eye-ball: I am nothing; I see all" ("Nature" 10). At the sentence level, it is interesting to note that both make three declarative statements about who they are, but the similarities of the two statements do not end there. Instead, both Emerson and Batman are declaring that individuals embody a central viewpoint on the world in which they live, and that they can thereby lay claim to a sort of universal connectedness that grants them far-reaching abilities. Where Emerson states, "I am nothing," Batman responds, "I am the night." From this place of emptiness and darkness, both emerge with purpose: Emerson possesses sight, whereas Batman possesses vengeance. In Emerson's case, the individual opens him or herself up to Nature, and in doing so, finds that his or her consciousness is all-seeing. In Batman's case, he is able to root out evil in Gotham. Arguably, this intense, purposive vengeance is what imbues Bruce Wayne with the sight to root out the criminals of Gotham City and to put a stop to their crimes. It is thus appropriate that, for instance, the critically acclaimed and popular videogame *Arkham City* includes hidden images throughout of an "All Seeing Eye." There is also the depiction of the Batman from *The Dark Knight* who is empowered to be all-seeing and all-hearing through cellphone surveillance technology which allows him to locate the Joker. Finally, the classic depiction of Batman shows him with only the whites of his eyes while wearing his mask. In a very literal way, his eyes are invisible, and yet he is still the all-seeing caped crusader who can detect crimes and prevent them. Both the individual Emerson envisioned and Bruce Wayne as the Batman connect to something greater than

themselves in order to become fully realized as selves—even if the end product for the Transcendentalist and the Gothamite look very different from one another. Yet, Emerson claims,

> [W]e are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. ("Self-Reliance")

Emerson looks for a high-minded individual—a superhero—like Batman, who will face off against the coming evils of the world, covering himself in darkness, so that he might inspire those following him.

In ways not so dissimilar from Emerson, Thoreau also believes in the individual's ability to determine what is morally right and wrong without the need to have such laws imposed upon the self by an external entity. However, Thoreau takes this individualism a step further, and closer to the Batman in his essay "Civil Disobedience," where he urges Americans to disobey their government if its rules conflict with the natural laws of their own personal constitution. Thoreau claims, "[the government] does not keep the country free… the character inherent in the American public has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more if the government had not sometimes got in its way" (386). In Thoreau's view, then, government may often be an impediment to society's progress, and it is therefore the responsibility of the individual to implement certain measures to ensure the well-being of man. Additionally, Thoreau provides his readers with an understanding of what a true hero looks like: "a very few, as

heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and *men*,[19] serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part" (388; emphasis original). This creed of resistance is essential in understanding what a truly American hero should look like from Thoreau's and other Transcendentalists' perspective. Through acts of civil disobedience, these heroes are in fact acting to support society—what Thoreau refers to as the state—by working as counterbalances, ensuring the freedom and rights of the individual in the face of the restricting force of government. The fact that Thoreau identifies these persons as "martyrs" means that sometimes these heroes must sacrifice their very own selves in order to uphold individual liberty. Clearly, the hero does not always see a happy ending after any given fight to prevent government from imposing on the individual. In sacrificing him or herself, however, the hero does achieve a sort of transcendence in the eyes of the state.

This Thoreauvian understanding of the American Romantic hero certainly resonates with the comic book superhero. During one of the many times spent chasing down the Joker while rooting out the source of a recent crime spree, Batman apprehends the Clown Prince of Crime and begins beating the answers out of him. The comic clearly shows Batman physically dominating the already battered Joker, and before he reaches the point of killing this criminal, he and the audience are reminded by Commissioner Gordon "if Batman wanted to be a killer, he could have started years ago. But, it is a line. On one side, we believe in the law. On the others… sometimes that law fails us. Maybe that's why I've understood you… allowed you to help protect this city" (Loeb 20). As always, Batman does not kill the Joker outright, but leaves him to the police to take

[19] Thoreau's use of the word "men" in this context is not necessarily meant to signify the masculine gender, but instead, the race of mankind. This is implied by his italicizing of the term.

custody of the madman. Batman has dedicated his life to working outside of the boundaries of convention and government in order to uphold the rights (and safety) of the state. Perhaps what makes Batman truly compelling is not only that he is able to act outside of society's boundaries, but that he also struggles to maintain his values in the pursuit of this greater good. In the example given above, it is Commissioner Gordon who reminds Batman of his "role models [and] the beliefs they instilled in you" (Loeb 19). Although Gordon may not necessarily know Batman is Bruce Wayne and how he was inspired to take up the cape and cowl in Gotham's defense, the reader does. In this regard, Gordon reminds both the reader and Batman alike to recall how Thomas and Martha Wayne dedicated their lives to the betterment of others, not through the showy application of their resources and influence, but through closely adhering to their beliefs. Clearly, society needs individuals who can occasionally work outside of the letter of the law and disobey the civil rules in order to maintain society—it needs a Batman. If it were not so, we would not see an agent of that government in the form of Jim Gordon reminding Batman (and the reader) of his importance. Although the Thoreauvian hero need not adhere to the rules of society, it is essential that he or she—like Batman—remain fully vigilant in maintaining his or her highest personal values.

Lastly, Thoreau admits that some heroes will be tragically martyred. In "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859), Thoreau speaks in a far more rousing voice than his readership had grown accustomed to. Thoreau no longer advocates that "if you really want to do anything, resign your office," as he did in "Civil Disobedience" some ten years beforehand (10). Instead, Thoreau adopts a far more impassioned call to arms against the government that was preparing to execute John Brown for his raid on

Harper's Ferry. John Brown certainly used brutal methods in combating slavery in "Bloody Kansas." However, Thoreau defends Brown: "Though you may not approve of his method or his principles, recognize his magnanimity" (39). Though Batman is criticized for his unorthodox and morally problematic approaches to battling crime, especially when compared to the law-abiding Superman, Batman is certainly acting with "magnanimity" in Thoreau's sense when he bloodies his knuckles against criminals. Emerson himself is noted to have "perceived something military in Thoreau's nature," highlighting his divergence from his fellow Transcendentalists in this regard (Rosenblum 82). But Thoreau does not claim here that "might makes right"; he goes on to exclaim "it was [John Brown's] peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him" (45). This Thoreauvian belief in the proper application of force á là John Brown reaches its apogee in Batman's canon when he appears as a costumed general of a vigilante army in *The Dark Knight Returns* mini-series (1986; 2002).

Throughout his various cultural incarnations, Batman espouses the role as martyr that Thoreau emphasizes in his notion of the heroic American individual. At the end of the 2008 film *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman conspires with Commissioner Gordon to take responsibility for Harvey "Two-Face" Dent's kidnapping in order to preserve the memory of Dent's former good works. In order to protect the people of Gotham and preserve their sense of hope in the goodness of others Batman knowingly accepts the role of anti-hero where he will now live even further outside of the law (*Dark Knight Returns*). From the movies to the comics, Bruce Wayne enjoys no long-term love interest while he is Batman, as Superman experiences with Lois Lane; instead, he sacrifices his

wealth, his resources, and his personal life to becoming an ever-vigilante, ever-ready Batman.

This nature of Batman's self-sacrifice can also be seen in the popular story arc "Knightfall" from 1993-94. In this multi-title event, Batman runs himself to the point of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion as he strives to recapture the numerous criminals released from Arkham Asylum by the mastermind Bane. Realizing it will likely be his doom, Batman then goes on to face Bane, only to have his back broken in front of Gotham and be tossed into the streets to die. Like Christ, whose body was broken for others, Bruce Wayne eventually comes back to reclaim both the mantle of the Bat and Gotham City to provide salvation from the criminal elements that are running rampant. This recalls the component of Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" wherein the hero journeys into the depths of hell only to return stronger and bearing new life-giving abilities to the world around him. After having his back broken, Bruce undergoes medical treatments to rebuild his body, and even goes so far as to enlist the services of the deadly assassin Lady Shiva to help him reclaim the mantle of the Bat. The final conflict with the maddened Jean Paul Valley sees Bruce descend into the depths of the Bat cave, only to emerge victorious in the end, thereby bringing Gotham back under the watchful eye of the rightful Batman. It is only by choosing to sacrifice himself for the people of Gotham that Bruce Wayne is able to transcend his mortal identity and achieve near-mythic status as the Batman.

The American Gothic Knight

Up to this point, the discussion has centered on who the American Romantic hero is, and what marks him or her as being particularly American in nature. In demonstrating Batman's connections to the American Romantic writers of the nineteenth century, I have primarily focused on works from the Transcendentalists; however, other writers who participated in the advent of the gothic genre of the Romantic period also contributed significantly to Batman's development. Looking at some selections from Poe and Hawthorne, we can see additional literary roots of the Dark Knight of Gotham City.

Before looking at Batman's connections to the American literary tradition, it is also worth pointing to some parallels to one of the most well-known literary characters to come out of the gothic horror genre: Dracula. Both characters operate only at night. While Batman will certainly not crumble to ash under the gaze of the sun as Dracula might, his ability to blend into the shadows and strike out from darkness would certainly be lost. Although Dracula is generally shown preying upon anyone in his path and Batman hunts down the wicked, both make use of a combination of fear and darkness to strike down their intended targets. Moreover, both provide good examples of the gothic convention of dueling identities. Dracula, at one point, was a human who was turned into a creature of the night though by historical accounts, Vlad Dracul was still a vicious and bloodthirsty person. Likewise, we see Bruce Wayne as the playboy by day but the grim vigilante by night. Finally, we even see there are some vague similarities from a physical perspective wearing capes and fearful gazes: Dracula often being shown with blood-red eyes while Batman possesses only white pupils while wearing the cowl. Although it is unlikely Finger and Kane intended that readers see Batman as a type of Dracula

character, it does seem reasonable these similar elements were used to help invoke a similar mysterious, threatening, and dreadful feeling that often permeated gothic characters and stories.

Without the literary contributions of Poe to the Gothic, detective, and science fiction genres, the mythos of Batman may not even have come into existence. Poe is widely credited with writing the first detective story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," starring the crack detective C. Auguste Dupin. Dupin would reappear in Poe's later detective stories "The Purloined Letter" and "The Mystery of Marie Roget," which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would subsequently emulate in his famous Sherlock Holmes tales. Poe ends each of these stories with a now familiar "reveal": Dupin walks the narrator through the sequence of events that led to the crime. He is able to find each of the various clues, deduce their meaning, and arrive at the correct conclusion well ahead of everyone, including the reader. We see that the hero of the detective story then is one who possesses a unique ability to join knowledge with critical thinking, solving the crime and bringing the criminal to justice. Within each of these stories Poe also depicts Dupin as one whose insight lies in the ability to get "into the mind" of the criminal. What is particularly interesting for my purposes here, however, is that Dupin's ever-unnamed narrator/companion describes this acumen as a sort of "diseased intelligence," implying a psychological catalyst that produces this ability ("Murders" 402). When we look at Batman as the Dark Knight Detective, this "diseased intelligence" appears again.

Like Dupin, Batman is an outside agent who works hand-in-hand with Commissioner Gordon and the Gotham City police department. Also like Dupin, Batman possesses an uncanny ability for solving crimes that the regular detectives are unable to

solve, recalling Dupin's peculiarly "diseased intelligence." In Batman's earliest published form, we are told that Bruce Wayne witnessed the murders of both his mother and father, which cause him to "swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals" (Finger and Kane No.33, 63). The comic then goes on to show snapshots of Bruce Wayne as he grows older and becomes "a master scientist," as well as "train[ing] his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats" (Finger and Kane No.33, 63). Certainly, Wayne proves himself dedicated, but to be so single-minded is a kind of disease of his intelligence. Of course, Dupin relies almost entirely on the potency of his mind to win the day, while Batman's mind is more often displayed in his various gadgets. Of course, Batman's physical fighting skills are also often in evidence, so where else is the connection to detective work?

Although *Detective Comics* No.226 does not occupy the same pride of place as other origin issues within the Batman mythos, such as *Detective Comics* No.33 or *Batman* No.47, it provides an important insight into how a young Bruce Wayne would become "the world's greatest detective." In this issue, Bruce Wayne relates to Dick Grayson how he himself was actually the first Robin. The younger Bruce creates a disguise so that he could trail Harvey Harris, a famous detective, and train under the master sleuth. (This story is situated prior to the deaths of Thomas and Martha Wayne.) Nicknamed "Robin," Bruce aids Harris in his detective work and helps save the day, all the while believing he successfully hid his identity from the elder detective. Years later, however, Bruce receives a package in the mail with a letter from the now-dead Harris. In it, the teacher relates to the student how he deduced his identity. Harris proudly followed

all of Batman's exploits over the years and gladly passed to him the mantle of the world's greatest detective. As Julian Darius points out in his analysis of this particular chapter in Batman's origin, "it's important to note that 'When Batman was Robin' provided an early insight, however campy, into Bruce Wayne's training" (14).

Not surprisingly, this sometimes overlooked and cerebral element of Batman's past has come back to the forefront with the updated Batman origin story in Scott Snyder and Greg Capullo's "Zero Year" story arc. Each issue shows the ways in which Bruce Wayne became the master crime fighter and detective that would become Batman. In one scene, the reader sees him match wits with Edward Nigma, the future Riddler, instead of simply skipping over this battle of the minds to use his fists. In another section, Bruce is trapped in a well and must assemble the pieces of a puzzle to learn how to escape before the water rises and drowns him. Whereas in the past, many comic writers would gloss the "how" and skip directly to Batman's successful escape through some ingenious bat gadget, this contemporary update displays more of the detective elements as seen in with Edmond Hamilton's 1955 detective origin story. Just as Dupin was the greatest literary detective of his day and age, in "Zero Year" we see the Dark Knight as the greatest comics detective of today.

There is at least one more connection between the "diseased intelligences" of these two detectives. It is often problematic to diagnose the psychological ills of literary characters, since they need not live in any fictional world that adheres to our DSM IV. But it may thus be a misinterpretation to consider what Poe's narrator refers to as "diseased" as a kind of insanity. The uncanny ability on the part of Dupin to understand the thinking processes of those whom he is investigating in order to discern their identity

(as well as the ways they perpetrated that given crime) need not be in any way "insane." Likewise, psychologist Travis Langley reaffirms Batman's sanity when he discounts any possible diagnosis of PTSD, dissociation, obsessive-compulsive, let alone being "homicidal, suicidal, or gravely disabled" (266). Like Dupin, Batman is for Langley more akin to "the most driven athletes, artists, or activists," exceptionally gifted and capable within a chosen field of expertise, even if it is beyond the ability of the average person to replicate (266). Although it is possible to be both gifted and imaginative while suffering from some form of mental disorder such as PTSD, Langley makes the case that this is not what we see with the Batman – Bruce Wayne dynamic. It is also interesting to see contemporary comics giving a nod to this unique relationship between Poe's detective and Batman, as seen in 2007's *Batman: Confidential*, where Bruce names his computer "Dupin" after his own favorite literary hero (Cowan 14). Akin to the machine-like mind of Dupin, the nineteenth-century detective, this "Dupin" is a machine whose electronic mind aids Batman as the Dark Knight Detective deciphers one mystery after the next.

We also see connections, if only indirectly, from Poe to Batman through the use of science fiction narrative techniques. Poe was not only the author of the detective story, but also of one of the earliest science fiction stories when he penned "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaall."[20] This tale focuses on the adventures of the title character as he takes a balloon ride from the Earth to the moon. As Poe himself states, this story "attempt[s] to give plausibility" to an otherwise unrealistic set of circumstances through "scientific detail" ("Unparalleled Adventures" 996). Through Poe's use of scientific-sounding elements, he is able to make the unreal seem real to his readership,

[20] Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was originally published in Britain in 1818, a full 17 years before that of Poe's story, and is another example of foundational early science fiction.

and this becomes the hallmark of later science fiction stories and novels. There is also a link between Poe's prototypical SF and the pulps, the direct cultural predecessor of the comics medium. Gerard Jones discusses how, in pulp magazines of the 1920s such as *Amazing Stories* and *Science Wonder Stories*, the publisher Hugo Gernsback included the fiction of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne alongside that of other writers such as Forrest J. Ackerman and Bertram Chandler (32). Recalling the American Romantics only a few generations earlier, Jones states that "the horrors of the nineteenth-century industrialism and the technological hell of the world war were fading from memory," and as a result "Americans were beginning to view the pursuit of novelty as an act of social duty and individual heroism" (33). Poe was a key contributor to the formation of the entirely new and novelty-oriented genre of SF, which became a vital sector of the development of comics.

As Poe stated, he was able to make the unreal seem real through the use of fictionally-generated technical details. Batman is often ahead of both the police and criminal counterparts through his technological accessories. In Tim Burton's 1989 film, the Joker asks, "Where does he get those wonderful toys?" as Batman makes use of a pistol zip-line to extricate himself and the damsel in distress, Vikki Vale. We also see that he possesses an arsenal of equipment and vehicles such as an explosive-proof, remote-controlled Batmobile; the Batplane; bulletproof armor that allows him the ability to glide from skyscraper to skyscraper; and his "famous utility belt full of crime-stopping gimmicks" (Daniels 29). Bruce Wayne is also noted in his origin story as being a master scientist, and certainly, these skills are put to work in generating all of these gadgets that appear realistic. These ingenious inventions are an integral part of Batman's identity as a

superhero, as they provide him with many of the extraordinary powers and abilities that are organic to many other superheroes. Without them, Batman would never stand a chance against superheroes like Superman. However, Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* series underscores the importance of these inventions pulled from science fiction (yet still somewhat grounded in comic book realism) since they allow him to take down the strongest superhero of all time.

Finally, discussion of Batman's connections to the American Romantic period would not be complete without mentioning the importance of the American Gothic horror tradition, also exemplified by Poe. Gothic hallmarks include a special focus on entering and understanding the mind of the individual protagonist (e.g., Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"). The Gothic also revels in the mysteries of the unconscious, often paralleled in the setting the characters inhabit (e.g., Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher"). Although the phrase "it was a dark and stormy night" is now the most stereotyped way of creating mood in a story, it was Poe who helped set this standard (e.g., "The Masque of the Red Death" and "Metzengerstein"). Similarly, Batman avoids taking action during the day, using his alter ego to conduct affairs during this time, and prefers to move about and be concealed in the shadows of darkness and night. Like many of Poe's characters, such as Roderick Usher, Frederick Metzengerstein, and Prospero, who deal with psychological struggles themselves, so too do we see Batman facing extreme psychological challenges. He witnesses the death of his parents, thereby prompting him to dedicate his life to crime fighting, as well as the brutal murder of the second Robin at the hands of the Joker, a tragedy that haunts him for years to follow. The Gothic extremes to which Batman's psyche can be subjected is epitomized by *The Killing Joke* by Brian Bolland and Moore.

This graphic novel is considered to be one of, if not the most, psychologically chilling Batman stories to date, and was very influential on the 2008 summer blockbuster *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. *The Killing Joke* explores the similarities of Batman and the Joker and the close relationship between these two adversaries. As the Joker screams over a loudspeaker in a funhouse of death, "I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everybody else! All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. You had a bad day, and it drove you as crazy as everybody else… only you won't admit it!" (Moore 40). The difference between Batman and the Joker is at most a fine line—after all, how sane is it for a person to dress up like a bat and commit acts of violence against other people?

Unlike his literary counterparts in Poe, who also had "bad days" by giving into their homicidal desires by murdering their sisters, their annoying friends, or family rivals, Bruce Wayne is generally more successful at keeping his inner demons in check. Although Bruce is never tempted by incest as was Roderick Usher,[21] there are various close relationships with "off-limits" women such as Catwoman and Talia Al Ghul, and these women tempt him away from his life's mission at least for a time. In spite of many fellow superheroes with whom Batman has come into conflict with over the years, he has never taken Prospero's suggestion to rid himself of their insufferable behaviors by killing them off—no matter how often readers may have desired this! Finally, Batman is famous for his nefarious rogues gallery, with none other than the Joker as the greatest of all his nemeses. Yet, he does not exact final judgment and execution upon his sworn enemy through ending his life, as Frederick Metzengerstein does with the elder Berlifitzing. It is

[21] Although the act of incest between Roderick and Madeline Usher is never explicitly portrayed, Poe leaves a number of clues throughout the short story that make this a more than reasonable interpretation of the relationship between the two Usher siblings.

this diligence in keeping with his moral guidelines, perhaps, that keeps Batman from experiencing the self-inflicted fates that Poe's protagonists' suffer.

"The Gray Champion" and the Dark Knight

Poe is not the only American Gothic writer whose work seems to have strongly influenced the conception and characterization of Batman. Hawthorne's "The Gray Champion" serves not only as a final example in this chapter of the literary roots for Batman as the American Romantic (and Gothic) hero, it also serves as a sort of prototype for the comic book super hero with its portrayal of the title character.

"The Gray Champion" begins with the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony marching his troops down the main street of Boston as a show of force to prevent any possible uprisings among the populace. The procession comes complete with a retinue of dastardly cabinet members who sneer and look down upon the locals as they ride their horses amidst the parade of soldiers. However, as soon as one of the despairing citizens cries "Oh! Lord of Hosts…provide a Champion for thy people," an old pilgrim dressed in a dark cloak and hat appears from within the crowd (Hawthorne 62). Although his face is not obscured per se, it is twilight, and his identity is not known. Citizens young and old remark, "Who is this gray patriarch?...Whence did he come? What is his purpose?" (62). He stands alone against the tide of soldiers and magistrates coming down the street, and then commands the parade to "Stand!" immediately halting the governor and his retinue (63). Although they initially hurl insults at him and demand he step aside, the Gray Champion declares that "I am here, Sir Governor, because the cry of an oppressed people hath disturbed me in my secret place… and it was vouchsafed me to appear once again on

earth, in the good old cause of his Saints" (63). Although it is surprising to the crowds that Governor Andros backs down, they are more surprised to discover that this Champion has departed in the same fashion as he arrived. And Hawthorne's narrator reminds his readers that the Gray Champion's "hour is darkness, and adversity, and peril. But should domestic tyranny oppress us… still might the Gray Champion come" (65). In his own way, Hawthorne is authoring a prototypical superhero that possesses some sort of supernatural, immortal power, someone with a secret identity, someone with a higher mission, and this champion may reappear at any time.

Looking then at the character of Batman, created 103 years later, the connections to "The Gray Champion" are quite visible. Both individuals wear dark gray clothes, don a cloak, and possess a headdress that appears to obscure their face. Although both individuals' identities are unknown, citizens and foes alike quickly recognize these men are forces to be reckoned with. Just as the Gray Champion arrives when he is called upon in the moment of need, so too does Batman respond to the call for help from the people of Gotham City. At the very end of *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan, Commissioner Gordon raps on a newly minted spotlight replete a bat-symbol on it, and informs Batman, "I never said thank you." Batman immediately responds, "and you'll never have to" and proceeds to dive off the building and fall back into the shadows of the night. This is remarkably similar to the way Hawthorne's Gray Champion recedes into the twilight only to return when called—just as Batman promises to answer the future calls of Gotham through the bat-signal when its citizen are also in need. Even just a brief overview of these two characters clearly demonstrates how similar they are in appearance, nature, and deed.

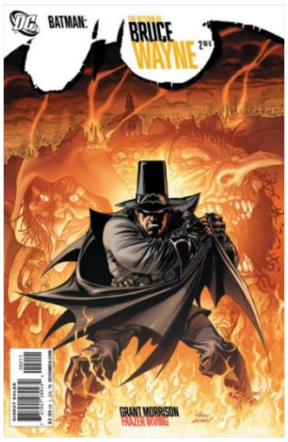

Fig. 2. Batman as a Gray Champion. Grant Morrison, Frazer Irving, and Andy Kubert, *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne* No.2 (New York: DC Comics, 2010) Print.

In 2010, Morrison published a science fiction mini-series in which Bruce Wayne was sent traveling through time to various periods where he would emerge as a Batman appropriate for that age. In this issue, he assumes the role of a Puritan witch hunter who is allied with a woman whom the village of Gotham believes to be a witch. When he abandons her to face the demon she has set loose—a monster which has followed him through his time travels—the woman is captured and hanged by Brother Malleus, another witch hunter. Before her execution, however, she curses the Puritan and his line, whom she reveals to be Nathaniel Wayne. This is a rather interesting choice of names, given both the literary and historical associations Hawthorne had with the Puritans and the witch hunts from New England. Hawthorne's grandfather, William Hathorne, was the infamous judge who was responsible for sitting on numerous cases of witchcraft and signing warrants of execution for many of the accused, not to mention the whippings and other forms of punishment exacted against the citizens of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Moreover, Morrison suggests that Nathaniel Wayne was originally a merchant from Scotland when he arrived in the New World; so too was Hawthorne's great-grandfather (William's father) a merchant from the British Isles when he crossed the Atlantic for the colonies. We do not know definitively that Hawthorne's "Gray Champion" influenced Morrison, but it is clear Hawthorne's influence can still be felt in Morrison's Batman.

Batman's acts of heroism and bravery show him to be a hero; however, this does not necessarily imbue him with any particular "American" qualities. As Roger Rollin states,

> If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended.... The fact that these laws frequently seem to be suspended by the hero himself gives [him] a semi-divine aura even though he is of earthly mold. Though limited, he is still overwhelmingly powerful and overwhelmingly virtuous. He is, however, capable of error (though seldom of crime or serious sin) and ultimately he is vulnerable. In pop romance, Batman is a familiar example of this type. (435)

What is important to recognize, and as will be discussed in Chapter Five, these characteristics which Rollin believes to help demarcate a uniquely "American" quality to certain heroes, like Batman, are traits heroes from throughout the world possess. If anything, one might simply suggest that Batman's connection to American culture lies in the combination of the various ideals and concerns of two different groups of writers, the

Transcendentalists and Romantics, who did so much to establish a distinctly American literary canon. Through looking at these established writers of the American literary canon, present day readers can begin to understand how Batman serves as one sort of exemplar for a twentieth- and twenty-first-century understanding of the American hero who is both human and yet transcends his constraints to become even greater than the everyday person. He is deeply flawed, and yet he manages to transcend these imperfections to reach all-new heights. Bruce Wayne strikes a curious balance between the playboy by day with the grim, Puritan enforcer by night. To say that Batman and other comic book superheroes are the only example of this notion of the American Romantic hero, or that comics are the most likely place to discover this literary dialectic, is overstatement; however, it seems fair to view these characters as offshoots of the American Romantic hero, with roots deep in the writings of early America.

CHAPTER THREE

SPIDER-MAN AND THE MARVEL AGE OF COMICS

Admittedly, Spider-Man has fewer direct connections to canonical literature than Superman and Batman. However, this does not mean he fails to espouse the "canon of ideals" that American authors established in the literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ideals that the superheroes of the Golden Age earlier embodied. The 1960s saw both the transformation of an awkward, teenaged boy into the witty, super-powered Spider-Man as well as a significant shift in mainstream literature and culture away from the conservative "Greatest Generation" to that of the progressive "Baby Boomers." Spider-Man often comes into conflict with organizations traditionally associated with these ideals of truth, justice, and public responsibility, especially the police and the news media. It is important to note, however, that the adolescent Spider-Man never has his integrity and commitment to social justice questioned by the reader, in direct contrast to the way those entities of "adult" power are depicted from one issue to the next.

When Spiderman emerged, comics were becoming more products of contemporary cultural engagement and were less about seeking to engage in discourse with literature of the past, as earlier comic creators sought to do. In 1970, Lee reported that "at every college campus where I speak, there's as much discussion of war and peace, civil rights, and the so-called youth rebellion as there is of our Marvel mags per se. None of us lives in a vacuum—none of us is untouched by the everyday events around us—events which shape our stories just as they shape our lives" (Lee, "Stan's Soapbox").

Given Lee's role as the writer for most of the comics being published at Marvel in addition to his role as the editor-in-chief, his culturally aware stance makes it clear there was a much greater interest at Marvel in depicting superheroes who used their "great powers" not for the conservation of traditional culture but instead for the "great[er] responsibility" to engage with events taking place in the present day. Peter Lee suggests that "Parker—and Spider-Man—serves as a commentator of the changing social milieu during the 1960s. His observations reflect his youthful audience's alienation toward the older generation's values and social standards" (29). Therefore, just as contemporary American authors were doing at the time, it makes sense that this new generation of superheroes would eschew parallels to the traditional literary canon just as they bucked the conventions of the Golden Age superheroes.

Introduction to the Marvel Age of Comics

With the advent of Marvel Comics and its introduction of *The Fantastic Four No.*1 in 1961, comics began shifting from a less sophisticated medium aimed at entertaining young readers to one with far greater nuance and potential for social commentary. These possibilities became manifest in the emergence of Lee, Kirby, Ditko, and their collaborative creations, the most important of which was Peter Parker—The Amazing Spider-Man. Differing in many ways from Batman and Superman, Spider-Man still serves as the archetypical Marvel hero. While Lee and Ditko employed traditional superhero conventions in creating Spider-Man, they adapted those conventions for the newly emerging postmodern reader. In particular, they would flesh out Peter Parker's character by focusing on the psychological components of the hero.

The rise of Superman and Batman took place within the course of one year, between 1938 and 1939, and in the decades to follow, numerous facsimile superheroes would come and go, seeking but unable to duplicate the same success in a lasting way (Fawcett's Captain Marvel came the closest). It was not until August, 1962 that Ditko and Lee finally recast a superhero as great as Superman and Batman when they included an eleven-page story in the fifteenth and final issue of Marvel's *Amazing Fantasy*—the Amazing Spider-Man. Like those classic superheroes before him, Spider-Man possesses powers unlike the abilities of any normal man. Thanks to the bite of a radioactive spider, the nerdish Peter Parker finds himself imbued with the "speed, the agility, the very strength of a gigantic spider" (Ditko and Lee 1.5). Further, Spider-Man's iconic costume is covered in a webbed pattern with a spider device planted in the center of his chest—the same location as Superman's iconic "S" shield and Batman's bat logo—which makes it clear who he is and what "totem" he derives his powers derive from.

However, it is Ditko and Lee's use of the superhero's identity that sets Spider-Man alongside and above the superheroes that came before him. Spider-Man's alter ego, Peter Parker, is Ditko and Lee's most startling take on the superhero archetype—he is not a man at all, but a boy. Parker is still in high school when he discovers his powers and fashions himself a costume. Of course it was not uncommon for comic book readers to discover teens in costumed garb parading around the pages of superhero comic books: during the Golden Age of comics, Robin fought alongside Batman in the streets of Gotham; Bucky Barnes joined Captain America on the frontlines of World War II; and Toro could be seen flying alongside the Human Torch. Yet, these examples (perhaps the best known among dozens at the time) show adolescents always as sidekicks, not

independent superheroes. Although one could make the argument that 1949's *Superboy* No.1 may represent the first teen superhero, it is also worth noting that this series is based upon stories taking place in Superman's past. Therefore, his safety is never truly in question, as we know that whatever dangers he faces in each issue, Superboy will ultimately live on to appear as an adult in *Action Comics* No.1 and beyond. With Spider-Man, however, readers had no such assurances, and there was always a possibility that their hero's life could be in true jeopardy.

Observing cultural trends leading up to and through World War II, Batman historian Will Brooker observed that "popular texts—and certainly most comic book characters—were drawn in to serve as part of a propaganda monologue" (34-5). Brooker further points to changes made in Batman's earlier representations as a means of pushing particular social agendas such as when "the character's iconography and appearance was subtly being modified to suit his new role as father-protector rather than lone avenger" (57-8). But if comics could be propaganda, so could marginalized groups make use of this same medium to speak out against the oppression of the dominant social paradigm.

While Peter Parker was originally conceived as a more conservative young man, the mere fact Ditko and Lee presented an empowered teenage boy as the superhero protagonist of this series was itself a form of pushing back against the decades-long establishment of who gets to wear the mask and exhibit superpowers. In fact, in the wake of comic book superheroes who fought for the wartime government, the 1950s-70s saw a noticeable rise in non-sanctioned, independent comics where "often the material has involved violent or antiestablishment messages" (Parsons 70). Like any form of art and

literature, comics also serve as a medium through which conflicting political and social entities struggle to achieve a greater sense of agency in public discourse.

Of course, it was more than just with their hero's youth that Lee and Ditko helped reconstruct the superhero. He was a gangly, unpopular nerd who did not appeal to any conventional norms of what constituted a masculine or manly hero. On the first page of his origin issue, this "bookworm" was referred to as "Midtown High's only professional wallflower" by his classmates, and the image we see is that of an out-of-fashion, social outcast well aware of his status as a pariah (Ditko and Lee 1). Although Clark Kent puts on a show of being mild-mannered and meek when Lois is around, there is no fooling the reader about who really lies beneath the dress shirt and tie. In fact, it has been a point of frustration and humor for fans of Superman that Clark's friends and coworkers exhibit such blindness in light of his obvious physical resemblance to the caped crusader.

Likewise, Bruce Wayne might have deep-seeded psychological scarring that he is only able to work out through donning the cape and cowl of Batman and fighting crime at night; however, he is also the millionaire playboy with dashing looks and social graces by day. This enviable image is stressed in the recent films starring Christian Bale, where Bruce Wayne lives the life of a successful socialite, throwing lavish parties and attending high-end functions with beautiful women on either arm. Peter Parker, on the other hand, continually finds how "other teen-agers can sometimes, unwittingly, be so very cruel to a shy young man… yes, for some, being a teen-ager has many heart-breaking moments" (2). Even in his guise as a hero, he is hounded by J. Jonah Jameson and routinely viewed as a criminal by the police. Not surprisingly, Peter Parker earns a reputation for having

terrible luck over the years, whereas both Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne relative periods of respite within their civilian lives.

Perhaps the most definitively heart-breaking moment Parker faces is the death of his Uncle Ben at the hands of a criminal whom he earlier has had the opportunity to capture. Instead of stopping the criminal from robbing the crooker wrestling promoter who had first cheated Parker, the would-be-hero chose to "look out for number one—that means me" (Lee and Ditko 8). Unlike Superman and Batman, who simply accept their role as superhero and protector, Spider-Man initially refuses what Joseph Campbell refers to as "the call to adventure" (Campbell 60). This call represents the opportunity for the hero to eschew the dull and unremitting world of the mundane and to assume the "life-role" for which he was destined (60). This refusal represents "an impotence to put off the infantile ego… and come to birth in the world without" (62), and Spider-Man's refusal to embrace the mission of the superhero to uphold justice and keep the peace is a clear-cut example of this. Interestingly, few heroes and superheroes up to this point in history were portrayed in such a light as it would typically prove "dull and unrewarding" (62); however, it is through this drastic shift in the psychology of the superhero where Ditko and Lee created a problematic and conflicted protagonist who thereby resonated deeply with contemporary readers, eager as they were for more realism in their comics. And while Bruce Wayne also had youthful trauma as a prime motivator for donning the cape and cowl, the psychological elements behind Batman were not as heavily emphasized in the superhero's comics until the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the wake of the campy *Batman* television series starring Adam West. Then, finally, and not coincidentally around the same time as the appearance of Spider-Man, creators Denny O'Neil and Neal

Adams started digging back into Batman's past for inspiration for their stories and character development. Spider-Man, however, has always had these traumatic components at the forefront of his character development from his first appearance onward.

The notion of an imperfect, vulnerable superhuman who struggled with his identity and mission as a superhero is arguably the reason Marvel Comics did the unthinkable and wrested the reigns from DC as the premier House of Ideas in comics during the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond. Spider-Man's radically unconventional origins deviated from the traditional mythic hero and the established conventions of comic book superheroes, and this new take on the superhero would ultimately open the door to the later anti-heroes who would emerge in the 1970s and 80s, where conventional approaches to comics were almost completely turned on their head.

Trauma and Spider-Man: The Birth of Postmodern Superhero[22]

When the reader sees the phrase "With great power comes great responsibility" emblazoned across the final panel of *Amazing Fantasy 15*, the painful lesson Peter Parker learns over the course of this short but poignant story of one's coming of age becomes all too clear.[23] Although fate imbues Parker with the powers of the radioactive spider, it does not happen so gently—biting instead of bestowing. He continues to feel the bite of the

[22] This section through "Parker's Attempts to Cope with Trauma" was originally published in slightly different form in my essay "The Loss of the Father: Trauma Theory and the Birth of Spider-Man," in *Web-Spinning Heroics: Critical Essays on the History and Meaning of Spider-Man*, ed. Robert M. Peaslee and Robert Weiner (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 146-53, print.

[23] While many fans of the first film directed by Sam Raimi will recall Uncle Ben as having uttered this iconic phrase, it was in fact never actually uttered by any one character to Peter Parker or Spider-Man, but instead an "unnamed narrator" in a text-box of the final panel in *Amazing Fantasy* #15.

spider when he initially chooses self over his familial community, and this failure to act as a member of that community by policing it results in his fracturing that social group, which in turn allows Uncle Ben's soon-to-be murderer to run free. With the loss of his foster father, Uncle Ben—a traumatic experience he will not soon, if ever, overcome—Parker's misuse of his newly found powers forces him to recognize that one must be responsible to his community or else cause great suffering.

Trauma Theory and Comic Book Superheroes

It is important to understand first and foremost that the stories and characters of Lee and Steve Ditko's *The Amazing Spider-Man* were meant to entertain young and old readers alike through a mix of comedy, action, and adventure. Unlike many other comics of yesteryear, however, there are certain Western metaphysical traces of humanity that show themselves from the very first story in *Amazing Fantasy* No.15. And while one must be exceptionally careful not to trivialize the importance of the subject of trauma and those who are victims of such disruptions in their lives, it is worth considering how even "funny books" such Lee and Ditko's *The Amazing Spider-Man* possess elements of the world in which we live. Such attempts at speaking to the human condition include elements of tragedy and trauma with which many readers of the past and present readily identify. Amidst the camp and conflict of costumed cartoons, readers of *The Amazing Spider-Man* discovered the story of a young boy who struggles to come to grips with what he perceives as a tragedy of his own making; further, it carried the story of how a person can grow stronger from such difficulty in spite of the many opportunities to let it get the best of him.

It is also worth noting that this examination of comic superheroes and trauma theory is not an isolated one. In his 2009 essay, titled "Sixty Five Years of Guilt Over the Death of Bucky," Rob Weiner explores Captain America's wartime experiences with his sidekick, Bucky Barnes, and he seems to have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the death of the young boy. Weiner maps out the origins of both individuals as well as the fateful day on which Bucky was strapped to an experimental plane, which was then blown apart, killing Bucky and tossing Captain America into the freezing waters. As Weiner observes: "He could not bring himself to believe Bucky was dead…. Captain America was avoiding the reality of Bucky's death by wanting to go back and 'make sure' he was really gone" (93). Pointing to this form of "survivor's guilt" as one symptom of PTSD among others, Weiner argues that many of the creators who handled the Captain America stories were, in part, finding a vehicle for coping with this very real problem of trauma. In this respect, there is precedent for this examination, and perhaps in bringing to light experiences like these, comics can provide an outlet for those who experience it in the real world.

Similarly, Shawn Gillen's work explores the relationship between comic heroes and post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) in Steve Rogers' continuing struggle to deal with his experiences from World War II during the explosive Vietnam era. While Gillen points to the ways in which Captain America's association with the U.S. military and wartime experiences directly contribute to his PTSD, I would argue that we can recognize the ways in which heroes are traumatized by experiences apart from a battlefield, much in the same way non-service members can also experience PTSD and other sorts of trauma-induced difficulties, even if the contributing factors differ significantly. In this light,

comics continue to serve as an inclusive vehicle for the discussion of relevant and topical social issues.

The Call to Adventure and the Self-Inflicted Wound

According to Joseph Campbell's popular work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, every hero answers the "call to adventure," leading to a great quest journey that forever alters his or her life trajectory. In the case of Spider-Man, Parker not only initially fails to respond to this call, he rejects it outright. At the end of shooting a scene for a television spot as another means of capitalizing on his sensational powers, Spider-Man sees a crook running away from the cop: "Stop! Thief! Stop him! If he makes the elevator, he'll get away" (Lee and Ditko 1.8). Instead of making use of his superior physical abilities to stop the crook, Parker rudely replies to the cop "That's your job! I'm thru being pushed around—by anyone! From now on I look out for number one—that means—me!" (8). Most "journey" stories do not start in this fashion. But as Campbell points out, there are usually dire consequences to the hero's failure to respond to the call: "The subject… becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life becomes meaningless" (59). Just as Sir Percival in the Grail legends failed to bring restitution by not responding to the plight of the Fisher King, so too does Parker's abject failure to respond to this call for a hero inadvertently bring about the traumatic destruction of his family. Parker returns home to find that his home was broken into—the invasion of the kingdom—and this burglar shot his Uncle Ben—the death of the king. As Parker walks down a dark city alley, the call to heroism is no longer voluntary; it becomes involuntarily internalized through this traumatic, life-changing experience.

It is in these final two panels of this short, eleven-page story that the traumatic event begins to sink in. Parker sobs: "My fault—all my fault! If only I had stopped him when I could have! But I didn't—and now—Uncle Ben—is dead…" (Lee and Ditko 1.11). Spider-Man's failure to answer the call to be a hero means the perpetuation of chaos and violence in his community, and that same destructive influence has now found its way into his home. Only after the fracturing of his home life does he recognize the trauma for which he is indirectly responsible. However, this same recognition provides Parker with something few people who reject the role of hero are offered: a second chance. As the unnamed narrator states at the close of the final panel, "a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come—great responsibility" (11). With the realization that his powers are more than just a source of fame and fortune, Parker finds himself with a hard-earned opportunity to once again take up the mantle of Spider-Man and fulfill the hero's calling. Furthermore, it is this internalization of the trauma that provides the cure for the psychological wound that Peter Parker inflicted upon himself:

> Willed introversion, in fact, is one of the classic implements of creative genius…. The result, of course, can be a disintegration of consciousness more or less complete; but on the other hand, if the personality is able to absorb and integrate the new forces, there will be experienced an almost super-human degree of self-consciousness and masterful control. (Campbell, *The Hero* 64)

Parker continually struggles with the isolation of his secret identity as Spider-Man, but it is through this continuous struggle that he eventually comes not only to accept his

responsibility to protect those around him, but also to regain control over his life and recover from the trauma of his uncle's death in the form and garb of Spider-Man.

Trauma and the Fracturing of Community

To gain a better understanding of Spider-Man's origins, critics will find in trauma theory a useful approach in considering Parker and the ways in which he came to grips with the death of his uncle and the birth of his web-slinging alter ego. Viewing the Parker / Spider-Man dynamic through this critical lens, it becomes clear that the act of fighting crime serves as a vehicle by which Parker is able to invent a new identity for himself and, in turn, to correct the mistakes of the past and prevent similar forms of trauma from being inflicted upon others in his community.

In medical terms, psychic trauma arises "when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from the outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind" (Terr 8). Other clinicians explain how "it is not the trauma itself that does the damage; rather, it is the manner in which the mind of the individual finds itself without the necessary resources and abilities to navigate the traumatic experience that gives rise to long-term difficulties" (Bloom 2). From these two perspectives, one can surmise then that these sudden external events serve as a catalyst for an internal shift, one that places the victim under a state of duress for a variable period of time. Furthermore, trauma acts as a "source that marks and defines… individual identity" as much "as racial or cultural identity" (Belaev 3), though certainly originating from a far more negative experience than one's race or culture. Therefore, trauma creates a lasting shift within the individual's

psyche, a sea change whose effects will remain an ongoing part of that individual's conception of and performance of self.

Trauma also seems to attack an individual's sense of being connected to a social community. In a medical study on trauma, psychiatrist Sarah Bloom notes that "we are physiologically designed to function best as an integrated whole... [and] the fragmentation that accompanies traumatic experience degrades this integration and impedes maximum performance" (3). It is hard to overestimate the importance of the individual's place within and need for community—the need on the part of everyone in a community for unity and integration throughout their everyday experiences. It is then reasonable to assume that traumatic experiences not only cause some form of psychological fracture in those affected but may also cause significant displacements from their communities in those traumatized persons.

Although the above is a somewhat cursory overview of a very complicated condition, it should provide a basic understanding of what is referred to as "trauma" in the medical field and what general effects trauma exerts on the traumatized victim.

Parker's Response to Trauma

Most comic book fans are all too familiar with the disruptive changes that a new cadre of artists and writers can enact upon a beloved long-running series. For this reason, my analysis will limit itself strictly to the early years of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, when the creative team of Lee and Ditko was steering the development of both Parker and Spider-Man. This narrowed focus will maintain a more accurate and consistent assessment of both creators' creative direction with this character. While Spider-Man

regularly made cross-over appearances in other comic titles during his early years, these episodes would not contribute in a substantial way to this analysis. And while later creators certainly provided substantial development of the Spider-Man mythos, it was Lee and Ditko who laid the foundation upon which all others would build. I will further focus in this section particularly on how Lee and Ditko portrayed Peter Parker's reactions to the trauma he experiences.

While Sandra Bloom presents an extensive medical list of possible responses exhibited by trauma victims, there are a few that prove particularly relevant to Parker. These responses show how the traumatic events in Peter's life changed him, how the death of his Uncle Ben was the moment when he was fractured from his community, and how he continually attempts to return that broken community to its original state of wholeness. Of the responses Bloom discusses, those that stand out most clearly in Parker's behavior are Remembering Under Stress, Thinking Under Stress, The Loss of "Volume Control" (or emotional stability), Victim to Victimizer, and Traumatic Reenactment (3-11).

Shortly after Uncle Ben's death, Parker begins exhibiting behaviors that resemble the responses of Remembering Under Stress, Thinking Under Stress, and The Loss of "Volume Control." Remembering Under Stress refers to a condition where conscious memory is often impaired during a time of trauma, and "powerful images, feelings, and sensations don't just 'go away.' They are deeply imprinted... [and can be] difficult or impossible to erase" (Bloom 5). This can often lead the victim to the unconscious experience of flashbacks, temporarily disrupting the individual's relationship to linear time. *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* No.1 presents a clear example of how these sorts of

powerful memories can surface and create a break in the victim's temporal consciousness. Walking along the precipice of a New York skyscraper and wearing the protective garb of Spider-Man, Parker is lost in thoughts of his Uncle Ben. This is more than mere reminiscence, however. He becomes so lost in his thoughts that "the sure-footed adventurer loses his balance" and falls from the building (Lee and Ditko 2.120). Not only does this flashback cause him to lose track of his surroundings, it also brings about a temporary loss of his spider powers. It is no coincidence that Spider-Man loses his powers while dwelling upon Uncle Ben's traumatic murder, and this becomes emblematic of the loss of control Peter is experiencing in his life. The traumatic loss of his father-like uncle leaves such a strong psychic imprint that it temporarily disempowers the superhero.

The next traumatic response Parker exhibits is Thinking Under Stress, which refers to those situations where the individual's ability to think clearly is significantly impaired and "decisions tend to be based on impulse and are based on… a need to self-protect" (Bloom 5). Furthermore, the individual is no longer prepared to think rationally and finds him or herself "geared towards action and often the action taken will be violent" (Bloom 5). Although one of Spider-Man's strengths is his ability to think under pressure, highlighted by his "spider sense," there are instances where his decision-making is seriously brought into question. In *Amazing Spider-Man* No.12, Parker catches a debilitating flu that severely weakens him, and despite recognizing he is not physically well, the unnamed narrator informs readers: "But, shrugging off his own problem, Peter quickly rushes to an alley, where he changes to Spider-Man" (Lee and Ditko 2.28). It is in this state that Spider-Man battles and loses to Doctor Octopus, who then unmasks him

revealing the near-unconscious, weakened Peter Parker. While one expects Spider-Man to confront villains such as Doctor Octopus and prevent further crimes against New York (and by extension, his own family), he rashly jumps into violent action without considering his own ability to stop the criminal and avoid personal harm at the same time. With his secret identity shown to the world, he puts his beloved and sickly Aunt May at risk. Even his Spider-Man alter ego confronts him for his carelessness in his sleep that night as he dreams: "What are you? Some kinda nut or something?? You should have your head examined for appearing as Spider-Man when you were so weak" (Lee and Ditko 2.30). Clearly, there is a part of Peter that recognizes his own failure to think clearly and resist such impulsive thoughts.

A third response Peter illustrates is The Loss of "Volume Control" (or emotional stability). Most people possess the faculty to regulate their inner emotions, but after being exposed to a violent, traumatic experience, many individuals may lose that ability. In particular, these individuals will be prone to substance abuse as a means of coping with their erratic feelings. In Parker's case, however, he does not turn to substance abuse, but to his wrestling and his television persona, Spider-Man, to find a means of compensating for the harm he allowed to happen. The robber (and eventual murderer of Uncle Ben) is allowed to continue on his way while Peter is donning his blue and red costume, and it is interesting to note that Peter then uses the same costume as a means of making up for his failure in the weeks, months, and years to follow.

One example (of many) of the strength of Parker's compulsion to maintain the Spider-Man persona as a means of containing his emotions can be seen in the final, haunting panel drawn by Steve Ditko at the end of *Amazing Spider-Man* No.29. In this

picture, Parker is shown walking away dejectedly with the rejected Betty Brant crying in the background.[24] What is particularly poignant is the ghost-like image of Spider-Man interjected between the two with his arms spread out as though he were directly keeping the two star-crossed lovers apart. The message is clear: be Spider-Man and be without love. Parker's walking away from Betty further drives this point home—he cannot and will not abandon his role as Spider-Man even if it is to his own detriment. Throughout their relationship, Parker continues wants to open up and share his secret life with Betty, but fears the consequences of doing so. As a result of being unable to negotiate this emotional territory, he opts to abandon it and Betty altogether in favor of the emotional isolation of the mask.

Parker's Attempts to Cope With Trauma

The next set of responses (Victim to Victimizer and Traumatic Reenactment) could best be viewed as Parker's conscious (and unconscious) attempts to cope with the traumatic experience of Uncle Ben's death and find some methods of moving on with his life. During the Victim to Victimizer response, in an attempt to regain control over their lives, traumatized individuals assume the role of victimizer so they can assert some level of control over their lives and the world around them—unfortunately creating additional links in the chain of trauma. In the case of Parker, however, his creation of the Spider-Man alter ego demonstrates an interesting perspective on this particular response to

[24]Although many later Spider-Man comic book and movie fans may not recall Betty Brant, she was in fact Peter Parker's first love interest and someone who played a significant role in the development of his love life during the Ditko years (1963-66). Their inability to continue their relationship would give way to Peter's relationships with Gwen Stacy and then Mary Jane Watson, which would further define and complicate both Peter Parker and Spider-Man's growth as a character.

trauma. Where it was a criminal who initially causes the trauma to the Parker family, Parker uses his Spider-Man persona to "victimize" the "victimizers." Parker realizes he could even use his superhuman abilities to impose order over the world around him through becoming like the criminal who forcibly imposed chaos into his life: "I can go anywhere! No one, nothing can stop me! Any amount of money could be mine—just for the taking!" (Lee and Ditko 1.16). Instead of using his powers to further the violation of community forced upon him, however, he declares, "I'm not a thief! […] it would break Aunt May's heart!" (16). Parker recognizes the dangers of further fracturing the bonds of community and does not want the members of his community (represented by Aunt May) to experience such psychic trauma. Yet, he will become the "victimizer" of individuals who would make victims of members of his family and all of New York. He states, "fate gave me some terrific super-powers, and I realize now that it's my duty to use them… without doubt… without hesitation…!!" (Lee and Ditko 2.255). Even months after Uncle Ben's death, Parker sits on a rooftop brooding over the effects of this traumatic experience and how "no matter what I do… no matter how great my spider powers are, I can never undo that tragic mistake! I can never completely forgive myself!" (120). This moment of vulnerability highlights the very reason for Spider-Man's continual battle against evildoers: he is stuck in a cycle of continually reestablishing order in his world by battling those who would wrest that control for their own reprehensible interests. This leads to the final response Parker has to trauma, through Traumatic Reenactment.

For Spider-Man, Traumatic Reenactment is being locked in a cyclical battle with the forces of evil, with the Sinister Six at the forefront (Doctor Octopus, Vulture, Electro, Kraven the Hunter, Mysterio, and Sandman, in *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* No.1, where

Spider-Man also temporarily loses his powers as discussed above). This reenactment refers to the unconscious need for the individual to reintegrate him or herself into a functioning role in society; however, the traumatic events create a sort of disruption of the individual's routine. When we enact this day-to-day drama, we "secretly hop[e] that someone will give us a different script, a different outcome to the drama, depending on how damaging our experiences have been. The cure is in the disease" (10). In other words, reenactment serves as a means by which the traumatized subconscious attempts to right itself, by rehearsing the events that originally caused the disruption in hopes of eventually working through the trauma.

One might detect in Parker's adoption of the Spider-Man persona an attempt to develop a new identity script to perform—one whose identity is a clean slate, and therefore free of the traumatic death of his "father." Furthermore, looking at the previous incident of Spider-Man's loss of powers from *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* No.1, he regains his superhuman abilities—those traits that differentiate Parker from Spider-Man—when he embraces his newly formed identity script: "I'm still alive!! I dodged his bolt! But… nobody without super powers can do that!! That can mean only one thing… my powers have returned to me!! I haven't lost them!! I'm still Spider-Man!" (Lee and Ditko 2.128). With the acceptance of his newly refashioned self, Parker (as Spider-Man) is able to come to power, and by extension, find some sense of personal renewal. The cure to Peter's trauma is found through this cathartic reenactment of the role he should have performed the fateful evening at the wrestling arena, and it is through this continued performance of his costumed-self that Parker can reach his full potential as he continues on the path towards adulthood. In his essay "Captain America, Post-Traumatic Stress

Syndrome, and the Vietnam Era," Shawn Gillen suggests that the very reason Steve Rogers struggles with the trauma of his war-time experience and the death of Bucky results, in part, from his having to wrestle with the trauma alone, unlike many of his fellow WWII veterans, who were welcomed home with open arms (106). In a similar way, Peter Parker cannot allow himself to grapple fully with the trauma of Uncle Ben's death lest his identity as Spider-Man, who allowed the criminal to pass by unmolested, be exposed. Like Steve Rogers, Parker struggles with trauma alone but it is through his role as Spider-Man that he vindicates himself.

Spider-Man's abilities allow Peter Parker the ability to find greater independence and self-reliance as a newly emerging adult. The point in time when Spider-Man comes into existence is concurrent with the same period in Parker's life when he would normally be experiencing all the physical, mental, and emotional development of young adulthood. Young men grow taller, develop their physical prowess, strengthen their sense self-discipline, and generally begin to move from a state of dependence on their parents to one of independence, relying more on their own abilities than on those of their mothers and fathers to meet their needs. Parker's newfound super-strength, constitution, and speed allow far greater range of movement as well as endurance under hardship. He experiences jubilation in his newly acquired abilities and regularly seeks new ways in which to test his boundaries—again, not so dissimilar from most adolescents, who "push boundaries" as they learn their capabilities. Just as young adults begin to break away from their parents and adopt personas of their own fashioning, so too does Parker break from his "bookish" image and recast himself as the Spider-Man. While he initially rejects the responsibility of adulthood in the first call to exercise the use of power in a heroic way, it

is through this trauma that Parker receives his second opportunity to accept his place in society as the protector, Spider-Man.

Spider-Man and the New Masculine

Spider-Man was not created in a vacuum. Not only can we see how Lee and Ditko partially deconstructed the past model of the superhero and rebuilt him in such a way that he better resembled the readers of the 1960s, but Spider-Man also seems to reflect some of the social anxieties of the period, particularly regarding shifting notions of masculinity in the Civil Rights period. While Peter Parker still adheres to the dominant white, male, heterosexual model of superheroes originally cast by Superman and Batman, he does present an example of how comic writers and artists' notions of masculine characters were beginning—albeit slowly—to move in a different direction.

Initially, Steve Ditko's portrayal of Peter Parker was a remarkably conservative one. In Ditko's final issue on *The Amazing Spider-Man* (No.38), Parker is on the Empire State University campus where there are a number of liberal students protesting various causes—all of which are portrayed in a superficial, negative light. When they approach Parker to join them, he replies, "Not me! I haven't got time! Besides, I've nothing to protest about!" (Lee and Ditko 3.10). The protestors are vapid sign wavers whose real interest is in simply cutting class and possibly getting their pictures published in the news. So how is this characterization of Parker, who sees no need to disrupt the social status quo, an image of change?

Clearly, there are some elements of him that readers (then as well as now) would see as outdated. His sometimes conservative views stand in contrast to more sympathetic

viewpoints of his peers such as those of Betty Brant and Gwen Stacy, who often try to help the more socially awkward Peter to fit in without putting him in a situation requiring him to compromise his values. Moreover, Lee made used "Stan's Soapbox"—originally a venue for readers to ask Lee questions—to speak directly to his audience about more than just the comics but also social issues that he felt needed to be discussed. In *Thor* No.162, Lee tells his readers that

> One of the greatest barriers to real peace and justice in this troubled world is the feeling that everyone on the other side of the ideological fence is a "bad guy." We don't know if you're a far-out radical, or Mr. Establishment himself—If you're a black militant or a white liberal—If you're a pantin' protest marcher or a jolly John Bircher—but, whatever you are, don't get bogged down by kindergarten labels! It's time we learned how fruitless it is to think in terms of us and them—of black and white.

Although this may seem fairly reasonable for contemporary readers, this was published in 1969, at the height of the Viet Nam war and only a year after the Tet Offensive. The United States, the bastion of freedom and democracy, had pitted itself against the North Vietnamese and its Communist backers in the Soviet Union and China. Opponents to the establishment were found on the domestic front as well. The cover date for this particular soapbox letter was March of 1968,[25] just a month before Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, which in turn led to outbreaks of racial rioting across the nation. Lee's message was thus quite progressive given its original context;

[25] According to Tom Brevoort, Marvel Senior Vice President of Publishing, "Cover dates were approximately three months ahead in those days."

that it was couched within the pages of a superhero comic book shows that the genre itself was finally becoming more progressive.

Further, we begin to see how this portrayal stands in contrast to the previously dominant conception of what our superheroes looked and behaved like. Unlike Clark Kent—whose personality is often viewed as a role that the alien Superman adopts artificially in order to blend into society—Peter Parker is a broken character who struggles to reconstruct himself through the formation and performance of the Spider-Man persona. And while Bruce Wayne does seem to reconstruct his reality and redress the traumatic murder of his parents through the cape and cowl of Batman, there has always been the question of who the real person is: Batman or Bruce Wayne? If Superman and Batman's utter certainty in their abilities as supermen serves as one of their defining characteristics, then Spider-Man's continual self-doubt in the face of his success as a superhero stands in contrast to such confidently masculine superheroes.

Then there is the issue of the physical aspect of the alter ego. Although Spider-Man possesses powers beyond that of Batman, he has a slight physical carriage, one that is far different from the peak physical specimen that is Bruce Wayne, especially as Batman was being depicted in 1962—the same time as Spider-Man's first appearance—with his barrel chest and muscular arms. Peter regularly faces off against Flash Thompson, and the difference in their appearance is obvious. Where Peter is "puny" and diminutive in stature, Flash is depicted as a strapping and tall young man. Peter is typically shown wearing fine, wire-rimmed glasses and "Sunday" clothes that one would not want to get dirty. He does not give the impression of being the stereotypical "man of action." Flash Thompson, on the other hand, is shown wearing clothing that accentuates

his lean, athletic form—such as his tight-fitting varsity sports sweater and sneakers. Ditko also subtly positions each character's body in such a way that their body language either connotes strength, confidence, and manliness, as in the case of Flash, or, as seen with Peter, shyness, nervousness, and frustration. Around the women in their lives, Flash is confident, assertive, and never seems to be lacking for words—even if they do not always result in his "getting the girl"—while Peter is quiet, uncertain, and often bumbling in his attempts at talking to women. The irony over the non-traditional, less-than-masculine protagonist is particularly reinforced in *Amazing Spider-Man No.*5. In this early issue, Dr. Doom mistakes Flash Thompson for Spider-Man. He seems he would be the more conventional choice, but of course Flash is ineffectual in his performance of the super-powered Spider-Man.

Spider-Man and Peter Parker do not serve as a complete overhaul of the past paradigm of the comic book superhero and his mainstream alter ego. It is also unclear exactly how far Lee and Ditko were trying to push societal conceptions of gender performance. But one can reasonably point to Spider-Man as an important turning point. This shift would create room for additional reinterpretations of masculinity in comics.

The Rise of the Anti-Superhero

While the company worked to incorporate elements of the real world into its fantastic stories of superheroes, Marvel Comics continued to dominate the superhero genre during the 1970s. Bucking decades of corporate oppression under the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which arose during the McCarthy era and profoundly sanitized comics in the following decades, Lee and artist Gil Kane published a three-part story arc in *The*

Amazing Spider-Man Nos.96-98 that addressed the use and dangers of drug use among young adults. The story centered on Harry Osborn's use of an unnamed pill and the after-effects of his drug use. Although the Nixon administration commended Marvel for its bold move in confronting a growing problem in the United States—especially in New York City, where Spider-Man lived—these were the first comic books published without the stamp of approval of the CCA. It was a revolutionary move at the time. Less than six months later, DC Comics followed suit, and showcased the drug addiction of Speedy, Green Arrow's sidekick and ward.[26]

Of course, these first salvoes disregarding the CCA led to more challenges of the strict content guidelines that previously held the industry in an iron grip. These challenges took the form not only of edgy storylines, but of new anti-superheroes whose very nature pushed the CCA envelope. Three years later, one of the most well-known of all anti-superheroes was introduced in the pages of *Amazing Spider-Man* No.129 with Frank Castle as The Punisher. Coogan finds that the Punisher typified the anti-hero who had already arisen during the Bronze Age of comics: "He became the quintessential 'grim-and-gritty guy-with-a-gun.' …[H]e is willing to kill his enemies, and his death's head icon symbolizes… [his] focus on death" (217). But as Coogan argues the Punisher would shift from a mere vigilante to a superhero, and yet this character never stepped away from the vigilante philosophy of stopping criminals with extreme prejudice. The Punisher was immediate popular when he debuted in February of 1974, reflecting a growing interest in such darker characters. Wolverine, arguably the most popular of all of Marvel's anti-superheroes, was introduced in October of that same year. But, as the next chapter will discuss, it was in 1986 that the anti-superhero would reach its peak, with the

[26] See *Green Lantern / Green Arrow* #85-86, story by Denny O'Neil and art by Neal Adams.

publication of Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* and Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. As I have tried to show in this chapter, all of these anti-superheroes can trace their origin to the puny teenage nerd who was bitten by a radioactive spider.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SUPERHERO

I mentioned in Chapter Three that comics of the 1960s and 70s continued to be more products of cultural engagement than responses to literature of the past. This trend is no less true for the 1980s, where comics reflected a generation who was moving increasingly further away from their conservative parents in nearly every facet of culture. As Jeffery K. Johnson points out, "As Americans changed the nation's social and cultural narratives, comic book heroes followed suit. The 1980s would serve as a decade of re-creation and re-imagination" (Chapter Seven). Emerson's words in his introduction to *Nature* apply equally to this era: "[o]ur age is retrospective. It builds sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face" (7). The comics writers and artists of "Generation X"—taking a cue from the Baby Boomers before them—broke from the literary "sepulchers" of the previous generations and explored new ideas, just as mainstream modern and postmodern literature worked to destroy and resurrect its past traditions.

1986: A Postmodern Watershed for Comics

There are several *anni mirabiles* in comics that stand apart from the rest: 1938 and the introduction of the Golden Age of Comics; 1961 and beginning of Marvel's Silver Age of Comics; and then 1986—the birth of the postmodern superhero, which saw the publication various comics, trade collected editions, and original graphic novels that are now widely considered to be definitive classics within the medium. This year was rich

with books from nearly every comics genre, including previously "underground" or independent comics, such as the publication of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*[27] and Harvey Pekar's acclaimed *American Splendor*,[28] which saw republication in new, collected editions. The increasingly popular self-published *Teenage Mutant Turtles* also exploded beyond the basement press where they had been born in two years earlier and quickly entrenched themselves in mainstream pop culture. However, if 1986 was anything in comics, it was the year of the superhero.

Perhaps the two most significant comics creators throughout the 1980s were Frank Miller and Alan Moore. With series like *The Dark Knight Returns, Batman: Year One,* and *Daredevil: Born Again,* Miller spread his influence from within a handful of the core titles of the superhero genre, while Moore operated either from the periphery of mainstream comics (such as the previously tertiary comic *Swamp Thing*, or *Miracleman*, which was less familiar to readers within the United States) or from an altogether new property, like his original twelve-part maxi-series *Watchmen* created with Dave Gibbons.

This "two-prong offensive" on the conventional superhero—largely, though not completely, unchallenged since the introduction of the Marvel Age of comics over twenty years prior—eventually brought an end to the conventional approach to superhero comics, which generally featured costumed adventurers who were less psychologically complicated, and injected them with a cold dose of postmodern, Cold-War era anxiety, where moral ambiguity reigned supreme. Colin Smith summarizes the deconstructive movement in comics this way:

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[27] *Maus*, which would go onto win the first Pulitzer Prize in 1991, was originally published in serialized format from 1980-1991, but it was in 1986 that the first volume was collected and published by Pantheon.

[28] *American Splendor* was originally published in 1976, and was later brought together in a complete volume under Double Day publishing.

> [D]econstruction involved the stripping down of the tradition of the super-hero to what might be considered its essential components…. Part of that might involve a discussion of how the conventions of the superhero book might play out in real-world conditions. Part might see an examination of the values which had most typically been represented in the form.

Smith provides a succinct assessment of the options open to the deconstructionist comics writer. Deconstruction was a challenge to the most fundamental conventions that had been previously handed down almost unchanged from one generation of superheroes to the next.

It is not that the creators of the Silver Age of comics failed to provide human renderings of their superheroes. As discussed in the previous chapter, Spider-Man demonstrates that more nuanced and psychologically developed superheroes were in vogue with the creators of the time and their readership. However, Peter Paik argues that the "revisionist realism" of the 1980s "endows these archetypes with a density of characterization and a striking array of idiosyncrasies that achieve a novelistic complexity" (358-59). Spearheaded by Moore and Miller, the deconstructionist movement thrust readers into stories that were instantly complex and demanding, whereas the handful of superheroes emerging from the Golden and Silver Ages took decades to achieve such depth.

This seachange in the 1980s superhero is something Matthew Costello addresses as well in *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America*. Costello demonstrates how the comic book superhero genre evolved politically, particularly the Marvel Age of Comics, namely towards a Cold War viewpoint.

Costello's argument is compelling when he takes into account the ways Americans have long defined themselves through "righteous conflict," perhaps best seen in the nineteenth-century ideology of Manifest Destiny (I will touch upon this below in Chapter Five, in discussing American Exceptionalism). The two world wars also helped to homogenize the American public into what Costello refers to as the "consensus," and it was this development of national unity that Costello sees as a primary influence on the way comics were written, drawn, and presented to the reading public in the early and mid-century decades. Finally, in the course of the Cold War, Costello argues that the American public has now moved from a period of unquestioning loyalty to the federal government to era of skepticism.

Comics followed a similar trajectory when they began pushing back against the conservative restrictions of the CCA in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in the rise of underground and alternative comics. As Peter Sanderson points out,

> The underground cartoonists were intent on producing comic books for adults that dealt, seriously or comedically, with adult topics such as sex, religion, politics, and the drug culture, free from the restrictions that the mainstream comics industry had imposed on itself through the Comics Code Authority.

This culture of change is what would go on to set the stage for the deconstructionist writers of the 1980s such as Miller, Moore, Morrison, and Art Spiegelman[29] to name a few. These and other noted creators pushed the boundaries further and in directions

[29] Although Spiegelman's work was not in the superhero genre of comics, his seminal masterpiece *Maus* drew a significant amount of mainstream attention to comics and served to help disrupt many non-comic readers' established notions of what comics were and what they could be.

previously unexplored, in turn allowing a new generation of comics readers to become more skeptical of authority and of traditional superheroes.

Reviewing the heroes who were the subject of its comic books during the 1960s and 70s, Costello also argues that Marvel Comics was a virtual socio-political litmus test for mainstream culture. In particular, he notes how the Marvel superheroes were almost all presented as variations of anti-communist, capitalist-loving, nationalist enforcers of the community; many of whom saw their origins through scientific breakthroughs: "eight of [the] ten [most popular] gained their powers through Cold War context or radiation" (62). Yet, while these heroes still represented the consensus and were quick to restore the status quo at the end of each monthly issue, they still had progressive undercurrents. Steve Rogers would question the government; the Incredible Hulk would often serve to point to the problems of the military war machine; and Spider-Man could be counted upon to illustrate the inherent goodness of the common man, over against the self-serving capitalist like J. Jonah Jameson. Even DC's Green Lantern faces his own indiscreet racism in *Green Lantern / Green Arrow* No.76, as an old, black man points out how the intergalactic peacekeeper would aid every other colored being in the universe except the blacks on planet Earth. Thus, comics creators in the 1960s and 70s did not fail to challenge certain aspects of the status quo, but essentially none challenged the very conventions of the genre in which they worked. But with the emergence of Generation "X," no subject was off-limits for reconsideration, and during the 1980s these generic conventions were completely exploded.

Alan Moore and the Deconstruction of the Superhero

Moore and Dave Gibbon's tour de force *Watchmen* carried forward the call to arms against the old guard's rendering of the superhero. Describing *Watchmen* as "clinical" in its artistry, Morrison sees this epic story as a "cold dissection of self-serving US foreign policy decisions in the guise of an alternate history of superhumans and masked crime fighters" (195).[30] Further, in the form of Rorschach, Moore exemplifies and amplifies the convention of the troubled and traumatized superhero initially introduced with Batman and further developed with Peter Parker. Born out of the slums to a prostitute mother, Rorschach is the epitome of the vigilante anti-superhero who fights fire with fire. As he knowingly comments on his late colleague, the Comedian "[u]nderstood man's capacity for horrors and never quit. Saw the world's black underbelly and never surrendered. Once a man has seen, he can never turn his back on it. Never pretend it doesn't exist" (Moore and Gibbons 6.15). This describes the qualities Rorschach himself upholds as a masked vigilante. *Watchmen* underscores that the danger in trusting heroes who fail to recognize the true evils in the world and to combat them accordingly "[is] to give up responsibility for our lives and future to the Reagans, Thatchers, and other 'Watchmen' of the world who [are] supposed to 'rescue' us and perhaps lay waste to the planet in the process" (Wright 273). And this is exactly how Moore ends *Watchmen* (these are also the same conclusions, if less polished, that Moore drew out of his earlier *Miracleman* comics as well).

Ultimately, readers encounter a thorough deconstruction of the superhero archetypes of the past in *Watchmen*, even if Moore's heroes are recognizable amalgams of those costumed icons. Dr. Manhattan is both the godlike Superman with his near-

[30] The same assessment could be applied to Moore's earlier work *Miracleman* (1981).

infinite power set, and parallels many of the heroes of the Marvel era, where scientific discoveries often went awry, resulting in the atomic bombardment of the scientist and the birthing of a superhuman. Unlike DC's Superman and Marvel's various radioactive superheroes, however, Dr. Manhattan brings death, and not life, through his cancer-inducing presence. In turn, he gradually grows less and less human and eventually physically removes himself from earth altogether. Likewise, Ozymandias could be viewed as a combination of both Superman, with his all-around superhuman strength, speed, and agility, and Batman, as seen in his exceptional fighting prowess and unmatched mental acumen. Likewise, Adrian Veidt also possesses a pro-social agenda wherein he plans to deliver the world from nuclear Armageddon, even if it is twisted and horrifically utilitarian in nature: unlike his iconic superhero counterparts, Ozymandias has no qualms about murdering millions of people to preserve the lives of billions of others. Silk Spectre and Nite Owl are the two superheroes who seem the most grounded in the conventional sense of the archetype, and yet even they serve to deconstruct reader expectations.

Fig. 3. Dan Dreiberg as the Nite Owl. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *The Watchmen* No.10 (New York: DC Comics, 2010) 5. Print.

Dan Dreiberg, the second Nite Owl, is modeled after both Batman and the old Charlton (and eventual DC) Blue Beetle. Like them, Nite Owl uses his intelligence and vast array of gadgets and inventions to aid him in his crime fighting pursuits, recalling Tony Stark's Iron Man armor, Batman's notorious utility belt, Spider-Man's self-made webslingers, Reed Richard's various inventions, and other instances of superhero technical ingenuity. It is the visual depiction of Nite Owl, however, that provides the most compelling deconstruction of reader expectations of what superheroes are supposed to look like.

It is clear this costumed superhero does not physically match up with the type whom he is modeled after. His jaw is weak and his expression is more pleading than assertive. Instead of broad, muscular shoulders, Gibbons and Moore break this hero down into a man with pointed shoulders, which lead to thins arms held close to the body and partially hidden from view—not the typical rippling, brawny arms of a man accustomed to enforcing his beliefs with a fist. Moreover, the only line on this hero's chest seems to indicate a sort of paunchy, rounded stomach—not the six-pack abdomen and chiseled physique readers commonly find etched across the chests and stomachs of their masked strongmen. In short, the physical structure of the superhero is broken down and rebuilt in the form of a normal, middle-aged man—something truly unexpected within the genre at that time.

Nite Owl and Silk Spectre further reinforce the deconstruction of the superhero in the way they agree to remain silent about Adrian's scheme and therefore be complicit in his plans. Although Silk Spectre performs admirably in convincing Dr. Manhattan to

return to earth and save it from Veidt's machinations, she too agrees to the compromise of silence at the story's end. Abraham Lincoln is said to have claimed that "to sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men," and it would seem this silence also makes cowards of these superheroes as well. This stands in direct contrast to Rorschach, who alone acts in such a way to exemplify more conventional superheroic behaviors. Yet, he dies without seeming to realize any posthumous victory, unlike more traditional superheroes who, even in defeat, recognize that they have won the victory in the long run. While the reader does see Rorschach's journal eventually reaching the hands of Seymour (the dim-witted journalist at the right-wing newspaper), Moore provides no guarantee or assurance that the truth ever really gets out to the mass public. Moore also refuses to provide assurance to his murderous architect. At the series' conclusion, Ozymandias asks Dr. Manhattan if "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end," to which the departing demi-god responds, "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (Moore and Gibbons 12.27). As when the dullish Seymour picks up Rorschach's journal in the final page and appears to prepare it for publication, we must call into question the permanence of Veidt's new world order. The only guarantee Moore offers his readers is the uncertainty of the world in which they live. Even if Veidt's plan is not undone, millions in New York are still dead and the heroes failed to prevent this devastation. Even worse, the heroes themselves are the root cause of it all—a truly bleak critique of what the world might look like if superheroes truly existed.

Yet, for all of the critical acclaim *Watchmen* has rightly earned for its role in the deconstruction of the superhero, it is neither Moore's first nor even necessarily his most

important contribution to the postmodern era of superheroes. While Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* was originally published over half a year earlier than *Watchmen*, it was Moore who earlier opened the gates of postmodernism that would go on to flood the superhero genre. For this, readers need look to Moore's work definitively deconstructing the superhero in *Miracleman*, originally published in serialized format starting in 1981.[31] Unlike *The Watchmen*, which has been the subject of innumerable critical articles, *Miracleman* not had the same level of attention.[32] This is due in no small part to the sheer difficulty in accessing the series.[33] Regardless, the first eleven chapters alone[34] clearly demonstrate the Moore's ambition to engage in not only a meta-criticism of the conventional superhero but also a reconstruction of the genre as a whole.

Moore's story of Miracleman revives what was originally a British copycat of Fawcett's Captain Marvel and Billy Batson. Reporter Mike Moran possesses the ability to speak the magic word, "Kimota!" and turn into the *übermensch* Miracleman.[35] This super-powered being possesses much of the same abilities as Superman along with the pro-social mission of ensuring peace and protecting the planet from evil. Where his story differs from his Golden Age predecessors, however, is how Moran remains in his human

[31] The original name of the Fawcett series was *Marvelman*; however, copyright issues with Marvel Comics arose, and the series from *Warrior* magazine was renamed *Miracleman*.

[32] For an extended analysis of *Miracleman*, see Julian Darius' on-going series of critical articles on Sequart.com (2012-13).

[33] Given that *Miracleman* was initially printed in the U.K. by a smaller independent publisher, the print runs were notably smaller than those from Marvel and DC Comics in the United States. Moreover, multiple lawsuits and copyright issues in the years since the series was initially published have kept this book out of print and generally unavailable for nearly twenty-five years. However, Marvel Comics announced in 2013 that this series will be made available once again.

[34] These 11 chapters were originally published in *Warrior* magazine starting in 1981, and then in issues 1-3 in the serialized *Mircaleman* comic book. They can also be found in the first volume of the collected trade paperback edition from Eclipse Books (1988), currently out of print.

[35] "Kimota!" is "Atomic!" backwards, cuing readers into the nuclear ties of this superhero, as opposed to the purely magical nature of Billy Batson and the original Captain Marvel.

alter ego for many years because of a traumatic event that left him locked in his mortal body. With the eventual reemergence of his one-time sidekick, now turned homicidal nemesis, Johnny Bates (the Kid Marvel), Moran's super-powered self reappears after his eighteen-year hiatus. It is only through Kid Marvel's mistakenly uttering his own word of power that he transforms back into the adolescent Johnny Bates and Miracleman is able to secure the victory.

After seeing his young ward, now grown, begin to ruthlessly incinerate a young woman, carelessly throw a baby high into the atmosphere only to be narrowly saved by Miracleman, and then flippantly destroy of a significant portion of London, it is no surprise that Miracleman recognizes the need to "kill him before he has a chance to change back" and "trample over me, over Liz, over the world" (Moore, et al. 39-40). Miracleman soon recognizes, however, that the traumatized young boy is somehow cut off from his source of power and unable to change back into the murderous Kid Marvelman. Thinking it more humane to allow the boy to live and leaving him to the authorities, Moran departs so that he might recuperate from the battle that has brought him near death.

Readers discover, however, that the Kid Marvelman persona is still quite alive and well inside the comatose Johnny Bates: "[a]nd now I'm trapped in this puny little pre-pubescent body in a rancid little nursing home. Because of you. Because of Miracleman. He just better hope I never get our here, that's all…. Just better hope I stay in here forever" (Moore 40). Of course, Kid Marvel does eventually return later in the series, after Moore departed and left it in the hands of Neil Gaiman, who sought to bring the story to its conclusion. While the ideal "ending" for Superman would be a world

where “truth, justice, and the American way” pervades society, the world of Miracleman ends with him at the head of a totalitarian council of superhumans whose creation of a worldwide Utopia is enforced with a super-powered fist. As Coogan suggests, “Miracleman decides that he cannot leave humanity’s path to itself, so he takes over governance with the rest of the Miracle Family. The series shifts from being a superhero genre to a meditation on the discontents of utopia… because in utopia the superheroes rule instead of fighting crime and hence are not really superheroes at all” (115). While I am not sure Coogan is entirely correct in asserting these characters are no longer viable members of the superhero category, his argument highlights the way in which Moore (and then Gaiman) utilized the superhero genre as a vehicle for addressing literary themes far greater than the simple “wish fulfillment” arcs of the past generation of superhero comic creators.

Given the significance of both *Miracleman* and *Watchmen*, it is easy to name Moore as the first writer to fully deconstruct the superhero. But Moore was more the flagbearer for a deconstrutionist movement that had already gotten started in the 1970s. Robert Mayer’s *Superfolks* (1977) is a superhero novel that not only skewers the genre, but also inspired Moore in the years just prior to his publication of *Miracleman*. In his three-part investigative article on *The Beat*, Pádraig Ó Méalóid explores, in part, Mayer and other influences on Moore and his highly influential superhero works from the 1980s. Mayer’s satire engages with both actual comic book superheroes from the DC universe such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel and fictional parodies of the same archetypical heroes. Mayer not only pokes fun at the various conventions of the superhero, such as their costumes, powers, and limitations, but also their missions and

alter egos where heroes retire and retreat into their civilian lives. Moreover, we see a precursor to the villainous Kid Marvelman who is beaten through accidentally speaking a magic, transformational word that leads to his defeat. While Méalóid believes *Superfolks* had less of an influence on Moore's superhero works than critics such as Morrison and Kurt Busiek have argued, even Moore states that "I may have had [*Superfolks*] subconsciously in my mind, but it was certainly influential on *Marvelman* and the idea of placing superheroes in hard times and in a browbeaten real world" (Parkin qtd. in Méalóid).[36]

While Moore's deconstructive ideas may not have been entirely original, his work in *Miracleman* and *Watchmen* (not to mention *Swamp Thing* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen)* has had a profound influence on how later creators would go on to envision and depict superheroes. Not only does Moore confront readers with what the world might look like if Superman had "a really bad day" (in the form of the deranged Kid Miracleman), but we also see the possible political implications of the presence of a true "overman" in today's world. Where *Watchmen* presents readers with a bleak dystopian view of a world populated with dysfunctional superheroes, *Miracleman* offers a similarly problematized utopian future with Aryan-like superheroes at the head of a frightening new world order. This work had a resounding impact throughout the medium, and its reverberations are still being felt in contemporary mainstream culture.

[36] It is also worth pointing out that, in the same interview, Moore points to another highly influential source that predates even Mayer with Brian Patten's poem, "Where Are You Now, Batman?" from Penguin's poetry anthology, *Mersey Sound* (1967).

Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight* Series[37]

The deconstruction of the superhero that Moore most memorably initiated in *Miracleman* was also carried forward in the 1980s by the other great superhero deconstructor, Frank Miller. As Bradford Wright argues, "Frank Miller spearheaded a loose movement among comic book writers in the 1980s who worked to deconstruct superheroes while revitalizing them in the process" (267). But while Moore works collaboratively as writer with various artists, Miller's vision is expressed in both creating stories and in penciling the art. And where Moore did his work either by reviving lesser known titles or by creating brand new concept, Miller took on the revisioning some of the greatest icons of the superhero tradition: Daredevil, Wolverine, and above all Batman. Perhaps even more than *Watchmen*, Miller's *Dark Knight* series is the postmodern prototype of what Morrison calls the "Dark Age" of comics, which is marked by the breaking down of the conventional portrayals of comic book superheroes and the inclusion of hyper-real elements of sex, violence, and psychological angst.

Published in the spring of 1986, the cover of *The Dark Knight Returns* (hereafter *DKR*) foreshadows the effect this mini-series would have on not only its title character but also on the comics industry as a whole. We see an iconic black silhouette of the Batman leaping into action in the foreground as a bright lightning bolt splits the center of a dark background, an image offering "the promise of explosive energy and rejuvenation" (Morrison 191). This rejuvenation was extended to the visually explosive levels of violence Miller wove into his darker and morally ambivalent Batman. Such uncompromising vision provided readers with a drastic departure from the past iterations

[37] An earlier version of part of this section can be seen in "The Anxiety of Influence and Failed Sequels: Frank Miller and *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*" published on Sequart.

of the Dark Knight, which in turn recharged fan interest in the character within the United States and abroad. In *DKR*, it is an aged Bruce Wayne who returns from retirement to a post-apocalyptic Gotham that is oversaturated by talking heads in the media and a Reagan administration, which has created a "Big Brother"-esque government with Superman as its lead enforcer. Miller depicts Batman as a hulkish brute who is intent on wresting control of the city from the mutants and criminals overrunning its streets. The moment in *DKR* that arguably may, all on its own, have ushered in the "Dark Age" of comics is the final conflict between Batman and Superman, with the Dark Knight's apparent death and rebirth in the ruins of his bat cave: "Here in the endless cave, far past the burnt remains of a crime fighter whose time has passed… it begins here—an army—to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers" (Miller 4.47). A new and darker version of the superhero had arisen, and this superhero took on a sharper edge than ever before in order to combat his opponents.

In 2002, nearly fifteen years after writing and publishing his original four-part mini-series, Miller returned to finish telling the story of his post-apocalyptic story of Gotham City and its Dark Knight. The question often debated among comics fans and critics is whether or not Miller's later work can be viewed as equally successful—or whether it should even be read at all. Perhaps the most common concern about Miller's later efforts centers on the way it employs a number of poorly constructed stereotypes to drive its social commentary. Certainly, one can look at the portrayals of American youth and the dialogue used to see how readers might come to this conclusion:

"I hope you realize this is all about *me."*

"Marr, if this is treason, then treason rocks!"

> "OHMYGOD!!! A superchix meltdown!!! It's a totally tragedy!!! But you couldn't even hear about it with all the noise and shooting and stuff!!!" (Miller 3.9-10)

Clearly, these youthful reporters are more focused on issues of entertainment than the political violence taking place before them. Even those media figures who recognize the uprisings against Luthor's corrupt government portray it in a sensationalistic manner geared more towards titillating than informing their viewers. Titillation is continually reinforced from the first page of the three-part series to the end. In particular, Miller often portrays body parts of women in order to suggest double entendres. On the first page of the first book, a disembodied pair of luscious lips tells the reader "You *want* it… you *must* have it…. we'll never let your stocks go flaccid" (1.1-3) at which point a toned and voluptuous nude female body is shown covered in money—not terribly subtle. It is clear Miller is reacting satirically against the overly vapid and sexualized nature of contemporary media in the aforementioned examples; however, the problem is that he also wants us to take seriously the appearances of real-world figures like John Ashcroft, Donald Rumsfeld, George W. Bush, and George Stephanopoulos (Harris-Fain 153). Although Miller might have some legitimate concerns about the priorities of adolescent programming when taking into account the explosion of reality television shows at the beginning of the new millennium—the height of vapid titillation on television—he can also be viewed as painting the picture in black and white terms. In *DK2*, either you are a militant protestor (such as Carrie Kelly) or you are a mindless youth sucked in by the media. However, this is not the only criticism leveled against Miller's sequel to *DKR*, and the issue of continuity is one that readers may find particularly difficult in *DK2*.

One of the biggest challenges facing the comics publishing industry is that many new readers simply do not possess sufficient background knowledge to make the jump into reading new comics. In the first decades of comics, readers could pick up a single issue and find a self-contained story arc. Only rarely would they need to read multiple issues to reach that narrative's logical conclusion. Starting with the Marvel Age of comics in the 1960s, however, continuity of storylines began taking hold and is now the industry standard. For example, in order for contemporary comic readers to accurately understand who Robin is, they must be aware of a source from 1987 titled *The Son of the Demon*; otherwise, readers will be totally unaware that Batman even had a child who has now inherited the mantle of "Boy Wonder."[38]

This same problem with continuity and background knowledge arises in *DK2* as Miller calls upon a great number of DC characters and he takes the conflict out of Gotham and goes global. Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman (as well as the Joker) are all fairly well-known characters in mainstream culture and did not present a major problem in *DKR*; however, only a niche demographic would be at all familiar with many of the characters Miller summons in *DK2:* Green Lantern, Green Arrow, Elongated Man, Black Canary, and Brainiac. In *DKR*, the cast of characters is more limited, thereby requiring less "insider" knowledge and making it far more accessible. Given the smaller scale of the narrative in *DKR*, Miller is able to make the most of his exposition to provide readers with sufficient information to keep up with the story; not so with *DK2*. It is no wonder *DK2* received far less fanfare from those mainstream outlets that had heralded *DKR* as the catalyst behind Batman's rebirth, which it has since proven to be. However,

[38] The current Robin, Damien Wayne, the son of Bruce Wayne and Talia Al Ghul, is generally understood to be the fifth person to serve as Batman's sidekick.

DK2 is still a collected work that comic fans and scholars need to be aware of if for no other reason than it provides a greater understanding of the impact *DKR* has had on modern comics readers. Further, it does provide a natural conclusion to Miller's post-apocalyptic vision, however satisfying or unsatisfying.

In some regards, *DK2* was doomed to failure at some level. When Miller and Klaus Jansen published *DKR*, it essentially reinvented the styles, tropes, layouts, and character portrayals that had been the norm for decades. *DK2*, however, simply continues in this tradition essentially adopting the same form with few significant changes. Miller does update his presentation of media to include a digital President of the United States, courtesy of Lex Luthor; however, no other new ground is really broken. So is it fair to view Miller from 2001-02 as aping Miller from 1986? I would argue in fact that this is not an entirely fair assessment. In his review of John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* C. S. Lewis defends Milton against critics who claimed Milton was a purveyor of bad stereotypes and sensationalistic style. Lewis contends that Milton's elevation of style is accomplished through his "continued allusion to all the sources of heightened interest in our sensual experience (light, darkness, storm, flowers, sexual love, and the like), but all over the top" (40). Miller is most certainly not on the same playing field as John Milton, but his influence on later writers is not unlike Milton's in their respective literary fields. Lewis further elaborates his defense of Milton when he states: "Sensitive writers are so tired of seeing good stock responses aped by bad writers that when at last they meet the reality they mistake it for one more instance of bad posturing" (51). When Miller referenced politics and culture of the 1980s in his seminal *DKR*, this was groundbreaking. By the time *DK2* was published fifteen years later, this style was overfamiliar, and interpreted as

"bad posturing." Driving a narrative through vapid talking heads was new and innovative in *DKR*; in *DK2,* it simply appeared as rehashing.

What happened in fifteen years to make Miller's work go from fresh and cutting edge to stale and dull? I suggest the answer lies in the fifteen years' worth of responses and reactions to Miller, where nearly every other creative team who would work on *Batman, Detective Comics*, and any other Batman title were forced to work in Miller's shadow. And it did not help that Miller also redefined mainstream continuity and readers' understanding of Batman's origins with his "Year One" story arc in *Batman* Nos.404-07 the year following *DKR's* publication. There is simply no escaping Miller's revolutionary vision of Batman from the 1980s, so much so that even the Miller from the 2000s falls victim to himself. One need only look at the rise of the anti-hero following *DKR's* success to see Miller's influence.

When Miller produced a work in *DK2* that looked and felt quite similar to his original post-apocalyptic Batman story with the added requirement of deeper comic background knowledge, it is no wonder readers and critics perceived it as a lesser work than *DKR.* There are legitimate concerns about the way Miller minimizes the psychological effects of the aging Batman struggling to save his city in favor of a more brutish and physical hero. Readers should question the manner in which he closes out *DK2*, with its hasty introduction and destruction of Dick Grayson, along with the insinuation of a borderline incestuous "winter-spring" relationship between the near-geriatric Bruce Wayne and the all-too-underage Carrie Kelly. However, *DK2* should now be read immediately alongside *DKR*, without the fifteen years of baggage accompanying the original collected work. Doing so provides readers and critics with a more complete

picture of the vision Miller intended for Batman in his struggle to protect Gotham. A close reading of *DKR* and *DK2* as a two-volume set will still show many similarities in terms of its blistering critique of media and the mass public, along with its advocating for a strong protector in the form of Batman.

The Comics World Post-1986

Of course, Superman and Spider-Man were not left unaffected by this seismic cultural shift either. In 1988, Moore fittingly provided the scripts for a two-part story arc in *Superman* No.423 and *Action Comics* No.583 called "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" With art by Curt Swan—one of the classic Silver Age artists for the Superman comics—Moore told a story where the traditional Superman of yesteryear (along with all of his villains and most of his supporting cast mates) were killed off in an Armageddon-style battle in the arctic. The cover for *Action Comics No.*583 depicts the traditional red, yellow, and blue clad Superman with a morose expression as he prepares to fly off the page, out of the story and into the past. We discover the reason for his departure when he informs Lois at the end of the story after saving the rest of the survivors through killing the demonic Mr. Mxypltk that "Nobody has the right to kill. Not Mxypltk, not you, not Superman. Especially not Superman!" (Moore and Swan 22). He then proceeds to enter a room of Gold Kryptonite rendering himself mortal, and "it was concluded that he'd walked out powerless into the subzero wastes to freeze. They never found his body" (23). Two years into a world that now embraced the violence and disregard for rules ushered in by *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, it was clear this was no longer a place for the classic Superman.

Perhaps the DC superheroes experienced the greatest upheaval when compared to their web-slinging counterpart at Marvel, as Spider-Man's origins and following storylines already wove some aspects of the real world into their tales of romantic heroism. Marvel had already made its mark on the industry through its introduction of more psychologically nuanced superheroes, unlike their counterparts at DC (with perhaps the exception of Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams' collaborations, which consistently steered readers down more pro-social pathways). But some additional elements of this darker and grittier world did enter into the Spider-Man's mythos, and this is best seen in the six-part "Kraven's Last Hunt" story arc.[39]

This story saw one of Spider-Man's original villains—modeled after General Zardof from Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game"—doggedly pursue him through the streets of New York and appear to successfully shoot the superhero. After burying Peter Parker, Kraven temporarily assumes the role of Spider-Man and plays the role of crime fighter until the original Spider-Man digs himself out of his grave. Having satisfied himself of his superiority over Spider-Man, Kraven finds himself in a losing battle with depression, and lacking any further prey to pursue, he commits suicide. Often considered one of the most powerful and emotionally gripping tales in the Spider-Man canon, "Kraven's Last Hunt" provided a human side to the all-too-often two-dimensional villains, depicting Kraven's emotional turmoil in his failed struggle with depression. Further, suicide was a more realistic response to this clearly disturbed individual's continued failure. The standard convention following defeat at the hands of the superhero

[39] It is important to note that while story arcs such as Moore's "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow" and J. M. DeMatteis' "Kraven's Last Hunt" were published in 1988 and 1987 respectively, the comics publishing industry often works months in advance. This means DeMatteis' story would have been written in 1986 while Moore would have likely been writing his Superman finale while or not long after *Watchmen* was appearing in print.

has the supervillain carted away by the police, shaking his or her fist at the hero, exclaiming that vengeance will still be served at a later date. According to this pattern, no one would expected the villain to break down, admit utter failure, and end his life. Readers wouldn't be out of line for thinking that these characters are crazy for dressing up in costumes while perpetrating various crimes, and what other than mental illness would the long-term implications be of such actions?

As the 1990s ended and the new millennium approached, the influence of Moore and Miller's dystopian creations were still being felt. In 1996, writer Mark Waid teamed up with artist Alex Ross to create the four-part mini-series *Kingdom Come,* a kind of amalgam of *The Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. Waid explores a world set in the not-so-distant future where the heroes of the Golden Age—Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and the like—have aged and retired from their roles as superheroes, only to be replaced by a batch of postmodern vigilante anti-superheroes who are hardly distinguishable from the enemies they continually battle. After one such hero sets off a nuclear disaster, which devastates the entire state of Kansas, the superheroes of old return to take care of a world that no longer seems capable of taking care of itself. Ross's highly stylized aesthetic, grounded in a deep sense of realism, presents readers with photorealistic paintings of heroes who seem to show the signs of aging through time and care. Clearly the "anything goes" cynicisms that became popular in the 1980s and early 90s was proving wearisome for readers and creators alike. However, Waid and Ross seemed to recognize there was no returning to the world of the comic book superheroes from the Gold and Silver Age of Comics where the lines between right and wrong, and good and evil were more easily discernible, and our superheroes could be depicted with

simple lines and basic, primary colors. Both Waid and Ross understood there were too many shades of gray that needed to be accounted for in the wake of the superheroes' deconstruction in 1986.

A similar theme would be tackled ten years later in Marvel's cross-company event *Civil War* where real world issues of government control and nationalism would intersect with individual rights and comic book superheroes. Once again, a loose- cannon superhero negligently creates a nuclear incident resulting in the total destruction of Stamford, Connecticut. Spider-Man soon finds himself at the center of the debate over the registration of superhumans to ensure public safety. Do superheroes have a right to privacy and individual rights, or does their independent use of superpowers create opportunities where the nation is placed at risk? It is a question still being discussed in comics today.

Incognito and *Irredeemable*: Anti-Supervillains[40]

In almost forty years since The Punisher and Wolverine's debut and nearly 30 years since the ushering in of the postmodernism movement in the superhero genre, comic readers are still fascinated with protagonists who refuse to conform to the mold of the conventional "good guy." One more of the more contemporary comic series that turned this trope of the anti-hero on its head is Ed Brubaker's mini-series *Incognito*. Brubaker's series takes a unique perspective on the gray areas between heroes and villains, asking what would happen if a bad guy became a good guy, and why that might happen?

[40] An earlier version of part of this section can be seen in " The Difficulties of Being "Just" Good and Bad in Comics of the New Millennium" published on Sequart.

The term "anti-hero" might seem like something of a misnomer, as it literally translates to someone who stands in direct opposition to heroes and their values. For many anti-heroic protagonists, however, this is not always the case. In general, these individuals still possess a higher purpose for their lives or actions. Frank Castle, the Punisher, a memorable anti-superhero, still exemplifies the fundamental traits of all superheroes after Coogan: costumed identity, special powers, and pro-social mission. The Punisher demarcates himself from other heroes with his all-black costume with a large white skull on the front. While he does not possess radioactive or mutant powers, he more than makes up for this with his uncanny knowledge and skill in firearms and all things explosive. Finally, Castle is motivated to clean the streets of crime after his family was killed by the mob… even if his attempts to clean the streets involve far more lethal methods than that of other New York City-based superheroes such as Daredevil and Spider-Man. Yet, the Punisher's aim is still the same: prevent the same crimes that happened to him from happening to others so the tragedy of his life ends with him. This shows the anti-hero can still be a hero; the difference lies in how he or she performs his or her role—not the result they work towards. It is this sort of moral ambiguity that caught the attention of postmodern readers.

In December 2008, Ed Brubaker began publishing his take on the popular anti-superhero subgenre with *Incognito*, which explores whether it is possible for a villain to change sides and become a hero. In this series, the protagonist—Zack Overkill—is an ex-supervillain who is placed in the witness protection program for testifying against the crime boss the Black Death, who was responsible for the death of Xander Overkill, Zack's twin brother and partner-in-crime, in addition to leaving Zack for dead. In a nod

to the quiet desperation of white collar working men of America as depicted in *Fight Club*, Zack is bored and dissatisfied with his domesticated life as an office worker, and salvation appears in the form of drugs that allow full use of his old powers: "Did I enjoy saving morons clearly too stupid not to walk in front of a hail of bullets? / Not really. People weren't exactly growing on me. / But like I said, those nights made my days survivable" (Brubaker). This line recalls Pixar's 2004 film *The Incredibles*, which also features superheroes in a kind of witness protection program, yet who still perform their hero duties to feel again the exhilaration from the old days. In this instance, however, Brubaker conveys a much more perverse rationale for Overkill to save others. This reluctant hero says he "didn't even need to get high anymore," for the satisfaction derived from being a "good guy" lies for him not in being on the side of "right" but in the high of simply exercising his increased strengths and abilities without being caught. Zack is still able to break the law, find thrills and adventure, and not show up on the supervisory S.O.S. agency's radar. What more could he ask for?

This disinterest in the intrinsic rewards of morality on Zack's part is what makes him stand out as a unique anti-superhero. Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner, arguably one of the earliest anti-heroes from the Timely and Marvel eras, is still concerned about the welfare of the Atlanteans—even if this brings him into conflict with the surface dwellers. Frank Castle ultimately wants to prevent the murder and tragedy that befell his family, even if he implements the same destructive tools of his enemies to enact change. Moore's Rorschach is motivated to end violence against the innocent; though he employs severe brutality and takes a sadistic sort of pleasure in the pain he doles out, he continues to fight against the evils of the world even when it becomes illegal. On the other hand, Zack

Overkill has no such driving motivation to perform good acts. One might even consider him to be something of an anti-supervillain.

At the end of the series, when Zoe Zeppelin asks which side he is on, Overkill confesses: "Honestly? / I'm not sure anymore. / What am I?" (Brubaker). Of course, Zack does leave with Zoe (it is hardly accidental that their names both begin with "Z" and that they fly into an orange-colored sunset), and this suggests that Zack is now a "good guy" who will be a government-sanctioned superhero. However, he makes a particular comment immediately after Xander's death that is telling. Zack rips out Xander's heart—for all intents and purposes, his own heart, since they are clones—and he realizes he too possesses one: "I was a little relieved to find out for sure I had one" (Brubaker). This is not a confession that he found a superhero within himself, but instead a recognition that he is human and not a machine. Considering the earlier shock of learning that he had been cloned and bred for the purpose of being a part of the Black Death's army of super soldiers, this must have been a real relief for him. But this discovery of his humanity is not the same as having innate morality.[41] Further, Zack tells Zoe "I almost feel like we should kiss or something" (Brubaker), and this suggests the artificialness of the superhero identity to Zack. Although he has been performing the behaviors expected from a superhero, it is not natural to him.

In her well-known work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler further deconstructs our traditional notions of gender, biological sex, and sexual desire—the various components of self-identity. Because language and physical actions allow individuals to represent themselves in the ways they want, Butler finds room in this paradigm for the "possibility

[41] I argue that possessing humanity means that one has the free will. Possessing morality is more than merely discerning between right and wrong, but also acting in accordance with what is generally considered acceptable by society and communal standards.

of self-determination, or worse, room for "the 'relevant' culture that constructs" (Butler 12), or the cultural formation of individuals over time without their explicit knowledge or consent. What this means for individuals—including characters like Zack Overkill—is that many find themselves trapped into believing there is only one set of possibilities—such as being either a supervillain lackey or government-sanctioned superhero—for how they represent themselves when, in fact, there are far more options available. This helps us understand Overkill's relief at finding a human heart inside his brother, because it also means he is not locked into the genetically constructed role of being a tool of violence. Butler advocates for multiple options of self-representation beyond the basic societal dichotomies of gender and sexuality. In the case of Zack, he is no longer forced into being either a supervillain or a superhero. It is, as he states, a "huge question" but one that he is able to begin exploring now that he is "free of the lies" (Brubaker). Zack will work with the S.O.S. through his "final" confrontation with the Black Death and departure with Zoe, but this protagonist's new mission is to serve his own needs and interests, with the welfare of the community being only a secondary concern. If his interests happen to coincide with those of the "good" guys, then he is all the more able to "kill those who deserve it" and satisfy his need to exercise power (Brubaker).

Where superhero films like *The Incredibles* provide humorous insight into what happens "after the cape," so does Brubaker's *Incognito* answer the same question for the villains. The familiar markings of how the good superheroes looked and behaved were no longer enough to distinguish them from the villains they fought. In essence, the world of the superhero became muddied and boundaries blurred. No longer was the medium exclusive to the Supermen and Lex Luthors of the world, but would also include

Punishers, Milleresque Batmen, and Rorschachs. The superhero genre is one that is no longer so easily defined in black and white terms of clear-cut good guys and painfully obvious bad guys. It is the place where the anti-hero now resides, and in many cases, reigns supreme.

Fig. 4. Cover images to *Irredeemable* No.1 and volume 3 of *Miracleman.*[42] Mark Waid and Peter Krause, *Irredeemable* vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Boom Comics, 2009) 101. Print. Alan Moore and John Totleben, *Miracleman* vol. 3 (Forestville: Eclipse Books,1982). Print.

Mark Waid and Peter Krause's *Irredeemable* is yet another example of a superhero comic that attempts to take a look into the psychology of what defines a superhero… and the depths to which one of them can fall. Waid, like Brubaker before him, directs greater attention to his characters' motivations as opposed to the particular

[42] Note the similarities between each superhero sitting on a throne, seemingly surrounded by death—one with bloodied hands, the other with a skull in his hand.

ways their anti-heroes break the traditional superhero norms. *Irredeemable* takes the perspective of seeing what would happen if a godlike superhero—akin to Superman—went to the dark side and became a truly murderous villain. It is a concept that Moore initially developed and Neil Gaiman first fleshed out in *Miracleman*, and for those unable to obtain that definitive superhero deconstruction, Waid modernizes the story and presents contemporary readers with another rendering of an *übermensch* who breaks the mold of Siegel and Shuster's definitive overman.

Irredeemable tells the story of the Plutonian, and it begins in the aftermath of his having turned sociopathic on an epic scale. Mark Waid described his inspirations behind the Plutonian as a counter-response to the Golden Age superheroes: "In superhero comics, pretty much everyone who's called upon to put on a cape is, at heart, emotionally equipped for the job. I reject that premise" (7). Instead, the Plutonian finds he is unable to cope with his superhuman ability to hear every word spoken and thought about him. He crumbles under the pressure of having to right every wrong, save every person in danger, and keep all of his emotional and instinctual urges—both violent and sexual—in check. And as the Plutonian himself states in response to a question about the world in which he resides, "Let me tell you the kind of world I live in. It is a world of miserable, bitter, ungrateful paramecium who lash out at you in a state of perpetual rage for not solving their problems fast enough" (Waid and Krause 71). The result of such overwhelming pressures is not a superhero who is able to overcome, but instead, one who utterly snaps. He becomes a "super-predator," taking out his anger and frustrations on a world that had previously heaped a "steady drip, drip of insinuation, scorn and criticism" upon their would-be savior (Morrison, "Afterword").

Readers encounter his ex-girlfriend, Alana, cooped up in a rundown apartment in the remnants of a city—one of many—her once lover has laid low. Ironically, the name is similar to that of Superman's first girlfriend, Lana Lang. When offered protection, she tells the Plutonian's once-teammate that "No offense, but I'm way more worried about you than I am me. He can hear my heartbeat. He can smell my perfume. He could find me anywhere" (Waid and Krause 52). Her resigned tone connotes how heroes like the Plutonian have previously offered hope, but now instill helplessness in the common person. He hunts down his former teammates in order to prevent any possibility of being defeated, and rounds up his past nemeses either to incinerate them en masse or use them to fulfill his sexual desires, as when he coerces one of the remaining female villains to avoid the fate of her comrades by dressing up as one of the Plutonian's old teammate for sexual roleplaying. This horrific desire to rape the villainess indicates his twisted desire for power—a sad fall from the once-savior of his world.

Fig. 5. The Plutonian hovering over the remains of Singapore. Mark Waid and Peter Krause, *Irredeemable* vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Boom Comics, 2009) 101. Print.

The most chilling element of this story, however, is in the conclusion of the first volume when the near-omnipotent super-being floats above what used to be Singapore, as he looks upon his work—the Asian city now buried beneath the ocean waters. This scene underscores the godlike character of the Plutonian, as the image seems to play upon the biblical account of the watery creation of the universe, when "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). Unlike the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, the god-like Plutonian is not a creator, but instead a destroyer. Whereas the biblical account begins a story of creation that is set with the Spirit of God hovering between the heavens and waters, this volume ends with a god floating between heaven and the waters marking his destruction.

Chris Ware's Deconstructed Super-Man[43]

Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* is to comics as Joyce is to conventional literature. While Art Spiegelman's landmark *Maus* is without a doubt the work that all comics scholars and critics can point "outsiders" to as an example of the very best the medium has produced,[44] Ware pushed comics even further into serious academic territory with his genre-busting graphic novel. Equally important is the stylistic approach Ware employed. Although there are many aspects of this work worthy of analysis, there are two that will serve to illustrate Ware's role in challenging reader expectations of the conventions for both the superhero genre and the comics medium as a

[43] An earlier version of part of this section can be seen in "Jimmy Corrigan and the Smartest Deconstruction of the Superhero in the World" published on Sequart.

[44] *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize "Special Awards and Citations-Letters" in 1992; this is arguably the highest recognition ever awarded to any comic.

whole. The first six pages of *Jimmy Corrigan* deconstructs the superhero and provides a unique take on the "origin story."

During the Golden Age of Comics,[45] readers encountered a young Kansan who discovers he is not like other boys: he has the ability to run faster than a speeding bullet, clear buildings in a single bound, and outdo anyone in a contest of strength. Likewise, Billy Batson discovered the wizard who would teach him how to transform into the super-powered hero Captain Marvel, making good on nearly every boyhood fantasy of being empowered and able to surpass both mom and dad. Fast forward twenty years, and a young teen is bitten by a radioactive spider who imbues him with the proportionate strength of an arachnid, while yet another boy has radioactive materials dumped on him that, while blinding him, also provide him with other super-sensory powers. The superhero origin happens when a young, ordinary boy or girl (or young adult) comes upon his or her powers in an extraordinary fashion, in order to become extraordinary person. In *Jimmy Corrigan*, however, the reader encounters a very different treatment of both the superhero and the main protagonist's origin story.

Like so many superheroes before him,[46] Jimmy is without a father and faces an overbearing mother who does not seem to share his sense of high-flying imagination. Not only does she fail to understand his juvenile attempts at flight—"Stop sticking your arm out there—what are you doing, anyway?" (Ware), but she is not even an integral part of his world, as her dialogue is placed outside of the panel, away from the thoughts and

[45] The Golden Age is traditionally associated with the period between 1938 and 1955, beginning with the arrival of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 and ending with the arrival of the new Flash (Barry Allen) in *Showcase Comics* #4 in March of 1956.

[46] Bruce Wayne's parents are killed when he is a boy; Clark Kent is an orphan Kryptonian adopted by the Kents; Peter Parker is adopted by his Aunt May after his parents' death; Matt Murdock is left alone after his father is murdered by the mob; and the list goes on.

actions of young Jimmy. Ware asks, "When you have all the tools of visual art at your disposal, then why put words in balloons?" (Groth 16:1). Placing her dialogue outside of the panels and in the gutter underscores the emotional separation between the mother and son. Our hero will soon be experiencing a less than super story of disillusionment.

At a local car show, the hot rods, muscle cars, and girls—typical focuses for adolescent boys—are of no interest to Jimmy. He is here to see his hero, Super-Man. Underscoring this stagnated development, a theme that will run throughout the course of the book, is the word "pussy" tucked away on a sign in the bottom right corner of the panel depicting the car show. Jimmy is failing to move from childlike innocence into a healthy exploration of adolescent curiosity. In the following panel, he ignores the scantily clad women handling a large tool on a poster, despite the fact there is a second sign with a large arrow pointing to this sexually suggestive picture—one that most readers will not fail to miss out on. Jimmy next asks himself: "Where is it?" He is looking for the meet-and-greet with his hero, but this question suggests the real quest this hero will undertake throughout the graphic novel. Just as the younger Jimmy fails to recognize the sexual, albeit crude, imagery around him, so too does the older Jimmy struggle to recognize and respond to the women in his adult life. Even the bumbling Clark Kent and down-on-his-luck Peter Parker manage to secure bombshells for girlfriends. There is no hint of this happening for the much older Jimmy until the final three pages of this massive graphic novel, with the introduction of Tammy.

Jimmy is awestruck when he finally meets Super-Man, and yet readers cannot help but notice from the empty chairs and disinterested listeners, to the hero's graying hair, sweaty forehead, and general frumpy presentation that this man is not terribly

"super." Ware reinforces the opportunistic nature of Jimmy's hero when Mrs. Corrigan's breast protrudes from the panel and quickly catches Super-Man's eye. This washed up actor with a fried chicken leg in his secret belt is a pretty questionable guy who angles for a sexual hookup by manipulating Jimmy's hero adoration. Jimmy and his mother are treated to "fine dining" at what appears to be a roadside truck stop. Then, instead of Jimmy being mentored by his hero, he worriedly listens in his bedroom as Super-Man moves in on his mother. As opposed to being motivated by helping others, this masked man is motivated more by helping himself to others.

The next morning, Jimmy encounters the actor in the kitchen as he attempts to slip off without having to speak to the woman he just slept with—a pretty scathing play on Superman's familiar "Up, up, and away!" Jimmy's forlorn expression and the way he hangs his head suggest some understanding that his hero is not only a fake, but that he is also not a good person. Jimmy is rejected not only by his father but also by his childhood hero. As the morally questionable actor heads out the door, however, he hands Jimmy his mask, telling him "you deserve it!" Like a good sidekick, Jimmy—filled with false purpose—gleefully delivers the message to his mom that "he said to tell you he had a real good time!" One cannot help but feel pity for Jimmy and his mother at being treated so shoddily by someone who makes a living playing as a superhero. Ware suggests that unchecked belief in superheroes opens us to being manipulated, if we buy into their grand, overly romantic narratives. Later in the novel, during one of the newspaper-like sequences, the older Jimmy fantasizes about Super-Man killing himself by leaping off of a tall building.

The multi-layered plot of *Jimmy Corrigan* also marks the text as highly postmodern in nature. Like a modern-day Faulkner, Ware delivers a melancholic story of a boy who failed to launch by breaking the traditional linear narrative. An early precursor of postmodernist writing, William Faulkner experimented heavily with breaking linear narratives and speaking from multiple generational viewpoints in masterpieces like *As I Lay Dying,* and other writers such as Toni Morrison in *Beloved* and filmmakers such as Quentin Tarrantino in *Pulp Fiction* would pick up this nonlinear way of plotting and push it even further. Although the use of nonlinear narrative is not the only noteworthy aspect to these creators' respective stories that earned them significant critical praise, it is one such element that set each apart from their contemporaries in the way they adapted it to their respective medium. Gene Kannenberg refers to this postmodern technique as "creating complimentary, co-existing narratives" (313). Ware already had created two co-existing narratives in "Thrilling Adventure Stories" before moving to three distinct story arcs in *Jimmy Corrigan* (313). The result can be quite intimidating for Ware's audience. We see three generational trajectories in *Jimmy Corrigan*—that of young Jimmy, middle-aged Jimmy, and Jimmy's grandfather as a young boy—and readers must track them carefully, as they occur asynchronously across hundreds of pages. Ware weaves the three narratives together to amplify the sense of loss, hopelessness, and not belonging that each Corrigan generation experiences. The process begins right at the very onset of the story as we meet young Jimmy but are then moved forward to the present within the span of seven panels on the sixth page. The end result is a somewhat depressing—but grudgingly sympathetic—view on the male Corrigan family line.

Not only is Ware's use of broken narrative postmodern in nature and revolutionary for comics, but his layout and panel composition also reveals his radical deconstruction of the superhero. The opening splash page portrays deep space, letting us expect something epic. On the next page is a view of Earth—as if we are somewhere in the universe beyond looking down upon the planet. A voice bubble shouts: "Jimmy!" and something seems strange. The viewpoint begins descending to earth and the reading experience becomes vertiginous as Ware tilts the next four panels completely sideways. Ware is both literally and figuratively turning the origin trope on end, and this is reinforced by the 90-degree tilt of the layouts on the following three and a half pages. Time shifts to the present when Ware resets the layouts horizontally. Here he focuses on a building instead of a planet, implying a far less epic and far greater domestic scope with this new image. Such are the "heights" the young hero has soared to since his encounter with Super-Man. Instead of exploring the green and blue planet on the first page, it appears Jimmy is confined to a mundane urban world.

Overall, Chris Ware effectively—and painfully—deconstructs the superhero trope as he explores the real-world struggles that men and women face. *Jimmy Corrigan* takes a hard look at the way people pursue comfort in the "mass produced entertainment" of mainstream superhero narratives and yet discover that these "panaceas are ultimately revealed to be merely powerless placebos" (Kannenberg 315). The result is an exceptionally complex comic that demonstrates how well comics can stand up under critical literary scrutiny.

Final Thoughts on the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Superhero

The years following World War II proved both tumultuous and disastrous for comics in many regards. The rise of the "age of consensus" and the CCA strangled much of the earlier creativity of comics. Yet, only a few years later, Marvel Comics would emerge from the ashes of Timely, and with it, a new philosophy arose that would guide comics in a direction "characterized by persistent identity crises for their characters, reflecting the breakdown of Cold War consensus and the ambiguity surrounding American culture and values" (Costello 123). In spite of Marvel's counter-culture movement, however, the mid-1970s found the "House of M" employing more hackneyed approaches to storytelling. There was a lull in new characters and long-standing titles coming out of this period. It was not until the 1980s that comics took a new, deconstructive pathway that led to a wide increase in drama, realism, sexuality, violence, and abstraction across the entire comics spectrum.

This anti-establishment movement would give rise to the anti-superhero, and the culture was ready for this as more and more young adults openly questioned the established authorities in their daily lives. As Matthew Costello points out: "Distrust of government was part of a general questioning of a basic theme in the rhetoric of American identity… irony and order would have to sit side by side as Cold War was reborn and ended" (161). Costello further raises the question as to "which side"—the populists and progressives—"is given the privileged moral position" (237). This left open previously marginalized viewpoints as potentially viable options instead. And it was this opening that creators like Moore and Miller would seize upon in their deconstruction of the conventional superhero, which would in turn lead other creators like Chris Ware to expand upon this postmodern movement.

The opportunity for creating a more expanded platform upon which other voices might be heard—both within the greater culture and in comics—is something that will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Five and the Conclusion, which pay particular attention to American Exceptionalism and issues of race and ethnicity within the superhero genre. In each instance, persons of various genders, sexualities, races, and ethnicities have slowly begun to find greater representation, first during the 1960s and the early 1970s, and again during the mid-1980s.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUPERHERO 2.0: MOVING BEYOND EXCEPTIONALISM

American Exceptionalism

There is no denying the fact that the superhero genre of comics has been inundated with American creators. The most well-known of the earliest comic book writers—Siegel, Shuster, Finger, Kane, Lee, Kirby, Ditko, Joe Simon, Will Eisner, and many others—were born, lived, and worked in the United States. As a result, it is not surprising that many comics readers view the medium as a whole—and superheroes in particular—to be uniquely American in nature, despite the so-called "British Invasion" and the international explosion of interest in Japanese manga. Just as they originated around certain masculine ideals, so too were comic book superheroes steeped in the American nationalism that permeated the era of their early beginnings. In this regard, one can argue that the earliest and arguably most influential comics of the Golden Age not only formed the basis for the superhero canon of comics, but it also engaged in the greater discourse of American cultural identity as it both reflected and informed the ideals forming the traditional literary canon as well as comics have continued to perpetuate a white, masculine image of American exceptionalism. Looking into the concept of American exceptionalism and how it has played out in the literature and politics of the United States will therefore provide one possible answer for this unique and problematic relationship.

What is American exceptionalism? The term itself Josef Stalin originally used the term in reference to a group of American socialists who split off from the greater

communist party. Soon after, Donald Pease notes, the American exceptionalism was reclaimed by early American studies experts to signify that "the United States [was] destined to perform a special role in the world of nations" (108). Moreover, Pease suggests that "By installing a uniquely "American" exceptionalism as the foundational tenet of American studies, the field's founders elevated the United States" both as a political model for other countries to emulate (108), but also as a culture that was worthy of being singled out from amongst the other European powers.

A second, more contemporary definition of American exceptionalism can be found within the core precepts of the Republican Party of the United States. It holds “the conviction that our country holds a unique place and role in human history” ("American Exceptionalism"). In addition to this Calvinistic notion of privilege, they contend that “the twentieth century was undeniably an American century—with strong leadership, adherence to the principles of freedom and democracy our Founders’ enshrined in our nation’s Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and a continued reliance on Divine Providence—the twenty-first century will be one of American greatness as well” ("American Exceptionalism"). Here is a clear-cut connection between ideology, religion, and privilege as laid out by one of the two major American political parties. Shelley Streeby even points to "Vice President Dick Cheney's Christmas card, which contained the following quotation, attributed to Benjamin Franklin: 'And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, it is probable that an empire cannot rise without His aid'" (96), which reinforces not only the ties of the United States' government's view of itself as divinely appointed, but also suggests its place as an empire. Given the active role of the United States in the international community during the Bush-Cheney years, this may

not be surprising; however, it also underscores the same notion that the country's founding fathers held about their aspirations for the fledgling nation.

No country should be forbidden to see itself as a leader that prides itself on a strong moral foundation based in freedom and democracy. However, what makes this definition an exemplar of exceptionalism is its assertion of ownership. If we accept the twentieth century as a period that emphasized freedom, democracy, and Divine Providence, then it is this party's assertion that this period of time was an "undeniably American century" that marks it as American exceptionalism. As Andrew Terjesen states, "Whether intended or not, American exceptionalism implies international inferiority" (893-94). Not surprisingly, many countries find this sort of language and ideology highly problematic and off-putting to say the least.

Manifest Destiny and the American Dream in Literature

The feeling of divinely inspired expansionism took hold during the nineteenth century with the belief in Manifest Destiny and the possibility for individual transcendence—in a romantic sense in the first half of the century, and from a realist and naturalist perspective later on. Henry Nash Smith speaks to this when he states, "The Wild West was by contrast an exhilarating region of adventure and comradeship in the open air. Its heroes bore none of the marks of degraded status [of the farmer]. They were in reality not members of society at all, but noble anarchs owning no master, free denizens of a limitless wilderness" (52). This succinctly captures the feeling of the individual possibilities inherent in Manifest Destiny. Emerson reaffirms this concept in his opening remarks in "Nature": "There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us

demand our own works and laws and worship" (7). He further states that it is "[i]n the woods, we return to reason and faith" (10), and it is when "the tradesman and attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and woods" that he "is man again" (14). Man achieves full realization of him or herself when he or she is able to connect with the land. Therefore, the expansion into the Wild West was justified from not only a capitalistic stance but a spiritual and philosophical one as well.

Even later writers such as the naturalist and socialist Jack London carry forward a similar notion of man's opportunity for renewal and progress through expanding into the wild frontier, as seen in his classic novel *The Call of the Wild*. While the protagonist of London's novel is a canine and not human, there are some general traits the author emphasizes that many American writers were interested in conveying in their literary characters, human or otherwise. The practice of writers using animals in place of humans is a common narrative device going back to the classical period with Aesop's beast fables. Even today, popular comics such as Brian K. Vaughan's *Pride of Baghdad,* David Petersen's *Mouse Guard,* and Bryan J. L. Glass and Michael Avon Oeming's *Mice Templar* series employ animals as their protagonists and are praised by fans and critics alike. Therefore, this classic of American literature will serve as a worthwhile example to understand the ways in which writers of the early twentieth century viewed humanity's relationship to nature and the search for personal transcendence.

Although Buck the dog is at the top of the animal hierarchy while living in suburban California with the Judge, it is equally clear who is the master of this household. Further, Buck stands out for his size and personable character, but his strength is generally unproven, as he is easily taken captive by a single man at the beginning of

the novel. After many months of grueling work in the cold, harsh wilds of Alaska, however, Buck transcends his past self and becomes an animal of unsurpassing strength and wit: "not only did he learn by experience, but instincts long dead became alive again. The domesticated generations fell from him. In vague ways he remembered back to the youth of the breed" (London 29). His natural and wild surroundings do more than train him to become a survivor, as his relationship with John Thornton demonstrates. In the wilds, Buck forges a deeper bond with his human companion. Their relationship becomes one based more on mutual affection and respect than the master-owner dynamic, regardless of how benign it had been with Judge Miller. We see this when "Buck dashed into camp and sprang upon him in a frenzy of affection… playing the general tom-fool," as John Thornton characterized it, "while he shook Buck back and forth and cursed him lovingly" (117). The connection between the American finding transcendence in the great outdoors in an Emersonian sort of way—if more dangerously—was not lost on readers at the time.

The belief in the rise of the American individual through westward expansion picked up momentum in the years preceding and following the American Civil War. Not surprisingly, Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, also published during this period, found fertile territory in American culture. Notions of social Darwinism justified beliefs in racial inequality that were far from put to rest with the abolition of slavery. Darwin's work was often misappropriated to serve as scientific justification for the dominance of Anglo-Americans. As Roderick Nash points out, "This taming of the wilderness gave meaning and purpose to the frontiersman's life…. Was he not the agent of civilization battling man's traditional foe on behalf of the welfare of the race?" (40-41). Here, Nash

underscores the racial overtones of this conflict with the Anglo-American championing civilization—a higher form of life—against whom else but its opposite: the savage Native American. He points to Colorado's first governor, William Gilpin, who stated "Progress is God" and Americans were under divine appointment to ensure that "the occupation of wild territory… proceeds with all the solemnity of a providential ordinance" (41). Not all writers had such faith in God's providence, however. In the face of the seemingly divine appointment to expand westward and achieve the American Dream of independence, Leo Marx suggests an intriguing reading of Melville's epic *Moby Dick* that prophesies the destructive consequences of this pursuit: "He had his 'humanities,' and at times was tempted by thoughts of 'green land,' but Ahab could not finally renounce the chase" (126). Marx further contends that "Ahab and Ishmael, representing irreconcilable conceptions of America's destiny…were incapable of saving the *Pequod*… our writers have provided a desperate recognition of this truth: of the attributes necessary for survival, the Ahabs alone have been endowed with the power," and yet we see Ahab never returns from the chase (126). So too do we find that the pursuit of the American Dream and the realization of Manifest Destiny would prove equally destructive to many members both "on board" as well as "in the sea." This pursuit was destructive for non-male, non-whites within and outside of the borders of the United States as well as for anyone who came into conflict with the growing country's interests.

It is not difficult to look back through American history and observe many of the more overt ways male, Anglo-American culture oppressed women and individuals of different races and ethnicities. It was the pursuit of the American Dream at a national level to bring about the country's collective hopes of being both a land brimming with

economic opportunity and culture of equal (if not greater) value than that of England and the rest of Europe that drove this multifaceted oppression. What is often overlooked, however, are the less obvious ways the dominant, patriarchal culture worked to establish itself as representative of this dream realized. In his essay "The Great American Novelist" (1902), Norris opens his discussion by saying that "[o]f all the overworked phrases of the overworked book reviewers, the phrase, the 'Great American Novelist,' is beyond doubt worn thinnest from much handling—or mishandling" (1180). This speaks to a national anxiety at the turn of the twentieth century over establishing an American literary canon, one that would include a hierarchy of the greatest American writers that would in turn set an example for the rest of the world to follow. This is something Norris astutely disregards since great writers "become a heritage of the whole world," arguing that we should not seek to limit our view of literature with such artificial constraints (1180-81). Norris advocates that writers and critics should see themselves as part of a global culture and push back against the desire to label writers and works of literature as distinctly "American" and "great."

Nearly fifty years after Norris' appeals to a greater world view, F. O. Matthiessen published his widely influential work, *American Renaissance*, which would go on to inform the ways English departments from secondary through graduate level studies would develop their curriculum in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. This work aimed to establish a narrow canon of the "greatest" American writers. In his introduction, Matthiessen explains how he set about selecting those writers who initiated this American Renaissance, which he believed to be the bedrock of all American literature: "The starting point for this book was my realization of how great a number of

our past masterpieces were produced in one extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression" (vii). He then goes on to list the works of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman as the preeminent works where "[y]ou might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality" (vii). In his desire to "place these works both in their age and in ours" (viii), Matthiessen elevates these five white, relatively affluent men to the prominent position of the forefathers for all American literature. This obviously excludes a great many other writers from the American canon of literature, and devalued gender and ethnic diversity in the American literary canon and thus with the greater culture. If everyone did not enjoy the same socio-economic worth as their white, male counterparts, then it stands to reason that the pursuit of the American Dream would likely be less important to them.

Interestingly, Matthiessen fails to name even a single major African American in his 678 page text—no Frederick Douglass, no Harriet Jacobs, no Booker T. Washington or W. E. B. duBois, let alone a near-contemporary in Langston Hughes. Race simply does not factor in any meaningful or representative way into his vision of the bedrock of American literature. Published only three years after *American Renaissance*, Ralph Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man* seems like a searing response to Matthiessen and a commentary on the exclusion of minorities from the American Dream. As his unnamed, everyman narrator states in the novel's opening page,

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunt Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids. I might even be said to

> possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (Ellison 3)

This invisibility extends to the narrator's name as we cannot even see who he is. Like the white culture depicted in Ellison's work, Matthiessen and the greater American culture of his time "refuse[d] to see" (3) those who did not fit within their narrowly defined notion of what the representatives of their culture were supposed to look like.

9/11 and American Exceptionalism

It seems as if nearly every generation of Americans experiences its own watershed moment that helps define who they are in the history of the United States. In the twentieth century, the "Greatest Generation" can point to the bombing of Pearl Harbor the United States' entry into World War II. "Baby Boomers" often ask "Where were you when Kennedy was shot," a moment which signaled a loss of national innocence and the end of the idealistic dream of an "American Camelot." Generation X and the Millennials can look back upon the turn of the twenty-first century at 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terrorism as their defining moment. If ever there was an opportunity to rethink previously held notions of American exceptionalism, this event should have been the one to shake Americans out of their faith in Western notions of democracy and capitalism and introduce them to an international community that did not necessarily hold the same beliefs about the world in which they live.

Yet, out of the tragic events surrounding 9/11, a compelling narrative grew out of the conservative Bush administration about the terrorists specifically targeting the people and values of the United States. As Kim Hong Ngyuen suggests, "[r]ecognizing 9/11 as a

culturally traumatic event, critical and cultural theorists have analyzed the circumstances that make post-9/11 discourses so pervasive, and consider the effects of such discourses" (267), and one of those effects was a resurgence in American exceptionalism. Feeling specifically targeted by an international terror organization—in spite of the fact this group targeted Westerners and non-Westerners throughout its history—many Americans placed themselves at the center of this narrative.

Events since that fateful day could only be understood from a post-9/11 lens. Literature, television, and film were often seen as direct or indirect responses to the irrevocable influence of 9/11. The world was more dangerous and fluid, and yet a conservative movement to deal in absolutes came to the fore, as evidenced in President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech from 2002. President Bush identified an "Axis of Evil," and implicitly set up the United States as an "Axis of Good":

> And all nations should know: America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation's security. We'll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons. (Bush)

At this moment, the United States was still coming to grips with the still recent tragedy that took place in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. Certainly, Bush gave Americans the impression that he would not allow similar events to happen again on his watch. It provided a sense of reassurance that the grieving country desired, yet Americans were not the only ones listening to this speech. It was also directed at every member of

the international community—either they would stand with America or they would be in its cross-hairs. Nguyen argues that "the dominant construction of 9/11 as a unique event—a rupture in an otherwise coherent cultural and historical tradition, between the past and the post-9/11" world in which we live (Nguyen 267) is where American exceptionalism continues to live on over a decade later. Further, George Steinmetz contends that the 9/11 narrative of American exceptionalism "obscures American capitalism's global expansion and the reassertion of the sovereignty of the nation-state" (326-27). This is not to say the United States should have remained inactive in the face of such inhumane acts of terror; however, the Bush administration's words and deeds were highly imperialistic.

Bush underscores his administration's pursuit of American exceptionalism and expansionism when he stated near the start of his 2002 State of the Union speech that the "American flag flies again over our embassy in Kabul. Terrorists who once occupied Afghanistan now occupy cells at Guantanamo Bay." He created an image of the red, white and blue flying high over foreign nations, while those who fought to oppose this transition would find themselves confined in a prison that would become infamous for circumventing the Geneva Convention treaties on keeping international prisoners of war. The message was clear: those who opposed the administration's efforts opposed "truth, justice, and the American way." This updated version of the nineteenth century's firmly held belief in Manifest Destiny shifts its focus from expanding across the continent to enforcing its interests well beyond its geographical borders.

The Exceptional American White Dream Made Manifest in Literature

So what does this notion of American Exceptionalism from the nineteenth century and continued through to the twenty-first century have to do with comic book superheroes? As pointed out earlier, many of the earliest and most influential comic creators appeared to fit within the dominant paradigm of the white heterosexual American male. Siegel and Shuster, the co-creators of Superman, were both working-class white men who married and had children. Finger and Kane, who co-created Batman, were likewise from white middle-class backgrounds and also were married with children. The pattern continues with the architects of the Marvel Universe, Lee and Kirby. Even noted creators Simon (co-creator of Captain America with Kirby) and Eisner (creator of the Spirit and an influential comics publisher) fit this same mold. Yet, all of these creators have in common another facet of their identity, one which during the period leading up to World War II was particularly fraught: they are all Jewish. Of the legendary creators in this group, only Ditko, co-creator of Spider-Man with Lee, was unmarried and of non-Jewish background; yet even he was of white, middle-class background. Jewishness was an especially uncertain category at the time these men were breaking into the business of publishing, as was any non-Protestant religious affiliation. John F. Kennedy for instance faced tough scrutiny from the American public for his Catholic faith. Considering how widespread Catholicism was in the United States at that time, it should come of no surprise how much less tolerant the public would be of other faiths over thirty years earlier.

Not surprisingly, a number of these same foundational creators used non-Jewish pennames to avoid any potential stigma, including Kane (Robert Kahn), Lee (Stanley

Lieberman), Simon (Hymie Simon), Kirby (Jacob Kurtzberg). There was something in American culture during the early twentieth century that led these highly creative and later successful creators to recognize that their Jewish heritage and "American-ness" were not mutually compatible, and this led them to construct new and more "American" identities for their public personas. It is, as Cheng suggests: "The melancholic eat[ing] the lost object" (8), or what one might otherwise see as the lost sense of self through the adoption of another identity. Pre-Civil Rights culture was openly bigoted, and if these Jewish writers were to "fit in" then they needed to embrace the values and reinforce the dominant ideology of the day. In looking at the Republican response to the events of 9/11, which were less progressive and more conservative in nature, Bruce Gronbeck points out that "what we needed to do to save ourselves in the future [is] to look back at traditional values, patriotic commitments to collective action…to work ourselves back into shape as an economy and [with our] politics" (197). In similar fashion, early immigrants attempted to save themselves through embracing these traditional, patriotic values in order to work themselves into the culture in which they lived. As suggested before, early comic creators felt this pressure and not only created works that embraced the culture of the time but also changed their public personas and names in order to fit in. And like many writers of every day and age, they took their cues from the literature around them.

The pressure these men felt to create new and more American-sounding personas had, in fact, been in the air for generations. As the United States began to grow from a fledging conglomeration of colonies into a fully realized nation, it began to develop a sense national identity, in part from within the literary tradition that grew out of early

American writers of the nineteenth century and later generations. And while this growing sense of what America looked like and how Americans behaved helped the young nation set itself apart from its European counterparts, it also created enormous pressure on many Americans to conform to these idealized expectations—something those early comic creators and many others quickly recognized if they wanted to be accepted. Examining this homogenization of a national identity will then help contemporary readers better understand these pressures early comic creators felt as they engaged in both the telling of their superhero stories and in participating in the greater discourse of American notions of self. And not unlike those previous generations of writers who influenced the Siegels, Shusters, Fingers, Kanes, Lees, and Kirbys of the comics world, these comic book stories of superheroes would go on to inform similar discussions of how the United States saw itself as it emerged as a global power in the wake of World War II.

Following in the Footsteps of Traditional American Literature

In order to make the argument these creators were also helping shape the face of Americanness, it is important to look at some of the literature and criticism that engaged in this molding process beforehand. One shared interest permeating each of the literary movements from Antebellum American to the post-bellum periods is the way Americans believed in the possibility of achieving self-definition. While many writers were interested in the Romantic notion of transcendence and self-definition, it becomes clear for contemporary readers and critics that the "face" of America that emerged was often white, masculine, and male. It is this shared discourse on the subject of national identity

that would go on to prove instrumental in informing later movements like Manifest Destiny, and the American Dream, and American exceptionalism.

Early Americans' desire to explore and expand their westward boundaries developed and influenced the discourse on national identity. Richard Slotkin discusses the relationship of myth and America as originally meant to "justify the inhabitance of the American colonies," but later it came to serve as a means of "account[ing] for our rapid growth, our emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctly American approach to the socially and culturally disruptive process of modernization" (10). In this light, the establishment of an American mythology helped provide a foundation for the formation of a growing national identity. Adding to the character of this new nation's identity, Henry Nash Smith asserts, "The railroad was the only means by which the wilderness from the Great Lakes to the Pacific could ever be developed," due to its "*creative* power" (34). Even science and technology were harnessed in order to better provide the growing nation with the means to continue its westward explorations. Smith links creativity with both exploration and conquering the wild. Previously, Smith recounts, William Ashley attempted to revive "the old dream of Asiatic trade," and yet Ashley "foresaw a dense population all along the way, with corresponding wealth, grandeur, and glory for the American people" (21). According to Smith, trade with Asia becomes the secondary concern for Ashley after westward expansion itself. Smith refers to "grandeur and glory" as the objects of American desire during this period, and these lofty goals could easily be seen as instruments for inspiring a fledgling country fresh from gaining and retaining its independence from Britain only a few years earlier. Further, the attainment of such glory and grandeur would provide added justification for

America's asserting itself as an autonomous and dominant power in the Western hemisphere in the nineteenth century and beyond. This same romantic dream of expansion westward into the unknown wilds contributed mythic qualities to the tales surrounding Daniel Boone, Jim Bowie, and Crockett.

Crockett penned his own biography as a means of setting the record straight about his life and adventures, which were already growing into tall tales by the time *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, of the State of Tennessee* was published in 1834.[47] He describes other Americans' "most profound astonishment at finding me in human shape, and with the countenance, appearance, and common feelings of a human being. It is to correct all these false notions, and to do justice to myself, that I have written" (Crockett 19-20). Yet, Crockett's most recent biographer, William Groneman, points out how he recounts a story of following a bear "into an earthquake crevice" where he "finally finished the beast off by descending into the crevice, feeling along the bear's shoulder while it battered the dogs, and plunging his knife into its heart" (85). And while Crockett certainly has no difficulty describing his wildly successful life as a hunter and trapper in the west, there is little mention in his biography of how he decimated local wildlife populations (85)—a point worth considering in the context of the American as conqueror of both the inhabitants and the land itself. Instead, the stories told by him and his contemporaries that remain tell of the glory and grandeur earned as a man of action in the west as he forged path for others to follow.

These notions of exploration and romanticizing the explorer were hardly confined to antebellum literature. Richard Slotkin suggests that much of American culture—

[47] There are multiple autobiographies from Crockett. These accounts were likely written by ghost writers and served as propaganda for various political campaigns.

including its literature—became increasingly focused on ideas of self-definition on a national scale through conflict and civilizing the unknown wilds. The "means to our achievement of a national identity, and a phenomenally dynamic and "progressive" civilization" originates from the "Myth of the Frontier," which encompasses the "conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it" (Slotkin 10). In 1912, over 80 years after Crockett's autobiography documenting his journeys as a frontiersman, Edgar Rice Burroughs penned what would become one of the best-known tales of early twentieth century fiction in *Tarzan of the Apes*, originally published in serial format. This narrative embraced the romantic concept of a man's victorious conflict and subjugation of the wilds and its indigenous peoples. Conflict would become one of the central precepts to the American myth as these "outward movements" of expansion necessitated a "struggle against an unfamiliar natural environment and against the non-European, non-White natives for whom the wilderness was home" (Slotkin 11). Fresh as American was from victory abroad following World War I, it is not surprising that a story of a strong, independent white male conquering foreign peoples and wild lands would prove popular among the American public.

In many regards, Tarzan represents an idealized image of the white, American male: he is strong and quick witted as he is able to defeat any animal from the gigantic apes in his herd to the predatory lioness, Sabor. When native Africans encroach upon his territory—stereotypically painted as superstitious cannibals—Tarzan is able to single-handedly manipulate their fears in order to secure both food and supplies to meet his own needs and those of others. In effect, he conquers them just as he is able to rise to

prominence over the apes in his herd—through violence and force. Even if Burroughs depicts him as being of English descent, it is the beautiful woman from Baltimore, Maryland to whom Tarzan most readily attaches himself. Furthermore, Bourroughs' narrative follows a trajectory similar to that of those Americans at the forefront of the American West, who often portrayed themselves as surrounded by the ferocious Native Americans and harsh wilds of the frontier. A likewise stereotypical and racist portrayal of other cultures that must be subdued can be seen in Crockett's earlier description of the Indians who "would be scalping the women and children all about there, if we didn't put a stop to it" (Crockett 521-522). This aspect of the mythic American individual as a racial superior over lesser forms of men was no doubt informed by popular notions of social Darwinism. Furthermore, it reinforces the role of the masculine male as one who protects the weaker members of his community—both the women and feminine men who are unable to fend off the herds of man-eating apes and scalp-hungry Native Americans.

Another characteristic of the mythic American individual is his masculine, rugged nature—he is a man of action. In "The American Scholar," Emerson lays out the blueprint of his vision of how action and academia interact:

> There goes in the world a notion, that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian, —as unfit for any handiwork or public labor… as far as this is true for the studious classes, it is not just and wise. Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. (59-60)

This pairing of action with the intellect is something Emerson believes is essential to the growing American individual. Historically, this makes sense as well. Europe was the

intellectual epicenter of Western civilization during this time, and both its rural and urban infrastructures were already established. The United States, however, was only just beginning to undergo its own Industrial Revolution. It was a time of innovation and action.

American interest in the innovative, action-oriented man is made all too clear in Louisa May Alcott's humorous satire "Transcendental Wild Oats." Alcott's short story lampoons her father's attempts to create a commune at Fruitlands where "some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away" (Alcott 7). This left only the wife and the children, "but with these poor appliances the indomitable woman got in the grain and saved food for her young, with the instinct and energy of a mother-bird with a brood of hungry nestlings to feed" (7). The Fruitlands experiment failed in the same way the commune falls apart in Alcott's story—due to a lack of active men. The men were viewed as failure because of their lack of appropriate masculine action: the women and children were left wanting because these men failed to perform in their expected roles as providers and protectors. Both Emerson and Alcott support the marrying of intellect with action as indispensable in the unforgiving wilds of the growing nation.

And the less one was a writer, the more one should be oriented to action. Crockett makes clear his preference for action over intellect when he brashly proclaims "Big men have more important matters to attend to than crossing their *t*'s—, and dotting their *i*'s—, and such like small things" (43-52). Spending hours editing and revising one's writing and deskwork of this sort takes a backseat to more important, manlier concerns for Crockett, though he himself still wrote and served as a congressman. Burroughs also addresses this notion of the noble and yet rugged American man as one

who is rough around the edges when it comes to intellectual refinement. Tarzan is self-taught, and his speech is less eloquent than that of Prof. Porter, Mr. Philander, or Clayton Greystoke. "My mother was an Ape," Tarzan informs Clayton, "and of course she couldn't tell me much about it. I never knew who my father was" (Burroughs 205). His speech is laconic yet it carries his nobility effectively in its sparing Clayton from a fall from grace and fortune. However, it is troublesome that each protagonist here commits acts of violence against the indigenous people. Crockett gladly follows the lead of his Native American scouts during the Jacksonian Indian Wars in committing acts of atrocity:

> When we reached them, they had cut off the heads of both the Indians; and each of those Indians with us would walk up to one of the heads, and taking his war club would strike on it. This was done by every one of them; and when they had got done, I took one of their clubs, and walked up as they had done, and struck it on the head also. (834-36)

It raises the question of how different Crockett is from those whom he previously slandered as being savage. Similarly, Tarzan's preferred method of dispatching his prey—especially the unwary warriors of Mbonga's tribe—is through hanging them: lowering a noose down from the trees and suddenly hanging them from midair. Even readers contemporary to Burroughs could not mistake the racial connotations associated with lynching, and this aspect of Tarzan continues to prove problematic for contemporary reading audiences.

It is hard to imagine many Caucasian readers of Crockett's time who found a favorable impression of the native people. Crockett sensationalizes the natives scalping

men, women and children, and he fails to represent equally the inhumane treatment of Native Americans at the hands of whites. Crocket left readers at the time with an impression of the inhumanity of the Native Americans and the restraint and civilized manner of the white soldiers, settlers, and frontiersmen like himself. Relating an instance when a company of Chicasaws and Choctaws accompanied his unit on a raid, he states that "We let the Indians understand that we white men would first fire on the camp, and then fall back, so as to give the Indians a chance to rush in and scalp them" (Crockett 818). It is the white warriors who appear measured and in control while the Native Americans are portrayed as bloodthirsty savages being let loose from their leashes.

In Crockett, then, we see a sort of proto-naturalist interest in natural selection, whether or not Crockett is aware of this while penning his biography. This is also something Edgar Rice Burroughs makes explicit in Tarzan with the brutal means by which the white male asserts his dominance over other homo sapiens. Holtsmark notes that "a dominant idea [in] Burroughs's novels and especially the Tarzan series is that of Darwinism… Tarzan is himself an idealized embodiment of evolutionary development compressed and worked out in a single lifetime" (47). Holtsmark points to this passage: "Tarzan of the apes, little primitive man, presented a picture filled, at once, with pathos and with promise—an allegorical figure of the primordial groping through the black night of ignorance toward the light of learning" (Burroughs 41). The apes show no interest in learning to improve their higher cognitive powers when they have an opportunity to make use of the primers in Lord and Lady Greystoke's cabin, and learning is hardly in interest evinced by Mbongo's tribesmen when they encounter the white man. It is only the young white male who proves interested in and capable of bettering himself.

Writing at the turn of the twentieth century just prior to Burroughs, Norris made a name for himself not only in his naturalist works of literature but also through his literary criticism. As Donald Pizer explains, "[Norris's] criticism is significant primarily because it increases our understanding of some of the most basic and seemingly most enduring characteristics of American fiction" (107) in his emphasis on "first-hand experience ('life')" over the "second-hand experience ('literature')" that is learned in the classroom (100). Norris, like Emerson, Alcott, Crockett and (later) Burroughs, sees the importance of both action and intellect for the American individual. His essay "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" would seem to confirm this as tries to rally "[y]ou, the aristocrats, who demand the fine linen and the purple in your fiction; you, the sensitive, the delicate, who will associate with your Romance only so long as she wears a silken gown" (1168). Norris speaks to the need to break from rigid notions of what constitutes "good" Romantic literature, which often addressed metaphysical experiences and bourgeois characters from the past. Instead, Norris advocates that Romantic literature could address the more mundane, everyday experiences readers lived at that moment and still provide them with a sublime experience. This recalls the words of Walt Whitman, who exclaimed: "But I will take each man and woman of you to the window and open the shutters… and my right [arm] shall point you to the endless and beginningless road along whose sides are crowded the rich cities of all living philosophies" (qtd. in Matthiessen 600-01). Whitman finds value in the experience of everyman and everywoman, and not only in nature but also in the city—a location often less associated with Romantic writing. Moreover, Norris recalls Emerson's words from "Self-Reliance": "Let a man then know his worth, and keep things under his feet… in the world which exists for him" (267). There is value in

fiction that explores the romantic element of the here and now as well as times since past. Writers such as Norris provided this connection from the post-bellum movements to the Romantic period, and this further enabled writers such as Burroughs to continue incorporating elements of romance in their works.

Like Crockett, whose earlier work can be seen to contain some racial-hierarchal undertones, and Burroughs, whose later works contain explicit Darwinist elements, Norris also espoused the Darwinistic belief in mankind's status above all other beasts. Norris, however, felt every person could rise above his or her more instinctual behaviors and achieve greater levels of self-awareness and societal progress. This belief was popular in America, which painted itself a land of opportunity, as seen in Benjamin Franklin's notion of "pulling one's self up from his or her bootstraps." Norris seems to imply there is a sort of social hierarchy in "Novelists of the Future," and the parallels between social betterment and skill in writing can be seen in this essay. He is quite clear that skillfulness in writing emerges from feeling and one's first-hand experience when he says it "cannot be acquired by shutting one's self in one's closet" (1154). However, he does suggest that "there's where we should be [the schoolhouse], and if we do not observe the rules and conform to some degree of order, we should be rapped on the knuckles or soundly clumped on the head" (1152). Donald Pizer suggests that "Norris, however, applauds the advances of modern industrialism. He views scientific mechanization as no threat to man, but rather as a means toward better, so long as the abuses of an uncontrolled industrialism are corrected" (101), and this translates to his views on writing. Structuring the rules for writing—a sort of industrialization—therefore frees the writer to better capture his or her life and ideas on paper and therefore evolve

into a better and more capable writer. Although he might not agree with all evolutionary ideas of his time, Norris recognizes how the use of technology, science, and education can better equip man to evolve into a higher state of being. And this final point is an important one when reconsidering how it might have helped inform developing notions of what America and its people looked and behaved like.

Through conquering the wilds with a marriage of intellect and action and later incorporating some elements of scientific thought and technology, the American individual was portrayed by writers both before and after the Civil War as a masculine, white male who took action but was possessed of a keen intellect. He was a protector and fully capable of making full use of violent force, but he exercised this power to protect others, which in turn ennobled his actions; further, he was one originated from all walks of life—high or low class, city-born or country-bred. These writers also seem to either prefigure or affirm notions of social evolution in the ways early Americans justified their pursuit of progress through conquest. And it is this evolving notion of America's self-conceptualization through literature that would go on to inform the early comic creators as they began telling stories of superheroes in the late 1930s and beyond. The remainder of this chapter will explore how comics superheroes, once recruited to support unthinkingly the American national agenda, have recently come to reject such American exceptionalism.

Superman's Rejection of American Exceptionalism[48]

In February of 1940, Superman ended World War II and prevented the future Cold War altogether through flying around the world by capturing both Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin and delivering them to international authorities in Geneva, Switzerland. Or at least, this was one possibility as depicted in *Look* magazine that month.

Fig. 6. Superman defeats fascism in American media. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, "Superman"; *Look*, Feb. 1940. Print.

This particular strip demonstrated the appeal of "this new myth system, which crystallized its conventions of plot and character in the axial decade of the 1930s, [and] shows a democratic face in that the protagonist is an Everyman," and yet it is equally clear it "has a pop-fascist dimension in that these unelected, law-transcending figures exercise superpowers to overcome foes" (Jewett and Lawrence 29). We the readers justify Superman's actions because he is employing might to make right, not in his own interests, but instead in the interests of the international community. Further, his

[48] An earlier version of part of this section can be seen in "Superman's Rejection of American Exceptionalism" published by Sequart.

aggression against two foreign heads of state in not unprovoked because he is acting in defense of those who cannot defend themselves, and this validates his exercise of force to enact social change—though it might just as well be construed as fascist-like behavior. And yet, many readers at the time did not find this use of force at all problematic, so long as it served to reinforce the American belief in democracy.

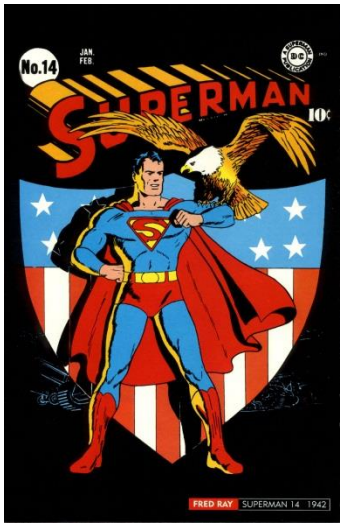

Fig. 7. Superman the American icon of World War II in February of 1942. Jerry Siegel and Fred Ray, *Superman* No.14 (New York: DC Comics, 1942) Print.

This democratic face of the superhero is quite pronounced just two years later in February of 1942 with Fred Ray's iconic cover to *Superman* No.14. The powerful Superman striking a domineering pose with the backdrop of the stars and stripes emblazoned across a protective shield. The American eagle is perched on his arm, and the might of the United States military can be seen outlined in the background. The message is clear: Superman stands for and protects America. Like the eagle, the United States can rest easy upon the strength and protecting arm of its Superman. But lurking behind the colorful

patriotic shield lie the tanks and artillery of the U.S. military—a force capable of delivering a terrible and destructive power that can be used to ensure its people and ideological beliefs are upheld.

The message is reaffirmed later when Superman adopts the slogan, "Truth, justice, and the American way"—as if somehow this American way was the same as such lofty international ideals as truth and justice.[49] This notion of superheroes working on behalf of the "American way" took root throughout the medium, and was embodies by the star-spangled avenger Captain America. Even in contemporary times, Superman and other superheroes have found themselves roped into the work of sponsoring American exceptionalism. In 2005, Spider-Man and Captain America stood alongside then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the United States Pentagon to promote a comic book meant to support the members of the armed forces.[50]

Fig. 8. Superhero support of the American military (source: photograph by Tech Sgt. Cherie A Thurlby, USA; found in Dittmer 116).

[49] This slogan originated in *The Adventures of Superman*, the radio program broadcast from 1942-49.

[50] It is worth noting that Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was one of the architects of not only the war in Afghanistan but also Operation Iraqi Freedom, which sought to spread American democracy to the fascist-led Iraq through invading the country and occupying it for well over ten years. This war has led to a loss of American influence abroad since here American exceptionalism seemed to have grossly overstepped its bounds.

It is clear that there is a relationship between the comic book superhero and the perpetuation of any given time period's sense of national identity. However, it is likely in the wake of the international backlash following the Bush administration of 2000-08 that American culture is beginning to awaken to the dangers of American exceptionalism and reconsider its previously narrow notions of how closely and exclusively related American-ness is to such lofty ideals as truth and justice. Moreover, this change in thinking has begun to creep into the comics culture as well. Just as Superman was once one of the most preeminent examples of an American superhero, the Man of Steel celebrated his 900th issue of *Actions Comics* doing the unthinkable: revoking his citizenship to the country in which he was originally conceived.

The story is a short one—nine pages in total—and yet it shows how contemporary notions of who Superman have expanded in recent years. Flying to Tehran, Superman performs an act of quiet civil disobedience by joining the Iranian citizens in a peaceful protest against the Revolutionary Guard and the Islamic government. This creates a media firestorm for the United States, whom Superman is viewed to be an agent, and political tensions between the U.S. and Iran flare up as a result of his participation in the protest. Growing "tired of having [his] actions construed as instruments of U.S. policy" (Goyer 76), Superman decides to renounce his status as a citizen of the United States. This international incident leads him to realize—899 issues after his debut—that "Truth, justice, and the American way—it's not enough anymore" (Goyer 76). But was there a need for Superman to upset conservative pundits in American media with his revocation of citizenship and special relationship to the United States? When taking into account the rise in his popularity worldwide since his first appearance over 73 years earlier, this was a

much needed change in direction for what otherwise be viewed as a nationalistic and patriotic hero at best, and, at worst, a stereotypical, jingoistic *übermensch*.

Fig. 9. Superman renounces U.S. citizenship in June 2011. David Goyer and Miguel Sepulveda, *Action Comics* No.900 (New York: DC Comics, 2011) 77. Print.

The worldwide cultural impact of the Man of Steel should not be underestimated, and Superman's international appeal can be seen in a number of ways. For example, one can look at the opening weekend box office returns from the Superman films. Going back to the now-classic *Superman* (1978) starring Christopher Reeve, the numbers showed that 55% of the total box office generated within the United States while 45% of the viewers were outside of the U.S. *Superman Returns* (2006) saw a slight increase of global interest with an approximate 49% of viewers from outside of the United States (IMDB). While this suggests that the interest in Superman is greatest within the United States,[51] these numbers also suggest that nearly half of audience of this superhero have consistently

[51] In 2013, *Man of Steel* garnered a record-breaking $196.7 million dollars on its opening weekend, with approximately 64% of the gross sales coming from within the United States.

been found outside of the Man of Steel's country of origin (or much more than half, in areas where individual ticket prices are much lower than in theaters in the U.S.). And yet, it was not until 2011 that Superman would begin to recognize this within the comics through addressing his ties to the United States and severing them in a symbolic way.

In order for Superman to avoid continued claims of fascism through using his superhuman powers to side step U.S. law and enforce American interests at home and abroad, it was necessary for him to cut his domestic ties and embrace a more global perspective. Although Superman has continued to protect peace and justice through the use of force—and carefully walk the tightrope of avoiding the role as a moral tyrant enforcing the greater good with an even more powerful fist than his foes—he has at least taken a step in the direction of freeing himself from any sort of political conflicts of interest.

CONCLUSION

THE REPLACEMENTS: THE CONTEMPORARY WAVE OF NEW SUPERHEROES

Changing Identity of the American Superhero

In the wake of what Morrison refers to as the "Dark Age" of comics, the era following the publication of *The Dark Knight Rises* and *The Watchmen*, the medium is now experiencing a renaissance of creativity centered on the superhero genre. There is a growing realization that it is time to expand previously held notions about who gets to be a superhero, and there has been more inclusive representation of LGBT and minority figures within superhero comics. Furthermore, perceived national boundaries of the "ownership" of superheroes have increasingly been questioned, as exemplified in *Superman* No.900 where the Man of Steel declined of his American citizenship in order to proclaim a greater allegiance to humankind as a whole. This question of Superman's true citizenship symbolizes his participation in the formation of a global, not just an American, mythology.

Ironically, it would seem readers and comic creators have begun to feel a sense of world-weariness from a decade-long perseveration within superhero comics on violence and moral ambiguity. In a way, this is not too dissimilar to how comic readers of the late 1930s welcomed the introduction of the idealistic and romantic stories of Superman and Batman, nor to how readers overwhelmingly responded during the 1960s on finding a more human rendering of their beloved superheroes in Spider-Man. And so, it is not

surprising, then, that a sort of "Superhero Renaissance" took place starting in the late 1990s as readers were ready for a new iteration of their beloved comic book characters.

This renaissance of the superhero revitalized old superheroes stories and introduced the world to new visions for the genre. Superman saw his origins revisited in the highly acclaimed *Superman for All Seasons* (1999), which brought the Man of Steel back to his small town roots, while *All-Star Superman* volumes 1 and 2 (2006-07) emphasized both the mythical and science fiction elements of Superman along with the ways he could continue to serve as the archetypical superhero. Spider-Man also saw new life in the creation of the *Ultimate Spider-Man* series (2001-), set in an alternate timeline where the old stories were updated for more contemporary, postmodern audiences.

More importantly, the recent iteration of *Ultimate Spider-Man* volume 2 (2011) saw the introduction of a minority superhero taking up the mantle of Spider-Man following the death of Peter Parker: Miles Morales, the young, Hispanic/African-American boy. Additionally, the Silver Age character Batwoman saw new life when she was recast as an ex-military-turned-vigilante. Tellingly, she assumes this role through her refusal to disavow her sexual orientation to her military superiors. Kate Keene is a smart, capable superheroine, who happens to be lesbian and at one point, dates an Hispanic police officer. Although these are only two examples of how the white, male-dominated genre has finally begun opening its doors to include people from different genders, races, and sexual orientations, there is the danger that Morales and Kane could be mere token characters – two-dimensional attempts to placate underrepresented people. However, I hope to show how these two characters also carry the mantles of two of the most highly recognizable superhero names and ably demonstrate how creators and readers are ready

to explore new ways of portraying extraordinary people with super powers, special identities, and missions to protect all of humanity.

As I suggested, a recent example of the longevity and durability of the appeal of the Spider-Man franchise can be seen in the recent and critically-acclaimed retelling of his story and history through Marvel's *Ultimate Comics* line. Written since its inception exclusively by Marvel "architect," Brian Michael Bendis, the series not only showcases the ways this character continues to speak to generations of comic readers, but it has recently placed itself in the forefront of pushing the racial boundaries of the superheroes behind the mask.

Miles Morales and the Spider-Man Mythos

Some comic book superheroes have it easy: a mentor is there to guide them through the transition from being a mere mortal to becoming a superhero. Others must face this journey on their own. And some superheroes face the unenviable task of living in the shadow of a legend as they try to define themselves as a "hero." With the death of Peter Parker in Marvel's *Ultimate Comics*, another young boy, Miles Morales, finds himself in such a situation. Although it is far from uncommon for superheroes to die and find a replacement, what makes Miles unique is that he is the first hero of mixed race to don the mask of a hero whose popularity in mainstream culture is second only to Superman and Batman.

Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man volume 2 keeps its new Spider-Man grounded in the traditional "web slinger mythos": the story keeps with the convention of a young boy out of New York who is unsuspectingly bitten by (another) radioactive spider, which also

results in the manifestation of a bevy of spider-like superhuman abilities. What makes Miles stand out from his late predecessor, however, is that he hails from a family of mixed race—his mother being Hispanic and his father African-American. Moreover, young Miles experiences the pains of losing a loved one while donning the mask of Spider-Man as his mother dies at the hands of a villain setting up a similar set of circumstances to Peter Parker and Uncle Ben (though in this instance, Miles' mother does not die due to his inaction though this does not free him from similar feelings of guilt that Peter experienced). While this series admirably tackles the age-old journey of becoming a hero, it also serves as a sort of mirror reflecting the changing identity of present day comics readers and non-readers alike. For this reason, Bendis and artist Sara Pichelli's collaborative efforts reach beyond the telling of an old, well-loved story—not so unlike Bendis and Mark Bagley's efforts in *Ultimate Spider-Man* volume 1—and move towards redefining the American superhero genre.

The Death of Spider-Man, the Rise of Miles, and a Brave New Direction

It was not until a decade-long foundation had been established and the trust with fans built that Bendis was finally free and able to do the unthinkable: unapologetically destroy the foundation of the Spider-Man mythos by killing Peter Parker. Yet, in doing so, Bendis proved just how Spider-Man as a superhero transcends one single person.

Although DC topped the sales charts with the rebooting of all its titles during the fall of 2011, it was Brian Michael Bendis' *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* volume 2 that stole the major mainstream headlines when media outlets picked up the story about the

death of Peter Parker[52] and his new replacement straight out of Brooklyn, New York: Miles Morales—a young boy of African-American and Hispanic descent. Conservative pundits, such as Glenn Beck, decried this as an affront to an American institution. Citing these changes as a part of the liberal agenda to change conventional American traditions, Beck decried the move to incorporate a Spider-Man that looked like President Obama as a part of the liberal agenda (Beck). Considering how few traits are shared between President Obama and Miles Morales aside from skin color, one cannot help but wince at the racially charged implications of these remarks. Fortunately, other critics in the mass media lauded this creative change as a much-needed and progressive move within the medium and rightly criticized Beck's racial remarks.

However, as Karen McGrath points out, "although small steps toward a more varied representation of minority groups are present" (268), one cannot escape the fact that the highest-selling and most enduring comic book superheroes are all Caucasian. Looking at the canon of superheroes in mainstream comics, there are few exceptionally popular superheroes of color. One can certainly point to Luke Cage, Falcon, and Black Panther from Marvel, and John Stewart, Cyborg, and Steel from DC, as examples of African-American superheroes, but when we compare them to the likes of Captain America, Spider-Man, Hal Jordan, Batman, and Superman, mainstream media's awareness of these heroes is noticeably diminished. Certainly, Bendis's decision to bring Miles Morales to the forefront not as a mere replacement, but as the next iteration of Spider-Man is a much-needed shift in representation. In an interview, Marvel Editor-in-Chief Axel Alonso stated his rationale for making such a drastic change:

[52] See *Ultimate Fallout* #4 (Aug. 2011) for the first appearance of Miles Morales.

> When we were planning *Ultimatum*, we realized that we were standing at the brink of America electing its first African-American President and we acknowledged that maybe it was time to take a good look at one of our icons… We're taking one of the world's most recognized superheroes, and peeling back the mask to reveal a new face. It's both revolutionary and long overdue. ("Axel Alonso Interview")

Creating greater space for different ethnic and racial representation is a significant milestone in the superhero genre. Yet, one could fairly ask if this change alone provides a truly meaningful shift in the status quo of the superhero genre of comics?

I believe the answer to this question is a resounding yes. A common criticism levied against mainstream comics is its tendency to cater towards its predominantly Caucasian heterosexual male audience. Observe some of the top selling titles from the past ten years (J. Miller):

Year Published	Title	Issue	Publisher
2001	*The Dark Knight Strikes Again*	1	DC Comics
2002	*Ultimates*	1	Marvel Comics
2003	*Batman*	619	DC Comics
2004	*Superman*	204	DC Comics
2005	*All-Star Batman and Robin*	1	DC Comics
2006	*Civil War*	2	Marvel Comics
2007	*Captain America*	25	Marvel Comics
2008	*Secret Invasion*	1	Marvel Comics
2009	*Amazing Spider-Man*	583	Marvel Comics
2010	*Avengers*	1	Marvel Comics
2011	*Justice League*	1	DC Comics

Fig. 10. Top Selling Issues by Year.

From 2001 until 2011, Superman, Batman, Spider-Man or one of the super-groups of the Big Two led sales without exception. There are a few points worth noting here. First, there are only two publishers truly competing for the top seller among all comic publishers distributing through Diamond Direct. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that these same two distributors are the source for reaching the largest audience of comic readers. One might further suggest that if there is real hope for increased diversity in comics, as Karen McGrath earlier suggested, it would need to take hold in one or both of these two companies. Second, it is abundantly clear through scanning these top-performing titles from the two major publishing houses that persons outside of the mainstream are not leading the charge. Although *Civil War, Avengers, Secret Invasion,* and *Justice League* do feature some female and minority characters, they are typically less prominent than their white male counterparts. Furthermore, the ten top-selling issues for each of the above mentioned years failed to yield a single title that feature either a woman or person of color in any sort of prominent role.

Perhaps the only exception to this rule would be *Amazing Spider-Man* No.583 (2009). Although its title character still fits within the same model as so many other superheroes, it did receive a significant boost in sales from the fact it prominently featured the first African-American President, Barack Obama, on the cover and within one of the stories. It was this watershed moment in American history that Axel Alonso addressed in his interview and which stirred his interest in "tak[ing] a good look at one of our icons." It also brought then-editor in chief Joe Quesada and Brian Michael Bendis closer to bringing Miles Morales from the conference room to comics newsstands.

Speaking about his decision to change the industry standard regarding superheroes and diversity, Bendis stated in an interview just prior to the publication of *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* volume 2 that:

> When it comes to quote-unquote "minorities" —and I really mean "quote-unquote" minorities, because sometimes I don't think there is such a thing anymore—everybody's experience in life is so different. And Miles' will be different, and it will be informed by who he is, and where he came from, but it's not going to be the universal experience of all African-American or Latino culture. There's a very specific road that this kid's on, and I'm excited to explore it. (Ching)

Bendis is clear that he is doing something different, but he is also smart enough to admit that he is not introducing a character who will represent everybody. Doing so would reduce Miles to a token character, and in some regards, that could be seen as a step backwards. Instead, Bendis does what he has always done: "I can tell you from my heart of hearts that it was story-first for years," and it is clear that the creation of character-driven stories has continued with his newest work on *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*, volume 2 (Ching). All the same, one cannot ignore the broader significance of this diversification not only the Ultimate universe and Marvel comics in general but also of the superhero genre as a whole. Although Miles exists in the context of the "Ultimate" alternate universe and not the canonical "reality" in which the traditional Peter Parker / Spider-Man continues to exist, most non-comic readers will even be aware of this distinction. Given the prominence that the iconic Spider-Man enjoys in mainstream culture, the decision to not only pass the mantle from one version of Peter to a young

African American-Hispanic boy but also respect this character enough to not retcon his place as the leading character marks an important shift in how superheroes, and by extension, their readers, are represented. One need only look at the international cinematic blockbuster, *Spider-Man*, to understand the appeal behind the character when Aunt May relates to Peter the story of a young neighborhood boy and his hero:

> May Parker: You'll never guess who he wants to be... Spider-Man!
>
> Peter Parker: Why?
>
> May Parker: He knows a hero when he sees one. Too few characters out there, flying around like that, saving old girls like me. And Lord knows, kids like Henry need a hero. Courageous, self-sacrificing people. Setting examples for all of us. Everybody loves a hero. People line up for them, cheer them, scream their names. And years later, they'll tell how they stood in the rain for hours just to get a glimpse of the one who taught them how to hold on a second longer. I believe there's a hero in all of us, that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride, even though sometimes we have to be steady, and give up the thing we want the most. Even our dreams. (*Spider-Man 2*)

This interaction is significant to understand the success of Spider-Man not only in the world that Raimi creates, but the one in which the audience resides as well. Except now, instead of having a yet another Caucasian superhero serving as the exemplar of humanity to other boys and girls, as well as adults, the Spider-Man of Marvel's *Ultimate Comics* series creates a space for people of other races and ethnicities to provide that same sort of guiding light.

Through moving the racial and ethnic boundaries of superheroes in comics—whether intentional or not—Bendis resoundingly shifted his role from a top-tier franchise writer to a marquis creator in his own right with this ability to create a character that both recognizes a wider range of comic readers and tells a story about a boy, "where he comes from and what happens when power is put in his hands" (Ching).

Final Thoughts on Miles Morales: A Brave New Spider-Man

Ultimately, Brian Michael Bendis could have simply enjoyed continuing to produce high-quality stories about the younger Peter Parker as Spider-Man in the Ultimate Universe, and in all likelihood, he would have continued to sell issues far and beyond the hopes of most up-and-coming comic creators. Instead of rehashing the same stories, however, he wanted to explore a "landscape that hasn't been done to death in fiction" (Ching). Just as Lee made a name for himself by highlighting the difficulties teenagers experience in the day-to-day awkwardness that is adolescence and the difficulties of struggling through the traumatic loss of loved ones, Bendis is coming into his own with *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* volume 2, subtly weaving in an awareness of the social inequalities faced by this one family in Brooklyn into one of the most well-known superhero comics.

The emphasis on character development is what makes this series particularly worthy of critical attention, as it avoids cheap stereotypes and takes its time in fleshing out Miles and his relationship to the various supporting cast members. Standard comic book melodrama and high-stakes battles are minimized, and readers are left waiting to discover which character will emerge as the super-villain. Instead of feeding readers with

flat stereotypes of minorities, Bendis focuses his attention on developing a fleshed-out and thus more representative superhero. Readers also see this new Spider-Man in costume but with his mask off at times reinforcing the open possibilities that it can be anyone under the mask. Where many persons of color once identified most with Spider-Man because, unlike Superman and Batman whose race was clearly Caucasian, his face couldn't be seen leaving the door open to his being other than white, now it is a reality.

This sincere attempt towards inclusivity is what marks *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* volume 2 one of the most important of Bendis' many works to date, and arguably one of the most important installments in the canon of one of the most beloved superheroes.

The Comics Code Authority: Maintaining "Truth, Justice and the American Way"

Another recent comic book superhero to make waves in mainstream comics is Batwoman, following her introduction first in *Detective Comics* and soon after in her own title. In 2006, Greg Rucka and J. H. Williams III's successfully re-launched Kate Keene as the new and openly gay Batwoman, and while it might have initially been a grab for mainstream attention, the quality of the art and depth of characterization quickly made readers and critics aware this was an entirely different type of superhero comic. However, it is important to understand the historical background of accusations against female superheroes and homosexuality in order to grasp the significance behind this new Batwoman's success. The most notable example of this discrimination can be seen with Wonder Woman by one of her greatest foes: Dr. Frederic Wertham.

In 1954, Frederic Wertham published the scathing comics commentary *Seduction of the Innocent.* This notorious screed emerged in a memorably conservative period in American culture. In this work, Wertham condemned many superheroes for their failure to behave in ways that lived up to conventional American ideas of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and other socially acceptable behavior. Two of Wertham's targets included Batman and Robin, whom he identified as the ultimate wish of homosexual men being played out in the pages of supposedly children's comics.

Fig. 11. Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson in bed and under fire in *Batman* No. 84 from June of 1954. David Vern and Sheldon Moldoff, *Batman* No. 84 (DC Comics, 1954) Print. [53]

Since the introduction of Robin in *Detective Comics* No.38 from April 1940, questions regarding the nature of the relationship between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson regularly arose. Both possessed secret identities, dressed flamboyantly, and both were rarely seen in the company of women. Instead, readers encountered a handsome,

[53] This issue came out the same year in which Frederic Werthem's *Seduction of the Innocent* was published, and no doubt confirmed suspicions in the minds of many of Werthem's readers.

virile adult playboy living alone with a young boy engaging in risk-taking behaviors at night. In essence, Wertham not only felt that these two individuals failed to portray properly heteronormative behaviors for men in the 1950s United States, but he also leveled accusations of pedophilia against Bruce Wayne for his all-too-close relationship with the young Dick. As a result, the *Batman* and *Detective Comics* titles were singled out for encouraging deviant behavior and were marked as unhealthy for children to read lest they be tempted into accepting homosexuality as anything less than abhorrent.

Wertham also identified what he saw as deviant behavior in Wonder Woman. He saw the heroic Amazon as a prime example of fetishism and lesbianism. From her earliest origins, Diana is presented as both strong in mind and body, both physically alluring and dominant. Further, she continually exclaims "Suffering Sapho"—a reference to the classical female poet who wrote about homosexual love from the island of Lesbos, from which the term "lesbian" itself originated. Wonder Woman also dressed herself with manacles on her wrists, carries a rope that she uses to lasso others in order to subdue them, and even finds herself subdued on numerous occasions by female villains alongside fellow female allies, all suggestive of her fetishistic tendencies for bondage. Images of Wonder Woman, her allies, or even her enemies being spanked—or spanking another person—further reinforced the charges of deviancy as well.

In this regard, Wertham was probably not so far from the mark as Wonder Woman's creator and writer, William Moulton Marston, was known not only for creating the lie detector but also for his unabashed interest in bondage. As he stated in a letter to his publisher: "The only hope for peace is to teach people who are full of pep and unbound force to enjoy being bound" (Jones 210). Marston was also known as a fervent

advocate for feminism and the overthrow of the patriarchal system in favor of a matriarchal one.

Fig. 12. Wonder Woman and bondage in *Sensation Comics* from Nov. 1944. William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, *Sensation Comics* No.35 (New York: DC Comics, 1944). Print.

He once claimed "[w]hen women rule, there won't be any more [war] because the girls won't want to waste time killing men… I regard that as the greatest—no, even more—as the only hope for permanent peace" (Richard). However, there is no indication that he ever intended Wonder Woman as a lesbian (or bisexual) superhero. In the same interview, Marston stated "Wonder Woman satisfies the subconscious, elaborately disguised desire of males to be mastered by a woman who loves them" (Richard), which clearly indicates her place within a heterosexual paradigm, even if she was meant to play a dominant role within that paradigm.

Ultimately, Wertham's accusations against the comics industry produced devastating effects on the entire medium. Given Wonder Woman's diminished role in the genre when compared to Superman and Batman after the fallout from the congressional inquiries that Wertham instigated, it is not too great a leap to argue that Wertham was

primarily culpable for relegating female superheroes to the second-class status they have experienced up until recent years. The proof of this can be seen in the sales. In 1960, only a few short years after the congressional inquiries, *Superman* and *Batman* were selling issues at an average monthly rate of 810,00 and 502,000, respectively, and ranked as the third and sixth bestselling titles of the year (Miller, "1960"). This stands in contrast to *Wonder Woman's* underwhelming 213,000 average monthly sales, placing her as the twenty-fifth bestselling title for the same year—figures that would drop drastically by the decade's end (Miller, "1960").

While Wertham's charges against Batman and Robin as homosexual wish fulfillment would have proven highly problematic for conservative parents during the 1950s, the Dark Knight and Boy Wonder still were men performing a number traditionally accepted masculine behaviors whatever their sexual orientations. Wonder Woman, however, was a female performing in ways not viewed as normative for her gender. By appropriating masculine traits and marginalizing men by reversing traditionally held gender roles, Wonder Woman must have been seen as a far more transgressive character, and this may account for her struggle to maintain as strong a cultural foothold in the mainstream as Superman and Batman were able to do.

Batwoman and the Queering of the Bat

In 2006, a watershed moment for the LGBT community took place within the pages of the DC maxi-series *52* No.7, where Greg Rucka and J. H. Williams III introduced readers to the newly re-imaged Kate Keene, the Batwoman. What made this recasting of Keene momentous was the fact she was a lesbian—no longer the token love-

interest that had been created as a knee-jerk response to conservative cries from the 1940s and 50s against a Batman accused of homosexuality and pedophilia. Where Kathy Keene was once used to mask potentially homosexual elements of the Batman persona, she was now embracing these queer traits and providing both the LGBT community and all readers of mainstream comic book superheroes with a strong, independent female superhero. Considering the publication of superhero titles starring this character type (fig. 10), it is clear how important this change was for the genre and industry as a whole in moving away from the legacy of the early twentieth century.

What is important to note about this new imagining of Batwoman is that she is a superhero first; being a woman and lesbian are simply additional layers to the character that readers are exposed to over the course one story arc to the next. In 2009, she becomes the lead character of *Detective Comics* – one DC Comics' top flagship titles – over the course of Issue No. 854 through 863. She is often depicted as standing toe-to-toe with Batman himself, and as shown in *Batwoman* Issue No. 24, matches the Caped Crusader both in intellect and fighting prowess (Williams III). While Rucka and Williams introduced her sexuality into the story, it was within a greater context of her life as a whole. While readers do gain access to some elements of her love life, it is done in service to the narrative – not as the subject of the narrative, and this is an important distinction to make. Her past experience as a West Point cadet who, in spite of being highly competent and hailing from an Army family, is released from the service due to her being homosexual is just as important to informing her character as is her sexuality. One might even argue that her military background surfaces far more frequently in her performance as Batwoman than does her homosexuality, which few outside of her family

are even aware of. As such, Rucka and Williams III (and later, Williams III and Blackman) are able to deliver a three-dimensional superhero who commands a wide appeal for a variety of fans while avoiding the lazy writing that is emblematic of so many token characters from the past.

Of course, Rucka and Williams were not the first creative team to recast a comic book superhero out of their past mold. Although Alpha Flight member, Northstar, was credited with being the first openly gay comic book superhero with his public outing in *Alpha Flight* Issue 106[55], original writer John Byrne points out that he always envisioned the Canadian hero as homosexual:

> I had to find ways to make those characters more three-dimensional.
>
> One of the things that popped immediately into my head was to make one of them Gay. I had recently read an article in SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN on what was then (the early 80s) fairly radical new thinking on just what processes caused a person to be homosexual, and the evidence was pointing increasingly to it being genetic and not environmental factors. So, I thought, it seemed like it was time for a Gay superhero, and since I was being "forced" to make ALPHA FLIGHT a real series, I might as well make one of *them* Gay. Of course, the temper of the times, the Powers That Were and, naturally, the Comics Code would not let me come right out and state that Jean-Paul was homosexual, but I managed to "get the word out" even with those barriers. (Byrne)

[55] Northstar is the first mainstream superhero to be openly homosexual; however, there was an established trend already established in independent publishing where LGBTQ persons received better representation in comics.

Marvel's editorial policy at the time meant that things had to be kept under wraps and open for interpretation. Jim Shooter, then Marvel editor-in-chief, confirms this on his blog in relating a brief interview he conducted: "[a] reporter from the Advocate came to interview me. The first thing he asked was why Marvel was anti-gay. I said we weren't. Why then, he asked, didn't we have any gay characters? I said we had lots of them. He asked which ones. I said, "You can't tell, can you?" (Shooter). While Shooter indicates openness on his part to include homosexuals, the question still stands. No superheroes were openly identified as homosexual; only through the subtexts of the characters, as John Byrne suggests, could readers see some of these superheroes as representing non-hetero-normative lifestyles.

Conservative American values have, at times, stood in the way of more progressive representations of comic book superheroes; however, there are other related causes driving this resistance to change in the genre. Thomas Inge points out that while "[c]omic books are catching up with the times," they are not as far along as forms of mass media and entertainment (Robinson). Inge goes on to state that "comic books have lagged behind, perhaps because books that deal with serious political and social issues often tend not to sell well" (Robinson). This raises an interesting question regarding what sort of superhero comics do and do not sell, and more to the point, who determines which comics will and will not continue to be in print.

Closing Thoughts on Contemporary Superhero Comics

I have tried to show the different ways in which the comic book superhero genre is not only informed by American literature, but how it also participates within the greater cultural discourse of which all written works are a part.

Iconic fictional characters have often provided a vehicle for early Americans to rally together under a common sense of national unity. Real life individuals such as Crockett, or fictional characters like Hawthorne's Gray Champion, give a literary expression of peoples' bold desires to explore and claim new worlds even when heavily embellished. Early Romantics such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman gave voice to these desires in their essays and lectures, further defining the "American Individual." Nevertheless, this "American Individual" was not fully representative of all Americans, but was exclusively white, heterosexual, and male Not surprisingly, regressive notions of American Exceptionalism have likewise continued to filter into the all areas of culture, including the medium of comics. And while contemporary culture continues to struggle against these narrow-minded visions of who can and cannot be "super," the industry is increasingly showing progress in achieving greater levels of representation for previously marginalized persons.

While the superhero genre continues to be dominated by the white, heterosexual, adult male of American descent, other genres within the comics medium exemplify the rich diversity of American culture and have made significant strides in connecting to a multitude of literary movements outside of comics. Tsitsi Dangarembga's critically acclaimed *Nervous Conditions* is a novel that addresses issues surrounding the pains of Westernization African people have faced during the twentieth century, while Maxine Kingston Hong's *The Woman Warrior* provides a powerful lens into the experience of

first and second-generation immigrants as they undergo the process of Americanization. In like fashion, Vera Brosgol's comic *Anya's Ghost* and Gene Luen Yang's award-winning graphic novel *American Born Chinese* are two examples of comics that weave the struggles of immigrant families to maintain an ethnic heritage with the desire to avoid the stigma of being "FOB."[56] And these are only two examples of comics that are actively engaged with concerns found in many literary genres.

As mainstream and independent superhero comic publishers continue to seek out "the next big thing," they will no doubt find a plethora of men and women of all backgrounds ready to invigorate the genre with fresh, new stories about superheroes from a variety of genders, ethnicities, and sexualities for fans to enjoy for years to come.

[56] For an extended analysis of how Brosgol's *Anya's Ghost* and Yang's *American Born Chinese* engage in this discussion of Americanization, see my article "Fresh Off the Boat: The Americanization Process in *Anya's Ghost and American Born Chinese*," *Sequart.com* (2011), web.

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