

# I

## INTRODUCTION

As long as comic books have existed in America, they have been reviled by traditionalist scholars and other guardians of canonical standards. The usual argument against comics is that they are responsible for such societal ills as illiteracy (both cultural and literal), but they have also been cited in the past as catalysts of juvenile delinquency, mass delusion, and a host of other blights too numerous to mention. Although in recent years the comic book, along with the superhero tale (still the predominant genre of the medium), has received a fair share of critical and scholarly attention, a perception remains in this country, among scholars and the general public alike, that comics are a medium for juveniles only and are, therefore, a juvenile medium. Yet, this general dismissal of comic books does not take into account the historical complexity and cultural impact of the medium, evident in the nascent days of the first Superman and Batman comics, and even more obvious during the McCarthy-esque crackdown on the medium in 1950s and the emergence of the underground comic book in the 1960s. But this treatise is not primarily intended to argue the importance of the comic book or the importance of the superhero genre, for it is evident that both have survived many mutations and permutations and have left their indelible mark on other genres and media. (One needs only to turn on the television or to go to the local Cineplex to see this pervasiveness in action.) Its intent, however, is to scrutinize a certain moment in the history of the comic book superhero where the traditional superhero story and all of its hoary accoutrements received a long-overdue reevaluation, a

moment embodied primarily in Frank Miller's The Dark Knight Returns. This work, more than any other, marked a distinct turn away from the traditional, cut-and-dried superhero story; instead of offering the reader a good-guy Batman who fights bad guys in a basically good society, Miller serves up a Batman whose moral center is hard to pin down, living in a Gotham City that seems at times to be irredeemably decayed, fighting villains more mentally disturbed than evil. In short, what was once rendered boldly in four colors is now tarnished and gray, both literally and figuratively. To fully examine this work, it is important to look at how it incorporates the traditional superhero story into the fragmented, personalized, and satirized elements introduced into comics by other comic book genres grown from the underground movement. The ideas of Michael Bakhtin, whose discussion on the differences between the Epic and the Novel, between the "monologic" and the "dialogic," are useful in assessing whether Miller has completely forgone the "monologic" storytelling techniques of the traditional comic book in favor of more "dialogic" modes of thought, or whether Miller's Batman is still basically equivalent to the Batman of the original "monologic" comic. As the reader will soon see, both of these statements are true in a way, since Batman still retains his monologic essence even though so much of the world around him become "dialogic," opened up to a plethora of voices and perspectives.

It will be important to begin with a history of the comic book superhero, explaining from a Marxist perspective how the medium created a genre that was fueled by capitalist concerns, and that was solidified, as well as stymied, by these concerns. This will lead to a discussion of the underground movement in comics, which gave the first hints of a "dialogic" approach to the medium. Then the focus of this discussion will shift to The Dark Knight Returns, describing the detailed struggle between "monologism" and "dialogism" that

occurs in this work and gives it an ambivalence and complexity not seen in most comics. The discussion will then move on to Miller's sequel to The Dark Knight Returns, titled The Dark Knight Strikes Again, which will be discussed from a postmodernist point of view, due to this work's use of parody and pastiche at the expense of its prequel. An attempt will then be made to discuss whether or not the "dialogic" elements in the work have intensified, and whether or not there is any remnant of the original "monologic" Batman.

## II

### NOT-SO-HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: SUPERMAN, BATMAN, AND THE CREATION OF A GENRE

To understand fully the importance of The Dark Knight Returns, it is important to first look carefully at the history of the superhero comic, because without fully comprehending the facts behind the arrival and promulgation of superhero comics, it will be difficult to understand just how revolutionary Frank Miller's work was and is from both an artistic and financial perspective. But first, let us discuss Superman and Batman and the differences between them in brief. Batman is an interesting superhero, for he has no superpowers, relying instead on his intellect and cunning, as well as his awesome array of "bat-gadgets" (batarangs, grappling hooks, etc.) stored in his utility belt, to save the day. After witnessing his parents murdered at a young age, he honed his crimefighting abilities for years, learning the skills that make him a great martial artist as well as a great detective. He also used his vast inheritance to finance his unique modes of transportation, such as the Batmobile and the Bat-Copter, and to set up his headquarters in the Bat-Cave, a huge underground recess situated under his vast estate, where he keeps his scientific equipment and his Bat-Computer. He dresses like a bat, incidentally, to scare criminals, using this fear as another weapon in his arsenal. Batman also has a boy sidekick, Robin the Boy Wonder, who is his colorful ward and protege. Robin's parents, like Batman's, were murdered, which gave the young orphan a *modus operandi* for crimefighting similar to

Batman. On the other end of the spectrum is Superman, who stands in stark contrast to Batman in many ways: Superman, an alien from the doomed planet Krypton, is incredibly powerful, with super-tough skin, immense strength, incredible speed, the power of flight, and the power to shoot red beams from his eyes. Superman's adventures tend to be more fantastic and less gritty than Batman's, since Superman's stories generally take place during the daytime, when the superhero is disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet, while Batman, like the animal on which he is based, operates at night.

These two heroes' histories are very fascinating to look at, since in many ways they are perfect examples of the twists and turns that the superhero genre endured since its inception, and they are also important because they have existed for the entire history of the genre. Batman is a hero who has been around in one form or another since his inception in the late 30s, and he is still arguably one of this country's most successful fictional characters, evidenced not only by his success in comics, but also by the fact that he has "generated vast cross-media exploitation" thanks to his many lucrative forays into other genres, such as television and motion pictures (Sabin, Comics 62). Because Batman has been around for so long in so many different media, his "mythology" has repeatedly been rewritten "to suit the times": "At first, he was a gothic figure, a tortured soul, driven by revenge and most at home in the shadows . . . Later though, the stories were progressively lightened in order to draw a younger readership" (62). In short, he has remained a foremost character in the superhero genre despite the fact that he has been repackaged and re-imagined along the lines of whatever societal expectations were dominant in America at any given time. As Uricchio and Pearson state, "the very nature of the Batman's textual existence reveals an impulse toward fragmentation. Since his creation in 1939, numerous editors, writers, artists, directors, scriptwriters, performers and

licensed manufacturers have continually “authored” the Batman, with the specificities of various media necessitating the selective emphasis of character qualities” (Uricchio and Pearson 184).

From a Marxist standpoint, this ability of Batman to mold completely to any ideological framework is in fact the main reason for the success of the character. According to Uricchio and Pearson, “the Batman has no primary urtext set in a specific period, but has rather existed in a plethora of equally valid texts constantly appearing over more than five decades” (Uricchio and Pearson 185). Yet this adaptability of the character comes at a steep price; Batman’s ability to conform to the societal expectations of America in any given period means that there is very little room for anything outside of the status quo to be celebrated, or even included, in Gotham City. A good example of this conformity can be seen in the early adventure titled “The Batman Meets Doctor Death,” where Batman is up against “Karl Hellfern,” a.k.a. Doctor Death, who is plotting an evil scheme while his henchman “Jabah” looks on; Doctor Death’s name, along with such visual cues as a monocle, pointy beard, and a smoldering cigarette in a long cigarette holder, more than hint that he is German, (or at least European), while Jabah is clearly a big stereotypical Indian servant reminiscent of Annie’s Punjab (Batman 54). Here it is clear that this story encapsulates certain dominant ideological stances that were held as truths in the late 30s; Batman, the wealthy Anglo-industrialist crime fighter, is held up as the ideal, while Doctor Death, the shifty German scientist, is reviled as a treacherous and murderous foreigner who should be eradicated. Added to this equation is Jabah, who is relegated to being a mere manservant/henchman under the command of Doctor Death. Through Jabah, the text reveals its imperialist ideologies along with their many attendant hierarchies of superiority: apparently, even Doctor Death should not be denied an Indian servant to lord over.

On the surface, which is nearly the only level here, this early example of the

superhero story is rife with political and ideological implications. According to Terry Eagleton, “Literature is an agent as well as effect of [ideological] struggles, a crucial mechanism by which the language and ideology of an imperialist class establishes its hegemony,” which can be seen in the fact that Batman is firmly putting his foot down here on all subversive foreign elements - no matter what country they come from - all in the name of white upper-class superiority (Eagleton 55). It is evident that the imperialistic overtones in this example reveal the prevailing ideology of this time period, even if this ideology is based on erroneous “factual” information; Eagleton refers to this as “false consciousness,” a phenomenon “which blocks true historical perception, a screen interposed between men and their ideology” (69). This Batman story, which would seem at the outset to be pure escapist fluff, nevertheless includes instances of the “imaginary production of the real which is ideology,” revealing in its inclusion of these “imaginary” truths the harsh perceptions that had over time been accepted as fact by the majority of Americans (75). So, this story, which is representative of many of Batman’s early adventures, provides us with a view of American society as it had been structured around the dominant ideology, and goes further by creating an extended fictionalized idealization of this ideology. Batman’s Gotham City is not an accurate portrayal of the real world (if such a thing is really possible), but it is an exaggeration of the dominant political and social hierarchies of the time, and is thus a reflection of the “false consciousness,” the *perceived* reality envisioned by the dominant social group, namely white male America. It is this aspect of early superhero stories that prompts Murray to ask, with tongue in cheek, “Whose America were superheroes? By and large they weren’t an America for women, or for African-Americans, or indeed for any minority or disempowered group. Where were the homosexual heroes, the black Batmans, or the Captain Conscientious Objectors?” (Murray 143). Of course, there were homosexuals, African-Americans, and

conscientious objectors in America at this time period, but these groups were not the dominant power-holding groups, and they were thus marginalized, and seen as almost an embarrassment, if, to be sure, they were ever seen at all. It is clear that, “far from representing America as it was, superhero comics represented a view of America that was constructed by and within the ideology of the dominant power structures and institutions,” and it is because of this that our hero is a rich white man in stories published by rich white men, created by artists that wanted to eventually become rich white men, and read by white children (Murray 143).

It must be noted that the creators of the story discussed at length above were probably unaware that they were reinforcing accepted ideologies of late 30’s America. Indeed, these creators were probably just following the established Batman formula, changing enough story elements to keep the readers from getting too bored to buy the next issue. This comic, as well as all comics, was intended to do one thing: *make money*. And the desire of comic book publishers to make as much money as possible led to the ideological reiteration that I have previously mentioned. There were not homosexual or black superheroes because there would be no way to sell these superheroes to mainstream white American children, who were the largest market for them. According to Eagleton, “Every text obliquely posits a putative reader, defining its producibility in terms of a certain capacity for consumption” (48). The “putative reader” in this case is the white male child, who enjoys the special privilege of being in a dominant social group and having his culture incorporated into the idealized perfection of the superhero mythos (48). For it is true that “every literary text in some sense internalises its social relations of production - that every text intimates by its very conventions the way it is to be consumed, encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced” (48). In the case of Batman, we see that this hero is clearly a product *of* the mainstream *for* the

mainstream, a result of the dominant culture that is creating stories aimed precisely at their children (48). In short, the early superhero stories, in which Batman is included, did not break outside of the expectations of the mainstream because that simply was not an option, especially for a medium that was ostensibly aimed at children.

These ideological implications previously discussed go a long way toward explaining how the superhero story achieved a level of solidification in its nascent years. But it would be wise to look at the success of Superman, the first comic book superhero ever created, in order to understand more fully how the superhero genre was formed. Many of the comic books created both in the 1930s and today are marketed and sold primarily to children, and the children of the 30s turned Superman into a huge financial success. Shrewd capitalists at DC Comics, wary of experimenting too heavily with the fledgling medium, favored replication over innovation. Hence, the oddity that was Superman was cloned into an entire genre of strapping white men fighting crime in colorful costumes. The conventions of the Superman stories soon became the conventions of every superhero: Superman had a secret identity in Clark Kent, so all subsequent superheroes had to have a secret identity. The secret identity is a good example of these oft-duplicated Superman traits that have become staples for most of the rest of the superheroes: Spider-Man has Peter Parker, The Hulk has Bruce Banner, Batman has Bruce Wayne, *etc.* Jeffrey Brown makes an interesting hypothesis by equating the superhero identity and the secret identity with a masculine/feminine dichotomy: “While the superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the muscularity, the confidence, the power that personifies the ideal of phallic masculinity, the alter ego - the identity that must be kept a secret - depicts the softness, the powerlessness, the insecurity associated with the feminized man” (31). For Brown, “the list is endless, for nearly every comic book hero is a variation on the wimp/warrior theme of

duality,” and he seems to be implying that this is a necessary by-product of the superhero genre (32). However, Brown’s generalizing about the necessity of the secret identity misses the mark, for it suggests that this aspect of the superhero story is inexorably tied to the genre, as if it springs from some sort of Jungian mass subconscious into every superhero creator’s head as a crucial storytelling function within the genre. This explanation is debatable of course, but it does not explain the extensive use of this device in most of the superhero stories. We must remember that Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster *invented* the superhero genre with Superman, and thus the real reason, the *only* reason, why most every superhero has a secret identity is that the idea was copied from Superman. No one was really prepared for the radical and unexpected success of Superman, so when the character started to generate huge sales revenues, the comic companies felt there was very little incentive for to experiment on unproven material. According to Wright, “this market consideration, along with low pay, the absence of royalties, incessant deadlines, and an assembly-line production process, meant that comic books became highly formulaic” (22). So DC Comics, along with their rivals, tried to duplicate the Superman success over and over again using the same formula that had worked before. Hence, within a few years, the genre was literally rife with superheroes of every conceivable stripe, and the so-called Golden Age of Comics was born. Characters such as the Flash, Green Lantern, Captain Marvel, Captain America, and Wonder Woman sprang up almost overnight in the wake of Superman. According to Wright again, “. . .writers and artists had very little motivation to get very sophisticated in their storytelling, and they had compelling reasons not to. They assumed, probably correctly, that a superhero’s appeal to juvenile readers depended, most simply, on how interesting his costume and powers were” (22).

Getting back to the secret identity question, then, it becomes painfully apparent

that such superhero trappings were primarily the result of fiscal concerns and not artistic ones. The comic book companies saw that Superman *sold*, and they went out of their way to recycle him into as many different permutations as they could. Bloom and McCue claim, “The secret identity has become a necessary part of every superhero. Without it, he is a distant, inaccessible god on Olympus” (20). This is not true at all. It certainly is not the case with Batman, whose secret identity of millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne is extraordinarily distant and inaccessible, almost as much so as Batman, if only because he is rich and the readers of his comics mostly were not. In fact, why would a multi-millionaire even need a secret identity to begin with? Batman has no Lois Lane to protect from criminals, no real friends with whom to have a meaningful existence as Bruce Wayne. He does not have Superman’s kindly interest in the human race. He could be Batman all the time if he wished to be, and there is no reason why he should not. So why the secret identity? There is no other reason, except for the fact that Superman, for whatever reason Siegel and Shuster intended, was also Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter. Perhaps one could debate the origins of Superman’s secret identity, but the Bruce Wayne persona exists only because of the success of Superman’s Clark Kent.

The same could be said about the traditional superhero costume that was popularized by Superman. It is true that “a superhero’s costume simultaneously masks his identity and identifies him as the genuine article. It often tells the story of his powers and genesis. It is his identity card” (Bloom and McCue 21). Batman’s superhero costume is in many ways equivalent to the Superman’s costume, although Batman’s costume has a few innovations. Both include a skintight monochromatic bodysuit, coupled with boots at the feet and what seems to be underwear briefs over the groin. Also, bizarrely, both Batman and Superman have belts on top of these briefs, although Batman’s is a “utility belt” where crimefighting tools are

conveniently stored. The utility belt, which has been integral to Batman from the earliest days, thus gives some logic to this strange fashion choice. Then there is the use of a cape, which Superman popularized as essential to the superhero design. (However, we must note that Batman's cape also makes a bit more sense than Superman's from a utilitarian perspective, since Bob Kane, Batman's creator, obviously designed the hero's cape to resemble bat's wings. Superman's cape seems gratuitous in comparison). And Batman uses a cowl which covers the top half of his face; Feiffer notes that "Batman popularized in comic books the strange idea, first used by the Phantom in newspapers, that when you put on your mask, your eyelids disappeared. Two white slits showed - that was all" (25).

Apart from these innovations, the suit is essentially in the same mold as the Superman suit. However, there is one defining characteristic in particular links Batman's costume inexorably to the superhero genre; like the Superman suit, the Batman suit features an iconic logo on the chest. This, in fact, is probably the greatest influence of Superman on Batman, this chest-centered logo, which also seems somewhat gratuitous and odd. Yet without Batman's black bat chest logo, it would be hard to identify him as a superhero, since Superman's "S-shield" chest logo cemented the icon as a necessity for every superhero costume, and acted as a shorthand way of knowing who, like Superman, belonged in the superhero club. This is not to say that the chest logo was laden with hidden meanings - just that it was, for whatever reason, popularized by the success of Superman and incorporated into the costumes of subsequent superheroes. Unlike the previously-mentioned Phantom, who-- as Donald Markstein's Toonopedia points out-- premiered in newspaper strips in 1936 (two years before the inception of the superhero genre) and is informed by the world of pulp heroes like Tarzan and Zorro, Batman has a small icon on his chest that marks him indelibly as a *superhero* and links him with

Superman and the superhero genre. Even though Batman has no superpowers to speak of and is stylistically and tonally similar to the Phantom (since both are grim costumed vigilantes with no superpowers), Batman is quoting the most crucial part of the superhero's visual vocabulary with the bat-emblem on his chest, while the Phantom is not, meaning that he is not exactly a superhero, even though he wears a gaudy purple costume and a black mask. The Phantom may look like a superhero, but he is really a pulp hero like the Lone Ranger, Dick Tracy, the Shadow, and Zorro (although Zorro's habit of carving a "Z" into everything and everyone could be seen as a faint rumbling of what the chest icon is meant to do). The chest icon, which proved so durable a concept with Superman, became a general symbol of the superhero, and thus most of the early superheroes got one - Captain Marvel, Green Lantern, the Flash, Captain America *et al.* Batman is thus firmly ensconced within the superhero genre, although he is "not a superhero in its truest form (however we may have liked to think about him). If you pricked him, he bled - buckets" (Feiffer 26). Even though he has no powers, and even though a bat icon on the chest of a man in a bat costume seems ridiculously redundant, and even though he is more in tune with The Shadow and Dick Tracy with respect to tone and subject matter, Batman is a *superhero*, if only because he meets the visual requirements of one as delineated by the post-Superman superhero template. Thus, it is clear that Superman's success as a money-making enterprise caused the superhero genre to be codified and solidified as much as the prevailing ideologies of the time did, and his success also caused the superhero genre to be dominated by publishers who wanted desperately to create another Superman-level phenomenon. From a Marxist point of view, the publishers' insistence on reiterating the Superman archetypes shows how "labour yields control to capital"; publishers paid the creators to recycle Superman, leaving the creators' "own 'life-activity' at the disposal of others who arrange it and control it in ways that maximise

profitability” (Wayne 33). The superhero is a direct result of publishers who were “guided above all, by the pursuit of quick profits”; without the desire to replicate Superman to make more money, there would not be a superhero genre, and Batman, along with countless others, would never have seen the light of day (Wright 28).

But this is not to say that Batman is basically a complete rip-off of Superman. Even though the genesis of Batman was directly influenced by the arrival of Superman, Batman could be seen as a response or counterpoint to the whole Superman mythos, a *yin* to Superman’s *yang*. This idea is echoed by Sabin, who states that “they [Superman and Batman] founded complementary superhero paradigms -supernatural versus super-athlete, strength versus wit and day versus night- which would later be copied by a seemingly endless array of imitators through the 1940’s” (Comics 62). Batman is notable not only in the ways that Superman had influenced his genesis, but also in the ways that he broke from the Superman mold. From the very beginning, “Batman was compelling because he suggested the darker side of human nature while Superman attracted the lighter side . . . .The atmosphere . . . complemented the national mood at the time. While Superman provided an escape from the twin threats of lingering depression and impending war, Batman acknowledged them” (Bloom and McCue 23). Batman’s Gotham City was “a world where no one, no matter the time of day, cast anything but long shadows - seen from weird perspectives. Batman’s world was scary; Superman’s, never” (Feiffer 28). So together, these two heroes made a strange unity that covered the highs and lows of 1930s and 1940s America. Even though much of Batman was influenced a great deal by Superman, there is a sense that Batman, at least initially, filled a gap in the superhero paradigm that the makers of Superman were not even aware existed. Superman’s brightly-rendered daytime exploits perhaps influenced Batman from the opposite end of the spectrum; having taken what they could from

the superhero motifs of Superman, the creators of Batman (Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and others) probably wanted to create a hero that was everything Superman was not: brutal, gritty, angry, and all-too-human. Sooner or later, the publishers of DC Comics would start putting these two characters together in one magazine. After all, the more comics with these successful heroes in it, the more money could be made. However, the important character innovations of Batman as contrasted with Superman were soon mitigated by even greater financial concerns that would shake the industry to its core and forge an even more homogenous and solidified genre.

### III

#### VICIOUS CIRCLES AND REAL SUPERVILLAINS: CENSORSHIP AND THE COMICS

##### CODE

As a medium ostensibly for children, the comic book was, and is, susceptible to backlashes from angry parents and censorship from wary government officials. One of the more vocal protests against comic books came from the educational community; comics were “seen as intrinsically bad because they tend to take the place of ‘real books,’ an attitude which crystallizes a double confrontation: between the written word and the world of images, on the one hand; between educational literature and pure entertainment on the other” (Groensteen 32). For most of these guardians of the traditional canon of “great works,” the belief that “that which is popular is necessarily vulgar” was a strong one, and is so even to this day in some circles (32). But comics were also guilty of another more serious crime; the guardians of “decency,” *e.g.* educators, politicians, and church leaders, “expected [comics] to make a contribution to [children’s] education by helping them learn to read, encouraging them to love ‘beautiful texts’ and ‘great authors.’ The imprisonment of verbal expression in the visual system . . . constitutes a symbolic revolution, a complete reversal of the commonly accepted hierarchy between semiotic systems” (34). In other words, comic books were bad for children because they subvert the importance of the written word, and “the champions of a culture which postulates the supremacy of the written word over all other forms of expression could only take this inversion as an

attack“(34). Comics blur the line between word and image because they include text that is “neither entirely within the picturespace nor outside it,” and this peculiar aspect of comics caused those who feel that written prose is the most “literate” and “intellectual” medium to feel uncomfortable enough to object to comics on purely educational grounds (Carrier 29). Indeed, “Awareness not just of the words balloons contain but also of their purely visual qualities is part of our experience of comics. We treat the balloons neither purely as holes in the picture nor as things depicted . . . . Normally reprinting a novel doesn’t require duplicating the type of the first edition. But modernizing the type in a cartoon would change that artwork” (Carrier 29). So, the text in comics can be seen almost as a mockery of itself, since its aesthetic qualities are just as important as its contextual meaning. And for a society who had long ago accepted the written word to convey important themes and ideas, this inversion of text was a horror that was leading the youth of America into juvenile delinquency and worse, since any distance from the “great canon” of literature would no doubt cause a disintegration of humanity.

But there were other complaints against comic books that were more concerned with social than intellectual effects on children. Comics, one of the most popular entertainments of children and teenagers, were increasingly blamed for juvenile delinquency and other worse transgressions against the increasingly conservative mainstream by nearly everyone that had power (teachers, scientists, churches, Congress). Having exploded into the world unawares, Superman and his manifold superheroic progeny were a phenomenon that the guardians of traditionalism in America found disturbing, if only for the fact that comics were an unregulated medium that was “controlled by urban young men with worldviews far removed from Victorian middle-class values,” and that superheroes had won the hearts and minds of the nation’s children (Wright 28). The fact that Superman was an overnight sensation meant that the comic book

publishers suddenly had a great deal of financial and social clout, which made them a target for those who wished to regulate what the industry could and could not produce. It did not take too long for this growing rancor to influence the subject matter and tone of the superhero stories. Superman himself was targeted for a gradual makeover, intended to make the character more “child-safe” and, of course, to preserve the massive financial gains garnered by the character as well:

Beginning in the latter half of 1940, Superman was transformed into a symbol of more general American cultural values in that his individualism was tied to consumerist values. Superman’s metamorphosis resulted from the confluence of a morality campaign directed at comic books, Superman’s increasing commercial value, and the advent of a heightened patriotism . . . (Gordon 181).

Batman added Robin the Boy Wonder in 1940, and almost instantly the moodiness of Batman abated, as evidenced by the introductory image of a *smiling* Batman holding up a circus hoop for a *smiling* Robin to burst through in a flourish, which unintentionally conjures up images of Porky Pig bursting through the bass drum at the end of the early Looney Tunes cartoons; hence, what was once dark and ominous became, quite literally, child’s play (Batman 64). From a Marxist standpoint again, we see that the primary motivations for changes like this were financial in nature and had little to do with any sense of moral obligation on the part of the comic book companies.

Yet these changes to the superhero genre did not stave off the ever-mounting pressure on the comic book industry. Even though much of the content of comics had been bowdlerized to appease the censors, the medium still had its detractors, and the chief of which was Dr. Fredric Wertham, an “eminent psychiatrist” who wrote a book titled Seduction of the Innocent that promulgated the “idea that [comics] were at least partly responsible for the rise in juvenile delinquency” (Sabin, Comics 68). Wertham’s book “attacked most genres of comics,

but focused on horror and crime in general, claiming that at best they were ‘especially apt to interfere with children’s sleep,’ and at worst led to copycat crimes” (Sabin, Comics 68).

Wertham did focus a lot of his criticism on crime and horror comics, which were, ironically, growing in popularity because of the waning interest behind the increasingly “child-friendly“ superhero stories. But he also focused much of his energy into criticizing the superhero genre; as Wertham himself stated: “ If I were asked to express in a single sentence what has happened mentally to many American children during the last decade, I would know no better formula than to say that they were conquered by Superman” (Wertham 265). Wertham seems to see Superman at times in this book as the symbol of comic books in general, even though he is ostensibly focused on the effects of horror and crime comics, which dealt with more violent and “mature” subject matter. It is hard to see why Superman and the superhero genre were considered to be as threatening as the crime or horror comics, since by this time the superheroes had been so sanitized in response to earlier criticism of the genre that it is difficult to discern what all this consternation was about. Wertham, one of the most vocal critics of comic books, saw the relatively innocuous superhero genre as just another facet of the overriding comic book problem, as if it did not matter what genres were used because the medium itself was somehow tainted. Wertham admits as much when he says that “someday parents will realize that comic books are not a necessary evil . . . . But before they can tackle Superman . . . people will have to learn that it is a distorted idea to think that democracy means giving good and evil an equal chance at expression” (395). Even though Superman had always stood up for “truth, justice, and the American Way,” as one of his early taglines stated, for Wertham he is as dangerous as the Crypt Keeper from Tales from the Crypt or one of the many real-life criminals from Crime Does Not Pay. This brazen and arguably nonsensical hypothesis leads Sabin to refer to Seduction of the

Innocent as the “*Mein Kampf* of comics” because it “drew together all the threads of [Wertham’s] campaigning over the years, and took in every kind of comic, raising objections to them all” and “used the term ‘crime comic books’ to designate any kind of comic in which crime was depicted - thus extending the negative implications of the ‘crime’ label until it encompassed almost the whole industry” (Sabin, Adult 157). Indeed, the book’s “sensationalism . . . and its author’s evangelical zeal, were enough to inspire widespread moral panic,” which “manifested itself in protests, and even in neighborhood comics burnings” (Sabin, Comics 68). The hysteria became so intense that it finally led to “hearings in the Senate, at which both Fredric Wertham and William Gaines [publisher of EC Comics, which was famous for its horror titles] testified, after which publishers were compelled to band together into a self-regulating group, the Comics Magazine Association of America (established in 1954) which then “administered a code of conduct, overseen by a review body called ‘The Comics Code Authority’” (Sabin, Comics 68).

This move by comic book publishers has influenced the direction of comics ever since. The Comics Code existed for years after its implementation, and it shaped for half a century the ways in which the medium can create its product. The publishers, who were essentially trying to avoid another Red Scare-like crackdown, knew it would be a huge financial risk to take any chances with characters like Superman and Batman, who retained enough of their popularity through the withering storm of protest of the late 40s and early 50s to keep the superhero genre afloat. The resulting changes to the superhero genre meant that the superhero stories were now more than formulaic - they were essentially identical. If Superman and Batman began as different sides of the superhero coin - one light, the other dark - they slowly met each other in the middle thanks to increasing official scrutiny. After being lambasted in the Senate and blamed for nearly every ill suffered by America’s youth, these two superheroes were now safely

generic; any sense of difference in their superhero mythologies was lost, and they started to be stale wooden effigies of the heroes they once were.

A good case in point can be seen with the story titled “Bat-Mite Meets Mr. Mxyzptlk,” in which Batman and Superman team up to deal with their respective “elfin character from another dimension” before Gotham City is destroyed (Batman 233). This story, published in 1960, is indicative of the stagnation of the post-Wertham superhero era for a number of reasons. First of all, there is the use of the characters Bat-Mite and Mr. Mxyzptlk, who are both whimsical, magical imps that are more of a nuisance than a villain to their superhero nemeses; this is essentially the same concept applied to both superheroes (233). Secondly, we can see that both the superheroes and their respective cities have now become nearly the same. This is evident in the segments where both Superman and Batman are trying to stop a giant (and somewhat generic) robot from destroying downtown Gotham City. Not only do Superman and Batman seem to be the exact same person in different costumes, but Batman’s Gotham City also comes to look exactly like Superman’s Metropolis. When looking at the story from the outset, it would seem like we are in Metropolis, since it is broad daylight (Superman’s world is usually shown in daylight, with no dark shadows or lurking Batmanesque villains) and the menace is a giant robot (a scenario Batman is ill-equipped to handle), yet somehow this *is* Gotham City, *sans* its earlier grotesqueness (Batman 233-36). The second panel of the story is especially absurd; Batman and Robin, as the narrative top bar of the panel tells us, have been “summoned by the Bat-Signal” (234). (It is clearly broad daylight, so we can only speculate how the Duo could see the Bat-Signal to begin with.) As Batman and Robin run to face off against the robot, Robin unintentionally points out the absurdity of their predicament: “Golly! . . .A giant, bullet-proof crime robot! How can we stop it, Batman?” (234). An appropriate question, since neither of the

Dynamic Duo has any superpowers, and they are, subsequently, poor robot-smashers; Batman's foes are crafty underworld bosses and demented creatures of the night like the Joker and Two-Face, not huge robots lumbering down the street in broad daylight. Superman, however, is perfect for this scenario, since he is strong and tough enough to get this job done, and since science fiction is at the heart of the Superman mythos. (Superman is an alien from planet Krypton, sent to Earth via a spaceship when he was just a baby, so these leaps into the fantastic are not as much of a stretch for him as they are with Batman, since he is just a mortal man fighting human [if deranged] criminals.) The Dynamic Duo *do* stop it, however, by melting the asphalt under the robot's feet with a giant (and inexplicably functional) welding torch used as a display at a "hardware exposition" across the street (Batman 234). Basically, this is a Superman story made ridiculous by Batman's presence; there is room in Superman's world for giant robots, and there always has been, but when Batman is forcibly shoehorned into the Superman mold, the result is unintentional camp, the kind that reiterated the "childishness" of comic books for years to come and eventually led to the 60s Batman television show, which solidified the perception among the general populace that superheroes were, at best, a joke.

If one compares the earlier-mentioned story, "The Batman Meets Doctor Death," to this story, there is little that connects them, save for the basic Batman components such as the Batarang (bat-shaped boomerangs), utility belt, or the generalized bat costume. Whereas before, Batman's world was a complementary presence to Superman's world, they were now in the same world - Superman's world - and Batman just did not belong there. In order to save comics then, the publishers had to boil down their heroes to their most inoffensive and generic components, namely costumes and powers. (They were already all strapping white men for the most part, so this was not a problem.) As I mentioned before, Batman's success is predicated on his ability to

conform to societal standards of any given period, but during this period Batman almost vanishes into the generic Superman-esque world of post-Wertham comics. He conformed to the repressive demands of the 50s and 60s, but almost to the point of anonymity into the cleaner and more generic adventure landscape, where, as Groensteen points out, “all this was a sort of double punishment for comics: deprived of their adult audience, comics were confined to the ghetto of youth magazines and reserved for children, but comics’ massive introduction into these magazines provoked the hostility of educators, who untiringly denounced them as ‘bad for children.’ Comics are thus blacklisted for corrupting their already restricted audience” (31). The result of this cycle is a further congealing of the genre, with innovation taking a backseat to repetition, and there was very little that the comic book creators could do about it. While the creators were once hamstrung by publishers who wanted to repeat past successes, they were now even more restricted by the Comics Code. This disadvantage means that “the extent to which mainstream comic books have the potential to challenge the status quo is perhaps limited despite the fact that they exist on the edge of popular culture. The boundaries imposed on comic books by either the individual publishers or the Comics Code deny an apparently ‘radical’ medium the chance to effectively challenge established ideology” (Matton 155). It was this situation that shaped both the superhero genre as well as the whole medium of comics from the mid 50s to the mid 60s, and the effects can still be seen today in both the general attitudes toward comic books and the format of the superhero tale itself. However, by the late 60s, the counterculture was reacting against the repression of this period, and comics soon followed suit.

#### IV

### UNDERGROUND COMIX AND THE BEGINNING OF DIALOGIC NARRATIVES IN THE MEDIUM: INTRODUCTION OF BAKHTINIAN IDEA OF “NOVEL” APPLIED TO COMICS

Toward the latter half of the 60s, two things happened in the world of comics. One was the rise of Marvel Comics, brought on by writer Stan Lee and artists Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and others too numerous to mention here. The company found success with newly-created superheroes such as Spider-Man and the Hulk, who were notable in that they that actually had distinct personalities and flaws, making them a welcome change to the superhero formula. These comics were also notable in that, for the first time in years, older readers were becoming fans of the superhero genre; as Sabin notes, “Although Lee had intended his creations for a children’s audience, he was very surprised to learn that [college] students were reading them too. Soon, on campuses throughout the country, the Marvel superheroes were being canonized as ‘an American mythology’” (Adult 165). This is important in that it breathed life back into a genre suffocating under McCarthy-esque restrictions, and also because it made it possible for comics to attract an older audience despite these restrictions. Superheroes seemed to be on a progressive track, despite the still-active Comics Code.

The second thing that happened to the comics industry was the rise of underground comics (or “comix“), which for the most part ignored the superhero genre and sought to “[speak] to the counter-culture on its own terms, which meant dealing with subjects

like drugs, anti-Vietnam protest, rock music and, above all, sex” (Sabin, Comics 92). Unlike the hugely popular Marvel Comics line of superheroes, the underground comics broke from the established genres and expectations of comics and were thus free to experiment with both form and content. This freedom brought in a number of different writers and creators with unique styles and points of view to the medium; there was a “boom in comix by and for women, and the growth of a subgenre of horror titles” that “forged new paths, and allowed an opportunity for creators to get involved with the comix movement who might otherwise not have had the chance or the inclination” (Sabin, Comics 104).

All this lends itself to the “Epic vs. Novel” dichotomy that Mikhail Bakhtin developed for discussing the special differences between the novel, which Bakhtin saw as dynamic and contemporary, and the epic, which he saw as static and ancient. For the first time, comics included works that were “epic” or “monologic” according to Bakhtin’s dichotomy (superhero stories), as well as works that were “novelistic” or “dialogic” (underground comix). The superhero genre is monologic because it adheres to Bakhtin’s description of the different features of the epic; the genre takes place in a “national epic past,” it is guided by “national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it),” and “an absolute epic distance separates the epic from contemporary reality, that is, the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives” (Bakhtin 14). This has been true for the superhero genre in many respects, because “national tradition” was a guiding factor in the formation of the genre, indeed having a greater influence on the direction of the stories than the ideas and whims of the individual creators did. We are also separated from the action of the superheroes by “epic distance” since they live in a world populated with technologies (Ray Guns, Robots) and locations (Metropolis, Gotham City) alien to our own. It is obvious that the traditional superhero

genre is “epic” since it is a “genre typical of societies in which diversity and change either go unrecognized or are actively suppressed,” *e.g.* post-World War II America (Holquist 77). Even though the newer Marvel heroes were innovative at the time thanks to their use of distinct characters and the more “realistic” setting of New York (instead of a fictional city like Metropolis or Gotham), they were still monologic stories because they did not include any diverse viewpoints or subversive content, and also because they still clung to the superhero trappings that solidified the genre since Superman’s arrival. Spider-Man, who was Marvel’s biggest star, was a teenage nerd rather than an ideal specimen of manhood, but he still had a secret identity, still wore a costume with a redundant emblem on his chest (a black spider), still had unique powers and gimmicks. His alter ego even worked at a newspaper, the Daily Bugle, which is basically Spider-Man’s version of Superman’s Daily Planet; invariably, the stories in both of these newspapers would be about the exploits of the superheroes who clandestinely work for them. Although there are a plethora of supporting characters in the Spider-Man mythos, there is still only one clear standpoint from which the stories are told. This is a monologic text because rarely, if ever, does the reader see events from any other point of view besides either the narrator or Spider-Man’s internal dialogue, which tells us exactly how to feel about each event that happens in the story. The superhero genre, then, is resistant to the intrusion of any dialogic multiplicity of voices; even when the formal elements are loosened up a bit, a great deal of unity still defined the superheroic tradition, and there is little need for any dissenting or ambivalent points of view, since a superhero is supposed to be the focal point, and is supposed to be rooted for.

Yet the newer underground comix tended to resist the monologic elements of the superhero genre by including stories that were personal, topical, satirical, and, above all else,

subversive. Whereas the previous era's comics thrived only when aligning themselves with the dominant ideologies, these comics thrived by reacting against them. Creators like R. Crumb and Harvey Pekar did not create elaborate epic universes; their comics were about personal and social issues rather than far-away adventures in fantasy worlds. Pekar's comic series titled American Splendor is a good example of a dialogic text, since it was influenced not by some vague national identity, but rather by Pekar's real life; the series "recounted various autobiographical stories of everyday life in Cleveland where he worked as a hospital porter" and featured a "strong left-wing sensibility and a delicious dry wit" (Sabin, Adult 176). Pekar's characters sprang from real life rather than some national archetype, and his use of humor coupled with this verisimilitude makes for a more dialogic text. Pekar's use of humor sets American Splendor apart from the epic, since humor is tied up with the here and now, and "to consider a subject in the context of the unfolding tangible moment is to acknowledge that it has a ridiculous, contingent quality incompatible with the epic aesthetics of completeness and wholeness" (Branham 207). R. Crumb's work is also humorous, if more fanciful. His various comic stories drop the epic qualities entirely and focus rather on "adult," and decidedly non-epic, subject matter; Indeed, "in his selection of subjects, though, Crumb opened broad new vistas by venturing into hitherto unexplored territory. And it was adult territory. At his most sensational, he broke age-old taboos, shattered them; and comics would never again be quite the same" (Harvey 202). Crumb's work is also far removed from anything considered to be epic; instead of nationally upheld ideals, Crumb focuses on social hypocrisies and injustices, sexual fantasies, and personal observations on himself and his surroundings, and offers a multitude of different styles - from autobiography to satire, from surrealism to seriousness, from big-footed cartooning to stark realism. For the first time, then, comics could choose to criticize dominant ideologies

and praise diverse and neglected ones, and this opening up of a dialogic possibility in comics led eventually to a dialogic possibility in the superhero genre, a possibility which would years later find its voice in Frank Miller's The Dark Knight Returns, a work which fascinates both in its ability to inject a dialogic "novel" approach into the genre, as well as in its reaffirmation of the traditional monologic superhero texts upon which it is based.

THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS: ITS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND ITS PLOT

In the mid 80s, the medium of comic books was experiencing a resurgence of popularity thanks to the vast success of “graphic novels,” which were compilations of reprinted multi-issue stories that originally ran in single-issue comic book format. This new format for comics gave the medium a higher prestige value, as well as a greater visibility to adult consumers, thus striking a blow against the perception of comics as strictly for children. The graphic novel had “become emblematic of the comics renaissance generally, and the ‘adult revolution’ in particular. Overnight, it was claimed, comics had developed from cheap, throwaway children’s fare to expensive album-form ‘novels’ for adults to keep on bookshelves” (Sabin, Adult 235). The books responsible for this resurgence are Art Spiegelman’s Maus, a narrative of the Holocaust performed by anthropomorphized cats and mice, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ Watchmen, a reimagining of superheroes from psychological and political perspectives, and Frank Miller’s The Dark Knight Returns (Sabin, Adult 235). All of these graphic novels “should be seen against the backdrop of the intellectually-liberating influence of the underground: not only did it reintroduce comics to an adult readership, but it also inspired creators to ‘think bigger’ in every sense” (237). Of these three graphic novels, the most interesting to focus on is The Dark Knight Returns, because it is the “first original superhero work to be reviewed seriously, and often favorably, in the mainstream press,” and it is the only

one of the three that is fueled by a tension between monologic and dialogic ideas (Wright 267). Maus is based on individual stories of the Holocaust acted out with cartoon mice and cats, which makes it completely dialogic since it fuses two diverse and unrelated genres together. Watchmen, which has long been paired with The Dark Knight Returns as a book responsible for reinventing the superhero genre, is very different from Dark Knight in that there is very little inclusion of any of the superhero genre's "epic" qualities in it. The superheroes in this book seem to have left the epic space of the Superman-fueled superhero genre behind completely, and there is never a sense of any kind of dichotomy of "good versus evil" or "superhero versus supervillain" in this story. The superheroes, who for the most part have no superpowers, are muddled by psychological introspection and are stymied by real-world politics and power plays. Its ambivalence both in its attitude toward superheroes, and its heroes' attitudes about crime-fighting, mark it as not anti-heroic, but non-heroic. However, The Dark Knight Returns is quite clearly a superhero story, and is quite clearly a Batman story to boot; as Alan Moore himself writes, "He [Miller] has taken a character whose every trivial and incidental detail is graven in stone on the hearts and minds of the comic fans that make up his audience and managed to dramatically redefine that character without contradicting one jot of the character's mythology . . . Everything is exactly the same, except for the fact that it's all totally different" (Moore, Mark). What makes The Dark Knight Returns a compelling text, then, is the fact that the traditional superhero story is forced to coincide with a multitude of perspectives, voices, styles, and genres. Miller's work somehow manages to straddle the line between the unfettered superhero tradition brought on by Superman and the newer underground sensibility, and therein lies its importance to both the superhero genre and the medium of comics.

The Dark Knight Returns begins ten years after Bruce Wayne has abandoned his

alter ego. Now a man in his mid-50s, he drinks and reminisces with Commissioner Gordon about the good old days as Batman, even though some part of him is disgusted with his new life. After witnessing the horrors inflicted on Gotham by the Mutant gang (a pack of vicious and mindless killers that are running rampant through the city), Bruce Wayne flashes back to his own parents' murders and succumbs to the growing resurgence of his inner Batman. Returning to battle crime in his native city, he kicks up a firestorm of media speculation and criticism, causing a host of media personalities and experts interpret Batman as everything from a fascist sociopath to an all-American hero. Chief among his critics is Dr. Bartholomew Wolper, who sees the hero as a creator of crimes rather than a crimefighter, and sees former Batman villains Two-Face and the Joker as fragile victims of the Batman's war on crime. This point of view leads to the supposed rehabilitation of Two-Face, who was once District Attorney Harvey Dent, Batman's good friend. Bruce Wayne uses his public persona to pay for surgery to correct Dent's facial disfigurement - a face scarred on one side by an acid burn, which left Dent with two personalities: one normal, the other psychotic. Dr. Wolper then declares Dent completely rehabilitated. Yet after Dent is released, a completely bandaged figure calling himself Two-Face asks for five million dollars in ransom or he will destroy Gotham's twin towers. Batman, hoping that this is not really his friend Dent, foils the plan and captures the bandaged ringleader, who turns out to really be Dent/Two-Face. Batman then realizes that Dent's scars are too deep to be fixed, much like his own. Concurrently, a young girl named Carrie Kelley is inspired to take on the mantle of Robin, wearing the traditional costume of Batman's sidekick as she breaks up petty crimes in her neighborhood. Later, Batman has tracked down the leader of the Mutant gang to an old junkyard. The leader is the biggest, nastiest Mutant of them all, with huge muscles and pointed teeth like a vampire. The Mutant leader bests the still-rusty Batman in hand-to-hand combat, but the hero is

saved by Carrie Kelley, who is then taken in by Batman as his new Robin. Meanwhile, the President is worried about the bad press generated by Batman, and enlists the help of Superman to try to talk some sense into the hero. Superman, who has been working for the government by defeating the Soviets in clandestine guerilla skirmishes in besieged Corto Maltese, has become an enigma after having his public presence denied officially by the government, which has made any mention of Superman in the media illegal.

Batman conceives a plan to break up the Mutant gang. He challenges the Mutant leader to a fight in front of all the Mutant gang members, but this time he fights more cunningly and utterly trounces the gang leader. Instantly, the gang splits into splinter groups, one of which being “The Sons of the Batman,” who idolize the hero and fight crime like he does, although more violently and haphazardly. Dr. Wolper, in response to Batman’s authoritarian tactics, decides to let the Joker, who has been living quietly in a mental hospital for years, be a guest on the David Endocrine late-night talk show to prove that his patient is not dangerous. Of course, he *is* dangerous, and he kills everyone at the show with gas that makes victims resemble the Joker. Batman tracks the villain to an amusement park, battles him through a hall of mirrors, and corners him in the Tunnel of Love, where he breaks the villain’s neck. The Joker, still alive and disappointed that Batman failed to kill him, twists his own neck, finishing the job Batman started in order to frame the hero for his murder. Later, the Russians respond to Superman’s secret war against troops in Corto Maltese by launching a special nuclear warhead designed to disrupt electrical devices, causing a blackout in Gotham City. Riots ensue and the Sons of the Batman plan to destroy Gotham, but Batman arrives on horseback and enlists the gang members to stop the riots and put out the fires that are destroying the city. After causing so much commotion, the President sends Superman to destroy Batman, but Batman is ready with missiles, sonic beams,

and a host of other weapons. Superman clearly has the advantage, but this changes when Oliver Queen, formerly the hero Green Arrow, shoots a kryptonite arrow at the Superman, leaving Batman with the opportunity to defeat him. Batman expresses disgust at Superman's mindless adherence to the whims of the American government, and pummels him mercilessly. After defeating Superman, Batman has a heart attack and dies. Wayne Manor explodes into flame, and the Batman saga is finally ended. Or so it would seem. Batman was only faking his death, and Superman hears his heartbeat in his coffin in the ground after Bruce Wayne's funeral, but he decides to keep quiet about it. In response to this, Batman promises to keep underground, both literally and figuratively. Having given up the Batman persona as a favor to Superman, he and the remnants of the Mutant gang plan in the Batcave for a future of crimefighting as a vigilante army that will operate secretly, away from official scrutiny.

## VI

### THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS AND BAKHTIN: A BATTLE BETWEEN MONOLOGIC AND DIALOGIC

Superhero stories have traditionally only had one authorial voice conveying meaning to the reader. Usually, this manifests itself as a third-person omniscient narrator that tells us exactly how the reader should be interpreting the action and leaves us very little room for interpretation. This is the case with much of “Batman versus Doctor Death,” since in nearly every panel there is a top caption that explains exactly what is going on, telling us how we should be properly digesting the story (see **Fig. 1**). In one page in particular, these somewhat overbearing captions are used excessively, in an apparent attempt to hammer home exactly what is going on; a panel where Batman lassoes a window sill is accompanied with the caption, “The Batman throws his lasso up to catch a jutting window sill,” and another one shows Batman parking his car in a vacant lot with the accompanying caption, “The Batman parks his car in the vacant lot where some construction work has been going on” (Batman 56). None of these captions is necessary to comprehend the story because they are merely describing what happens in the panels. The art conveys what is happening in the story without being described in words; if you removed these captions, you would still basically understand what is going on. But this use of captions shows us that this early Batman story is an extremely monologic epic text, since neither competing voices nor instances of ambiguity exist, and since “there is no place in the epic

world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy” (Bakhtin 16). It is almost as if Batman is too weird a character to let stalk silently around Gotham without being chaperoned by those “reassuring” captions. Batman is even called weird in one of the captions (“A weird figure races through the night”), and it seems that the narrative intent of this caption is to put us at ease by telling us outright that Batman is weird, thereby defusing any confusion or bewilderment about the character (Batman 56). He would be weirder if the narration did not call him weird, since we would then have to be perplexed enough in our own minds to eventually classify him as weird, and the narration will not allow us the luxury of coming up with our own conclusions. This is equivalent to Bakhtin’s view of the epic as “given solely by tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself” (Bakhtin 16).

What makes The Dark Knight Returns different in this regard is that there is no overarching monologic narrative voice to be seen in this text. Rather, a multitude of voices are used to convey the story, and for the most part these voices are contentious or contradictory to one another. Whereas in the earlier comics the narration is a singular entity that forces us to interpret the story from only one official perspective, the narration duties in The Dark Knight Returns are passed off to myriad voices, most of which are focused on Batman. A good example of this can be found in the ongoing Batman debate held on the television show “Point vs. Point,” where a Batman supporter debates a Batman detractor; in Book One, we see that the anti-Batman pundit sees Batman as a “social fascist,” and sees newly-reformed villain Harvey Dent (Two-Face) as a sick man that is “not in control of himself” (34). Later, there is another television debate, this time in the style of a “man on the street “ interview (37). The first panel shows a burly black man who says that he likes Batman because “he’s kicking just the right butts -- butts the cops ain’t kicking [ . . . ],” and he hopes Batman “goes after the homos next,” while

the second panel shows a white businessman who says that Batman “makes him sick” because “we must treat the socially mis-oriented with rehabilitative methods,” but, he adds, “No, I’d never live in the city.” We can see here that this story is different from the traditional superhero story in that it gives equal time to alternative voices and perspectives, even those that may contradict each other. Gone is the oppressive narration present in the early Batman stories, replaced by a cacophony of different responses and criticisms about Batman. In the early stories, Batman is beyond criticism, beyond any point of view other than the official one. The Dark Knight Returns gives the superhero story enough room to include alternate views on the central image of Batman without picking a favorite or official voice to carry the story. This is an important step in furthering the dialogic in the superhero story because “dialogism is the name not just for a dualism, but for a necessary *multiplicity* in human perception” (Holquist 22). Any such multiplicity is sure to include perceptions that are personal and illogical, as well as even hostile toward the superhero. It is what Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia*, which is a “situation of a subject surrounded by the myriad responses he or she might make at any particular point,” as well as a “way of conceiving the world as made up of a roiling mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct formal markers” (Holquist 69). This lessens the “epic-ness” of the traditional superhero monologue and moves the superhero into the world of the “novel,” since one of the features of the novel is a “peculiar ability to open a window in discourse from which the extraordinary variety of social languages can be perceived” (72). For, as Bakhtin notes, “in the novel there is no single language; there are rather languages, linked up with each other in a purely stylistic unity” (Bakhtin 415). This unity of multiple voices is the driving force behind this Batman story, since Batman is presented here not as an epic hero but as a focal point for a host of voices and perceptions.

The most interesting of these myriad voices are found in the older mainstays of Batman's world, who see the hero in unique ways that transcend their original characterizations and give us a glimpse into a personal and idiosyncratic mindset. Chief among these is the Joker, Batman's arch-nemesis, who is allowed to have a point of view that differs wildly from his traditional characterization. The Joker's perspective in this story is a departure from the superheroic tradition of simple villains with simple motives; In Book Three, the Joker, who is in the process of handing out poisoned cotton candy to a pack of Cub Scouts, muses to himself about his true feelings toward Batman: "They could put me in a helicopter and fly me up into the air and line the bodies head to toe on the ground in delightful geometric patterns like an endless June Taylor dance routine -- and it would never be enough. No, I don't keep count. But you do. And I love you for it" (36). The implication here, which is echoed throughout much of the text, is that the Joker is motivated by a perverse love for Batman. Whereas the traditional role of the Joker in the original comics had been one of a mere one-dimensional villain, whose motives and personality were always distinctly expressed by the monologic superhero story, this version of the Joker is more personal and enigmatic, giving us insight into a part of his psyche that has never been touched upon before (and, no doubt, could not have been touched upon before in the earlier stories thanks to intense scrutiny and censorship). The Joker's love for Batman is clearly a motivating factor in his crimes, but the exact nature of this love is not clearly defined. Unlike the normal monologic Batman texts of old, we are left with a Joker with a distinct voice, yet one that is atypical and fraught with ambiguity. It soon becomes clear that the multitude of different voices in this text inexorably leads us away from the monologic authorial voice that guided many of the early superhero comics and pushes us toward a more novelistic "indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality"

(Bakhtin 7). The story is being conveyed through a myriad of individual, unofficial voices, and thus the narrative becomes fragmented and disjointed because each of these voices, however valid, is limited in its capacity to witness and describe fully what is happening.

In The Dark Knight Returns, we are forced to see events through the experiences of characters that are limited in their perceptions, or we are left to piece together events in the narrative from fragmented and inconclusive information. A good example of this can be found in Book One, where Batman stops a murderer from stabbing a woman in a dark alley (20). The murderer, who is entirely rendered in black silhouette, is stopped by a black hand, (presumably Batman's, although we never get a good look at it) which breaks through a window and grabs the murderer's arm. The woman turns to find out what grabbed the criminal, and sees only a broken window - the criminal can no longer be seen. Here, there is a disconnect between the action and the perception of the action, and this causes an uncertainty to creep into the narrative. An indeterminate point of view is created thanks to the woman's lack of perception about what is happening to her, causing Batman to exist somewhere outside of what is being perceived by the character, in a nether-space on the fringes of the narrative. Hence, the hero resists any easy definitions and operates a great deal outside of the surrounding characters' perceptions despite the multiple voices that endlessly describe and analyze Batman in the text. This is also the case with the pimp in the cab on the following page. Batman first materializes as a noise on the roof of the cab, but then we see a boot crushing the pimp's wrist into the glass of the cab window, and then sound effects are shown that tell us that the pimp has finally collapsed ("gnaa, gnaa, gnnn-KLUNK") (21). All of this action is happening for the most part outside of our perspective, since our focal point for this scene is the bespectacled cab driver, whose face we focus on in the majority of the panels (see **Fig. 2**). Finally, we see Batman's hand reach in and take the cabby's

ill-gotten money and tear it to pieces in front of him. Batman is presented in a fragmented way, without any dialogue to let us know what exactly is going on, and with few visual clues to let us know that this is in fact Batman. It is interesting to note that this is an action scene that chooses to focus on the most inactive character in the scene, and all the “superheroic” action takes place without the reader seeing the majority of it. This is vastly different from the normal “epic” superhero stories, whose heroes are “entirely externalized in the most elementary, almost literal sense: everything in [them] is exposed and loudly expressed” (Bakhtin 34). Even Superman, the first and arguably most “externalized” of all the superheroes, spends the better part of the text without being clearly seen. In Book Three, Batman, disguised as a beggar, is fighting Bruno, a neo-Nazi gang member, and is interrupted by an exploding wall (8). As Bruno tries to shoot Batman, the bullets are stopped in mid-flight by an unseen force. The next panel shows Bruno tied up with rusty sewer pipes, her machine gun melting as it falls to the ground. A caption in the panel reads, “Bruce -- we have to talk” (8). Superman, who is primarily identified through his costume and general image, never appears visually in this segment, and thus he is seen as a human being would probably see him: not at all; he is merely a collection of effects stemming from unseen causes. When Superman *is* seen, he is for the most part rendered in black silhouette, as he is in Book Three, where four long panels depict him cutting through dark gray clouds on a dark gray night, only to show him finally demolishing a Russian fighter jet (16). Batman and Superman are presented in a more novelistic manner in this work; they are not “loudly expressed” at all, since they have been pushed to the edges of our perceptions, as well as the characters’ perceptions, in the story (Bakhtin 34).

This “muting” of the characters’ more visual and iconic qualities, especially in the case of Superman, is an indication of a dramatic shift away from both the monologic genre we

are familiar with as well as the characters with whom we have heretofore become familiar. In the earlier superhero stories, Batman and Superman had motives we could understand, powers and abilities that they would gladly explain to the reader, and physical appearances that were always easily distinguishable. In The Dark Knight Returns, we are less sure in our estimations of these heroes. They are no longer *the* Batman or *the* Superman of old; Miller broke the canonical traditions of these superheroes, reinventing them as unsettling and sometimes marginal enigmas that were not *the* Batman and *the* Superman, but *a* Batman and *a* Superman - heroes that were results of Miller's idiosyncratic perspective, not of the official interpretations of these characters. Miller's revolutionary take on these superheroes enabled other writers and artists to reinterpret similar texts, meaning that "the years since the publication of Miller's The Dark Knight Returns [have] seen the greatest array of character transmutations and violations of heretofore sacrosanct canonicity" (Urrichio 184). The superheroes could for the first time be shaken loose from their traditional overt meanings and be re-imagined in less monologic terms, opening up the monologic superhero story to a multitude of dialogical possibilities.

Another way in which The Dark Knight Returns is a dialogic text is that it incorporates a great deal of borrowing from other genres and media. And one of the chief media that is being co-opted is television, since so many of the panels are shaped like television screens. The news media, one of the most widely-used television genres in this text, is particularly given much narrative weight, as it is in of Book One, where it is interrupted by a special report from Harvey Dent/ Two-Face announcing his hijacking of Gotham's "twin towers" (42). The television news media is also shown as one of the influencing factors of Bruce Wayne's return as Batman; in Book One, after a commercial for the film The Mark of Zorro (the movie that Bruce Wayne's family was coming out of when his mother and father were gunned

down), Wayne flashes back to his parents' murder and starts changing channels with his remote, only to be bombarded by snippets of news reports of all kinds of criminal activity (“--four killed in a senseless attack on--KLIK--subway deaths reached an all-time high this--KLIK”) that finally brings out the Batman persona (16). Gotham's news programs are an inseparable part of the narrative, because a great amount of information is related through them, and also because they directly affect the characters and the plot.

Genres from media other than television are also incorporated into this text. The epistolary narrative, a staple of many novels, is used in a key scene in Book Four, where an astronaut, stranded aboard a space shuttle that is rendered inoperable by an electromagnetic pulse from a nuclear blast, is writing a letter to his wife explaining how he and the crew “are all dead anyway” and telling her ironically how the letter he is writing will burn up along with himself when the shuttle's orbit decays (16). The use of the epistolary narrative here gives a more personal perspective to the very brief segment with the astronaut, but it is also notable in that it is a letter essentially to nowhere. This strange use of this form, which is appropriate to the bleakness of the subject matter (yet is somewhat alien to the superhero genre) shows how this text plays with different genres in order to bring to mind new layers of meaning, and how the dialogic qualities of the text are emphasized through these different genres. This interplay between genres is an example of how novelistic works are “overwhelmingly intertextual, constantly referring, within themselves, to other works outside them,” and also how they “obsessively *quote* other specific works in one form or another” (Holquist 88). Bernard-Donals refers to the novel as an “anti-genre, an amalgam of various different, dialogized components of monologized literary genres”(108). This is the case with the astronaut's letter, since it is an odd twist on the old epistolary narrative, and an enigmatic choice for a superhero comic book.

And there are also other examples of strange uses of established genres that point to a dialogic reassessment. A good example of this can be found in Book Four, where we hear stories about the problems in Gotham City due to the aftermath of the nuclear blast (27-32). Interviews with four people (a woman, two businessmen, and a priest) tell firsthand accounts about the pandemonium that occurs after the city loses power, yet, strangely, these interviews are not put in panels shaped like television screens. This raises the question of who is giving the interviews and in what way they are being related to the reader. Miller's use of the television news interview is transformed into something less strictly codified as a television program, making these interviews seem to exist apart from the genre that they are based on. The interviews here are interesting not only because of their ambiguity, but also because they reinvent Miller's own method of including television shows into the narrative; hence, they recontextualize a genre that has already been recontextualized.

Possibly the most interesting genre that is being reconfigured in this text is the traditional monologic superhero genre itself. There are numerous examples in this text of images and tropes culled from the earlier superhero texts and redefined in new, sometimes shocking ways. In Book Three, Selena Kyle, formerly the Batman villain known as Catwoman, is found after the Joker has viciously attacked her (32). She is clad in the costume of the superhero Wonder Woman and is tied up with what looks like Wonder Woman's "Lasso of Truth," the traditional weapon of the hero. This is important because it reuses familiar imagery (Wonder Woman's costume) while at the same time undermining it, twisting it satirically to call attention to Wonder Woman's inherently sexist overtones as a character that "appealed to (older) boys owing to [her] undisguised erotic charge" (Sabin, *Adult* 223). There is a less harrowing example of reworked superhero genres shown in Book Three, where a news reporter is interviewing the

owner of a newsstand about a strange object that flew past him “faster than anything;” in response to this, Lola the anchorperson says “faster than a speeding --” before being cut off by the other anchorperson (5). This is a reference to the line “faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound” that was said at the beginning of the Max Fleisher Superman cartoons of the late 30s to explain Superman’s powers. This line has since become a well-known tagline for the hero, which it apparently also is in the fictional world of The Dark Knight Returns, since Lola is using it slyly to refer to the superhero without actually saying his name in order to circumvent the FCC, which has banned all references to Superman in the world of the narrative. Here, the novelistic inclusion of an old Superman tagline is key to the subtleties of the plot. The line is reinterpreted not merely to describe Superman’s powers, as it was originally intended, but also to act in lieu of the hero himself. Miller relies heavily on our awareness of this line to carry the presence of Superman, since this passage would make little sense without the reader knowing what the line comes from and what it means. Another Superman reference that is also used in a similar manner can be seen on page 26 of Book Three, where Superman is revealed in full for the first time. The image shows Superman holding a tank over his head in front of a grim background of silhouetted soldiers being shot to death, and it visually quotes from the cover of Action Comics #1 (the first appearance of the superhero) which shows Superman lifting a 30s-style car into the air while several gangsters run in fear (Shuster and Siegel). Miller is quoting the original image, but he is placing it in a new context with a decidedly darker tone; what was colorful and simplistic is now dark and disturbing (compare **Figs. 4** and **5**). Miller melds the old iconography of Superman into his dialogic text by juxtaposing Superman’s iconic image with real-world horrors, which he does in much of the story. It is evident then that The Dark Knight Returns is a dialogic work, since

“intertextuality and inter-textuality are the novel’s hallmarks,” and this quoting of earlier superhero texts helps to give the story layers of interpretation that would be missing otherwise (Holquist 89).

Another way in which Miller has remade the superhero genre along dialogic lines can be found in the many ways that The Dark Knight Returns incorporates elements of the real world (or the real world of 1986 at least) into the superhero genre. And in many cases, the elements of reality that exist in this text are used to elicit moments of parody or satire. This is evident in the text’s characterization of Ronald Reagan, who is clearly the President of the United States in the story; although he is never referred to by name, he is visually an accurate rendition (and sometimes caricature) of Reagan (see **Fig. 3**). Reagan is satirized in Book Three, where he is shown giving a televised press conference while being *literally* wrapped in the American flag (4). Later, Reagan is shown giving a televised speech about American soldiers engaging the Soviets while wearing a red tie, white shirt, and a star-spangled blazer (13). Reagan’s dialogue here is clearly intended to satirize our Reagan’s relentless optimism (“Now, there’s a lot of loose talk these days about nuclear war . . .well, let me tell you nobody’s running off half-cocked, no sir . . .but we sure as shootin’ aren’t running away, either. We’ve got to secure our-- ahem-- stand up for the cause of freedom”) (15). The next time Reagan appears is in Book Four, where he is in a radiation suit (“ . . .and the bad news, well . . .it looks like those soviets are pretty bad losers, yes, they are. . .”) (11). Reagan appears again, discussing the Batman problem with Superman, but this time, he looks completely different; he is without the trademark black pompadour, and he is riding around on what looks to be a futuristic, tank-treaded walker while wearing a red-and-white-striped nightgown (33). In short, he looks like a doddering old man, which implies that the real Reagan is the same way behind his public

persona. Reagan is thus made ridiculous by being put in “a zone of maximally close contact” where we are able to see his farcical hidden side (Bakhtin 24). The dialogic text can include interpretations of a subject other than the officially sanctioned ones; indeed, the novelistic text can perform a “comical operation of dismemberment” by showing that “the naked object is ridiculous, it’s ‘empty’ clothing, stripped and separated from its person, is also ridiculous” (Bakhtin 24). To see Reagan in this more personal setting is to see him as a comical figure, since “as a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close . . . . Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out . . . .” (Bakhtin 23). In using Reagan this way, Miller has distanced himself even further from the epic, since the world of Batman no longer “stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance” (14). This Gotham City is not the abstract landscape that it once was; there are now parallels between it and our reality that keep the work from becoming merely an abstract adventure.

Other real-world figures are satirized in this work as well, such as David Endocrine, the obvious parody of David Letterman in Book Three, on whose show the Joker makes his escape by poisoning the host and the audience, leaving them dead but with huge Jokeresque smiles on their faces (25). Here, Miller is using one of the traditional weapons of the Joker (Joker Venom, a poison that makes its victims resemble the Joker) to make a wry comment on the nature of mainstream comedy shows like “Late Night with David Letterman”; the image of a dead live audience, all sporting identical laughing Joker faces, seems to satirize the inanity of these shows, revealing them as prefabricated, insincere, and, above all, *dead*. Another instance of real-world parody occurs in Book Four, where the “Nixons,” a “splinter group” of the gang

that Batman has just broken up, attempt to rob a convenience store before being shot to death by the “Sons of the Batman,” another splinter group (10). The satirical content of this group of robbers dressed like Richard Nixon (himself famously accused of being a thief) is typical of how the real world is informing this text, leading us away from the distant epic interpretations of Batman and into the contemporary “novelistic” world: “For Bakhtin, contemporaneity and laughter are at the center of this process and seen to be almost inseparable” (Branham 207). Even though the epic world of our superheroes is essentially absurd, Miller shows that it is our own world that is the most laughable.

It is clear that The Dark Knight Returns is far more dialogic than the traditional superhero story. But could it be said that Miller has erased entirely the traditional monologic aspects of the genre in favor of a less strictly delineated superhero tale? After all, it is very clear that Miller is incorporating dialogic techniques, such as multiple voices (heteroglossia), elements of reality, and parody into the long-stagnant superhero genre. However, what is unclear is the extent to which the monologic superhero tradition has been forsaken in favor of this new approach. In the battle between the monologic and dialogic, of the epic and the novel, which side has taken control of this text? Numerous instances of dialogic storytelling exist in this text, but it would be a mistake to insist that the traditional monologic Batman story has been lost entirely. In fact, much evidence suggests that most of the epic qualities of Batman remain firm despite all of Miller’s revisionism.

The use of multiple voices and perspectives in The Dark Knight Returns is revolutionary for the superhero genre, yet in several instances, the story is carried by only one voice, an unambiguous authorial voice that is removed from the perspectives of the characters, leaving the reader with only one way to interpret the text. For instance, in Book Two, the

narrative shifts abruptly to a third person omniscient point of view (13). The narration tells the story of Margaret Corcoran, a waitress who is coming home on the subway and is killed when members of the Mutant gang put a grenade in her purse. The narration tells us about how she has bought a paint set for her son (“She pictures Robert’s able little hands, his eager smile . . . her purse strap bites into her shoulder . . . and Margaret Corcoran, who had not pleaded with Blue-Cross when they cancelled her insurance or with Citicorp when they repossessed her car . . . begs like a wino for a ten-dollar paint set”). The final panel is of a television news anchor saying, “Woman explodes in subway station -- film at eleven.” It is clear that the narration tells us exactly what we should think about these events, and leaves us with no room for alternative interpretations. The story is short but memorably sad, and there is no other way to interpret it, since the narrator clearly intends to convey the suffering of Margaret and to make sure that we are appropriately appalled by it. The glib news segment at the end of this brief story ironically satirizes the predatory nature of the television news media, since it contrasts with the pathos of the woman’s plight. All in all, this sequence provides no confusion about how the reader should interpret it, since the point of view is for the most part explicit. Whereas before the text is rife with a cacophony of voices and perspectives, here the reader is clearly supposed to sympathize with this poor woman, which is obvious thanks to the authoritative monologic narration. This points to an insistence on the monologic traditions of the old superhero tales, where we were told precisely how to think about the story we were reading; in an epic text, “point of view and evaluation are fused with the subject into one inseparable whole,” and it is clear that Miller’s narration has already interpreted this part of the story for us (Bakhtin 17). This also happens at other similar points in the text, such as in Book Two, where this narrator tells the story of Peppi Spandek, a shop owner who “can’t say he approves of this Batman,” but nevertheless saves a

woman from a mugging by assaulting the mugger with a rolling pin, even though, as the narration ultimately notes, “nobody is hurt badly enough for this to make the news” (34). There is also a similarly told story where Iron Man Vasquez, a leg breaker and down-and out prizefighter, reads about Batman in Time and decides to dress like the hero and shoot his boss; this *was* violent enough to make the news, since the last panel shows Lola the news anchor say, “Crazed would-be killer dresses as Batman -- after this...” (34). The irony of these random stories is that they are only trivially connected to the main story, but are the most outright monologic segments in the text. Whereas the superhero monologic tradition is being splintered by the inclusive dialogic narrative in this text, these stories, which seem to be outwardly more novelistic thanks to their contemporary real-world subject matter, are in fact the most monologic. Nowhere else in the text is there an authorial voice that interprets the subject matter for us. Here, the traditionally monologic superhero story is treated in a dialogic way, while the more “novelistic” real-world subject matter is presented as monologic. Interestingly, the traditional modes of presentation of these genres are reversed, creating a strange tension between monologic and dialogic superiority that is unusual because it is complicated because we are used to neither dialogic superhero tales or monologic novel material. Indeed, “dialogism conceives history as a constant contest between monologue and dialogue, with the possibility of reversions always present,” but it is strange to see Miller use monologue to tell these “novelistic” segments, and dialogue in the superhero world, since we are not used to these genres being presented in this way (Holquist 75).

The Dark Knight Returns reinterprets Batman in very non-traditional ways, some of which may be thought of as subversive, immoral, and non-heroic. However, it is clear in certain sections of this work that Miller has not left out the simplistic superhero morality that had

driven the genre for decades beforehand. While in many sections of the text, Batman's actions are inscrutably cruel and sadistic, a number of instances illustrate how the traditional morality of the superhero is upheld and idealized. In Book Two, the mutant gang members have kidnapped the child of a wealthy industrialist and are threatening to kill the boy if payment is not received (8). The kidnapers are then assaulted by Batman, who breaks through a wall to take the weapon of the most heavily-armed gang member and shoots the other gang member - who has a pistol to the child's head - in the shoulder. The young boy is then picked up by Batman and cradled in the hero's arms. Here, clearly, Batman is playing the traditional role of the straightforward superhero, a "good guy" fighting the "bad guys." The heroism found here is clearly meant to be lauded, and the villains are meant to be eradicated by the hero. The distinction between the morality of Batman and the villainous Mutant gang members is clearly delineated; in Book Two, Batman is seemingly in the process of killing all of the gang members with machine rounds fired from his tank-like Batmobile, but he eventually reveals that he isn't killing anybody: "Rubber bullets. Honest" (20). This reveals that his traditionally non-lethal ways are intact, even in this futuristic nightmarish landscape. Later, Batman is faced with the choice of either staying in his Batmobile and killing the Mutant gang leader with a lethal round, or answering the gang leader's challenge to a hand-to-hand fight. Although Batman is tempted to put an end to the gang leader, he ultimately faces him in a straight fight, even though Batman knows that there is a strong possibility that he will receive a savage beating (which he does). Batman is obviously being portrayed in these examples as a "good guy" with a sense of fairness and restraint, and a superhero in the traditional Superman-inspired mold. This example flies in the face of such criticisms as Sabin's view of Batman being "essentially a fascist personality" (Adult 88). An argument for Batman being a "fascist" could definitely be made from some of his actions in this

story, but a more compelling argument would be how Batman has kept a great deal of his superheroic morality intact despite being given a more totalitarian characterization in this work. A good example of this can be seen in the climactic battle with the Joker in Book Three, where he escapes into the Hall of Mirrors at the fair, prompting a young boy to say to the villain, “You’re the Joker, right? Batman’s gonna kick your ass” (41). The Joker takes the boy hostage, until Batman crashes through a mirror and saves the child, and then Batman and the Joker fight it out until the Joker makes an escape (42).. The young boy is about to tell Batman that he has to go “kick the Joker’s ass,” when Batman, still groggy from his wounds, tells the boy, “ Watch your language, son.” The boy then sheepishly says “Yes, sir” (42).

This example points to the fact that Batman is still the hero he always has been, since he commands respect even from those in the story that are too young to really know who Batman is. This boy somehow can discern instantly the dichotomy of good and evil that Batman and the Joker represent, even though it is clear that both the media and the city’s populace cannot. This child is interesting because he urges Batman to fight the Joker, which is exactly what he has been doing for decades beforehand. In some respects the boy here is one of the few people in the narrative who can still identify the original simplicity of these two characters; he instantly picks up on the fact that the showdown between Batman and the Joker is supposed to be an epic battle between epic characters. Even in the face of the myriad changes that Miller has made to the superhero tale, this story is still able to be reduced to this boy’s simple equation of Batman “kicking Joker’s ass.” Even if the Joker has a perverse attraction to Batman, and even though Batman commits cruel acts of violence in his war against crime, the fundamental core of the original epic superhero texts remains intact, with a superhero saving lives and a supervillain taking them.

The insistence of the monologic superhero tradition here shows that the superhero genre is an epic genre whose “rigidity and canonic quality in all classical eras of [its] development” is maintained because “variations from era to era, from trend to trend or school to school are peripheral and do not affect [its] ossified generic skeleton” (Bakhtin 8). Even though Miller has added a plethora of dialogic techniques into the superhero genre, the structure is still basically the same. Kawa notes that “it is true that [The Dark Knight Returns] deconstructed and criticised nearly fifty years of comics history, and stretched the boundaries of the genre,” but it did not break these boundaries because Batman still is a character who wages war on crime like he always has, regardless of the complexities of the world he now operates in (Kawa 216). The Dark Knight Returns is a reinterpretation of the original Batman stories, yet people “tend to forget that [it reveals] in [its] interpretation of the classic superhero trappings, and [brings] new meaning to its stock formula“ (216). Although many would call this Batman sadistic and asocial, there is a precedent for heroes to be “portrayed as the lonely individual confronting the forces of evil without support from a cowed or corrupt or impotent community; adapted, that is to say, to the archetypal image embodied in Tarzan of the Apes, Superman, and Batman” (Fiedler 391). Batman was initially one of these heroes, and in Miller’s hands he still is. The truth is that Miller has infused the traditions of the superhero story with newer novelistic sensibilities, but the traditions are still in existence, and are still an important aspect of the plot. After all, Batman sends much of the text solving crimes and fighting criminals, which is what he has always done. And in some ways all of these novelistic differences only further elucidate how much of a distanced, monologic epic hero he still is. The text even comments on Batman’s epic nature. In Book Four, the new Police Commissioner Ellen Yindel, who had earlier issued an arrest warrant for Batman, watches the hero ride up on horseback to the remaining Mutant gang members and

enlist their help in subduing the riots in Gotham City, which were precipitated by a blackout brought on by a Soviet nuclear blast; Commissioner Yindel is prodded by an officer to arrest Batman, but she balks, saying, “No. No. He’s . . .too big . . . “ (24). Yindel has realized that Batman, who on horseback invokes the image of an actual knight, is an epic character for whom the rules of this more complex and novelistic Gotham City somehow do not apply, as if the character does not belong in this world at all.

Batman maintains much of his original epic qualities in The Dark Knight Returns. Even though most of the Batman mythos has been exploded and reformed along dialogic lines, Batman himself remains the superhero that he has been before. This can be seen in Batman’s encounter with the two police officers in Book One, where the older officer remembers Batman, having seen the hero when he was a rookie on the police force many years ago, and chastises his younger partner for trying to arrest Batman: “Don’t try it, kid. He’s being patient with you as it is.” Batman tells the older officer to tell Commissioner Gordon to get in touch with him, to which the officer replies, “Sure thing, Bats. But how’s he sposed [sic] to get in touch with -- Oh, yeah! Now I remember . . .” (32). What the officer remembers is the Bat-Signal, a floodlight with the bat insignia on it that has been used by Commissioner Gordon since the early stories to summon Batman. This officer remembers Batman because the hero has remained static and unchanging, and this fits with Bakhtin’s definition of an epic hero because “there is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation. All his potential, all his possibilities are realized utterly in his external social position, in the whole of his fate and even in his external appearance” (Bakhtin 34). Batman is still a man who dresses up like a bat and terrorizes the criminal element of Gotham City - this has not changed from the original concept. Even though there are many, many voices that interpret and reinterpret Batman in The Dark Knight Returns,

making him seem at times to be an enigmatic and perhaps vacant textual center that is impossible to define clearly, an equal number of moments exist in the text where Batman's motives and actions are so straightforwardly presented to the reader that they could fit into any of the more monologic Batman stories that preceded it. A good example of this can be seen in Book One, where Commissioner Gordon and Batman are on a rooftop discussing Two-Face's latest crime under the glaring light of the Bat-Signal (38). The scene is a familiar one in the Batman mythos, and it is rendered in a clear-cut style that is free from any alternate points of view or narrative fragmentation (see **Fig. 6**). It is simply the point in any Batman story where these two characters meet to discuss the criminal and his motives under the light of the Bat-Signal. It is free from moments of dialogic intrusion, since it places Batman in such a familiar setting and refuses to allow any other perspectives to creep into this traditional scene. Critics have long called the Batman of The Dark Knight Returns a radical interpretation of the original, but it is not so clear whether Batman has changed, or whether the world surrounding him has changed. Batman comments on this himself in Book One, where he is shown leaping through the air and talking to himself about his return to being Batman: "This should be agony. I should be a mass of aching muscle-- broken, spent, unable to move. And, were I an older man, I surely would . . .but I'm a man of thirty-- of twenty again. The rain on my chest is a baptism-- I'm born again . . ." (26).

So, Batman is admitting that he is the same hero he always was, and there is little evidence in the text to suggest that he is not. He remains an epic hero because he is "hopelessly ready-made; he is all there, from beginning to end he coincides with himself, he is absolutely equal to himself. He is, furthermore, completely externalized" (Bakhtin 34). Although everything around him has changed and continues to change away from the traditional epic superhero genre, Batman remains fairly constant. The only confusion about his character occurs at the beginning

of the story, where he has been retired from being Batman for ten years, and the end of the story, where Batman “dies” and Bruce Wayne goes underground to continue the fight against crime. But whenever Bruce Wayne takes on the Batman persona in this work, he is the same superhero he always was. As Uricchio and Pearson say, “Neither author, nor medium, nor primary texts, nor time period defines the Batman. In the absence of these other markers, character, that is, a set of key components, become the primary marker of Batman texts: the key components of the Batman character have constituted sine qua non for any Batman narrative in any medium” (185). What this means is that Batman is not a character so much as a collection of external cues and motifs that add up to Batman. Batman’s meeting with Commissioner Gordon is one of these cues, as are the Bat-Signal, the Batmobile, Batman’s murdered parents (and Batman’s resulting obsession), and a host of other tropes that tell us that we are in Batman’s world. But possibly the most important of these motifs is Batman’s costume itself, which, as has been stated earlier, is arguably the most important of these “key components” of the character. Batman’s costume is intact in The Dark Knight Returns, and it is never without the trademark qualities that we are familiar with, such as the pointy bat ears, the bat insignia on the chest, the cape, and the yellow utility belt. It is interesting to note that even at the end of the story, where Batman is preparing to battle Superman for the final time in Book Four, the specialized protective suit that Batman wears is *still* adorned with these trademarks (except for the bat-icon on the chest, strangely enough) (38). Even though this is a costume that we have never seen before, it is still identifiable as Batman’s because it has enough visual cues to tell us who the character is (see **Fig. 7**). This points to the permanence and invariability of Batman, showing that he is an epic hero after all because everything about him is represented by these trademark cues, these externalized manifestations of character. If we were to remove enough of these visual cues, then Batman

would disappear. (For instance, if we just removed the bat-ears from Batman's battle-suit, then it is instantly impossible to read the suit as a Batman suit). It is interesting to note in Book Four that the bat-eared helmet is ripped off by Superman just before Batman starts to "die," since in a strange way this foreshadows Bruce Wayne's abandoning of the Batman persona by faking his death, as if Batman cannot live without a bat-mask (39). In short, then, Batman retains a great deal of his epic qualities through these integral "bat-cues," even though much of the world around him has suffered from a novelistic surge in ambiguity and fragmentation.

## VII

### THE DARK KNIGHT STRIKES AGAIN: AN OVERVIEW

The Dark Knight Strikes Again is an interesting text for many reasons. First of all, as a sequel to The Dark Knight Returns, it can be seen as an extension of the original work as well as a reaction to it, or perhaps against it. In many ways, the sequel reads like a parodic take on the original, with its incessant subversion of the stylistic and artistic motifs that made The Dark Knight Returns a groundbreaking success. Hence, the sequel could be read as metafiction, since it is a self-conscious and ironic commentary on the original. Secondly, as a more modern work, it can be used to gauge the dialogic changes to the superhero narrative that have occurred since the inception of the original. The Dark Knight Strikes Again also has many instances of dialogic reinterpretation of the monologic superhero tradition, and in some respects it surpasses its prequel by upping the narrative openness and decreasing the epic qualities of Batman to an even lower level.

The story begins three years after the events in The Dark Knight Returns. America is enjoying a resurgence in wealth, but Bruce Wayne knows that there is something troublesome behind the facade, and has decided to reemerge as Batman to set things straight. He send Carrie Kelley, formerly Robin and now Catgirl, to free The Atom, who has the superpower of shrinking, even to the subatomic level, and has been trapped in a petri dish unaware of who he

is. Superman, who is still working for the government, grows extraordinarily angry at Batman, who broke his promise of operating only underground. It is revealed shortly that the President of the United States is nothing but a hologram under the control of Lex Luthor, arch-nemesis to Superman. Batman sends Catgirl in to rescue another hero, The Flash, the Fastest Man Alive, who is trapped in a giant turbine and is forced to run all day in circles to generate cheap electricity. Later, in a space station on the dark side of the moon, Superman meets with fellow heroes Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel to discuss his growing dissatisfaction from working for a country controlled by Lex Luthor. Luthor finds out about this, and appears as a hologram to reveal his partner-in-crime Brainiac, a cybernetic alien that shrinks cities down to miniscule proportions and collects them. Brainiac has stolen the Bottle City of Kandor, an entire Kryptonian city originally shrunk and stolen by Brainiac before Krypton was destroyed. As punishment for Superman's rebelliousness and Batman's relentlessness, Brainiac kills one of the tiny families in Kandor, which enrages Superman. He crashes into Batman's lair, but Batman is ready for him. After Batman springs several traps on Superman, The Flash enters and places multiple explosive mines on Superman, which knock him around. Green Arrow then shoots a kryptonite arrow at Superman, and then The Atom throws off Superman's equilibrium by shrinking and jumping on Superman's inner ear. Finally, Batman appears wearing two giant gauntlets made entirely of kryptonite, and pummels Superman without mercy.

Batman and Catgirl attack Luthor and his henchman. After explaining that he just destroyed all of the computer files that Luthor used to blackmail the world, Batman carves a Z into Luthor's face. Superman, still badly beaten by Batman, is sulking at the North Pole when Wonder Woman appears and chastises Superman thoroughly, goading him into making love to her. Brainiac then stages a phony alien attack on Metropolis and orders Superman to lose the fight

to dispel the growing superhero furor. But Supergirl, the teenage daughter of Superman and Wonder Woman, chooses to destroy the giant alien ravaging Metropolis instead. Concurrently, Batman, The Flash, and Catgirl go to the rain forest to talk with the son of Hawkman and Hawkwoman, who tells the heroes that Luthor killed his parents with a powerful space cannon that has also incinerated much of the rainforest. Batman, no doubt identifying with the Hawk children losing their parents, tells the children that they will wreak retribution, which Batman says he personally never received.

Cashing in on the furor caused by this reemergence of the superheroes are the Superchix -Batgirl, Wonder Girl, and Black Canary - three scantily-clad and vapid performers who have formed a pop band. The Superchix cause a furor among the right-leaning media, but they also have become huge media stars. The Superchix are set to give a concert, which causes pandemonium and prompts Luthor to send armed troops to start firing into the crowd. But Batman and his newly-freed superheroes use this to their own advantage, choosing this time to mount an offensive against Luthor's troops. In retaliation, Luthor destroys half of Metropolis. Batman then appears to Superman as a hologram and figures out that Braniac has the Bottle City of Kandor. Batman then tells Superman to do what he says at all costs, which raises Supergirl's ire. Superman decides however to listen to Batman. Later, Catgirl meets with Saturn Girl, who can see the future. She tells Catgirl that a crazed Jokerlike villain will soon attack her. Catgirl has already met this villain and has killed him, but Catgirl remains uncertain. (The villain is seen throughout most of this work killing off the lesser superheroes who have been coming out of the woodwork).

Batman soon allows himself to be captured by Lex Luthor, who has Batman shackled and is beating him mercilessly. Luthor explains his plan of incinerating the rest of

Metropolis with his space cannons, but instead Green Lantern appears and disintegrates the cannons. Luthor, totally perplexed, asks Batman why he allowed himself to be captured and beaten within an inch of his life, to which Batman explains that he is there to watch Luthor die. Just as he says this, the son of Hawkman burst through a window and smashes Luthor in the head with a mace to Batman's grim amusement. Concurrently, Supergirl allows herself to be captured by Brainiac. After asking to see Kandor, she cries a single tear containing The Atom shrunk down to atomic size. The Atom gets inside the bottle holding Kandor and grows to a relatively giant size and smashes the bottle, releasing the millions of tiny Kryptonians inside. Freed from the bottle's de-powering effects, the Kryptonians join their power with Supergirl and together they fry Brainiac with their eye-beams.

Later, Batman gets a distress call from the Bat-Cave. It's Catgirl, and she is being savagely attacked by the Jokerlike villain. Batman appears as a hologram to enact the Batcave's self destruct mechanism. When the villain gives the counter code to stop the self-destruct sequence, Batman realizes it is Dick Grayson, the original Robin, who has undergone gene therapy to make him nearly invulnerable. Batman stalls Robin long enough to start the self-destruct mechanism, which is an underground volcano that Batman releases with explosives. He finally arrives to finish off the Boy Wonder, cutting his head off with an axe. When Robin catches his own head and puts it back on his body, Batman tackles him off a ledge, and the two of them fall towards the oncoming lava. When Batman gives the word, Superman appears to fly Batman to safety, and Robin is destroyed in the lava. Batman gives Catgirl the medical attention she needs in the new flying Batmobile, while Superman, who now realizes his own power and refutes mankind's laws, hovers over the Earth with Supergirl and discusses what they should do next with their world.

## VIII

### THE DARK KNIGHT STRIKES AGAIN, BAKHTIN, AND POSTMODERNISM: HEROES OF A NEW ERA?

The Dark Knight Strikes Again is even more of a foray into the world of the dialogic than its predecessor. Whereas the story in the original was furthered by a multitude of voices from different genres and perspectives, opening up the narrative to fragmentation and ambiguity, The Dark Knight Strikes Again uses these different voices in an even greater capacity, making the whole work appear to be a sounding board for whatever genre Miller wants to quote from. Film is one of these media, as can be seen on page 144, where the first panel shows a baby careening down a flight of steps in a stroller during Braniac's relentless fight with Superman, and the second shows the baby's doll tossed in mid-air to imply that the baby has met with a tragic end. This is a brief but unmistakable quote of the oft-imitated "Odessa Steps" sequence from the silent classic Battleship Potemkin by Russian film pioneer Sergei Eisenstein. As Helen Grace points out, in this scene dissenters of the tsarist government are eradicated by troops on the steps of Odessa - a scene of horror culminating in the image of a baby carriage rolling down the steps through the carnage. Another film reference occurs when Batman carves a "Z" into Lex Luthor's face (110). This is an obvious reference to the Zorro movies and television shows, as well as to The Mark of Zorro, which Miller established in The Dark Knight Returns as

the film that Thomas and Martha Wayne took young Bruce to see just before they were murdered in front of him. These examples show this as a dialogic work, for the inclusion of these genres “exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them” (Bakhtin 5). The television news media, relentlessly caricatured and lampooned in The Dark Knight Strikes Again, is also incorporated in this way, but differently than in The Dark Knight Returns, since the television news media in the original book did not include caricatures of actual real-world news anchors and pundits, whereas this text does. On page 94-95 of The Dark Knight Strikes Again, stylized and somewhat grotesque caricatures of Chris Matthews, George Stephanopolous, George F. Will, and Don Imus discuss the rising tide of superheroism in ways that exaggerate and lampoon their respective personalities: Chris Matthews is full of wrathful confusion (“Are they heroes? Or are they assholes?”), George F. Will exhibits intellectual elitism (“The American people are a drooling pack of troglodytes. This is exhibitionism, pure and simple.”), and Don Imus is confused (“I don’t understand what anybody’s saying.”). These scenes show that this work is even more dialogic than the first Dark Knight, since we now are not only satirizing a genre, but also the real-world figures that propagate this genre. If the epic is set in “the nationally heroic past” and the “world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests,’” then the world that Miller has created for this sequel is doubly non-epic, since it is both parodying the genre of television news as it exists today (personality-driven, politicized punditry) and satirizing the real-world figures that promulgate this type of news, showing them as unable to form a consensus on who is “first” and “best” thanks to their personal biases and peccadilloes (Bakhtin 13).

Miller also uses images from diverse corners of both the superhero world and

other genres of comics to be news anchors as well. This can be seen where Alfred E. Neuman, iconic mascot of Mad Magazine, is relating a news snippet about the Superchix concert (127). Also on this page is the unnamed host of “Super Manga Giant Big News,” who is a pastiche of many of the clichés of Japanese Manga comic characters: inhumanly huge eyes, tiny noses, unnatural hair colors, oversexualized body parts, and cybernetic limbs. The host even speaks in a terrible translation - “Hugely large alien spaceship attack whole big planet!” Bat-Mite even makes an appearance as a news reporter describing crudely the rift between Batchick and the rest of the Superchix (199). Some of the sillier comic characters are being used to relate the news here, which implies that Miller is satirizing the news media through them, as well as through real-world news personalities. Miller also satirizes news programs on the Internet, a target for satire that is new for Miller’s Batman. The “Happy Hacker,” an oversexed female stereotype (who may or may not be a digital creation) covers the story of Catgirl’s rescue of The Atom, giving “the real dish” as to what happened (34). This character is clearly meant to satirize the oversexed nature of the Internet, and creates a similar effect of imparting a degree of silliness into the news. This is also accomplished when the anchor for “scifigeeknews.com,” a strange, green-skinned alien (who also is probably a digital image), segues back to the “killer asteroid” that Superman soon destroys (65). So many strange entities are relaying newscasts to the reader that it becomes clear that this work is a dialogic and novelistic work, because “it celebrates the grotesque body of the world” by including so many variations on both the real-world and the genre-based figures; both groups are used to show the infinite variety of both humanity and the genre of comics (Holquist 90). The news, then, has become less of a genre and more of a representation of humanity in its entirety, since so many traditional and non-traditional news anchors have equal voices in this text.

The Dark Knight Strikes Again, like its predecessor, co-opts both the superhero genre and the medium of comics in intriguing ways. For example, a woman bystander recontextualizes another of Superman's famous taglines ("Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!") as she narrowly avoids getting crushed by Superman as he is swatted to the Earth by Brainiac; the only difference is that the woman's response is reconfigured as comedy - "Look! Up in the sky! It's -- Oh shit!" (129). Batman does the same thing when he says, "Look. Up in the sky. Gosh, we're all *impressed*, down here" (80). Both of these reconfigured lines take the familiar, heroic wonder associated with Superman and, in essence, trample on it, turning the ideal hero into the subject of mockery. The treatment of Superman here, as in the rest of Miller's Dark Knight universe, shows a turn toward "the carnivalization of the high genres by popular comic traditions that recast myth in comic patterns and replace the distant and heroic with the familiar and mortal" (Branham 207). Superman, the venerable progenitor of a whole genre, is reduced to tatters, and not even the idioms and epithets that are attributed to him survive the onslaught of this outright mockery. It is little wonder that Superman gets beaten within an inch of his life by Batman right after he satirizes Superman's catchphrase - the attack on the epic hero is here waged on all fronts, from his history, to his ideologically-laden catchphrases, and finally to his person.

But there are instances where the text does much the same with the Batman mythos, albeit less vehemently than in its treatment of Superman. The campy 60s Batman television show, which portrayed the hero in less than reverent terms, is referenced when Batman activates the Batcave's self-destruct sequence by saying, "Alfred. Command: Destruct. Code: Zap. Biff. Pow." The reconfigured Jokeresque Robin, who is attacking Catgirl in the Batcave, tries to counter with the abort code, "Kitt. Newmar. Craig" (239). The "Zap, Biff, Pow" refers to

the show's tendency to punctuate the onscreen action with comic book sound effects that would flash on the screen whenever Batman or Robin punched out a villain, but it also refers indirectly to the comics medium itself, where sound effects are written out in large splashy letters over or next to the action. The latter sequence is made up of last names of actresses who starred in the series - Eartha Kitt and Julie Newmar as Catwoman, Yvonne Craig as Batgirl. Invoking these sillier aspects of Batman is an intriguing choice because it precedes the final battle between Batman and Robin and thereby deflates the importance of it, as if quoting the old television show Batman is a sign to readers not to take the ending too seriously. This is a big difference from the original Dark Knight, where the kitschy, campy world of the television show is nowhere to be seen. Even though many diverse points of view are used to prod and pick at Batman in The Dark Knight Returns, none of these includes any mention of the 60s Batman show, possibly because the show was *still* how the world saw Batman in 1986. (Miller's work influenced Batman, the hugely successful Tim Burton film released in 1989 that popularized a more dark and brooding Batman and supplanted the fame of the television show).

The Bakhtinian interpretations of these texts reveal that The Dark Knight Strikes Again is somewhat more of a dialogic text than its predecessor, if only for the fact that it steps almost completely outside of the traditional epic source material by becoming a completely satirical work. The Dark Knight Returns, while infusing a satirical and cockeyed sensibility to the stoic world of the superheroic ideal, was not a full satire because it did not satirize Batman, even though it did satirize many aspects of his world. The Dark Knight Strikes Again, on the other hand, has taken a less reverential stance toward its hero, and it also takes a similar stance toward its prequel, parodying both in the course of this work. One need only look at the progression of the Batman's appearance in this text to figure out that Miller is descending (or

ascending) into self-parody. Towards the end of this text, Batman starts to lose the iconic Batman look that has heretofore been canonical; there are several panels where Batman, who has endured an incredible beating from Lex Luthor, starts to lose costume details, such as his Bat-ears, which now hang down in front in a manner suggesting a puppy dog's ears (243). His lower jaw is a mass of broken teeth and blood stains (a mass of jumbled lines, actually), and his mask is starting to rip at the seams. And, amazingly, it is now possible to see his actual eyeballs under his mask instead of the traditional "two white slits" that Feiffer pointed out. He looks, in short, like a beaten-up hobo in a hand-me-down Bat-costume from twenty years ago. The Batman here is a parodic vision of the first Dark Knight, in which the physical appearance of Batman morphed from a more iconic-looking Batman (with a standard blue and gray costume) to a huge, grizzled (and often wounded) behemoth in a dark gray costume. The satire comes from taking the grimness of the Batman found in The Dark Knight Returns and increasing it to a ridiculous level; before Batman was an emblem of machismo toughness, but now he is so resilient that he can be beaten to the point that his costume, his outward self, shreds to pieces (compare **Figs. 8** and **9**). Hence, Batman is not the stoic, resilient hero he is in the original book, but rather an ironic magnification of the Batman in The Dark Knight Returns as well as a parody of its gritty tone. Hence, he is a self-aware jab at his earlier self, making him less a hero than a meta-joke, a parodic, self-conscious ironic entity. This is a hallmark of postmodern literature, which "presents itself as deliberately, consciously antiheroic," meaning that this Batman is operating outside of the parameters of the superhero, acting as a more of a satire of another text than a superhero in his own right (Wilde 131).

Kawa says that, due to the original Dark Knight and the other new wave of comics in the 80s, the "genre fully entered its postmodern period," but he is only partially right

(216). The Batman of The Dark Knight Returns, for the most part, adhered to the basic epic traditions that has defined him from the beginning of his fictional life, and was thus presented in a way that ultimately revealed the respect that Miller had for the character and the tacit significance with which the reader is supposed to treat him. For all of the many changes to Batman in The Dark Knight Returns, he never becomes an object of irony; the joke was never on him. Clearly, the Batman of The Dark Knight Strikes Again is used in a more fully postmodern way to comment satirically upon earlier incarnations of the character, since the character invokes the earlier versions of himself primarily to defuse the epic qualities of himself. This postmodern take on Batman dovetails with the Bakhtinian discussion of this work, in that both discussions lead to a lessening of the importance of epic qualities to the hero. The difference here is that a Bakhtinian explanation of this phenomenon centers around a “spirit of process and inclusiveness” that allows for a diverse set of genres and voices, while a postmodern take on this phenomenon is more concerned with the self-awareness of the text, with a Batman that is used primarily as a self-conscious magnification of earlier aspects of the Batman character (Bakhtin 7). Whereas Bakhtin focuses on the dialogic effect of allowing multiple perspectives to puncture the hermetically sealed world of the epic, allowing the modern world to be included in all its infinite variety, a postmodernist would focus on the “immense process of the destruction of meaning” that would render these perspectives less important (Baudrillard 160). The postmodern take on Batman in The Dark Knight Strikes Again is driven by a kind of dearth of significance more than a desire for heteroglossia, since he is basically an ironic figure that resists his epic qualities by having no defined qualities, or having qualities that fluctuate from one meaning to the next. In the first Dark Knight, Batman’s meaning was not very flexible, and he somehow remained the traditional Batman even though other subversions were at work in his world. The

Batman in the latter Dark Knight is more of a slippery character to pin down. He goes from a parody of the earlier Miller Batman to a reminder of the 60s television show in the wink of an eye. He unmask himself on page 183 to incite a riot against the Lex Luthor-controlled government. And, bizarrely, he is seen casually drinking tea from a dainty cup after he has thwarted Luthor's plans to destroy Metropolis, right before Luthor is killed by the new Hawkman (231). In short, his characterization is all over the proverbial map. He is not driven by inclusiveness but by a multitude of meanings that slip in and out of the character. Jean-François Lyotard, in his discussion of "graphic artists" (which is about graphic designers instead of comic book artists), explains how they "'target' an object, but the target keeps shifting: "It cannot be said that they commune, or even dialogue, with 'their' people. On the contrary, they are banking on an unsure, unforeseeable, perhaps impossible communication" (45). Batman's inherent meaning is now up in the air, since he is a carrier of whatever ideological or aesthetic standpoint Miller wants to imbue him with at any given moment. The most telling scene in this regard is the scene where Batman is shown smiling mischievously in response to Catgirl and the Atom's confusion over his laconic response to the Braniac invasion; Batman says to himself, "Stay grim. Don't break into a run. Don't laugh like a schoolboy. Don't let them know how much fun you're having" (126). What does Batman mean when he says this? Is he no longer a soul tortured by the death of his parents? Is he now just keeping up all the appearances of Batman, grimness and all? This small but important panel undermines the Gothic melancholia found in the original Dark Knight, but it also casts some doubt on a number of Batman's actions in this sequel. Which Batman is the real Batman? In the end, the reader is kept guessing. The treatment of Batman here is especially postmodern, since he is not the traditional Batman at all but is now a self-conscious reflection of himself, as well as a cypher whose meaning shifts relentlessly. True there are a few

scenes where he lapses into straight superheroic action, such as when he and Catgirl assault Lex Luthor and his bodyguards (104-05). But these moments are few and far between, and much rarer than in the original Dark Knight, leaving us to consider Batman in less heroic terms than the prequel.

## IX

### BAUDRILLARD AND BATMAN: REAL VS. SIMULATION

One more postmodern take on this work can be gleaned from Jean Baudrillard, who is concerned with the effects of “simulacra,” which are simulations that represent a thing or idea yet somehow fail to achieve full representation, as a driving force in the postmodern world. There are many instances of simulacra in the text that stem from the use of holograms, perfect simulations of actual physical people and objects. The President himself is a hologram controlled by Lex Luthor, as he reveals after a glitch is found in the hologram: “Reformat the President -- and while you’re at it, spike up his compassion levels. He’s coming across a little cold. Now get out of my sight” (45). This goes along with Baudrillard’s view of the postmodern world as being led primarily by simulacra: “For a long time now a head of state - *no matter which one* - is nothing but the simulacrum of himself, and *only that gives him the power to govern*. No one would grant the least consent, the least devotion to a *real* person” (23). It does not matter much that the President is a hologram, since there are still a great number of people that support him, as evidenced by the old man who says, “Who cares if the President doesn’t exist? He’s a great American!” (139). In fact, there is a “groundswell of public support for the President’s military

assault on domestic terrorism,” even though the President is now completely pixelized, rendered in huge computerized blocks (see **Fig. 10**) (214). The emptiness of the Presidential hologram is painfully apparent, yet his power is somehow strengthened by this, as if the populace is desperately trying to ignore this issue in the face of the embattled status quo. The empty image of the President is indicative of Baudrillard’s ideas about what being “real” really means:

The real, the real object is supposed to be equal to itself, it’s supposed to resemble itself like a face in a mirror - and this virtual similitude is in effect the only definition of the real - will inevitably miss its object, because it does not take its shadow into account . . . this hidden face where the object crumbles, its secret. The holographic image literally jumps over its shadow, and plunges into transparency, to lose itself there” (Baudrillard 109).

Miller uses simulation at the government level to satirize the current Bush administration, showing Donald Rumsfeld and John Ashcroft giving press conferences about the superhero “terrorists” and therefore implying that George W. Bush is a president who is in effect a hologram (or perhaps implying that Rumsfeld and Ridge are holograms as well) (245-46). The fact that The Flash, the Fastest Man Alive, is seen standing behind Rumsfeld and Ashcroft and giving them “rabbit ears” to the delight of the attendees (Says Ashcroft: “And the Department of Justice has not given anyone in this room permission to indulge in unsolicited and inappropriate laughter.”) shows that “the more hegemonic the system, the more the imagination is struck by the smallest of its reversals” (Baudrillard 163). The book ends with the vision of the current administration as a punchline to the long joke about the holographic President, which subversively suggests that Bush and his cabinet are commanded to commit atrocities by unstoppable supervillains that use them as puppets.

Lex Luthor, in addition to controlling the hologram President, is also responsible for using Brainiac to fake an alien invasion in order to usurp power from the superheroes by publicly defeating Superman (141). And Superman, blackmailed into not fighting back, has to

perform a simulation of an epic superhero battle, with himself on the losing end. The simulated battle is somehow more insidious than an honest fight between hero and villain, since “simulation is infinitely more dangerous because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, *law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation*” (Baudrillard 20). And it is, at least in The Dark Knight Strikes Again. Batman is represented as a hologram in certain key scenes in this text that also show the power of the simulacrum (see **Fig.11**). He confronts Superman about his hedging attitude toward Lex Luthor and Brainiac, and berates him mercilessly - “For God’s sake, man! What more can they do to you? What can you possibly have left to lose?” (194). After Batman figures out that Brainiac is holding hostage the bottle city of Kandor (a city miniaturized and stolen by Brainiac from Krypton before it exploded), Batman asserts his authority - “Let’s get this much straight, Clark. From here on out, we don’t debate a damn thing. We don’t discuss a damn thing. You tell me what I want to know and you do what I tell you to do. From here on out, you work for me” (195). When Supergirl gets angry at Batman’s arrogance, Superman, for the first time, acquiesces to Batman, saying, “The bastard. He’s our only hope” (196). It is notable that Superman only acquiesces when Batman appears as only a holographic image projected by Batman from a chamber in the Batcave, which reinforces the power of the simulated image. Batman also appears as a hologram to stop Robin from killing Catgirl in the Batcave by berating him. (“You were pathetic, Dickster. You were always pathetic. You’re still pathetic. And now you’re pathetic and just plain weird-looking.” [241] ). Batman then activates the Batcave’s self-destruct mechanism, which is really just an underground volcano, and drops Robin into the lava (244). Batman stopped Robin without physically being there; he was just a simulation of himself, but this too is a scene where he nevertheless carries a great deal of power, probably more than any other scene in the text. For “power itself has for a

long time produced nothing but the signs of its resemblance,” so the power of Batman is just a reflection of the hero that is not there but is dangerous nonetheless (Baudrillard 23).

## X

### CONCLUSION

These two texts that I have described in detail give some idea of the significance of the superhero genre in modern America. As of this writing, there is a resurgence of the old superhero texts in American popular culture, as both the movie and television industries have molded the genre into blockbuster motion pictures and television programs that are more palatable to mainstream America. As of this writing, a new Batman movie, with the (unintentionally ironic) title Batman Begins, will be in wide release in a few months, and this is just one drop in a sea of superhero movies to be spawned by profit-hungry studio heads in the wake of massively successful superhero movies like 2002's Spider-Man (not to mention Sin City, the recent adaptation of Frank Miller's crime-noir comics of the same name, which was recently a surprise success despite its departure from the superhero genre). But comic book movies always make extraordinary amounts of cash, possibly because film is now a culturally acceptable medium, while the comic book is not. It is as if the masses wait years for superhero movies because they yearn for these heroes, yet they would not be seen reading a comic book or graphic novel for any reason whatsoever. Miller's work has somewhat lessened this tendency and has bolstered critical and scholarly attention to the medium, but, as a whole, the comics

industry is still a pariah of sorts, even though it has provided popular culture with some of its most durable and far-reaching characters. Miller has also injected some idiosyncratic style and non-traditional interpretations into a long canonized superhero mindset, thereby reasserting their mythic stature as well as subverting their ideological underpinnings. In short, superheroes now are at their freshest and most alluring as they contradict themselves in response to a less clear-cut world. But the power of the superhero and of the medium which it popularized is no less potent than it has ever been. This is evident in Miller's work, which somehow stretches the superhero genre to its limit without damaging its soul. Whether or not the medium attains full legitimacy remains to be seen, but clearly The Dark Knight Returns and The Dark Knight Strikes Again at least confound expectations and prove that the superhero genre still has life for those who seek it out.

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## APPENDIX

## FIGURE CAPTIONS

**Fig. 1:** A sample page from the early Batman story “The Batman Meets Doctor Death”  
(Source: Batman: From the 30s to the 70s. New York: Crown Publishers, 1972. 57.)

**Fig. 2:** Example of narrative ambiguity from Book One of The Dark Knight Returns, page 21.

**Fig. 3:** Dialogic satire of Reagan from Book Three of The Dark Knight Returns, page 15.

**Fig. 4:** Cover of Action Comics #1, the first appearance of Superman.  
(Source: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/f/fe/Action1.JPG>)

**Fig. 5:** Parody of cover of Action Comics #1 from Book Three of The Dark Knight Returns, page 26.

**Fig. 6:** Example of monologic Batman traditions from Book One of The Dark Knight Returns, page 38.

**Fig. 7:** Insistence of archetypal Batman costume from Book Four of The Dark Knight Returns, page 38.

**Fig. 8:** Example of “grim and gritty” Batman from Book Three of The Dark Knight Returns, page 47.

**Fig 9:** Parody of the above Batman from The Dark Knight Strikes Again, page 243.

**Fig. 10:** Hologram Batman from The Dark Knight Strikes Again, page 194.

**Fig. 11:** Hologram President from The Dark Knight Strikes Again, page 43.

**Fig. 1**

**Fig. 2**

**Fig. 3**

**Fig. 4**

**Fig. 5**

**Fig. 6**

**Fig. 7**

**Fig. 8**

**Fig. 9**

**Fig. 10**

**Fig. 11**