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# He's the Hero We Deserve: Batman as a Figure of Dominant Masculinity

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HE'S THE HERO WE DESERVE: BATMAN AS A FIGURE OF DOMINANT  
MASCULINITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art and Art History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Karen Medrano

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

HE'S THE HERO WE DESERVE: BATMAN AS A FIGURE OF DOMINANT  
MASCULINITY

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ART HISTORY

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

### HE'S THE HERO WE DESERVE: BATMAN AS A FIGURE OF DOMINANT MASCULINITY

by Karen Medrano

For decades, comic books have been a prevalent media format through which cultural perceptions of masculinity are disseminated. Batman is an exemplary character who is expected to perform and behave in a manner that corresponds with social constructs of the American masculine identity: strong, dominant, and protective. These gendered traits, as represented through Batman's body and relationships with various allies, are analyzed through the lens of R.W. Connell's theory of dominant and subordinated masculinities (derived from her larger theory of hegemonic masculinity). As our cultural perception of masculinity has shifted, so has the visual representation of Batman over his eighty-year history with contemporary depictions presenting the audience with a hero that is "hyper-masculine" (an exaggeration of stereotypical masculine qualities). These attributes are explored through two case studies, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Hush*; both narratives interweave the notions of male identity and the further perpetuation of masculine ideologies. Through these case studies I have examined Batman's dominant role within the framework of his relationships with his subordinated allies, making this a distinctive approach to the current bodies of research on Batman, masculinity, and the cultural impact of comic books and graphic novels.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Sometimes people influence you not so much by what they mean to you, as by what they allow you to mean to them.” – James Gordon in *Batman: Gotham Knights* #6

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## Introduction

For all the physical trauma that Batman has endured over the years, very few injuries should come as a shock to fans of the Dark Knight. Yet, the story *Knightfall* was quite distressing for the comic book audience who read along in fascinated horror as the impossibly strong super-villain, Bane, snapped Batman's spine and incapacitated the hero for the remainder of the story.<sup>1</sup> Realistically, an injury of this nature was inevitable, as Batman constantly engages in violent altercations and possesses no "super powers" to protect or heal him. However, as a character based in fiction, Batman is not a man at all, but a symbol of masculinity that defies physical weakness and represents male strength. As this masculine symbol, Batman further substantiates the patriarchal belief in male invincibility, and by extension, male dominance.

In popular culture, lead male characters, like Batman, often exemplify masculine traits that affirm their hero status. These traits correspond to ascendant cultural ideologies, that is, strongly held beliefs typically learned through cultural conditioning. Masculine ideology is the pervasive belief in the superiority of men over women, which is present in and perpetuated by the character of Batman. More specifically, Batman is made to look and act in a manner that is consistent with masculine characteristics that are culturally acceptable for the period in which the character is designed and disseminated.

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Moench, Chuck Dixon, and Alan Grant, *Batman: Knightfall* Volume One, (New York: DC Comics, 1993).



This study is an exploration in male gender stereotypes of masculinity as represented by Batman in modern and contemporary American comic books and graphic novels.<sup>2</sup> As one of the most iconic characters in North American pop culture, he continues to influence past and present generations' views on the physical and behavioral ideals of men.

Throughout this study, a uniquely American form of masculinity is discussed; however, it has been adapted from Western ideals of masculinity. It refers to physical and behavioral characteristics associated with culturally acceptable ways of "being a man." This masculine socialization encourages boys and men to solve their problems with violence, suppress their emotions, dissociate themselves from femininity, and look physically powerful or intimidating. In the United States, these defining factors of manhood blend with heroic masculinity (e.g. the cowboy, the masked hero, the adventurer, the detective) to create a distinctive masculine identity, wherefrom the model of American male heroism stems. As the superhero genre was a descendent of the pulp fiction genre, it was only natural that Batman would emulate many characteristics of the American heroes that came before him.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), xviii-xix. Comic books originate from the comic strips of the 1930s, while graphic novels were later derived from comic books in the 1970s. Graphic novels tend to have lengthier stories than comic books and utilize fewer issues to tell the story. Also, graphic novels tend to be more complex and mature in their storytelling and character development.

Chapter one of this study details the development of the character over the past eighty years. Batman's history is chronicled from his conception in 1939 to more modern depictions of the twenty-first century. Examining Batman in the 1940s helps to understand the impact his creators had on the aesthetics of early depictions of the character. Key moments in his history are focused upon, wherein changes were made to the character to maintain his role as the dominant male. Subsequently, one may then understand how the societal figure of Batman mirrors and perpetuates specific gender stereotypes of masculinity within the highly influential medium of comic books.

In the second chapter, Batman's relation to other supporting characters in various narratives are examined by connecting those relationships to sociologist R.W. Connell's ideas around dominant and subordinated masculinities, a concept that is part of her larger theory of hegemonic masculinity. Within the field of gender studies, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a gender order configuration that epitomizes the culturally accepted idea of patriarchal dominance, which perpetuates the subordination of women and less dominant men.<sup>3</sup> Batman's role is the primary (dominant) figure within a pyramidal structure of supporting (subordinated) characters; thus, this analysis will demonstrate how Batman functions as a symbol of dominant masculinity by portraying masculine traits and reinforcing this power through his relationships with various characters

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<sup>3</sup> R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 77.

within his world. Furthermore, from an historical perspective, one may also understand that although the portrayal of Batman changes over time, it consistently serves to support the dominance of men over women and other gender identities.

Analyzed in the third chapter is Batman's most radical manifestation since his conception, Frank Miller's graphic novel *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. At this time, Batman's body style began to encapsulate the strong-bodied ideal popularized by action movies and bodybuilding, and Miller's work is critical in understanding the male ideal of the 1980s and 1990s. Though the story is of a middle-aged Batman who has been retired for ten years, he is still illustrated to be a highly muscular and agile figure. This is significant in understanding the type of masculinity that is specific to Batman (and some other non-superpowered, human male characters), who even as an aging man, still maintains his dominant position amongst the characters within the narrative.

Lastly, in the fourth chapter, the examination of Batman and dominant masculinity continues with the graphic novel by writer Jeph Loeb, illustrator Jim Lee, and colorist Scott Williams entitled *Batman: Hush*. This story features more recent illustrations of Batman's hyper-masculine form, as at this point in Batman's history, he is consistently illustrated to represent contemporary masculine body ideals. This narrative also focuses on his diverse relationships with assorted allies of Batman and how these characters function to support his role of dominance and enable the patriarchal hierarchy of these stories.

Furthermore, each case study will be examined with the aid of various texts that are used to support these discussions; these significant texts will be explored more thoroughly in the literature review.

## Literature Review

This is an interdisciplinary study that intertwines the American comic book field, masculine studies, and sociological ideologies of masculinity. Modern views of masculinity impact more recent depictions of Batman, specifically, how he functions as a dominating presence based upon his relationships with females (Catwoman/Selina Kyle and Robin/Carrie Kelly) and males (Superman/Clark Kent, Robin/Tim Drake, Nightwing/Dick Grayson, and Alfred Pennyworth). Connell's theory helps to fully explain Batman's role within his network of allies and how his relationships with various (albeit highly significant) supporting characters serves to perpetuate his masculine authority.

Discussing Batman's history is significant to this study, as the consideration of his physical and behavioral changes will aid in the understanding of Batman's longevity as a masculine symbol. From the 1950s to the 2000s, the Comics Code Authority regulated the material that comic publishers could release to the public. In *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (1998), author Amy Kiste Nyberg explores in detail the proclamations of the Comics Code, including additions, amendments, and the Code's abolishment in 2011.<sup>4</sup> As all comic publishers were forced to strictly adhere to this "code of ethics and standards," it is vital to the study of the shifts in Batman's presentation, as the way a character

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<sup>4</sup> Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

is depicted connects strongly to his behavior (e.g. aggression, sexuality, and violence).

Furthermore, Batman was one such character to be criticized most heavily during the 1950s, primarily by Dr. Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist who railed against comic books for their excessive violence and overt sexuality. Dr. Wertham and his followers' criticisms prompted the introduction of the Comics Code and subsequently affected how Batman and several supporting characters were drawn and written. If any themes in a Batman comic book were deemed too graphic, they would have to be sanitized before they could be disseminated to the public. Moreover, Dr. Wertham's condemnation of "disturbing themes" in comic books (female sexuality, homosexuality, and violence) aids in understanding the shift in Batman's personality in the 1960s *Batman* television series.<sup>5</sup>

Two highly significant texts to this study are Connell's *Masculinities* (2005) and *Gender and Power* (1987).<sup>6</sup> Batman's appearance and behavior are the result of shifting standards within hegemonic masculinity, the idea that masculinity is inherently related to dominance and social hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity is utilized as a means of analyzing the concept

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<sup>5</sup> Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart and Company Inc., 1953), 189-192.

<sup>6</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Connell, *Gender and Power*.

<sup>7</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 75.

of dominant and subordinated masculinities. *Masculinities* is a discussion on the construction of gender order, the position of men within this construct, and the multitude of complex masculinities that transform over time. Her assertion of the existence and operation of these multiple masculinities clarifies the performative role Batman plays in relation to those around him.

Furthermore, *Gender and Power* is an analysis of social inequality through the exploration of gender theories, structures, and ideologies. This analysis has facilitated the notion that dominant masculinity is communicated through the construction of “manliness” and its concomitant attributes, as mentioned previously. Connell’s vast research on masculinity supports how visual representations of Batman are reflective of his position in the narrative and vis-à-vis other supporting characters.

Aaron Taylor’s essay “‘He’s Gotta Be Strong, And He’s Gotta Be Fast, And He’s Gotta Be Larger Than Life’: Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body” (2007) aides in exploring Batman’s precursory shift into hyper-masculinity, as observed in Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.<sup>8</sup> His essay is essential to the discussion on how American cultural ideals of manliness shape the way characters like Batman are visually rendered. Sections from Jean-Paul Gabilliet’s *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*

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<sup>8</sup> Aaron Taylor, “‘He’s Gotta Be Strong, and He’s Gotta Be Fast, and He’s Gotta Be Larger Than Life’: Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 2 (2007).

(2013) are used to discuss the cycle in which consumers of the comic book genre are inundated by their own society's ideals of masculinity, pressuring the artists and comic book corporations to construct a product that meets those expectations. This pertains to how the comic book audience is ideologically influenced by dominant masculinities, shaping their views on the physical and behavioral ideals of men (i.e. accepting one man's position over other subordinated characters in a narrative).

Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl's *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way* (2013) helps to detail how Batman's hyper-masculine representation has evolved into the hulking hero of Lee and Loeb's *Batman: Hush*.<sup>9</sup> Phillips and Strobl's chapter entitled "Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl: Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Comic Book Justice," aids in the investigation of the superhero by analyzing why the body of Batman must meet specific standards of masculinity. They assert that hyper-masculine depictions visually communicate that the hero possesses attributes (power, confidence, and attractiveness) that directly correlate to male identity, which further perpetuates ideologies of masculinity within American culture. Their work aids in the examination of Batman's hyper-masculinized physical and behavioral traits in *Batman: Hush*. These traits, as expressed through Batman's body, behavior,

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<sup>9</sup> Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl, *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).



and relationships with those around him, exist to function as signifiers of his legitimacy as a “real man,” thereby propagating dominant ideals of masculinity.

This study’s significance is its unique approach to the examination of Batman’s relationships with characters that support his dominant masculinity. Shana Kraynak’s dissertation discusses masculine representation in a post-9/11 America within graphic novels and film, though unlike this study, she examines an array of characters as they pertain to one specific American event.<sup>10</sup> Gary Johnson provides an in-depth exploration of the masculine identification of young men to male heroes represented in superhero comics, which does not examine the relationships between complicit subordinated characters as with this study.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, John Salyers’ research on Batman and masculinity aides in placing this study in the contemporary discussion on comic books, as each study examines *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* albeit in divergent ways.<sup>12</sup> Salyers argues that Miller’s Batman allows for an empowered, non-victimized version of feminism through the female character of Robin, while this study finds Miller’s Robin to be depicted as a starry-eyed fangirl of Batman who proceeds to “fight crime” alongside her hero armed with a slingshot and good old-fashioned juvenile

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<sup>10</sup> Shana Marie Kraynak, “Upon Life and All Its Random Injustice: The Post-Traumatic Masculinity of Superheroes, Villains, and Vigilantes in Graphic Novels, Television and Cinema” (PhD diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Gary V. Johnson, “Man Up: Perspectives of Male Masculinity Through Superhero Identification” (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> John William Salyers Jr., “Gender Performance and the Reclamation of Masculinity in Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*” (Master’s thesis, Gardner-Webb University, 2013).

rebellion. The audience is frequently reminded of her youth through the remarks of several characters within the narrative (at one point, she is even called “a sweet, young child” by Alfred). Moreover, Robin/Carrie Kelly is allowed to be Batman’s sidekick only after she drags him out of danger and splints his broken arm, effectively implying that her worth lies in her ability to act as a field-nurse to Batman. The manner in which she is treated and spoken to by supporting characters, most notably by Batman, is condescending and infantilizing, which does not support the idea that Batman’s type of masculinity empowers feminism.

While other studies concern Batman and masculinity, this study employs this lens to examine Batman’s behavior, his relationships with other characters in the Batman stories, and his various depictions over time. This study uses a sociological theory on dominant and subordinated masculinities to analyze one specific white, male comic book character. Connell’s theory has not before been implemented to advance the study of Batman and shape our understanding of his role within the American societal narrative of masculine and patriarchal ideology.

Lastly, this study is an exploration of gender stereotypes of masculinity as represented in Batman, which limits this examination to fictional characters that only exist in fantasy (with the technical exemption of actors who portray these heroes in movies). Lastly, the purpose of this investigation is to expand the field of comic books and prove that Batman functions within his world as a dominant figure whose male authority and power supersedes all other characters he

engages with; thus, perpetuating the patriarchal hierarchies that pervade American male culture.

## Chapter One

### Batman and Shifting Masculinity

Detailing Batman's history is pertinent to my examination of how the character has transformed over time while remaining an icon of masculinity. By exemplifying characteristics that align with the current masculine ideology, the character of Batman remains popular with his audience. Over time, Batman has become a masculine icon and commodity that represents a type of heroism one will understand, desire, and demand. This iconography of Batman will outline how the character has developed both physically and behaviorally.<sup>13</sup>

Batman has seen a plethora of changes from the campy hero of the 1960s TV show to the broody detective reimagined by Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams, as well as a shift from Bob Kane and Bill Finger's hero of average build to one of exaggerated muscularity seen in the 1990s and 2000s. Additionally, two significant representations of Batman will be more closely examined in their own chapters as key examples of the character's dominant role within his "world." These examples will provide further context to the following chapter, where Batman is examined sociologically as a dominant male surrounded by many subordinated characters who aid in our reading of his masculine identity.

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted early on that all chapters of this study are devoid of images, as DC Comics/Warner Bros. declined my request for permission to use images from both *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Hush*.

But first, one needs to understand not only why Batman was created when he was, but also what factors influenced specific details of the Batman character. American comic books have a lengthy history that begins with the creation of the costumed superhero. The comic magazine became an established platform of entertainment between 1936 and 1939, due in equal parts to the increase in publishers and themed magazines, and the creation of the first superhero.<sup>14</sup> Comic book historian Jean-Paul Gabilliet claims that “[i]n a single year, costumed crime fighters had become the first character types designed primarily for comic books thanks to their graphic and visual potential.”<sup>15</sup> This period, between 1938 and 1939, began with the introduction and subsequent success of Superman in *Action Comics #1*.<sup>16</sup> DC Comics, at the time known as Detective Comics, Inc., decided to take advantage of Superman’s instant popularity and introduce another crime fighting character into their lineup.

Freelance comic artist Bob Kane conceived the original idea for “The Batman” (typically written without the hyphen on the covers of each story). He worked in collaboration with then-aspiring writer Bill Finger to finalize the costume details for the character.<sup>17</sup> Working together they chose a black and gray color scheme for Batman’s costume, likely an attempt to set the character

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<sup>14</sup> Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Gabilliet, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Gabilliet, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Glen Weldon, *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 19.

apart from his predecessor, Superman. Pulp fiction heroes like The Shadow, Zorro, and Dick Tracy, as well as literary protagonist Sherlock Holmes, influenced additional details that make up the character's personality. Regarding the shared input on the character's design, Kane stated in his autobiography, "I made Batman a superhero-vigilante when I first created him. Bill turned him into a scientific detective."<sup>18</sup>

Batman debuted in *Detective Comics #27* in May of 1939 and was an immediate success. The short story, entitled "The Case of the Criminal Syndicate," was the public's first introduction to Batman, as well as his alter ego Bruce Wayne, the billionaire and philanthropist turned crime-fighter. Six issues later the audience discovered Bruce Wayne's tragic background: He became a vigilante only after witnessing the murder of his parents as a child.<sup>19</sup> Though unlike many superheroes that have come after, he did not possess any superhuman abilities and instead relied upon his physical prowess and detective skills to fight crime (again as another attempt to distance him from Superman).<sup>20</sup> This humanizing aspect serves to strengthen the hero fantasy of adolescent boys

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<sup>18</sup> Bob Kane and Tom Andrae, *Batman and Me* (Forestville, California: Eclipse Books, 1989), 44.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Kane, Gardner Fox, and Sheldon Moldoff, "Detective Comics #33: The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom," in *The Golden Age Batman: Volume One*, ed. Jeb Woodard and Paul Santos (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Kane and Andrae, *Batman and Me*, 38.

who desperately seek this unobtainable ideal. After all, it is much more conceivable to be like Batman than a super-powered alien from another planet.

In these early depictions, Batman was presented as a man of average build and height but donned a monochromatic costume with a wide black cape that made him appear larger and more menacing.<sup>21</sup> Though he was not heavily muscled, he punched, grabbed, and tossed bad guys with the ease of a man who was trained in hand-to-hand combat. His torso, arms, and thighs looked smoothly muscled beneath his thin costume, making his body look like that of an athlete.<sup>22</sup> His overall look exemplified the ideal male of the time, as he was modestly-built, athletic, tall, steadfastly moral, and spoke in a polished manner. Batman was handsome in a mysterious and heroic kind of way, as well as being classically handsome when depicted as Bruce Wayne.

Batman was not often drawn out of costume at this time, though when he was, his alter ego Bruce Wayne was illustrated as tall, lightly muscled, and conventionally handsome with dark hair and eyes. In comparison to the physicality of Superman, Batman is illustrated very similarly in size and build. As can be noted in the pages of *Detective Comics #27*, Batman is similar in build to the criminals he confronts and is not overtly muscular or intimidating in stature. His physique is comparable to popular actors of the time like Douglas Fairbanks

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<sup>21</sup> Bill Finger and Bob Kane, "Detective Comics #27: The Case of the Criminal Syndicate," in *The Golden Age Batman: Volume One*, ed. Jeb Woodard and Paul Santos (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Finger and Kane, 12-13.

Jr. and Chester Morris, as Kane likely recognized that the appeal of these leading men could translate quite favorably in his Batman comics.

In *Detective Comics #38*, published in April of 1940, Batman's sidekick Robin (the heroic alter ego of Dick Grayson) was introduced.<sup>23</sup> Kane and Finger developed the concept for the character with the help of fellow comic artist Jerry Robinson, who based the new character's name and costume off of N.C. Wyeth's drawings of Robin Hood.<sup>24</sup> Robin's purpose was originally to give Batman a person to talk to but also to give young boys their own hero; a boy who fought crime alongside Batman "appealed to the imagination of every kid in the world."<sup>25</sup> The vast majority of the comic book audience was school-aged children, which made the addition of a young sidekick a rather clever concept.<sup>26</sup>

The introduction of the Robin character also brought a lighter tone to the Batman stories. In the last scene of dialogue in "*Introducing Robin, the Boy Wonder*," Bruce and Dick are talking and laughing about their first crime-fighting adventure together. They both wear normal, everyday clothes as they sit around

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<sup>23</sup> Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson, "Detective Comics #38: Introducing Robin, the Boy Wonder," in *The Golden Age Batman: Volume One*, ed. Jeb Woodard and Paul Santos (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), 129-131.

<sup>24</sup> Joshua R. Pangborn, "Fashioning Himself a Hero: Robin's Costume and Its Role in Shaping His Identity," in *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing, and Batman*, ed. Kristen L. Geaman (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2015), 41.

<sup>25</sup> Kane and Andrae, *Batman and Me*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Parsons, "Batman and His Audience: The Dialectic of Culture," in *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 69.



chatting at Bruce Wayne's home and the scene feels like the audience is simply watching a father and son spend time together.<sup>27</sup> Robin became a person who Batman could care for, a permanent and dependent figure in his seemingly lonesome existence. The inclusion of this surrogate son created a light-hearted counterbalance to Batman's somber image and humanized him in a way that his lone avenger image could not.<sup>28</sup>

Though he was a juvenile, Robin was still constantly at Batman's side on numerous covers featuring propagandized imagery of the Second World War and the duo's fervent support of it. On one of these war covers, Batman and Robin ride atop a bald eagle as American World War II fighter planes soar along behind them; the duo exclaims in unison, "Keep the American eagle flying! Buy war bonds and stamps!"<sup>29</sup> During those war years in the 1940s, comic books were also found to be incredibly popular amongst soldiers. They were considered "cheap" entertainment, as the inexpensive paper they were printed on made them easy to mass produce and distribute to soldiers who needed the moral boost these characters provided. Additionally, superheroes were a reflection of the patriotism the American public felt and needed during a time of great

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<sup>27</sup> Finger, Kane, and Robinson, "Introducing Robin, the Boy Wonder," 140.

<sup>28</sup> Parsons, "Batman and his Audience," 69.

<sup>29</sup> Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson, "Batman #17 Cover," in *Batman: The War Years 1939-1945*, ed. Roy, Thomas, Michelle Faulkner, and Frank Opper (New York: Chartwell Books, 2015), 192.

conflict.<sup>30</sup> Several hundred new superheroes and dozens of new titles were created during the war years fighting against spies and saboteurs, as the comic book industry scrambled to keep their content and characters relevant.

Ironically, comic books soon came under heavy scrutiny for their overtly violent themes at the end of the 1940s. As with many newly introduced types of media, there was a burgeoning public discussion amongst parents on the potentially negative influence comic book themes may have on their children.<sup>31</sup> The debate began within the field of psychology and rapidly transformed into a national issue. Batman was one of the comic book characters to come under attack, resulting in several changes to his depiction.

This discussion was spearheaded by psychologist Dr. Frederic Wertham, who quickly turned it into an anti-comic crusade that nearly collapsed the Batman series.<sup>32</sup> Though he was less effective within the realm of academia, his arguments found traction with the general population; he utilized the popular press, and preyed on the fear and paranoia of a war-traumatized public.<sup>33</sup> His open demonization of comic books began in 1948 with several anti-comic articles and finally culminated in the publishing of his book *Seduction of the Innocent* in

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<sup>30</sup> Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Parsons, "Batman and his Audience," 70.

<sup>32</sup> Les Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History – The Life and Times of The Dark Knight* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 69.

<sup>33</sup> Parsons, "Batman and his Audience," 71.

1954. The book was a collection of his research (articles, lectures, case studies, select panels from comics, and so on) on the ways in which children were affected by violence and sexuality in mass media.<sup>34</sup> Dr. Wertham's condemnation of comic books started a censorship campaign that eventually led to the creation of the severely regulated Comics Code of 1954.

While there was a six-point code put into effect in 1948, it was merely a reactionary attempt at self-regulation by the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP), an American trade association officially formed in 1947.<sup>35</sup> However, the ACMP was unable to strictly enforce that code and several larger comics publishers abandoned the organization to distance themselves from the lower production standards the new stringent code would inevitably cause. This failure to self-regulate their content (and police their own people) led to several more bouts of criticism from the public and even congressional hearings to discuss appropriate subject matter for comics. The mounting tide of disapproval from multiple fronts led to the ACMP becoming the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), which was formed as an alternative to government intervention.<sup>36</sup> The organization created the Comics Code seal of approval,

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<sup>34</sup> Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Nyberg, 165. The six-point code of 1948 prohibits the depiction of (1) sexy or indecently exposed females, (2) crime that sympathizes with criminals and may inspire others to imitate such illegal actions, (3) scenes of sadistic torture or extreme violence, (4) vulgar and obscene language or slang talk, (5) divorce as being something glamorous or humorous, and (6) attacks on any religious or racial groups.

<sup>36</sup> Nyberg, 110.

which was to be placed on the covers of all comics screened and approved by the CMAA. Any objections from publishers were swiftly quelled, as it became apparent that the future of comic book sales was directly correlated to their compliance with the new code.

The Comics Code of 1954 included sections on the general standards for censorship, as well as subsections for dialogue, religion, costumes, marriage and sex.<sup>37</sup> Writers and artists working on Batman comics felt immense pressure to simultaneously maintain the character's popularity, satisfy fans that expected a pre-established mythos, and adhere to the new regulations of the code. From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, the theme and tone of Batman comics shifted to reconstruct his dark image. Dr. Wertham heavily criticized earlier comics for having homosexual and pedophilic undertones, so Batman was thrust into heterosexual relationships in order to distance the character from any uncertainty around his relationship with Robin.<sup>38</sup>

Urgently trying to save the character from the aftermath of Dr. Wertham's onslaught of denigration, writers and artists reworked Batman to be nonviolent and family-oriented, with a subtle focus on his romantic heterosexual relationships. Batman soon "lost any remaining edge of the shadowy vigilante of his earliest years and became an upholder of the most stifling small-town

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<sup>37</sup> Nyberg, 166-169.

<sup>38</sup> Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 188.

American values.”<sup>39</sup> This new, ebullient Batman easily transitioned from page to screen as the campy hero portrayed by actor Adam West in the television series aptly titled *Batman*.

As a television show and not a comic book, *Batman* did not have to adhere to the Comics Code, though the inanity of the show made that a non-issue. *Batman* aired on the ABC network from 1966 to 1968 and was colorfully comedic in its’ portrayal of the iconic character. The show parodied the sensational tropes of comic book characters with intentionally absurd situations and dialogue. The relationship between Batman and Catwoman (originally played by Julie Newmar) is notable as it is highly typical of the time period. Catwoman’s overly complicated schemes to make Batman “hers” would often culminate in him out-smarting her, as she could not hope to match his intellect and detective skills. The characters were mutually attracted to one another, although Catwoman’s overwhelming yearning would often cloud her logic and Batman (as the level-headed male character) would eventually realize that heroes and villains could not fraternize romantically. Batman was always in control of the situations between them, even if he appeared not to be, for it was assumed that the adoring, criminal seductress would never succeed in besting the hero.

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<sup>39</sup> Andy Medhurst, “Batman, Deviance, and Camp,” in *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 153.

In regard to Batman's popularity with the public, the television dramatization of *Batman* was the saving grace that the Batman franchise needed. The show, which aired from 1966 to 1968, was made at a time when nostalgia, pop art, and playful theatricality were at their zenith.<sup>40</sup> The instant success of the show revitalized the Batman comics, which reached a record low in sales and popularity around 1964. This steady decline was mainly due to the numerous changes the stories had been subjected to, as Batman no longer even resembled the sullen detective he was originally meant to be. Specifically, when these changes were made to Batman's appearance and personality, the tone of the narratives also shifted to match the joviality he now exuded.

Additionally, the commercial availability of the color television in the early 1950s negatively impacted the sales of comics.<sup>41</sup> As the entertainment industry evolved, comics struggled to keep up with the demands of their audience. Within the pages of comics as well as on the small screen, Batman continued to be portrayed on page as the jovial, non-threatening "good guy." Unfortunately, when the comics began mirroring the campiness of the show, their popularity began to fade once more. Regarding the impact the show had on the comics, DC Comics' then-editor Julius Schwartz stated, "When the television show was a

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<sup>40</sup> Kane and Andrae, *Batman and Me*, 134.

<sup>41</sup> Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 182.

success, I was asked to be campy, and of course when the show faded, so did the comics.”<sup>42</sup>

In 1969, Schwartz assigned writer Dennis O’Neil and artist Neal Adams to collaborate on creating a new image for Batman. The two made a very purposeful effort to distance this revamped Batman from the camp aesthetic of the television series. Adams and O’Neil “tried to get a sense of what Kane and Finger were after” in terms of inspiration and decided to return him to his original dark avenger image; they contemporized details around the character to revitalize his relevance for the decade.<sup>43</sup> This visual rendition of the character’s form more closely resembled that of a man who is trained in hand-to-hand combat and is at the peak of human athleticism.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, these changes to the comics included plot permutations that were more appropriate for a crime-fighting detective, which was allowed through a later revision to the Comics Code in 1971.

One problematic component of the 1954 Comics Code was its inevitable obsolescence. The code constructed at that time prohibited writers and artists from depicting or responding to social issues in the 1960s, such as the feminist

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<sup>42</sup> Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History*, 115.

<sup>43</sup> Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, “Notes from the Batcave: An Interview with Dennis O’Neil,” in *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 18.

<sup>44</sup> Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History*, 139.

and civil rights movements.<sup>45</sup> Any material that the comic book publishers wanted disseminated to the public had to meet the guidelines of the Code or it simply would not get published. Thus, the publishers agreed to amend the code in order to contribute to the education of readers on “social commentary and criticism of contemporary life.”<sup>46</sup> For Batman comics, the leniency of this modified code allowed for slightly more violence and sexuality to be depicted, so long as it was not overly graphic or excessive.

While the return to his grim avenger persona was enough to carry Batman through the 1970s and early 1980s, it did not protect him from declining comic book sales. In 1985, sales of Batman comics reached an all-time low. Though the work of Adams and O’Neil was artistically innovative, the narratives did not excite the Batman audience. Then, in 1986, Batman was transferred to Frank Miller, a protégé of Adams. He wrote and penciled *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, a story about the reemergence and subsequent downfall of a hero in a world who has deemed him obsolete (the first case study discussed in detail in a later chapter).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 139.

<sup>46</sup> Nyberg, 170.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Sharrett, “Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Interview with Frank Miller,” in *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 33.



Miller's version of Batman has widely been considered to have "nearly singlehandedly [revitalized] the ailing comics industry of the 1980s, an ailment caused in no small part by the proliferation of other forms of visual media."<sup>48</sup> This narrative is historically viewed as Batman's most unique and significant rebirth, as this was his first true venture into hyper-masculinity. Not only was his body bulked up to appear more intimidating, but his attitude became much more aggressive as well. The sophisticated story contravened the traditional modes of comic book storytelling and the definitive mythology of multiple superheroes, which appealed to adult readers.<sup>49</sup> The success of Miller's story led to one hundred and ninety thousand copies of *Batman* titles to be sold the following year, as the character's popularity again resurged.<sup>50</sup>

Just three years later in 1989, the Comics Code was ratified one last time. The CMAA was still attempting to maintain its authority over comic book publishers, though their importance was slowly beginning to fade. The 1989 Comics Code differed from the Code of 1971 in that it eliminated specific mention of overly sexual and violent elements that were previously prohibited, and instead offered generalized statements on approved imagery.<sup>51</sup> This final amendment had little effect on Batman comics, as they had never been explicitly graphic in

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<sup>48</sup> Salyers Jr., "Gender Performance," 4.

<sup>49</sup> Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, 92.

<sup>50</sup> Gabilliet, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 150.

their depictions of sexuality and violence. Additionally, the release of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* heavily pushed the restrictions of the Code with its investigation of the bleaker, seedier side of the superhero genre. visual representations of Batman began progressing from masculine to hyper-masculine.

From the 1980s to the 1990s, Batman's body type encapsulated the hyper-masculine ideal indorsed by bodybuilding and action heroes in film. The late 1980s gave life to a much more nuanced Batman, rife with masculine complexities. This Batman has been hauled through several traumatic events, like living through the death of Jason Todd (the second Robin) and having his spine broken by super-villain Bane, but he only becomes stronger with each setback. Through maintaining this level of bravery and strength, he exemplified the true masculine hero of the time. With the launch of *Batman: Knightfall* in 1993, one can observe his overemphasized muscularity and imposing presence.<sup>52</sup>

Within the last four decades, the age bracket of the comic book audience has gradually shifted; along with a more mature audience came room for more complex and adult storylines. Due to this shift, as well as the distribution of comic books in more direct markets (bookstores and retail stores), comic book publishers began to abandon the code. In 2011, DC Comics sanctioned their

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<sup>52</sup> Moench, Dixon, and Grant, *Batman: Knightfall* Volume One, 55.

own ratings system for comic book content and discontinued their use of the code.<sup>53</sup> They were one of the last publishers to renounce the Comics Code, making it entirely nonoperational by the end of the same year. Through these changes, Batman remains a character who functions as both an icon and a commodity, which has “brought [him] to the forefront of the public consciousness,” especially in recent years, through his numerous depictions in various media.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 161.

<sup>54</sup> Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, foreword to *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1.

## Chapter Two

### **Batman, Dominant Masculinity, and Subordinated Characters**

For Batman, dominant masculinity is best understood through character interactions and relationships, such as Robin and Nightwing acting as surrogate children to Batman. Batman's type of masculinity is supported and accepted by the masculine roles he undertakes through these relationships. These roles, in conjunction with the close relationships he engages in, function in maintaining his dominance over other characters and consequently propagating our conception of male superiority. Five Batman characters, with whom Batman shares close relationships with, are examined as subordinated men and women who perpetuate his position of dominance. This chapter will provide an understanding of dominant masculinity and its relevance to Batman's role within his network of allies.

As previously explained, dominant and subordinated masculinities are a part of Connell's larger theory of hegemonic masculinity. The term "hegemony" was originally conceived by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci from his concept of cultural hegemony, which examines differing power relations within a society and how a particular group can maintain a dominant social position.<sup>55</sup> Connell contributes to this Marxist theory by recognizing a multitude of masculinities that vary depending upon certain factors – the era, the culture, and the individual –

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<sup>55</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

and how they perpetuate a patriarchal society. Hence, hegemonic masculinity exemplifies a form of social configuration that is constantly shifting while still maintaining its position of power over femininity and subordinated masculinities, allowing it to become the *dominant* masculinity.

Though dominant masculinity operates by exercising power over women, it is just as essential to its function to also suppress other *complicit* masculinities, such as young men who operate as the protégés of older, more experienced men.<sup>56</sup> Connell asserts that, “the interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works.”<sup>57</sup> For example, dominant masculinity is interconnected with the normative practice of heterosexuality and its correlation to fatherhood, which may be represented by an intimate learning environment between men who engage in a master and apprentice relationship.<sup>58</sup> This concept is exemplified through Robin’s apprenticeship with Batman. As Batman characterizes the dominant form of masculinity, the other men around him are relegated to subordinated roles to further validate his reigning superiority in the masculine order.

Batman has long functioned as a mentor for the Robin character by teaching him how to smartly and safely fight crime. In a familiar turn of events, Dick Grayson witnessed his parents’ death at a young age, prompting Bruce Wayne

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<sup>56</sup> Connell, *Gender and Power*, 186.

<sup>57</sup> Connell, 183.

<sup>58</sup> Connell, 186.

(Batman's alter ego) to take him in and raise him as his own son. Then, he becomes Robin, the Boy Wonder and fights crime as Batman's sidekick. This serves to further establish Batman's role as the father figure, subtly ensuring that Robin remain in a place of subordination. Furthermore, this solidifies his masculine role in the traditional sense that fathers are meant to teach their sons "how to be a man." Batman performs this task by teaching his protégé how to defend himself, obey his commands, and be physically strong and emotionally controlled.<sup>59</sup>

However, much like a standard relationship between a father and son, Dick Grayson eventually grows into a young man and finds that he has outgrown the sidekick role. In comparison to the youthful dependency of his days as Robin, Dick Grayson now represents the older son who must "leave the nest" as he transitions into becoming a near-equal to Batman.<sup>60</sup> After abandoning his sidekick role, he adopts a new superhero identity as Nightwing and leaves to become the protector of a neighboring town (Blüdhaven) to Gotham City. In making this change, Dick Grayson must not only leave home (Gotham City), he

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<sup>59</sup> Bethany F. Brengan, "Mother Alfred: The Influence of Dick Grayson's 'Other Parent'," in *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing, and Batman*, ed. Kristen L. Geaman (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2015), 189.

<sup>60</sup> Kristen L. Geaman, "Boy Wonder to Man Wonder: Dick Grayson's Transition to Nightwing and the Bildungsroman," in *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing, and Batman*, ed. Kristen L. Geaman (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2015), 112.

must also create a completely new identity for himself, as the two dominant figures cannot coexist as they once did.

In the mid-1980s, Nightwing's costume transitioned into a tight-fitting, dark blue leotard with accents of light blue on his boots and gloves; the only remaining yellow from his Robin days were two diagonal stripes from his shoulders to his abdomen. However, Nightwing's more recognizable costume was designed about ten years later and is simply a full black leotard with a large, bright blue V-shape emblazoned across his chest.<sup>61</sup> This costume is much more reminiscent of Batman's own costume, further drawing parallels between their competing roles of dominance. Dick Grayson's more dominant persona of Nightwing becomes a challenging figure to Batman's dominant masculinity and can now only exist in this adjacent fashion to him. Yet, Nightwing's contradictory masculinity allows for the understanding that he was still *created* (trained and molded) by Batman.

When the mentor/protégé relationship dissolved with Dick Grayson, it left the role of Robin vacant and subsequently allowed Batman to take on other protégés, whom he could act as a teacher and father figure to. Tim Drake, with his own burgeoning detective skills, discovered that Bruce Wayne and pre-Nightwing Dick Grayson were Gotham's costumed crime-fighters. After an impassioned argument to Batman and Nightwing about why Batman needs a

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<sup>61</sup> Dennis O'Neil and Chuck Dixon, *Nightwing: Blüdhaven Volume One* (New York: DC Comics, 2014), cover.

Robin, and then several months of rigorous training, Tim Drake became the third young man to earn the Robin moniker (following the death of the second Robin, Jason Todd).

Tim Drake/Robin has a very similar relationship to the one a young Dick Grayson had with Batman. However, one significant difference is that Tim Drake already had a father and did not need Batman to serve in the role.<sup>62</sup> This still allows Batman to act as a secondary father figure to Tim Drake, one who allows him to fight crime by his side at the age of thirteen. Truly, Batman's hyper-focused pursuit of justice rationalizes putting children's lives in danger. Young men like Tim Drake, as well as Dick Grayson, want so badly to be at Batman's side that they are willing to lose their lives for the chance. This subtle idea places Batman in a heightened position of power as the ultimate man to revere and emulate.

Another such subordinated character is that of his unfailingly loyal butler and caretaker Alfred Pennyworth. The older man has long-served as the caretaker for the Wayne household and was a faithful servant to Bruce's parents. Then, when they are murdered, Alfred suddenly becomes both a father and mother figure to Bruce and proceeds to raise this angry and traumatized boy into adulthood. Alfred is an older, British man and is typically depicted with a tall, thin

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<sup>62</sup> This is only at first, as Tim Drake's father is eventually killed by a criminal. The tragic event leads to Bruce Wayne/Batman later adopting Tim Drake as his son and a brother to his previously adopted son, Dick Grayson.



frame. He also often appears to take up much less space (within each panel) than Batman does, which further solidifies his status as a “lesser masculinity.” Though Alfred is treated as a member of the Wayne family, his primary role is that of a servant and caretaker, placing him in a position of subservience to Batman/Bruce Wayne.

Alfred often acts as the personified conscience of Batman by questioning his decisions and actions. As one of the characters most in touch with his humanity, he asks questions that forces Batman to consider different perspectives, ones that are more concerned with safety than justice. He harbors a deep concern for Batman and his allies, as it is Alfred’s duty to clean, sew, and bandage them up after particularly dangerous altercations. Moreover, Alfred will vacillate between acting in a traditional mother role (protective and nurturing) to Batman’s allies and a traditional father role (mentoring and advising) to Batman himself.<sup>63</sup> This has developed through Alfred and Batman having a type of co-parenting relationship to Batman’s sidekicks, and Alfred submitting to Batman’s dominant nature.

Arguably Batman’s most notorious love interest, Catwoman has always found Batman’s man-of-mystery persona to be an attractive quality. Catwoman, whose unmasked identity is Selina Kyle, is a beautiful and athletically skilled thief who often blurs the line between right and wrong. She shares a complicated romantic

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<sup>63</sup> Brengan, “Mother Alfred: The Influence of Dick Grayson’s ‘Other Parent’,” 181.

relationship with Batman, both before and after she learns he is Bruce Wayne. Befitting of her sensuous and carefree attitude, she appears to be much more thrilled by the subsequent mysteries and dangers they find themselves embroiled in as their costumed identities.<sup>64</sup> Catwoman's predilection for Batman over Bruce supports Connell's idea that women are both repelled by and attracted to dominant masculinities for all that these men can give and take from them.<sup>65</sup>

The ambivalence in Catwoman's sexual attraction plays upon a contradictory dichotomy represented in Batman's dominant masculinity: the notion that women recognize the paradoxical aspects of the construct but also find the "hegemonic pattern [to be] more familiar and manageable."<sup>66</sup> Masculinity has a long history of being strategically complex with its utilization of both destructive and desirable qualities as a means of maintaining its dominance in the social order. Catwoman's attitude toward Batman represents a compliance with this hierarchy of dominance, even as she vacillates between resistance and cooperation with his masculine behaviors.<sup>67</sup>

Though he is not specifically a Batman character, Superman regularly interacts with Batman as his friend and teammate, his opposite, and, sometimes, his adversary. The two often disagree over their methods and views of heroism,

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<sup>64</sup> Jeph Loeb, Jim Lee, and Scott Williams, *Absolute Batman: Hush* (New York: DC Comics, 2011), 116 and 179.

<sup>65</sup> Connell, *Gender and Power*, 185.

<sup>66</sup> Connell, 185.

<sup>67</sup> Connell, 185.

as Batman is less bothered by violence and more willing to break laws. Superman is defined by his kindness and his sense of right and wrong, in addition to being gifted with a plethora of superhuman abilities. In contrast, Batman possesses no such abilities and is motivated by a more aggressive sense of justice. If one viewed Batman as a hero by choice and traumatic circumstance, then Superman would be viewed as a hero by divine birthright, the All-American hero.

One might, again, turn to World War II as a framework for the two heroes' paradoxical behaviors. They each represent various facets of American heroism that both differ and overlap. The messianic Superman dutifully accepts his heroic destiny bequeathed to him through a pre-recorded message from his late biological father on their long-lost planet of Krypton. Conversely, Batman is a hero of tragic circumstance who is driven by a sense of justice and vengeance, far-removed from the "manifest destiny" heroism reflected in Superman. While Batman is a realist about the limitations of his fight against injustice, Superman idealistically wants to (and perhaps even believes he can) save the world. Additionally, both men perform heroism in a dominant way, which results in a vacillation between argumentative and cooperative behaviors within their relationship; though who and what they fight against are the same, their methods differ so drastically that their shared goal becomes blurred against the backdrop of two alpha males quarrelling over dominance.

Batman's assorted relationships support his masculine dominance by allowing for the fluidity of contradiction. Connell states that "masculinities are not fixed [as] they are not homogenous, simple states of being."<sup>68</sup> Specifically, masculinity can still translate as dominant, though it may be represented in various forms, such as with Batman's differing roles. As he performs the designated role within each of his relationships, his masculinity changes depending upon the interaction. Yet, his dominance over each character remains, for the audience acknowledges Batman (a straight, white, privileged male) as being at the top of this hierarchy.

Male superheroes in American comic books are depicted to epitomize masculine characteristics to qualify them as heroes. For Batman, a hyper-masculine body image (in conjunction with behavior) has more recently become an integral part of his masculine identity. Within the comic book medium, hyper-masculinity is presented as an exaggeration of stereotypical masculine qualities, such as muscularity, bellicosity, and sexuality. He is expected to meet a criterion of manliness that is constructed from the comic book panel configuration, the demands of the audience, and the history of masculine standards. Why is it that hyper-masculinity has become a characteristic that is not only required but expected of this character? Dominant masculinity combined with societal

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<sup>68</sup> Connell, *The Men and The Boys* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 13.

expectations of men and the desires of the comic book audience have led to the rise of the hyper-masculine male superhero.

## Chapter Three

### ***Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* – A Case Study of Aged Masculinity**

Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is a graphic novel released in 1986 and set in a dystopian-like version of Gotham City. Ten years prior, Bruce Wayne, now a middle-aged man, retired the mantle of Batman after the death of his crime-fighting partner Robin/Jason Todd. As a result of Batman's long absence, criminals are again free to rule the streets of Gotham without fear of punishment from the Batman. However, with the emergence of a brutally violent gang called 'The Mutants', Batman comes out of retirement and rejoices in the thrill of his vigilantism once again. Through Batman's reemergence, the audience sees him take on a new female sidekick (Robin/Carrie Kelly), engage in a fatal last battle with The Joker, and slowly build up to an inevitable altercation with Superman. Furthermore, he effortlessly transforms into Batman once more with such ease and vigor that the legality and impracticality of his actions become lost within the excitement of the transformation.

Miller began with the visual details reestablished by Adams and O'Neil in the 1970s, and developed them to produce a grizzled, muscle-bound hero who comes out of retirement at 55 years old.<sup>69</sup> Truly, this version of Batman is quite daunting to behold: Thickly muscled arms branch off from a bulky, tree-trunk of a torso, supported by equally muscular thighs and calves. The feats that he

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<sup>69</sup> Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* Volume 1-4 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 34.

accomplishes throughout the story are impressive, and the audience's familiarity with this character undoubtedly aid in suspending judgment on the feasibility of them. Batman persists in accomplishing athletic and violent tasks, even as an older man; the character does not cease being a hero simply because he ages. Miller presents to the audience Batman's version of a mid-life crisis, as his actions echo that of a middle-aged man buying a sports car to reclaim the freedom of his youth.

When Batman dons his "batsuit" and pursues criminals again for the first time in a decade, he admits that the physical exertion is not as painful as it should be, as he is "a man of thirty – of twenty again."<sup>70</sup> Here, he is captured in mid-air with his bulging arms and legs lifted out in front of him, showing off cords of muscles throughout his torso that one might find on a body-builder rather than a middle-aged billionaire. This quote paired with the imagery of a very muscular and ageless Batman flying across the page perpetuates our ideological connection between attractiveness and men in their physical and sexual prime. Batman's declaration of his perceived reclaimed youth coupled with an image of a softer-bodied, middle-aged man would not be effective in proving that he is capable of the dexterity, strength, and speed he demonstrates. Furthermore, this scene is placed at the beginning of his becoming Batman again, helping suspend our belief that Batman has aged and instead allows us to perceive him as the

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<sup>70</sup> Miller, Janson, and Varley, 33.

dominant masculinity that has become familiar to us and that one expects from their hero.

The audience may recognize Batman's dominant masculinity through his performance as a male hero. His masculinity is confirmed through his broad shoulders, confidence, abilities, sexual attractiveness, and, perhaps most importantly, his dominating presence. The commanding physicality presented in these types of fictional men provides the visual proof that viewers, as an ideologically guided society, require to validate Batman's masculinity.

The acceptance of Batman as a symbol of masculinity relies upon our ideologically approved notions of masculine ideals, which correspond to his visual presentation. Respectively, representations of Batman's physicality in comic books are constantly changing according to ideals that are acceptable and desired at the time. Professor of popular culture Aaron Taylor elucidates the three principal influences on representations of superheroes. He explains,

Reading the superboddy is in many ways an attempt to understand a physiognomy that continually collapses and reforms itself from panel to panel, comic to comic, reader to reader... Alterations to each model of the superboddy are achieved through a triadic relationship between *form*, *fanship*, and *history*. These three categories do not function in isolation, but are interdependent and inform the varying strategies by which the bodies of superheroes are produced and received.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Taylor, "Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," 346.



Simply stated, comic book illustrators are influenced and even pressured by the fragmented composition of the medium, the profit-driven demands of the industry and audience, and the historic variability of art styles and body ideals. However, the reverse is also true, in that the medium or subject informs the audience with just as much impact through a cycle of influence. This idea is demonstrated in the historical changes in Batman's representation and the subsequent financial successes of various stories (i.e. the audience will show their adoration of a character by buying their comic, which tells the creators that their depiction of said character has been accepted and will continue to sell).

It is within this profit-driven cycle that Taylor's notion of fanship comes into play. Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was successful because Batman (as a character created decades earlier) evoked a sense of nostalgia while simultaneously fulfilling a need for a hero of the forgotten and the desperate (Miller's Batman rejects President Reagan and his politics).<sup>72</sup> Though this was a different Batman than previous incarnations, he was still who his audience wanted and needed him to be. The audience has come to accept the dominant masculinity that is Batman based on this history and how familiar the character feels to them; this would make it difficult to accept a Batman who was depicted as weak, unattractive, timid, and small in stature. Accordingly, masculine ideals that are accepted as the male standard become desirable to the audience, and

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<sup>72</sup> Sharrett, "Twilight of the Idols," 39-42.

those masculine qualities they are constantly viewing then become what is understood to be “the norm” for men.

Taylor explains that “historically contingent art styles and body ideals will play a major role in determining the body of the superhero.”<sup>73</sup> The visual representation of superheroes is based upon contextual demands of the current decade. Batman is a character who had been a part of American pop culture for over 40 years (by the release of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*) and has a fanbase that grew up with him, or rather, without him as he ceased to age. Though part of the success of dominant masculinity is that Batman is perpetually at the apex of his physicality, there is a significance to watching your hero age but still be capable of extraordinary physical feats; this idea breeds a mirroring effect that allows the audience to visualize themselves in the story.<sup>74</sup> Comparably, while the audience is presented with a Batman who has aged, he still does not perform heroism like a middle-aged man, perpetuating our original belief that perhaps he is ageless after all.

While the highlighted characteristic of Miller’s Batman is that he is an aged hero, he is still capable of incredible acts of heroism that should only be accepted from a hero 20 years younger; the suspended belief ingrained within the reading of comic books blurs our perception of Batman and fuels the idea that he would

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<sup>73</sup> Taylor, “Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body,” 350.

<sup>74</sup> Miller, Janson, and Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 52.

never age like an average man. Thus, the character functions within a cycle of endless modifications to create the illusion of agelessness, which appeases the fandom and continues to secure capital for the industry.

Comic books comprise interconnected panels displaying stagnant glimpses of events, which are meant to represent a character's actions (Taylor's third category, form).<sup>75</sup> Comic book illustrators present parts of the character's static form – arms, shoulders, jawlines, etc. – as a stand-in for dynamic action within the restrictive square and rectangular panels. By structuring the medium in this way, Miller presents the story in a manner that is more familiar to a 1980s media-saturated audience, as well as reinforcing the objectification of the character's bodies.<sup>76</sup>

Once illustrated, the characters then become literal objects on a page until they are “brought to life” by the imaginations of the audience. This idea is exemplified in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* with the focus placed upon parts of Batman's body as he engages in combat. In an altercation with his most infamous enemy, The Joker, Batman becomes a series of body parts, violently assaulting the villain.<sup>77</sup> The fragmented arrangement serves to construct Batman as a representation of his actions. Through this mode of presentation, Batman becomes an object of violence.

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor, “Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body,” 348.

<sup>76</sup> Salyers Jr., “*Gender Performance*,” 7.

<sup>77</sup> Miller, Janson, and Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 150-151.

As stated, Batman's dominant masculinity is formed by his physical appearance, as well as his relationships and interactions with other characters. Batman's most consistent and integral role, which affects many of his relationships in some capacity, is that of the anti-hero. He operates as a crime-fighter and a vigilante, which places him in a gray area of heroism. This role of anti-hero distinguishes him from other heroes, such as Superman, through the rebelliousness that allows him to work outside the law for the greater good. Consequently, as the audience hopes for Batman's success, they also challenge their belief in traditional heroism and reevaluate what it means to be a hero.

Toward the end of the narrative, Batman engages in physical combat with Superman while wearing a large, hulking metal suit of armor. The two heroes battle fiercely, striking at each other with the boldness of two men who both believe to their core that they're the good guy. Batman must be able to outsmart Superman, as he knows that he cannot match his strength, and he does so with the help of allies like Robin (a young girl named Carrie Kelly, as previously mentioned). Though, it should be noted that she is only allowed to help Batman from afar by shooting Superman with the cannon of a tank-like Batmobile; Batman keeping this female Robin off the front-line supports the masculine rhetoric within dominant masculinity that women need to be protected by strong men.<sup>78</sup> Thus, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* climactically leads to this violent

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<sup>78</sup> Miller, Janson, and Varley, 189.

brawl (mostly) between our two leading men, Batman and Superman, one a reckless political liability and the other a pawn of the government.

In the narrative, the American government has outlawed “unchecked” superheroes, an action that forced Superman to work for them as a way of still being allowed to help people. Batman strongly disagrees with Superman’s actions and views his cooperation with the government as an act of cowardice and submission. Miller gives the audience a glimpse into Batman’s inner thoughts as he bitterly thinks to himself that Superman will “always say yes to anyone with a badge – or a flag.”<sup>79</sup> This thought clearly defines who both men are and the roles that they have chosen for themselves; Superman feels that heroes need to follow the law and set an example, while Batman feels that the law is not always right and one must fight for what they believe in.

Batman’s inner monologue continues as he inwardly exclaims, “It’s way past time you learned what it means – to be a man.”<sup>80</sup> The double meaning references the fact that Superman is a Kryptonian and not a Human, but also Batman’s belief that Superman is a coward for agreeing to work with the people who aided in forcing him into retirement. Batman attacks Superman’s masculinity as a means of asserting his dominance. Throughout their history, Superman has represented the inspirational, good-natured hero who will always

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<sup>79</sup> Miller, Janson, and Varley, 190.

<sup>80</sup> Miller, Janson, and Varley, 190.

do what is morally and lawfully “right”; conversely, Batman’s flawed nature stands as the antithesis to this ideal and lacks Superman’s traditional heroic attributes. Batman, as a vigilante, works outside of the law and Superman, as a tool of the government, simply cannot allow his disregard for the law go unchecked. Through these comparisons one can determine that Batman symbolizes a masculinity that not only differs from Superman but also aides in establishing his specific brand of masculinity, the American anti-hero.

Batman exhibits this same flawed nature during his disagreements with Alfred, whose top priority is the safety of Batman and all of Batman’s allies. In one scene, Alfred engages in a conversation with Bruce/Batman about the new Robin/Carrie Kelly. Alfred’s concern for the girl is evident, though it more closely resembles a mother’s concern when juxtaposed against Batman’s masculine, disciplinary nature.<sup>81</sup> Alfred does not tell him that he is wrong for putting her in danger, but instead implores him to think of Jason Todd’s untimely death. Batman, taking more of an authoritative stance on the subject, argues that she is more than a child and even asserts that she is a soldier in his war for Gotham.

Within this argument lies a significant contrast between the two, as Alfred tends to acknowledge that Batman’s partners are mere children while Batman can often disregard their innocence. The power structure between the two men is clear, as Alfred does little more than suggest Batman consider his actions and

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<sup>81</sup> Miller, Janson, and Varley, 93.

ultimately Batman does what he believes is best, not necessarily for his young sidekicks but for Gotham City and his relentless battle for justice.

In regard to a man's own masculine awareness, one must understand that the act of performing the male role is not without its' complexities; it involves the image of a man's own body, the way he moves and stands, the types of skills he possesses or lacks, and how other people view and respond to him.<sup>82</sup> When examining the fragmentation of the comic book medium, one may understand how Batman might be viewed more as an object that symbolizes heroism rather than a person who dutifully works within the constructs of "good and right." Ultimately, heroism is just as much about one's physical presentation as it is one's behaviors.

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<sup>82</sup> Connell, *Gender and Power*, 84.

## Chapter Four

### ***Batman: Hush – A Case Study of Apex Masculinity***

A rather notable story in Batman's history is the 2003 graphic novel entitled *Batman: Hush* by Jeph Loeb, Jim Lee, and Scott Williams. The story portrays a Batman who is already established in his role of protector-punisher (Batman's specific brand of heroism) when a new villain arises to challenge his place of dominance. This challenge comes in the form of the titular character Hush attempting to best Batman in physical combat and psychological warfare. The villain's goal is to dismantle Batman's confidence and force him to submit to the other man's superiority. Throughout the narrative, the audience becomes familiar with Batman's multitude of relationships with those around him. Batman's ability to remain the central figure of power within each of his relationships is equally dependent upon his visual and behavioral representation: his body size and build, and conversations he engages in with others.

In *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way*, Criminologists Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl emphasize that "to fight crime, male heroes are expected to *look* heroic, to maintain a hyper-masculine physique, and to 'do crime fighting' in a gendered way...."<sup>83</sup> Loeb and Lee's Batman is presented as a hero whose body swells with muscles and seem as though they may tear the

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<sup>83</sup> Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 152.



fabric of his form-fitted costume.<sup>84</sup> Given our understanding that Batman lacks any type of superhuman ability, the incredible musculature of his body becomes that much more impressive to the audience. He is depicted as a man at the height of his physicality and masculinity, an apex male. This is precisely the hyper-masculine Batman that contemporary audiences have come to recognize: the man who has trained his body to, and even beyond, the peak of human perfection.

Batman is physically matched against Hush through the extraordinary muscular build of both the men. In this story, Batman is drawn as tall and thickly muscled, exuding an inhuman menace that is meant to instill fear into criminals.<sup>85</sup> His costume does not appear to be armored, making his “natural” bulking size that much more impressive and daunting.<sup>86</sup> The chiseled, brooding hero presented to the audience is the type of figure that could undoubtedly serve as a protector of the innocent and punisher of the guilty.<sup>87</sup> Specifically, the audience clearly understands that Batman is the hero of the story while simultaneously recognizing that he is also capable of committing or performing acts of great violence.

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<sup>84</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, *Absolute Batman: Hush*, 86.

<sup>85</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, 87.

<sup>86</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, 11-12.

However, Hush matches Batman in physical size and build, making him a more dangerous threat to Batman's dominance. One might contrast Hush to another of Batman's adversaries, The Riddler, who actively avoids coming to blows with Batman and instead incorporates complex puzzles and riddles into his crimes. Villains like The Riddler are not viewed as a physical threat to Batman due to having a much smaller stature; therefore, smaller built villains like him typically engage in battles of the mind and attempt to outsmart Batman rather than engaging in physical violence. Hush and Batman's violent natures mirror the relationship of two alpha males who brawl over territory. The territorial piece of contention is Hush's adamant belief that he is more deserving of everything Batman/Bruce Wayne has and is (the alpha's intrinsic need to be the dominant masculinity).

Men and women have long been placed into categories by gendered expectations and societal norms. Males in American society are measured against a checklist of masculine characteristics (or hegemonic masculinities), deeming them fit or unfit to be regarded as a "real man."<sup>88</sup> Batman validates his manliness through his hyper-masculine body image, which allows him to use his physical strength to rescue weaker victims through means of violence against criminals like Hush who reject his heroism and threaten his masculinity.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 148.

<sup>89</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, *Absolute Batman: Hush*, 63-69.

The unyielding disposition and exaggerated muscularity of Loeb and Lee's Batman heavily contribute to his manliness; thus, he is then able to take on the mantle of the hero. Phillips and Strobl assert that male crime fighters in graphic novels flaunt their hyper-masculinity with brawny builds and macho attitudes (as Batman does when confronted by criminals like Hush).<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is often represented through the size and shape of men's bodies, as well as the masculine traits those hard bodies signify: strength, protection, attractiveness, power, and aggression.<sup>91</sup> In *Batman: Hush*, heavily muscled men (like Batman) who represent these masculine ideals also tend to possess a stronger connection to manliness.

A central piece of one's manliness is the ability to exemplify the skill necessary to become a protector. Batman's body is frequently shown (within various graphic novels) to display a myriad of scars as a testament to his masculinity, and this is no different in *Batman: Hush*.<sup>92</sup> New wounds and old scars are a way of presenting the hero as battle-tested and capable of confrontation. Batman is "often shown shirtless with fresh wounds and scars from previous altercations."<sup>93</sup> These markings are a means of exemplifying for the audience the masculinity and attractiveness of the character through their

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<sup>90</sup> Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 152.

<sup>91</sup> Phillips and Strobl, 152.

<sup>92</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, *Absolute Batman: Hush*, 104-105.

<sup>93</sup> Phillips and Strobl, *Comic Book Crime*, 152.

battle-ravaged bodies.

It is understood that superheroes embody elements of masculinity through their hard bodies, sexual desirability, and emotional stoicism.<sup>94</sup> Batman's large, strong build and his behavioral traits are indicative of the characters' ability to perform the roles of both protector and lover. One must not only be physically skilled enough to "save the girl" but also attractive enough to "get the girl." Therefore, it must be just as believable for Batman to triumph over the muscular alpha-villain Hush in a violent brawl (physical prowess) as it is for him to participate in a rooftop rendezvous with the overtly sexual antihero Catwoman (sexual prowess).<sup>95</sup> For if he does not measure up to these fixed standards of masculinity, then the audience could become skeptical as to his actual worth and deservedness of our hero worship.

As previously discussed, dominant masculinity is concerned primarily with male superiority over women, as well as other types of men deemed lesser in some way.<sup>96</sup> In *Batman: Hush*, Batman is meant to be the standard of masculinity that no other male character can match physically, mentally, or behaviorally. He exerts his dominant masculinity by exercising a subtle authority over other characters in the narrative through his interactions and relationships with them.

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<sup>94</sup> Phillips and Strobl, 148.

<sup>95</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, *Absolute Batman: Hush*, 69 and 254.

<sup>96</sup> Connell, *Gender and Power*, 85.

As mentioned in chapter two, Batman's most trusted relationship is with his sidekick, Robin (in this story, the Robin moniker is adopted by Tim Drake, as Dick Grayson has already become Nightwing). In one scene, Robin/Tim Drake physically and verbally altercates with Catwoman, as he believes she is a criminal who cannot be trusted and is furious that she has teamed up to work with Batman.<sup>97</sup> The argument leads to Batman acting as the mediator between the two characters as he defends her trustworthiness to Robin. The scene is reminiscent of a familial disagreement wherein the father sides with the mother over the quarrelsome protests of the child. This serves to further establish Batman's role as the father figure, authoritatively ensuring that Robin know and accept his place of subordination.

Batman is depicted as rather tall and broad in comparison to both Robin and Catwoman. He stands firmly between the two and catches Catwoman's wrist mid-strike as he orders her to be calm. Then, when she protests being told what to do, he flatly replies, "This is not a discussion." Batman simultaneously holds an irate Robin in place by gripping the top of his cape; the act mimics that of a canine holding their rambunctious pup by the scruff of their neck. Controlling these character's actions through an act of dominance proves to the audience that the two subordinated characters will ultimately do as he commands.

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<sup>97</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, *Absolute Batman: Hush*, 210-216.

Batman's dominating presence and behavior signifies his power and reaffirms his dominant status amongst the supporting characters.

During another scene in the narrative, Batman is receiving medical care from Alfred, while Catwoman stands by and admires his scarred, half-clothed body.<sup>98</sup> As previously discussed, Alfred represents a subordinated masculinity as he performs the role of Bruce Wayne/Batman's caretaker, a role that has long been viewed as predominantly "feminine." Alfred's masculinity then becomes secondary to Batman's, similarly to the way Robin's masculine role has been subjugated. Though Alfred and Catwoman represent two different types of roles in the hierarchy, they still both serve to validate and sustain Batman's dominance, as they both defer to his masculine superiority.

In this scene, Catwoman embodies the *female* gaze, which invites the audience to acknowledge Batman's allure as she does. Though males typically perform this objectified gazing, the role shifts as Catwoman maintains the focus on Batman. However, instead of Batman being viewed as an object (something that often happens to females who become the subject of this type of gaze), he is viewed as an awe-inspiring hero whose scars and battles are worthy of adulation. This response is both due to and the result of his dominant role as the strong, powerful male. Specifically, Batman possesses the ability to be admired by his

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<sup>98</sup> Loeb, Lee, and Williams, 203-208.

romantic partner without being fully objectified by her through his patriarchal status in the gender hierarchy.

Societal standards for masculinity are currently perpetuating the desire for the “superbody” one observes throughout the pages of contemporary comic books. The fans of comic books are influenced by societal expectations of men and those influences are now apparent through the hyper-masculine bodies that are currently prevalent. Thus, the preference for the hyper-masculine body type is celebrated as the preferred dominant male body standard based upon contemporary masculine ideals; this then compels the creators of comic books to illustrate their heroes accordingly. With these superhero ideals so firmly set in place, one must question what the future of the superhero body image will be.

## Conclusion

With nearly eighty years of history, Batman has solidified his place within our modern mythology of heroes. Currently, comic book representations of Batman incorporate the hyper-masculinized body as a visual tool for legitimizing his masculinity. Simply due to the nature of comic books, the visual representation of superheroes is firmly linked to the masculine identity of lead male characters. As discussed, our society's perception of men is dependent upon "the ideologically sanctioned form of masculinity at the time" and must be understood as a transformative notion that is constantly shifting.<sup>99</sup> Batman, having been a prominent and relevant character for so many decades, has remained so by exemplifying the ideologically appropriate masculine physiognomies of any given era. Thus, dominant male characters like Batman not only represent society's ideals of masculinity but are also perpetuators of these ideologies.

As established, dominant masculinity is represented by one's body as well as one's behaviors and relationships. Batman performs a variety of roles depending on his interactions: a father, a lover, a co-parent, or even an adversary. He has continually represented American ideals of masculinity by performing roles that reaffirm his dominance. Moreover, the various characters within the Batman narrative reinforce his dominant position through their own defined roles and behaviors. The very construct that is dominant masculinity is perpetuated

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<sup>99</sup> Brian Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film Representing Men in Popular Genres, 1945-2000* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), vii.



through the performativity of these diverse characters and the formation of their relationships with Batman.

On the surface of his narratives, Batman is representative of hope in the darkest of places. Conversely, he is also representative of his white male privilege and how it is at the core of his role within dominant masculinity. He was a stereotypical product of his time but as his depictions shifted, Batman succeeded in perpetuating the masculine ideologies that his audience has continuously associated with comic book heroism. These societal views of men have had a significant impact upon Batman's body image and how he interacts with those around him. Circularly, comic book writers and artists are influenced by these views, leading to the hyper-masculine trend popularized in the 1980s and 1990s. That influence and perpetuation stems from our own shifting expectations of masculinity. Batman, as a character built upon our ideals and standards, has transformed into a modern-day commodified icon of masculinity. Plainly, he is the hero we deserve as he is of our own creation.

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