The Dynamic Duo Then and Now: Batman and Robin as Evolving Cultural Icons

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THE DYNAMIC DUO THEN AND NOW:
BATMAN AND ROBIN AS EVOLVING CULTURAL ICONS

by

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Introduction

When presented with the simple silhouette of a stylized bat inside a yellow oval, people the world over are able to recognize this emblem and, at the very least, name its wearer. Even as the logo is altered with time, the yellow backdrop traded for a grey one, the awareness persists. Yet even as people recognize Batman’s logo, one person’s impression of the superhero does not always align with another’s: a cheerful, law-abiding Batman who orders orange juice instead of alcohol at bars is Batman as he appeared in the 1960s, and a brooding hero wreathed in darkness and prone to conflicted inner monologues is the Batman of the 1980s. Since Batman’s debut in 1939, the superhero has gone through so many transformations as a character that one particular characterization is no more valid than any other. How can this widespread recognition of one character in multiple forms be so? How can it be possible for the same figure to contradict itself with all of its myriad variations? And if Batman does indeed embody multiple versions of himself, why does it matter?

Each incarnation of the Batman character is a production of a specific time and place – an era idealizing specific values and struggling to make sense of specific cultural issues. The Batman of the most recent film trilogy by Christopher Nolan, for example, is a post-9/11 Batman who would not have fit audience expectations in the 1980s during the course of the Cold War. Through his personal traits, his relationship with his sidekick Robin, and his
relationship with his assorted villains, Batman can be used as a historical thermometer of sorts to help reveal the values and issues of the era in which he is portrayed.

The origin of the superhero is unique to the United States, although roots of the character type have arguably been around for as long as people have told stories. Tales of superhuman figures who slay monsters are the bare bones of the superhero narrative and a constant in stories from as far back as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and likely even farther. What distinguishes the American superhero from fictional characters in other genres is that superheroes are not grounded in a single canonical text. Sherlock Holmes, for example, is constantly the subject of new films and television shows, but the only source of “official rules” for the governance of the character is the original works by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Superheroes, on the other hand, have a constantly evolving canonical text: comics are produced year after year after year, and even as writers come and go, the text continues to develop. In the cases of Batman and Superman, the only superheroes whose comics have been in continual development and circulation since the 1940s, this means that there are seventy years’ worth of “official rules” behind these figures, as well as movies and stand-alone titles that are likewise absorbed into the canon. Not only are these two characters seventy years old, but their canonical texts are still being produced and are always changing hands as new writers join the production team, introduce new characters and characteristics, and try to make sense of the seventy years of material that has come before.
More than any other superhero in the history of the United States, Batman embodies this constant give-and-take of fresh material, and his character evolves throughout the decades to align with the values of each new batch of readers. Even as he exists as a symbol, Batman is also unavoidably a character of a specific time and place, a character that can reveal to us the values and inner turmoil facing his audiences. Batman reflects the values and issues of the cultures in which he exists, and this comes across most clearly in his relationships with his villains, especially the Joker, and with his sidekick, Robin. As such, nearly every decade has its own interpretations of Batman based on the hopes, fears, and beliefs of the producers and consumers of the time.

To understand fully Batman’s present characterizations in the 2010s, I analyzed and compared Batman’s previous incarnations beginning with his origins in 1939 and continuing through to the 2010s. While Batman’s changing characterization can make the isolation of particular “historical Batmans” difficult, I can attempt an approximation nonetheless. The four approximate Batmans most important to our present exploration of the contemporary Batman are, in chronological order: the Batman of 1939; the Batman of the 1940s and the WWII period; the Batman of the 1960s and the Adam West/Burt Ward television show; and the Batman of the 1980s as depicted by Frank Miller. Following that, I will examine the modern Batman, taking into especial account the Christopher Nolan Batman trilogy for its usefulness in analyzing the values and expectations of a post-9/11 audience.
Batman is Born: 1939

1939 marked the first year of Batman’s life as a fictional character. Spurred into action by the success of Superman in the hands of Siegel and Shuster, Bob Kane went home one night after work, spent the weekend brainstorming, and came in with his own idea for a superhero on the following Monday. Batman began as a clear, if not fully-formed concept, and he would continue to change as a character from the moment he was set on paper. Inspired by Don Diego’s use of a secret identity in The Mask of Zorro starring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., Kane wanted Batman to “be a man of means who put on a façade of being effete” like a “foppish and wealthy Spanish count” (Kane 37-38). Kane also sought to differentiate Batman from Superman as much as possible, and he made the decision early on in the creative process to given Batman no superpowers: Batman became “an acrobat who used his physical prowess rather than weapons to defeat villains” (45). While Kane initially “made Batman a super-hero vigilante,” his partner and the writer of the Batman comics, Bill Finger, quickly began to help with the development of the character and “turned [Batman] into a scientific detective” whose mental gymnastics were as admirable as the hero’s physical acrobatics (43). This marriage resulted in an agile hero who had no superpowers and, with such extensive physical and mental dexterity, needed none.
During this first year of Batman’s fictional life, most of the present official guidelines governing the Batman character fell into place: (1) Bruce Wayne, a rich socialite dresses up and fights crime as Batman; (2) Bruce Wayne’s parents were killed when he was a child, and this is why he fights crime; (3) Bruce Wayne/Batman lives in Gotham City; (4) Batman depends on physical and mental skill rather than lethal weapons or superhuman abilities to defeat criminals. Batman’s full “origin story” is the mugging and death of his parents. Origin stories are deeply important to the characterizations of superheroes: “the fixing of a character’s origin ties down an initial all-important moment of transformation … [and] underwrites all of a character’s subsequent transformations and adventures” (Reynolds 48). Unlike Superman before him, and most other heroes after him, Batman does not start his crime-fighting career by being gifted with superpowers, but is motivated to turn an act of thoughtless violence against his parents into a catalyst for good.

Comic-book superheroes change hands more frequently than any other set of fictional characters, and as such, they are frequently imprinted with a certain set of guidelines that guide the superhero’s portrayal in subsequent comic books. Certain specific traits, such as Batman’s secret identity being Bruce Wayne, are considered integral to the character, and even if the story of the comic book is “restarted,” the character signifiers will carry over. In the case of Superman, integral markers include Superman’s origins on the planet Krypton, his weakness to Kryptonite, and his secret identity of Clark Kent; without these basic guidelines, Superman would cease to be Superman. Without his secret identity as
Bruce Wayne or the death of his parents, Batman would cease to be Batman. These guidelines are often unofficial, but as they become associated with the character through various incarnations, they become more and more integral to future portrayals of the superhero. If Batman’s original origin story had not been so firmly fixed in the canon, Batman’s present backstory might have been drastically different from his original one and we might have a Batman who is almost unrecognizable from his original form.

For most superheroes, from Superman to Spider-Man to Green Lantern to the Fantastic Four, a life dedicated to fighting crime does not begin until after the hero has acquired superpowers. Once superhuman abilities have altered the life of previously normal people, these powers serve as a call to action that overtakes the individual’s normal life, and the new heroes dedicate themselves to using their powers for the betterment of humankind. Bruce Wayne, however, is the victim of a tragedy that could conceivably happen to anyone: his parents are killed by a nameless gunman and a young Bruce dedicates the rest of his life to putting an end to the type of illegal activity that destroyed his family. The psychology behind this origin story of Batman has grown increasingly central to depictions of Batman as the years go on. At the time, Kane and Finger merely wanted a traumatic impetus that would spur a man into a lifetime of crime-fighting, and, Kane reports, “we couldn’t think of anything worse than [Bruce Wayne] seeing his parents shot down by a robber before his eyes” (Kane 104). Indeed, in the first year of his life as a comic book character, Batman is not
as maladjusted as he is in later years; for now, his origin story serves only to provide a pretext for allowing a man to dress in a Bat-suit and punch criminals after dark.

Even so, the atmosphere of the Batman comics was gloomy. Drawing from horror films of the period, Batman’s initial surroundings and adventures acquired deep Gothic tones. In addition to using cool, dark color schemes, Kane strove to “recreate the atmosphere of horror movies by utilizing long, dark shadows and weird camera angles” (111). Inspiration came from several Dracula films, The Phantom of the Opera (1925) and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1931). Batman’s appearance fit the theme as well: long, impish, ears on his hood; glowing, triangular slits instead of eyes; and a mouth set in a permanent scowl were the visual markers of Batman as of 1939, and his sweeping, scalloped black cape was intended to frighten both the readership and the fictional villains.

**Robin I: Dick Grayson Introduced**

This deliberately fearful persona of Batman changed in 1940. In the spring of 1940, about a year after Batman’s debut, Bob Kane and Bill Finger decided, “because [we] thought it would make the strip more successful,” to give Batman a kid sidekick: Robin (Kane 46). Robin is the single most important addition to the Batman story. Nothing else in Batman’s existence has made as much of an impact on the character as the inclusion (or exclusion, in later versions) of Robin. Kane initially thought that “young boys reading about Batman’s exploits would project their own
images into the story and daydream about fighting alongside the Caped Crusader as junior Batmen” (46). Little did Kane know that this sidekick would permanently alter Batman for the 1940s and in the years to come.

To clarify, there have so far been five Robins during Batman’s lifespan. Dick Grayson is the first Robin, the sidekick introduced in 1940, and he would remain Robin until the 1980s. After Dick Grayson steps down from the role, Jason Todd takes up the mantle and serves as Batman’s sidekick from 1983 to 1988 (a mere five years compared to Dick Grayson’s 40-year run). Tim Drake is the third Robin, serving from 1991 to 2009 (replaced briefly by Stephanie Brown in 2004), and the most recent Robin is Damian Wayne, whose run as Batman’s sidekick lasted from 2009 to 2013. Batman’s relationships with each of his various Robins is a leading indicator of Batman’s characterizations and also of the social circumstances in the real world that necessitated certain events within the world of the text.

Upon his introduction, Dick Grayson had his own tragic origin story: his parents were trapeze artists, part of a circus act known as the Flying Graysons, when they were killed by a man seeking to extort money from the circus’s manager. Like Bruce Wayne, Dick Grayson witnesses his parents’ deaths as a child. For this reason, Bruce Wayne adopts Dick Grayson as his ward and trains him to assist in the crusade against crime. This was the plan, anyway; Jack Liebowitz (the editor of Bob Kane and Bill Finger, and eventually the head publisher of what would become DC Comics – the company that is still producing Batman comics today) was presented with the idea of Robin and found the idea less than promising. Liebowitz
replied that “Batman was doing well enough by himself and [you] shouldn’t tamper with it… [and] mothers would object to a kid fighting gangsters” (46). At the time, the “only boy assistant in comics was Junior in *Dick Tracy*;” Superman and all other costumed heroes were adults without kid sidekicks (101). Robin would have been an anomaly and Batman, though popular, might have lost readers’ interests if he were to be introduced into the comic.

Kane and Finger introduced Robin anyway, convinced that the enterprise would be financially successful. They were right. According to Kane,

> [The] comic book which introduced Robin … sold almost double what Batman had sold as a single feature. … ‘Well, I guess we ought to take Robin out – right, Jack? You don’t want a kid fighting gangsters.’ ‘Well,’ he said sheepishly, ‘Leave it in. It’s okay – we’ll let it go.’ (46)

Robin was there to stay. Following his inclusion in the comics, “kid sidekicks became almost obligatory for the next generation of superheroes” (Daniels 36). As sales continued to remain high for the issues in which Robin was a prominent character, “the two opposing visions of Batman as dark loner and Batman as benevolent father figure … was settled by audience response” (Brooker 59). Before 1940 was over, Robin was a permanent fixture at Batman’s side and was the first character in the *Batman* comics to have a permanent relationship with Batman. Only later would the Joker (Batman’s most-referenced foe), Commissioner Gordon, Alfred (Bruce Wayne’s butler), or Catwoman (sometimes friend, sometimes foe) be significant players in Batman’s life; before them, there was only Robin.
With the inclusion of a kid sidekick, the look of Batman and Batman’s comic-book world began to change. Robin had been designed with a costume of bright green, red, and yellow, and these colors themselves could not help but alleviate the gloom of Batman’s gothic surroundings. To “suit his new role as father-protector rather than lone avenger,” Batman’s moral code also changed: while Batman already refrained from using firearms, he no longer killed villains outright or condoned murder in any circumstances (58). Kane deliberately modified Batman’s appearance as well, giving the masked hero “a more handsome countenance, and [making] him look less satanic and ominous” by gracing him with a less-imposing cowl and a mouth far more inclined to smiling (Kane 47). Though Batman had occasionally been a wit before Robin’s appearance, “Robin lightened the mood of the strip and he and Batman would engage in punning and badinage as they defeated their adversaries” (46). Though Robin was not necessarily intended to “humanize Batman,” this humanizing responsibility is nevertheless the role the sidekick has since taken, in the 1940s and especially in recent adaptations (Kane 46). Dick Grayson loosens the grim face of his mentor with cheerful banter and irrepressible energy.

With the admittance of Robin into the Batman universe, two new tenets were added to the list of Batman’s then-official guidelines: (5) Batman does not kill and (6) Batman is often accompanied by his sidekick, Robin. While Robin comes and goes, Batman’s refusal to kill is a constant in the Batman mythology, and this refusal is addressed today both in the Christopher Nolan trilogy and in the modern text of the comics.
Into World War II … or Not

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, all existing superheroes were called to the front lines, it may be said – all superheroes except Batman and Robin. Of all the comic-book heroes created before World War II, Batman and Robin were the only ones who were not drawn directly into the wartime dialogue. Comic-book tales “of glorified violence against the enemy – often featuring Hitler himself – were … the rule for superhero comics during the war years” (Brooker 77). Some superheroes such as Green Lantern, Hawkman, and the Flash were created for the purpose of fighting in World War II (Parsons). Captain America, especially, was “not created solely for the sake of entertainment – he was created to fight Hitler himself” (Packer 242). Even those superheroes not created expressly for the war were drafted, especially Superman and Wonder Woman, both of whom were depicted attacking Nazis, joining the war effort on the front lines, redirecting launched Axis missiles, and (in the case of Superman and Captain America), punching Hitler in a way that American troops were unable to do.

Batman, on the other hand, made hardly any changes to its usual storylines. There was no exchange of gangsters for Nazis, and while the rest of the comics of the era embraced the oft-offensive discourse of the wartime, “the total absence of Japanese villains in the Batman stories of the war period” kept Batman in a category of his own (Brooker 90). Even Detective Comics, another title by DC, “embraced the same stereotypes and racist slurs” as were seen in virtually every strip save Batman’s (91). During World War II, only four stories
in *Batman* comics dealt in any way with the war, and two of these encouraged readers to buy war bonds. Four stories “could be regarded as war-related, then, over four years,” while the other forty of the forty-four once-monthly stories released between January 1942 and August 1945 were business as usual for Batman. Furthermore, Two-Face, one of Batman’s most popular foes even to this day, was introduced in August 1942 during the wartime period; he might never have existed if Batman had not stayed out of the war (77). Kane, Finger, and their growing ranks of compatriots sought, during the war times, to “differentiate [the *Batman* comics] from the rest of the superhero market” of the time, and the easiest way to achieve such a goal was to keep Batman out of the wartime discourse (36).

Batman’s immunity can be traced, as his aversion to killing criminals can, to Robin. Dick Grayson gave Batman a level of independence unknown to any other superhero of the period. “Robin had doubled sales and the ‘socially responsible’ Batman was doing great business,” and as a result, editor “Liebowitz and his superiors must have been … firmly inclined to trust the judgment of the creators,” creators who wanted to write Batman stories as they pleased, not propaganda dressed up in the clothes of the superhero (81). Robin had been such a successful introduction orchestrated by Kane and Finger that the two creators were trusted with other decisions carrying equal weight. In a sense, Les Daniels (a contemporary writer for DC) phrased it accurately when he claimed that not only did Batman look out for Robin as a father figure, but, “in a sense, Robin was Batman’s guardian,
too” (Daniels 36). Robin, then, saved Batman from being drafted and granted him immunity from propaganda throughout these war years.

The decision, as the inclusion of Robin had been, proved successful. Superhero comics during this period were in general used to raise the morale both of those fighting and those helping the cause from home. The army during this period became “the largest purchaser of comic books” and the soldiers “due to their young age, were the first generation of Americans who had grown up reading comic books” (Gabillet 197). Comic books were cheap, portable, easy to manufacture, and they offered a way for soldiers to escape into fantasy storylines in which good easily triumphed over evil and in which real-life enemies like Hitler were brought to justice with as little loss of life as possible.

Batman, though not involved in the war, “did sell, and was apparently very popular during the war years, in spite of its deviation from the conventions of the ‘patriotic’ superhero comic” (Brooker 83). In recounting escapades against established, entirely-fictional villains such as the Penguin and the Joker, and in remaining grounded in Gotham City (a thinly-disguised New York City), “Batman may almost have seemed like a letter from home” (84). Kane and Finger had achieved what they sought: a title that kept its integrity when no other heroes of the time were allowed to do so, and a title that did not have to struggle to adapt to peace-time rhetoric once the war had run its course. “The overwhelming sense of victory at the war's conclusion stripped many superheroes, who had had their energies
diverted from fighting crime to winning the war, of their *raison d'être* (Parsons 11). Batman was not faced with this problem.

This return from World War II pulled many superheroes out of vogue and made it difficult for some of them to recover enough to remain in publication. Captain America, for example, lost his primary adversaries with the end of the war and with no gallery of villains to continue to fight, the sale of his comics floundered until the line was ultimately canceled. Though Batman remained steadily in publication due to his removal from the war, the masked hero had his own real-life opponents to fight.

**The Gay Crisis**

1954 saw the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book written by the American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham that spearheaded the public criminalization of comic books. *Seduction of the Innocent* addressed what Wertham found to be problematic in comic books (such as depictions of women and violence, not always separately) and how comic books were negatively influencing the behaviors of the readership. Many of Wertham’s concerns were valid, including his criticisms of the advertisements for body-enhancement and army knives which were often present between the pages of superhero comic books meant for children. The revised Comics Code of 1954 helped to maintain basic propriety in a medium intended for children, but it was also one of the most restrictive Comics Codes to be instated. Beginning with this instance in the 1950s, publishers of comic books instated official “codes of conduct” to mediate what comic books would be allowed to
portray. More recent codes have loosened prohibitions or have given age-specific comics certain freedoms, but the Comics Code of 1954, replacing the Code of 1948, tightly restricted comics of the age. “Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions should never be presented … as to create disrespect for established authority” and “The letters of the word ‘Crime’ on a comics magazine cover shall never be … greater in dimension than the other words contained in the title … [and the] word shall never appear alone on a cover” were among the most restrictive instructions, although everything from sympathetic villains, ghouls, and “depravity” with no further elaboration were forbidden from appearing in comic books (Nyberg Seal of Approval 166-7).

Wertham’s most publicized finding, however, and one that is still present in the discourse today, was that Batman and Robin were being read as a gay couple by the young homosexual patients at his medical center. As Kane had hoped years before, young boys were indeed “project[ing] their own images into the story and daydream[ing] about… the Caped Crusader,” though not in the way Kane had perhaps originally intended (Kane 46).

Such a finding did not go over well in the 1950s. “While homosexuality, communism, and delinquency may seem to present very different social ‘problems,’ the discourses surrounding them in the early 1950s were remarkably similar” (Brooker 117). Many readers vehemently denied even the remotest possibility that Batman and Robin were a couple, but many adolescents had found the Batman stories to be the one way in which they might safely explore a culturally-vilified sexuality. Said Wertham, “We inquired about Batman
from overt homosexuals… A number of them knew these stories very well and spoke of them as their favorite reading” (Wertham 191). More specifically, one young man in Wertham’s psychotherapy sessions admitted, “At the age of ten or eleven, I found my liking, my sexual desires, in comic books. … I was put in the position of the rescued rather than the rescuer. I felt like I’d like to be loved by someone like Batman or Superman” (192). Such an interpretation of the Batman texts was not unfounded; Wertham’s analysis of the perceived romantic relationship is succinct:

Sometimes Batman ends up in bed injured and young Robin is shown sitting next to him. … As they sit by the fireplace the young boy sometimes worries about his partner: ‘Something’s wrong with Bruce. He hasn’t been himself these past few days.’ … Sometimes they are shown on a couch, Bruce reclining and Dick sitting next to him, jacket off, collar open, and his hand on his friend’s arm. (Wertham 191)

The focus on Batman and Robin’s home life cuts to the quick of why these two were singled out as homosexual when all other superheroes and their respective sidekicks were never similarly accused. Green Arrow and Speedy, Superman and Super-Girl, Flash and Kid-Flash, and other hero-sidekick teams, kept their relationships firmly in the business realm: at the end of the day, the heroes go to one home and the sidekicks go to another. Only Batman and Robin extended their relationship into the domestic sphere; only Batman and Robin lived together.
The structure of the Batman comics leading up to and carrying through the 1950s also came “intriguingly close to the conventions of the romance comic” (Brooker 135). Like the damsels in distress of the era, “part of Robin’s narrative function … is to be kidnapped and rescued” – a feminine role in the 1950s and one that highlights the rescue fantasies that female readers of romance comics at the time were thought to enjoy.

One Batman comic in particular that serves to help visualize the perceived relationship between Batman and Robin is the comic “Robin Dies at Dawn” written by Bill Finger. “Robin Dies at Dawn” begins with Batman being placed in a fully-immersive mental simulation intended to test the emotional durability of astronauts who might find themselves “alone on … a space flight” (Finger “Robin Dies at Dawn” 42). As soon as he enters the simulation, Batman forgets that what he sees is not real and imagines aliens, architectural ruins, and bleak landscapes. Instead of remaining alone as the test intended, Batman imagines Robin accompanying him in the evolving simulation, and the imagined sidekick appears in time to rescue Batman from an attacking alien. When Robin is later killed by a stone giant, Batman is inconsolable, weeps openly, and, as he is assaulted again by hostile aliens, announces, “Let it come! I don’t want to live! It’s my fault Robin died! I don’t want to live…” (41). Batman’s anguish is so extensive that the scientists observing him pull him out of the test before permanent harm can come to Batman, and Batman’s reunion with an alive-and-well Robin concludes with the duo exiting the research facility with the hero’s arm around his sidekick’s shoulders.
The second chapter of the same story reveals that even though Batman has been freed
from the trauma of the test, he is prone to hallucinating the same stone giant that he was so convinced had killed Robin. Each time the visual hallucination appears, Batman “seems to see Robin in peril” and “acts instinctively” to push his sidekick out of danger (45). Nightmares of a similar theme accost Batman as he tries to sleep; bright lights send the hero into a panic, and again he cries, “‘Let it come! I don’t want to live! It’s my fault Robin died! I don’t want to live…” (47). Robin’s well-being is all that keeps Batman from falling apart entirely, and serious threats to the sidekick’s life are enough to send the hero into an uncontrollable panic. Though this comic was originally published in 1963, nearly a decade after the initial publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, Batman and Robin’s affection for one another had not yet been curtailed as sharply as it would be in later years.
Robin, the live-in sidekick so openly loved by his guardian (whether platonically or otherwise), was the sole reason the queer reading of Batman gained purchase. “In one story after another, Batman and Robin exhibit a trust and love for each other which often extends beyond the generic conventions of the adventure or science fiction narrative” and if nothing else, these portrayals depict a closeness between the crime-fighting duo that, homosexual or otherwise, loses its potency out of fear of the former (Brooker 133). Without Robin, Batman would likely never have been interpreted as a queer figure, and such an interpretation would as such not be reflected in the Batman character of today. “If one wants to take Batman as a Real Man, the biggest stumbling block has always been Robin” and modern narratives either discard Robin for this reason or hyper-masculinize Batman – or do both (Medhurst 159). The 1950s gay discourse began a cycle of “Batman is not gay, here's proof; he's still not gay, here's more proof” that reached a peak in the 1980s and echoes through to today.

This fear of a gay Batman is realized in the presence of female love-interests in many of the Batman films: in keeping with his intended dandy/effete public persona, Bruce Wayne was originally depicted as celibate, but women for Bruce Wayne/Batman to fall in love with have been a staple in the majority of the Batman films from the 1960s to the 2010s. Such attempts to defuse the queer readings are not fully successful, however, as each film gives Batman a new, film-specific girlfriend and these girlfriends “have never lasted long, while Robin has been by [Batman's] side in one form or another for fifty-nine years” (Brooker 105).
1960s TV Show

While Kane insists that the 1960s ABC show starring Adam West and Burt Ward was never intended to become part of Batman’s canonical texts, such a claim holds little water in the face of other “non-canonical” Batman texts that have nevertheless influenced the course of Batman’s canonical history. *The Killing Joke*, for example, a stand-alone comic written by Alan Moore in 1988, depicts the Joker shooting Barbara Gordon (Batgirl) through the stomach and permanently crippling her. This event was absorbed into the official *Batman* comics of the time and is still in effect today: Barbara Gordon, previously active in the field alongside Batman, is now wheelchair-bound and serves instead as Oracle, an information specialist who coordinates communication between Batman and his other followers from the computers of the Batcave. As another example, the animated television show *Batman: The Animated Series* (running from 1992 to 1994) introduced, as a minor villain, Harley Quinn who had been the Joker’s psychiatric nurse before becoming his girlfriend and turning to a(n apparently more profitable) life of crime. Harley Quinn has since been adopted by the comics and holds a significant place within the Rogues Gallery of well-known Batman villains (Daniels 221). The Batman of the 1960s, then, is as much in continuity as the major additions to the *Batman* franchise are, and to deny it as such, as many do, is to deny formative and influential years in the development of the Batman character.

Perhaps more than anything else, the 1960s *Batman* television series kept Batman from falling into obscurity. Comics nationwide suffered the possibility of permanent erasure,
caused both by public outcries for censorship and by flagging sales. The “staple outlet” for comic book sales in the 1950s and 1960s was the “Mom ‘n’ Pop corner store” which was dying out; in its place “arose the large supermarket chain which avoided comics because of the industry’s tarnished image and … newsstands ceased to carry comics because of the low profit margin” (Bacon-Smith 75). Comics were bad for business and were struggling to draw in an increasingly-disinterested audience, an audience attracted instead to a marvel that became a household staple in the 1950s: the television. More than “the ideological battle” over the “potentially corrupting influence of comic books,” the television swept fans of the comic book into an appreciation for a new medium (71-2). Superman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, and the rest were left behind and *Star Trek*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Flinstones* became the household names of the decade. Joining the ranks of television characters beloved by a new audience, however, were Batman and Robin.

Beginning in 1966 and running through 1968, the ABC series *Batman* revived a flagging interest in the title character, if not in comics in general. “Batman would very probably never have survived beyond 1965 without the help of the ABC television show” and Bob Kane had even “received the bad news about the title’s flagging sales from DC in that year” (Brooker 179). Quickly after its introduction to a primetime television slot, the show “catapulted the Batman books to the top of the sales charts” and though superheroes were generally viewed as relics of an age past, “relics of an outmoded sensibility,” television
altered the medium, if not the content, of superhero stories and recaptured a generation of viewers (Daniels 141).

The *Batman* television show, to speak mildly, won a nationwide audience instantly. It kicked off a period of “Batmania,” in which everything from lunchboxes to loaves of bread was plastered with the Batman logo and images of the costumed hero. By the end of the first season, profits were so high that producers could afford to include a Batmobile and a Batplane (or helicopter) in the two seasons that followed. Villains on the television show were frequently celebrities hoping for guest-star roles to boost their own popularity, and after the show came off the air, Adam West and Burt Ward were too well-known as Batman and Robin to find other film work for much of their lives. The show also “boosted the Riddler into the ranks of big-time bad guys” thanks to “Frank Gorshin’s manic performance,” and the Riddler is still around today thanks to the show’s immense popularity (Daniels 138).

Taking advantage of the popularity of the show, creators of the *Batman* comics rode the stylistic coattails of the ABC production in order to turn viewers into readers: “the increased continuity between TV series and comic would have had significant benefits … in terms of attracting and maintaining an increased readership,” and the writers of the Batman comics made a deliberate decision to emulate the “tone, style, characterization, and dialogue” of the show (Brooker 187).
Given the campy, off-the-wall nature of the television show, fans of the comics have often claimed that the show “ruined Batman” and turned him into a laughing-stock. But the characterizations of Batman before the show’s premiere were light-hearted and ebullient already, due partly to the continued influence of Robin. “Robin Dies at Dawn” from 1963, referenced previously, had many of the same elements of the television show: a bright color-scheme, elaborate and ineffective plots by the villains, and a Gotham City devoid of murder, public property damage, and any degree of bloodshed. Even the guilt inherent in Batman’s origin story had largely dissipated by this point, and “a reader could follow the action for years without ever suspecting that Batman and Robin were catching crooks for any reason but the fun of it” (Daniels 36).

Regarding the camp of the comics specifically, one is hard-pressed to find Ace the Bat-hound (a brown dog disguised by a replica of Batman’s hood), introduced in 1955, to be particularly gothic.

Nevertheless, the campy quality of the television series became its selling point and one of the main reasons for its cross-generational appeal. With no as-yet developed sense of irony, children took the escapades of Batman and Robin seriously while adults saw the show as funny. Batman’s straight-faced attempts to free himself from a giant ice-cream cone in which he has been trapped by a villain was seen as heart-wrenching to children and hilarious to adults who recognized Batman and Robin’s earnestness in the face of the ridiculous. While
this Batman’s “ponderous moral pronouncements on seatbelts and homework belong more to a rose-tinted 1950s vision of American than to a nation plagued by race riots and student protests,” and increasing public displeasure over the war in Vietnam, there was no denying the hero’s popularity, and “escapism may have been exactly what American audiences wanted at the time (Brooker 229-30). The Civil Rights movement, the Second-Wave Feminist movement, and the American Indian movement all gathered strength and reached their peak during the 1960s. Between marches, riots, protests, and civil unrest, news programs and newspapers were filled with images from the Vietnam War and the atrocities committed overseas. Late in the decade, a number of serial and mass killings swept across the United States, no longer occurring in one city or another, and fully destroyed the “That could not happen here” mentality that some Americans had maintained in the face of other tragedies. The murder of Kitty Genovese convinced Americans that their society “had turned away from the concept of neighbors helping neighbors to a world in which individuals lived in fear and isolation” (Rielly 14). A temporary escape from present concerns, not surprisingly, may not have been unwanted after a glance at the evening news.

Far from being a character to embrace social issues in this period, Batman did the opposite: he existed in and helped define a saccharine world in which villains’ crimes involved “grandiose attempts to steal high visibility items from the wealthy or the state but arise from no political purpose or social need” (Pearson and Uricchio “I’m Not Fooled…” 203). This Batman was deliberately removed from the socially-decayed setting in which he
originally acted, and with his sidekick at his shoulder, the masked hero operated as a glue between generations as well as a way for the public to focus on issues no more loaded than, for example, the latest hijinks of the largely-harmless Riddler.

Other reasons may have led to the tame depictions of Batman, Robin, and the villains in the ABC television show. While television was “the most dominant communications method” during the 1960s, it was also “the most conservative of the decade’s performing arts” (Rielly 193, 183). While films were developing a tendency to glorify villains and outlaws, as in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), television “sought to avoid controversy as much as possible” (194). Shows such as *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) and *The Flinstones* (1960-1966), while they took place in non-traditional settings, nevertheless revolved around the daily life of a traditional nuclear family: a mother, a father, and their young children. *Batman*, though it did not quite feature a nuclear family, did suggest a world populated by bad guys who committed no violent crimes and never threatened the safety of those they captured. Even in the *Batman* movie of 1966 (essentially a two-hour-long *Batman* television episode) went out of its way to keep permanent harm from befalling even minor characters: the gallery of villains steal a sea-captain’s ship, and instead of throwing him overboard, tuck him into a cozy room aboard the ship and construct an elaborate set to keep him convinced that he is still at sea; the Joker even disguises himself as a sailor to periodically bring the captain cups of tea.
For all that it served as escapism for its viewership, the ABC series proved to be fertile ground for the continued queer reading/viewing of Batman and Robin. The superhero theme in general served as an effective metaphor for the social world in which the homosexuals of the 1950s and 1960s lived. Their lives, like the lives of comic book heroes, were “dominated by the very real fear of discovery and its consequences” and they inhabited “a world of intense paranoia coupled with regular sighs of relief” in which, forgoing discovery, “the hero’s identity always remains intact, and his sidekick is always returned to him for an embrace in the final frame” (Brooker 138). Batman and Robin had already been seen by many of the young readers as a sort of Zeus-Ganymede love relationship; the ABC television show altered the dynamic of the characters’ relationship by aging Robin: instead of a child, Robin was played by a 19-year-old Burt Ward, significantly closing the age gap between him and his mentor.

The 1960s ABC television show of *Batman* did little to dismiss the claims of a supposed, inadmissible homosexuality (inadmissible in the discourse of the 1950s) between Batman and Robin. While Robin occasionally took his turn being the rescuer in the television series (instead of always being the one in distress), there remains an alternative reading of the show that continues to be easily identifiable for those interested in looking for it. Most of the television episodes include Batman and Robin bantering in the Batmobile (usually in the form of light teasing or the exchange of puns), and Batman frequently touches Robin on the shoulder or puts an arm companionably around his sidekick. Some of the
episodes, however, are less ambiguous than others. Episode 75, “Scat! Darn Catwoman” concludes with Batman chasing Catwoman across a rooftop, the hero calling out, “I’ll do everything I can to rehabilitate you!” Catwoman counters with “Marry me.” Batman’s immediate reply: “Everything except that.” After Catwoman argues her case, Batman’s first and only question is, “What about Robin?” Catwoman, of course, replies with a less-than-satisfactory solution, “We’ll kill him,” and Batman ends the episode side by side with Robin once again (“Scat! Darn Catwoman”). This closeness between Batman and Robin, indicative even slightly of a relationship not entirely non-romantic, in the social climate of the 1960s, did not mesh with mainstream comfort levels regarding homosexual people. The gay rights movement did not come to fruition until the end of the decade, and for much of the 1960s, gay people were arrested, not allowed to protest, and faced public and police brutality. As such, a gay Batman and Robin, while welcomed by some, was not a characterization of their character that DC Comics wanted to proliferate.

Introducing female characters to the television show and comic books became the main method of debunking the queer-Batman rumors. Aunt Harriet, a character unique to the television series, was introduced to add a female character to the all-male household of Bruce Wayne, but her presence helped rather than hindered the queer reading of the show. As Aunt Harriet was unaware of the superhero identities of Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson, Bruce and Dick made increasingly ridiculous excuses to preface their disappearances together
into Bruce’s study – the room annexing the secret compartment of the Batcave (Batman’s secret hideout) and a room in which Aunt Harriet was never allowed.

At the beginning of episode 89, “The Black Widow Strikes Again,” Bruce marks his first appearance in the episode by remarking upon Aunt Harriet’s adoption of a new fashion trend: “Très chic, Aunt Harriet!” and, when Alfred (the family butler who is aware of Bruce’s superhero escapades) arrives to alert Bruce to a new mission, Bruce excuses himself and Dick with, “Uh, excuse us, Aunt Harriet; we may be tied up for a little while.” Aunt Harriet lets them go, remarking to Alfred, “There they go, healthy and normal” (“The Black Widow Strikes Again”). Also worth noting is that episodes 89 and 90 (featuring the Black Widow as the villainess) and episodes 74 and 75 (featuring Catwoman and her assistant Pussycat) revolve around the necessity of either Batman or Robin rescuing his counterpart from the nefarious spell under which he is trapped: Batman is brainwashed into fawning over Black Widow and supporting her evil schemes, and Robin snaps him out of it to save the day; Catwoman and Pussycat likewise turn Robin into “his own moral opposite” and the first thing he does is swoon over Pussycat. Batman pretends to be likewise enamored with Catwoman and rescues Robin from the danger of his sidekick’s affections being misplaced. Both Batman and Robin choose each other over attractive female counterparts, and the inclusion of seductive female villains highlighted rather than obscured the queer reading of the show’s two male protagonists.
As the comics drew from the appeal of the television show and the television show drew from the stories featured in the comics, the campy quality of both became increasingly evident. By the end of the show’s run and the beginning of the 1970s, measures had been put into place to make the homosexual subtext less obvious. Aside from the introduction of Aunt Harriet, Batwoman and Bat-Girl were brought into the comics (in 1956) to serve as love-interests for Batman and Robin respectively (interestingly enough, Batwoman in the comics of the current decade is a lesbian and is the most prominent character in DC comics to have a same-sex love interest). A love-interest for Robin was brought into the show in 1968: Batgirl #2, this one Barbara Gordon, daughter (sometimes niece) of Police Commissioner Jim Gordon, and a staple character in the comic for all ensuing decades. Alfred, the Wayne butler, was revived from his in-comic death for use in the television show to assist in tending to Wayne Manor, maintain Bruce Wayne’s secret-hero identity, and serve as a chaperone to prevent Batman and Robin from being unsupervised in the Batcave for too long a time.

Most importantly of all the alterations to take place in the comics, Dick Grayson, the original Robin, was sent to college in 1969. This destroyed the Batman-Robin partnership that had been in place since 1940 and began the anti-camp and gritty-Batman trend that overtook the 1980s and resonates within the Batman character to this day. The *Batman* television series remained conservative in a time of liberal, sometimes violent upheavals, but could not dispel the queer readings that had become associated with its two protagonists.
1980s: Dark Times Ahead

The 1980s saw a significant darkening of its social outlook and of its caped crusader. The unsuccessful counterculture movement of the 1960s, and the continued struggles of minority groups in the United States left the citizens of the 1980s with the sense that little had been solved; the social programs of the 1960s, some (especially the politically conservative) argued, “had not only proved expensive and inefficient, but had also exacerbated the problems they were intended to address” (Harrison 13). In much the same vein, the Vietnam War had ended, but nuclear war with the Soviet Union was looming ever-closer on the horizon. Values and opinions “were so qualified and contrary that they cancelled each other out” and many movies and books of the 1980s “depict the moral wasteland that the crisis in values had created” (Magnet 234). *The Terminator* (1984), *The Shining* (1980), and a media predilection towards Vietnam films and horror movies enforced the bleak reality of the condition of the United States while *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986) showcase the contradictory values held by the younger generations and the sense of futility or “What does it matter?” that they eventually embrace.

Under Reagan’s presidential leadership, the citizens of the United States were led to focus on issues outside their own country; Jimmy Carter “tended to emphasize the internal sins of racism and materialism, whereas Regan stressed the external threat of communism” (Flamm 103). Reagan’s preferred method of dealing with the Soviet Union, the source of concerns about communism, was to “rebuild America’s arsenal, to develop and deploy new
bombers and missiles, tanks and planes, as soon as possible no matter the cost” and to pursue a policy of “confrontation and isolation, challenging the ‘evil empire’ and refusing to hold a single summit with Soviet leaders” (105, 160). When Reagan took office, the Cold War already seemed “like a permanent and perilous reality” to most Americans, and over the course of the 1980s, “a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union seemed like a realistic – and terrifying – possibility” (158, 115). Neo-conservative, even war-mongering, politics dominated the decade, and issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and AIDS “pitted minority cultures against white protestant populism” (Thompson 31). Death, war, and nuclear annihilation were very real concerns for those living through the Cold War, and no end to the struggle with the Soviets seemed in sight.

Superhero comics, previously primarily a child’s fantasy realm, followed the trend of films of the period and became significantly darker. Since the 1940s, comics had been aimed primarily at children and the campy stories of the 1960s did not target a significantly older audience. To destroy the reputation of comic books as silly and derelict, DC Comics “moved vigorously to reposition their products to appeal to an older, more sophisticated audience; they have repeatedly told reporters, readers, and retailers that they’re after… a college-age, college-educated Batfan” (Parsons 66). The comics-scare of the 1950s and 1960s had already reduced the industry to “dependence on hard core fans and collectors” and these hard core fans were the ones with disposable income enough to afford each and every issue – an income available to eighteen-year-olds, not eight-year olds. “Reading comic books” had been
a “cultural practice that was nearly universal among American preadolescents and adolescents of both sexes ... [and] the average age of comic book readers was ten to twelve years old” during the 1940s (Gabillet 198). By 1991, however, the average DC reader was “twenty-four and male” (Pearson and Uricchio “Notes from the Batcave…” 29). By this same time, “only six to ten percent [of comic readers] were female,” and the renewed focus on the male demographic accompanied an increased demand for more violence and more action (Parsons 78).

This older, male-dominated readership developed a 1980s “obsession with ‘literary’ status or ‘adult themes,’” as well as a vehement anti-camp movement that shadowed all renditions of the Batman created during this decade (Brooker 248). The Camp movement of the 1960s had become associated with homosexuality, and as of 1981, homosexuality (specifically male homosexuality) became associated with AIDS. By the time Reagan left office in 1989, “seventy-eight thousand Americans had contracted AIDS, of whom about fifty-thousand died” (Ehrman 52). AIDS first appeared on US soil in gay men, and conservatives were quick to associate the disease with homosexuality. After the Stonewall riots in 1969, “homosexual men and women in the US had become increasingly visible,” but attempts to classify AIDS as some sort of plague started by homosexual activity further curtailed attempts to normalize homosexuality (Thompson 21). Camp (associated with homosexuality as it was) was no longer mainstreamed as it had been in the 1960s.
Among those who derided the 1960s *Batman* television series as “campy and cheap” were Alan Moore and Frank Miller, and hopes for an “anti-camp” Batman quickly became synonymous with “dark and brutal” Batman (236). “Batman works best in a society that’s going to hell,” Frank Miller explained in an interview, “He was created when the world was going to hell, and *Dark Knight [Returns]* came out when the world went to hell” (Sharrett 44). The nation-wide “fear of nuclear annihilation skyrocketed” (Packer 5). “Over the heads of all … hung the apocalyptic possibility of atomic warfare amid the constant crises of the Cold War” (Costello 38). These fears found an outlet in comic books, especially in the portrayal of Batman’s home: Gotham City.

The sunny metropolis of Gotham City in the 1960s became a vision of urban decay and corruption, populated by cops who shoot to kill, criminals with no motives but to kill innocents whenever possible, and reporters who bring serial killers on stage for light-hearted interviews and treat weather trends and mass murder with the same lack of gravity. The *Batman* film of 1988 and *Batman Returns* of 1992 portray Gotham as a dystopian, urban wasteland populated by thieves, homeless people, prostitutes, and a corrupt police force. The production designer of the film, Anton Furst, described the cityscape as “New York if it had gone all wrong, taking the worst aspects of it. … Hell had erupted through the pavement and kept on going” (Daniels 204). Concrete and industrial structures abound, and Wayne Manor is a Gothic castle on the edge of the sprawling city limits. Not even the lighting of the city’s
Christmas tree on Christmas Eve can be undertaken without the event being devastated by armed robbers.

The citizens of Gotham City, while resilient given the nature of their urban home, are given no real depth. While they had none in the 1960s show, either, the bleak outlook suggested by their incompetence in *Batman* (1989) is indicative of a pessimistic outlook on the state of society. The citizens of Gotham City in *Batman* are so fickle as to accept free money from a known mass murderer, and in *Batman Returns* (1992), they flip allegiances between the mayor, the Penguin, and Batman, depending on who needs to be in power based on convenience of plot. They are en masse portrayed as pawns in a game between Batman and his antagonists, and there exist no civilian heroes in either film: the mayor disappears from the discourse of *Batman Returns* within the first half and seems to hand over the mayoral position to the Penguin without disputing the claim. Commissioner Gordon, the head of the Gotham police force, exists in the *Batman* movie only to object to rumors of the Batman, while he is entirely absent from *Batman Returns*. Only Vicki Vale and Max Shreck are prominent civilian characters in either film; the former is a person of interest for both Batman and the Joker, and the latter is the corrupt businessman responsible for letting both Catwoman and the Penguin loose on Gotham City.

Batman’s villains, too, became darker and as far from harmless troublemakers as possible during the troubled era of the 1980s. The villains of the 1960s had been uncomplicated: their crimes revolved around the occasional theft of some themed object or
kidnapping for the sake of extortion. Murder was not committed either on- or off-screen, and while the villains frequently left Batman and Robin in death traps, the heroes always escaped without any real or lasting pain. The Penguin, for example, is altered from his 1960s portrayal for his appearance in the 1992 film *Batman Returns*. This revised Penguin is “not the jolly rogue of yore, but a deformed lunatic who has grown up in the sewers and now seeks to achieve public acceptance through fraudulent displays of benevolence” (Daniels 214). The opening scene of *Batman Returns* sets the tone of the Penguin for the rest of the film: Oswald Cobblepot (the Penguin’s civilian identity) is shown as an infant on his first birthday, locked in a cage beneath his family’s Christmas tree. As the family cat passes within his reach, Oswald grabs the cat, drags it into his cage, and, judging from the ensuing silence, eats it. His behavior does not improve as he enters adulthood; the Penguin here is no longer a fat old man with a penchant for umbrellas, but a demented and truly dangerous maniac.

Of all the villains, The Joker was the one preferred in the 1980s and he continues to be one of the most popular to portray on screen. Just as the presence or absence of Robin has a direct correlation with the mental deterioration of Batman, so too can the Joker be used as a measure of Batman’s darkness, in both the comic setting and in film. The 1960s Joker, as far as television portrayals went, fought a merry prankster battle against Batman, stole from banks as his primary criminal undertaking, and overtly expressed concern for the possibility that innocent bystanders might be harmed by his activities. The 1980s, however, introduced “an increasingly out-of-control Joker” who was “a raging madman who kills 206 people for
pleasure … shoots Commissioner Gordon’s daughter and photographs her nude body to
driver her father insane… [and] tries to gas the entire General Assembly” of the United
Nations (Pearson and Uricchio “I’m Not Fooled…” 199). This decade’s Joker sought to kill as
many innocent people as possible, and Batman could
no longer retain his benevolent, boy-scout attitude
when faced with such an aggressive, dangerous threat.
Indeed, the Batman of *Batman* (1989) openly kills
villains and their henchmen when he would have
been forbidden from doing so in the comics (and
indeed continues to abstain from killing enemies in
that medium even to this day).

This violent, unrestrained Joker was reimagined partially “in response to the
emergence of celebrity serial killers such as Charles Manson and the Zodiac Killer” (DiPaolo
60). As part of the overt anti-camp mentality, however, this Joker also took onto his
shoulders the camp qualities that had been criminalized by the readership. As Batman’s
primary arch-villain, Joker is often described as “Batman’s ‘bad twin’” and “part of that
badness is, increasingly, an implied homosexuality” (Medhurst 160). The Joker of Frank
Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (a stand-alone comic published in 1986) prepares
for a live-television interview by bringing his own lipstick and applying it himself (Miller
121). This Joker also refers to Batman as “Darling” and forces the hero into a final
confrontation with him in an amusement park’s Tunnel of Love (141, 148). Tim Burton’s
Joker of the film *Batman* (1989) is blatantly flamboyant as well: he dresses in a bright purple
suit, obsesses over his physical appearance, dances through an art museum to the musical
accompaniment of Prince, and specializes in acid-laced beauty products. He is also openly
upset by Batman’s prevalence in
the media and moves beyond a
desire for personal revenge
against essentially-nameless
politicians in order to garner
more media attention. This amalgamation of homosexuality and evil was not far removed
from “the dominant cultural construction of gay men at the end of the 1980s” which grossly
profiled gay men “as plague-carriers, and the word ‘degenerate’ is not far removed from some
of the labels affixed… in the age of AIDS” (Medhurst 161). Camp, then, not merely
unwanted in association with Batman, became a part of that from which he strove to protect
Gotham City. By assigning the Joker campy characteristics as well as mass-murdering
tendencies, Batman fought not only a rendition of Charles Manson, but also the feminine
characteristics as adopted by members of the maligned gay community.
In keeping with this anti-camp, anti-gay trend, Batman himself grew increasingly hyper-masculinized. *Rocky II* through *IV* (1979 -1985), the *Rambo* series (1982-1988), and *The Terminator* (1984) protagonists all reinforce exaggerated musculatures and barely-contained aggression: stereotypical masculine traits widely associated with male action heroes of the period. Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* depicts a Batman with a body built like a tank. His face is angular, the pronounced jaw nearly turning his face into a square, and the man smiles once or twice throughout the story, if ever. He is as physically aggressive with his villains as they are with him, engaging in hand-to-hand combat and pulverizing his enemies until they are on the brink of death. The Robin accompanying this Batman is a teenage girl, not a boy, who is referred to by Batman as a “good soldier” (Miller 138).

While Batman is not built like a human wrecking ball in Tim Burton’s *Batman*, Bruce Wayne is given a female love interest. In keeping with Bruce Wayne’s dandy/effete persona, Bob Kane and Bill Finger intended for Bruce/Batman to be celibate. Comic codes leading up to the 1980s kept tight control over deliberate displays of intimacy between characters, making celibacy more of a requirement than an option. Nevertheless, Batwoman of the 1960s comics and Catwoman of the 1960s television series failed to make much of a romantic impression on Bruce Wayne, and Dick Grayson was as disinterested in romance as his
mentor. But the *Batman* film introduced Vicki Vale, a reporter who makes her screen debut as a pair of legs (her upper body masked by an open newspaper), and the film is quick to pair Bruce Wayne off with the sole female character of the production, going so far as to kiss her and sleep with her after their first date. *Batman Returns* removed Vicki Vale from the picture entirely, replacing her with the leather-clad Catwoman so that a dual romance can take place: one between Batman and Catwoman (the secretary-turned-villain Selina Kyle), as well as one between Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle, each of whom is unaware of their partner’s alter-ego for much of the film.

**Robin II: Jason Todd’s Life and Death**

Elsewhere in the quest to remove all homosexual signifiers from Batman’s character, one of the signifiers so removed is Batman’s affection for and whole-hearted loyalty to Robin. Following the removal of Dick Grayson from the comics in 1969, Dick does not return to the comics as Robin. He takes up a new superhero persona known as Nightwing, moves to Blüdhaven (a city neighboring Gotham), and officially breaks with Batman in a dramatic falling-out that takes years to fully heal.

In 1983, Batman adopts a new Robin. Robin II is Jason Todd, an orphan who steals the tires from the Batmobile prior to his adoption by Bruce Wayne. His description by *Batman* editor Dennis O’Neil as “an arrogant little snot” sums up how most of the writers and readers of the time felt about him as a character (Pearson and Uricchio “Notes from the Batcave…” 201). Jason Todd disobeys Batman, is characterized by his inability to control his
own temper, and never loses the rebelliousness that got him caught by Batman in the first
place. Dick Grayson as Robin, sunny and a bright presence in contrast to Batman’s grimness,
“shared with his mentor … not only a bond of sympathy but acted as a continual reminder of
the vulnerable youngster Bruce Wayne had himself once been” (200). Jason Todd, however,
is picked up as a criminal – a young thief, but a thief nonetheless. Jason serves as a constant
reminder of the negative side of Gotham City, the murderous side that Bruce Wayne and
Dick Grayson have both been orphaned by.

Determined to keep Batman and Robin II from becoming the homo-romantic duo
again, Batman writers stripped away Batman’s affection for his sidekick. Compared to
Batman’s concern when he thought Robin was dead (see “Robin Dies at Dawn” as mentioned
earlier), the hero’s concern over Jason Todd’s possible death is extremely downplayed. In
“…My Beginning… and My Probable End,” Batman’s concern for Jason Todd is limited to a
somber, “It was my fault” and “What can I do?” asked of the nurse upon delivering Robin to
a hospital (Barr 126). As Batman retreats to the anteroom to wait, he “sits and feels the
numbness wash over him, almost welcoming it” (126). Gone are the days of Batman wailing
to the heavens, “Let it come! I don’t want to live! It’s my fault Robin died! I don’t want to
live…” (Finger “Robin Dies at Dawn” 41). And while the 1963 Batman is haunted by Robin’s
death even after Dick Grayson is revealed to be alive and well, 1987 Batman in the anteroom
falls into a recollection of his own parents’ death; Jason Todd’s injuries become a segue into
Batman’s angst and anxieties focused on his own personal origin story. Jason Todd’s injuries,
though severe, lose their place as the locus of this narrative and are replaced by explorations (re-explorations, really) of Batman’s pain and reason for fighting crime.

Unlike Dick Grayson, however, the threats of death for Jason Todd move from the realm of the theoretical into the canonical. “In a fantasy world as defined by 1940s-era standards, there was no real worry that anything untoward of a permanent nature would happen to Dick Grayson,” but in the conflicted, boiling political climate of the 1980s, even in the realm of the comic book, Jason Todd was not so safe (Fingeroth 69). Jason as the second Robin is killed in “the most notorious event in comic book history” as of 1988. (Daniels 200). Facing fans who were increasingly vocal about their dislike of the new Robin, writers and editors decided to “do something interesting with the new 900 numbers being offered by telephone companies” (200). These telephone numbers took a fee in exchange for providing information, but DC writers decided to incorporate such a number into “a chance to let fans participate in the creation of the comics even more immediately than they could through their letters” (200).

In Batman #427, the final panels depict a bomb exploding inside the building in which Jason Todd lies unconscious after being beaten within inches of his life by the Joker. On the inside of the back cover, “readers were given two telephone numbers whereby, for two days only [and for fifty cents], they could vote” on whether or not Robin survived the explosion (201). More than 10,000 votes were cast and the final numbers were close: 5,343
readers had voted to let Robin die, and 5,271 readers had voted to keep him alive; the margin was a mere 72 votes (201).

Even Batman’s methods of grieving bear the mark of the anti-camp (and by extension anti-gay) trend of the 1980s. In the *Batman* arc entitled “A Death in the Family,” Jason Todd is killed and Batman’s reactions, far from the dramatic reactions in “Robin Dies at Dawn,” are far more calculated than sentimental. In *Batman* #428, installation five of the arc, Batman searches through the rubble of the destroyed warehouse in search of Jason Todd’s body. When Batman finds Jason Todd, the hero embraces his fallen sidekick for one panel, then immediately begins his methodical revenge against the Joker: tracking the villain halfway across the country to confront him about Robin’s death. Even upon reaching the Joker, however, Batman allows the villain one last chance to repent, though the Joker refuses outright to show the slightest remorse for what he has done. There is no immediate loss of control or overwhelming emotional response on the part of Batman, and even though he claims that the Joker has finally gone too far – “Let there be an end to it! No more!” – Batman never kills the Joker for murdering Jason Todd, not in this arc or in any of the ones to come (Starlin 6.18). Batman does relentlessly pursue the Joker, however, even at the end
of “A Death in the Family,” and he openly shows a disregard for the innocents who are killed in the ensuing battle, though these innocents had once been the hero’s first priority.

Jason Todd’s death solidified the trend toward a dark and gritty Batman. Tim Burton “used the precedent of Robin’s demise after the recent readers’ poll to justify giving the Boy Wonder the boot” and the *Batman* film “became one of the biggest hits in Hollywood history, earning back its cost [$40 million] in the first weekend it opened” (Daniels 202). *Batman Returns* earned $4.5 million dollars on opening weekend in the United States alone.

While the public was receptive to a Batman without Robin, Batman in the world of the comics grew increasingly guilt-ridden and solitary. “If Batman were a real person, Robin probably would be keeping him from crossing the line into nuttiness… [He] is what keeps Batman and Bruce Wayne from going too far” (Pearson and Uricchio “Notes from the Batcave…” 20). The Joker’s murder of Robin II, then, “precipitated a severe deterioration of the Batman’s mental state, as the Batman, wracked by guilt, refused to come to terms with his grief … [and] his violent and brutal responses negate everything that he stood for” (Pearson and Uricchio “I’m Not Fooled…”)
The “tension between do-gooder and revenge-driven psychopath … can be seen as a tension between the shifting depictions and the presences/absences of Robin” (197). For the next 18 months, Batman has no sidekick; he operates in total isolation. Little by little, “the ‘dark’ 1980s vision of the character … progressively removed all helpers from Batman’s side – Robin murdered, Batgirl crippled, Nightwing [Dick Grayson] estranged – until the Dark Knight became an obsessive loner” (Brooker 246). Without Robin, either Jason Todd or the Dick Grayson of years past, Batman experiences a dark, obsessively-anti-social period of mourning, self-destruction, and aggression in the solitude of his Batcave.

**Robin III: Tim Drake Introduced**

In December 1989, eighteen months after the death of Jason Todd, Robin III is introduced. Tim Drake, the first of the Robins to not be an orphan at the time of his introduction, has been described as a “computer whiz” and has more in common with Batman in terms of intellectual capabilities as opposed to physical skills (Daniels 201). Tim Drake figures out the secret identity of Batman and recognizes that, in the vacuum left by Jason Todd’s death, Batman is in a desperate state, “sunken too far within himself” (White 273). At age 13, Tim confronts Bruce Wayne directly and requests to be brought on board Batman’s crusade against crime as the new Robin. This is (understandably, given Jason Todd’s death) a request Bruce Wayne is reluctant to grant and “Robin I [the now-adult Dick Grayson] was recruited to ease the way for Robin III” and convince Batman to take another sidekick (Daniels 201).
While Batman eventually allows Tim Drake to take on the Robin costume, clear limitations are immediately placed on the sidekick: do not confront a known killer (such as Two-Face), withdraw and request assistance; and complete training from Batman, Alfred, and Nightwing before going out into the field even once. And while Batman’s relationship with Robin I (Dick Grayson) was as much an emotional relationship as it was a partnership, Batman’s relationship with Robin III is primarily an intellectual partnership. There is less room for Bruce Wayne and Tim Drake to bond, as Tim Drake does not need to live at Wayne Manor, and he seeks out Batman as a detective, not as a surrogate father. Tim is also kidnapped far less frequently than Dick Grayson ever was, and early in Tim’s career as Robin, when he is separated from Batman and confronted by the Joker, Tim is able to outsmart the villain and escape – a feat Jason Todd was incapable of. On the occasions when Tim Drake is kidnapped, he is usually able to rescue himself and is not in need of protection to the degree that Dick Grayson was. This self-sufficiency reinforced the necessary appearance of indestructability of the new Robin, defraying the Batman’s concerns surrounding Tim Drake’s assumption of the sidekick role: this Robin was too intelligent and level-headed to be in the same danger that compromised Jason Todd.

In a further departure from the physically-aggressive solo Batman, the appearance of Tim Drake heralds a new focus on the intellectual aspects of the superhero character. Tim Drake comes easily into the role of detective, but he has great difficulty in developing the acrobatic or combative skills that his predecessors came to so easily. Batman, too, is a father-
figure again, his protectiveness including Tim Drake, of course, but also Tim Drake’s family – especially Tim’s father: when Tim’s father is kidnapped, Batman travels the world to follow the man’s trail and bring him back home. When Tim’s father dies, Bruce Wayne offers to take Tim in as an adopted son. Tim initially refuses this offer, though he eventually accepts it and lives in Wayne Manor’s carriage house rather than in the main building. Though Tim Drake loses (at various times since becoming Robin), his mother, father, girlfriend, and two best friends, he has “seen what loss has done to Bruce” (White 273). “If anyone has a right to sink into despair and lose his soft, compassionate nature in strict devotion to his hard, retributive side, it’s Tim,” but Tim counters Batman’s aggressive-depressive attitude of the late 1980s and, despite multiple personal tragedies, never loses his grasp on his own gentler qualities or compromises his values for the sake of personal revenge (273).

Tim Drake is also the first Robin to have his own run of comics, the first issue of *Robin* released in 1994 and in production since. The introduction of a solo comic-book run is tied to Tim Drake’s capabilities as Robin and the degree of autonomy with which Tim Drake can be trusted. Also a factor in Robin’s solo run was the popularity of the Spider-Man superhero, who was one of the first, if not the first, superhero(es) to be a teenager. Unlike the adult/child superhero/sidekick roles, both age groups and both roles were incorporated into Spider-Man’s characterization; “as an adolescent, he has aspects of a child and aspects of an adult” and two of Spider-Man’s more childlike traits are his cracking of jokes (when he was the only one around to hear) and his ability to “have fun whilst doing his heroic deeds”
Spider-Man often talked to himself and functioned as his own sidekick, a trait that Tim Drake as Robin would soon emulate, and both young heroes starred in comics that became “sagas of adolescents who have the burdens of adulthood forced on them, yet who still maintain a youthful exuberance and sense of wonder” (153). These types of 1990s narratives brought the readership back towards adolescents. With the new media outlet of Saturday morning cartoons (such as *Static Shock, Batman Beyond, X-Men: The Animated Series*, *The Batman/Superman Animated Adventures, Spider-Man, The Avengers*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*) superheroes became increasingly the territory of the child and young adult, no longer the sole territory of the grim and jaded, literary-focused adults of the 1980s.

**Gay Crisis II: The 1990s Joel Schumacher Films**

The return of a Robin in the comics ultimately accompanied an incorporation of Robin in the Hollywood adventures of Batman as well. In 1995, Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher co-produced *Batman Forever* starring Val Kilmer as Batman and Chris O’Donnell as a young-adult Dick Grayson. Tim Burton’s dismal, gray Gotham is still the city by day, but Joel Schumacher introduces a neon Gotham at night: after sunset, the city lights up with bright colors and extravagant storefronts that were absent in the bleak portrayal of the city in the 1980s. Schumacher also brings a new levity to the film franchise, evident even in the opening lines of the film: as the Batmobile emerges from the Batcave and Batman is shown sitting with a stern frown in the driver’s seat, Alfred (the elderly Wayne butler), calls
from the sidelines, “Can I persuade you to take a sandwich with you, sir?” to which Batman replies (without cracking a smile), “I’ll get drive-through” (Batman Forever).

Despite the increase humor, the film is largely careful to maintain the anti-camp trends of its predecessors. Dick Grayson’s age makes Bruce Wayne’s adoption of him a bit peculiar, but even after Dick Grayson’s parents are killed by the villain Two-Face and Dick Grayson is adopted by Bruce Wayne, there is very little interaction between the two men. Dick bonds with Alfred and insists on staying at the manor as a mechanic to Bruce’s motorcycles, not as an orphaned ward. Both male protagonists kiss female characters, although only Bruce Wayne is given a love-interest – a psychologist named Chase Meridian (the third love interest in as many films). When Dick Grayson is finally allowed to accompany a reluctant Batman as Robin, he does not wear the underpants/leggings combination as adapted by the in-comic Dick Grayson, but instead wears the replica of Batman’s full-body, black-rubber body armor.

The villains, too, are again the film’s main embodiment of the campy 1960s. Tommy Lee Jones as Two-Face and Jim Carrey as the Riddler sport pink hair and dress in bright, chaotic colors – Two-Face in a suit of pink-and-black tiger stripes, with a yellow leopard-print shirt underneath, and the Riddler in a lime-green body suit that is later exchanged for a bedazzled leotard during his final confrontation with Batman. In their partnership, too, the villains are as loony and campy as their 1960s counterparts, often giggling, dancing, or acting like over-excited children; they are often shown sitting or standing close together, even
embracing, and the Riddler’s first encounter with Two-Face plays almost like a seduction, with the Riddler flattering his counterpart with multiple compliments, maintaining physical closeness (even putting an arm around Two-Face’s shoulder), batting his eyes, and progressively lowering his voice until he speaks in a whisper. Compared with Batman and Robin’s inability, for the majority of the film, to work as a team, Two-Face and the Riddler’s joint escapades and excellent teamwork make the two villains seem almost like a couple.

For the most part, the camp in *Batman Forever* remains closely associated with the villains. Robin’s quip of “Hol(e)y rusted metal, Batman!” is the only direct association of the heroes with the 1960s. Yet Robin’s arrival does bring with it the movement from a reclusive 1980s Batman to a socialite 1990s Batman: a Bruce Wayne who does not hide himself away in Wayne manor but attends social functions, gives openly to charity, and introduces profit-sharing plans to the employees of Wayne Enterprises.

Compared to the outward-looking approach of the Reagan administration in the 1980s, the Clinton administration from 1993 to 2001 carried the United States from the 1990s into the 2000s with a renewed focus on introspection. Clinton “issued a blizzard of new regulation governing … health and safety working conditions throughout the nation” and “became the first president to visit Vietnam” in a spirit of goodwill (536-7). Economically, “the bull market of the Nineties had become the longest in United States history, and the second strongest in terms of percentage gains” (472). From constant fear of nuclear war to a
period of relative peace and economic prosperity, the citizens of the United States shrank from international politics and focused instead on matters close to home.

For better or for worse, the 1990s put celebrity scandals at the top of every newspaper and embraced “TV’s pursuit of sensational revelations” including constant coverage of controversial celebrity trials such as the trial of O.J. Simpson (Johnson 459). With no public movements to capture public attention, the 1990s were “the era of mass-media entertainment and celebrity culture” (455). Scandal even consumed the White House during this decade, but even with the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Bill Clinton left office in 2001 with high approval ratings; “Americans were … in a tolerant, forgiving, even affectionate mood toward their talented but wayward outgoing president” (538). The United States, in this climate, had no need for superheroes, dystopian Gotham Cities, or a Batman who skulked in his gloomy Batcave and avoided all possible emotional attachments.

In 1997, Tim Burton stepped away from the Batman franchise and hands production of the next Batman film entirely to Joel Schumacher, who takes the seeds sown in the 1992 film to create the colorful, warm-hearted Batman & Robin that, more than any other Batman film before or since, harkens back to the 1960s Batman and Robin partnership without an ounce of mockery. George Clooney replaces Val Kilmer as Batman, though Chris O’Donnell is still cast as Robin, and Alicia Silverstone is brought on board to play Batgirl. Batman & Robin unapologetically focuses on Bruce Wayne/Batman and his relationships with the two people who share knowledge of his secret identity: Alfred (still the aged family butler) and
Robin/Dick Grayson, now his official partner in crime-fighting. Joel Schumacher’s intent for the film was to “let the audience ‘have fun’ by creating a living comic book for them” and to try “lightening the tone a tad for an anticipated audience of younger viewers” (Daniels 248). In attempting to create a family-friendly Batman film, Schumacher focused much of the narrative strength on the role of trust within Bruce Wayne/Batman’s family and, in the words of Alfred, Dick Grayson, and Bruce Wayne in the film, “Sometimes counting on someone else is the only way to win” (Batman & Robin).

This film, and Batman Forever before it, features the as-yet-smallest age gap between Batman and Robin. It is the first film of the four in which Batman has no significant female love-interest: Julie Madison, a woman who stands at Bruce Wayne’s shoulder when he appears at social events, is openly unbothered by Bruce Wayne’s complete resistance to marriage. Julie appears in a scant handful of scenes, and serves as a shield with which Bruce Wayne can protect himself from the dangers of being rich, well-known, and single. Bruce has shed his playboy reputation over the course of the four Batman films, and this is his most chaste film yet: he shares only one kiss with one woman.

Bruce Wayne/Batman’s family, meanwhile, are the three characters who display the most affection for each other. In Batman & Robin, Bruce Wayne has several flashbacks of Alfred taking care of him after the death of Bruce’s parents, and when Alfred is thought to be dying of a rare disease, the two openly admit to loving one another: Bruce has come to think of Alfred as his father, and Alfred considers Bruce his own son. Bruce cares for Dick Grayson
as well and comes across as overprotective, while Dick argues that if Batman and Robin are a team, he and Bruce are partners who need to trust one another; “Don’t go all protective on me,” he insists, and Alfred likewise accuses Bruce of being “a novice in the ways of family.” Wayne Manor, home to all three of them, is warm and homey, no longer the Gothic castle of the 1980s, and the main parlor during Alfred’s absence gathers half-empty pizza boxes, skewed pillows, and open books – clear indications of habitation and an irreverence for the impersonal, museum-like interior of the house in *Batman* and *Batman Returns*.

The importance of Batman and Robin’s relationship is most highlighted once the villains enter the film. Mr. Freeze (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Poison Ivy (played by Uma Thurman) are the villains this time around, and their puns are as numerous and as corny as those of the 1960s. A rough count suggests that Mr. Freeze delivers about 22 ice-related puns over the course of the film, and Poison Ivy is not far behind if one catalogues botanical puns as well as general innuendos. More importantly, Poison Ivy functions as a wedge between Batman and Robin, which they must overcome if they are to defeat either villain and protect Gotham City. Poison Ivy utilizes a type of love-dust that entices men to be deeply, blindly attracted to her – a love-dust that works against almost all of the men she uses it on, the exceptions being Mr. Freeze (who is too devoted to his wife to be swayed) and Batman, who is briefly enamored but manages to shake off the enticement almost immediately and is never compromised in action by base attraction. The dust is more effective against Robin, though both masked heroes ignore Poison Ivy if they see their
counterpart on the verge of injury; for example, Robin is starry-eyed until he hears a third villain, Bane, attacking Batman, at which point Robin rushes to aid his partner. Poison Ivy even remarks on this, stating that Batman and Robin “turned out to be much more resistant to my love-dust than expected.”

Towards the end of the film, after Robin has been exposed multiple times to Poison Ivy’s love-dust, he takes out his aggression on Batman, claiming that Batman stops him from kissing Poison Ivy not because she’s toxic but because Batman is jealous. Seconds away from his sidekick storming away forever in a fit of deadly pride, arrogance, and misplaced attraction, Batman calms Robin down by using Robin’s earlier insistences against him: if the two of them are a team, he and Robin are partners who need to trust one another. “Friend – partner – brother” is the call that ultimately turns Robin back towards Batman, and the two unite against the female antagonist.

By the end of the film, though Batman and Robin have spent a significant part of it bickering over a female foe, the two heroes are ultimately united against her because of the renewed trust between them. Neither hero ends the movie with a female love-interest; though Robin showed a brief interest in Batgirl (Alfred’s niece) when she first appeared, she ultimately joins the Wayne family in a sisterly capacity rather than that of romantic side-character. Reinforcing the film’s focus on love and family are the closing scenes: a three-way handshake between Batman, Robin, and Batgirl, and the trio of their silhouettes against the lights of the Batcave.
Taken altogether, *Batman & Robin* brought to the fore the idea of a friendly, well-adjusted, fatherly Batman. Gotham City here was again neon, brightly-lit, and populated by petty thieves who wear Day-Glo costumes and glow-in-the-dark face-paint. For the first time in any of the four films, no petty villains or major villains die, and Mr. Freeze, who had been looking for a medical cure for his wife, is allowed to continue his research in a special, sub-zero cell within the city’s psychiatric ward. This warm-hearted Batman and his brightly-lit Gotham City, along with the plethora of puns, meant that as far as film-goers were concerned, 1960s camp was back in full force. This rendition of Batman became “associated with all the qualities comic fans had learned to abhor – camp, gayness, the aesthetics of the TV show,” and long-time Batman fan frequently accuse Joel Schumacher of ruining Batman (Brooker 299). After the 1980s Batman films, Batman fans were convinced that “it was time to stop play: it was, after all, the time of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke*, of the graphic novel, the comic as literature” (318). There was no room for a Batman who was surrounded by loving allies and a healthy surrogate family. Like Adam West in the 1960s, George Clooney played an “uncomplicated, good-natured, boy scout Batman,” not the desired dark, gothic Batman as introduced by Tim Burton and Frank Miller (Pearson and Uricchio “I’m Not Fooled…” 199).

Embodying the exact opposite of a solitary, vigilante Batman, *Batman & Robin* was a box-office flop and a critical failure, and launched an absence of Batman films in the media – a drought that would last for twenty years.
Where is Batman Now?

The 2000s and 2010s have seen more renditions of Batman than any historical period prior. Propelled by the Saturday morning cartoons of the early 1990s and by the Hollywood revitalization of superheroes from the Fantastic Four to Captain America, superheroes are as much for children again as they are for adults. The 1990s saw “a renaissance in animation, both in film and television … due in part to Disney’s return to studio production” and the 1990s is sometimes known, more specifically, as the Disney Renaissance (Harrison 127). From 1989 with the release of The Little Mermaid through the 1999 release of Tarzan, many of the animated Disney movies, including Beauty and the Beast (1991), The Lion King (1994), and Mulan (1998), revived the perceived potential of the animated cartoon to be economically successful. A flood of Saturday morning cartoons inundated their young viewers with a variety of brightly-colored, action-oriented storylines, many of them revolving around superheroes. To match the age of character with the average age of the intended audience, these cartoons (as well as early video games intended for young consumers) focus on the younger members of the Batman mythos: Robin, Batgirl, and in the case of Batman Beyond (1991-2001), a young replacement Batman. Batman Beyond and Young Justice (2010-2013), as well as the comic books of the same names that accompany them, focus on Batman’s sidekicks or successors, “moving the younger team to centre stage” while Batman’s role is primarily that of “a concerned father in the background” who advises from the sidelines (Brooker 327).
In addition to the relatively new technology of video games, burgeoning technology in the form of computers and cell phones created a greater interconnectedness between children and their peer groups. Parents and teachers did not become less important in children’s lives, but peers were classmates, neighbors, and friend-groups – and technology brought them closer together more often and for extended periods of time. Peer groups became more integral to a child’s sense of self and sense of belonging, hence, perhaps, the increase in shows which featured groups of young heroes rather than the solo superhero. 

*Young Justice* and *Teen Titans* (2003-2006) in particular embraced the format: young superheroes largely left unsupervised struggled to connect with one another as friends and to fight crime as a coherent unit.

In order to keep from becoming obsolete, Batman appears in these works as a supporter in the background – as a mentor or father figure who would otherwise serve no purpose in a story revolving around the youngest members of the crime-fighting roster. In *Teen Titans*, Batman is largely absent and is usually only present in Robin’s occasional oblique references to a teacher and surrogate father. *Young Justice* in particular, however, depicts Batman as a more affectionate, responsible adoptive parent than the Superman of the same show, never becoming confrontational with a young-adult Dick Grayson; rather than estranging his sidekick, Batman allows Dick to move from the sidekick (Robin) role into the Nightwing (independent hero) role, although the two continue to work closely following this shift.
As has been seen with the Teen Titans cartoon, Batman himself is not a necessary character even within the space of Gotham City, and Robin has the potential to upstage his mentor as the more popular member of the duo. In order to keep Batman involved in the television shows and comic books meant for adolescent readers, he had to become a character who would work well with others; this was the only way to keep the masked vigilante from becoming a character discarded in favor of younger, more relatable heroes. As such, in order to survive the changing consumer focus, Batman becomes an active father figure to his younger teammates and assists them more often than he undertakes solo missions.

Justice League, while it focused on adult superheroes in the persons of Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, and so on, still retains the “new-model Batman as a team player” (Brooker 319). Batman’s solitary and estranged days of the 1980s draw to a close, and instead of isolating himself from all possible allies, Batman of the 2000s and 2010s is surrounded by them. Even in video games, which are increasingly adapting superhero stories, Batman is a team player: LEGO Batman video games (and its resultant movie) characterize the masked hero as a serious stick-in-the-mud who is accompanied on every mission by sidekicks and fellow superheroes whose cheer and energy counter Batman’s perpetually grumpy exterior (LEGO Batman: The Movie).

The cartoons and LEGO Batman video games are primarily intended for an adolescent audience, but even the Batman for teenagers and adults continues to be a team player.
Adopting a new Robin, Damian Wayne, in 2009, Batman nevertheless works with Dick
Grayson (now Nightwing) and Tim Drake (upgraded to Red Robin from the Robin role) and
considers all three of them family. Other allies include Alfred (again, considered family) as
well as Huntress and Batgirl, two superheroines who operate solo as well as in conjunction
with Batman or other members of the so-called “Bat-family.”

With two ex-Robins and one current-Robin at his shoulder, Batman of the 2000s is
still unsmiling, though he is open and communicative with his sidekicks and other allies.
Even when he undertakes a mission “alone,” he more often collaborates with fellow heroes
and trusts his adopted family to follow directions, investigate leads, and work with him to
take down the various villains of Gotham City. This new team-oriented attitude is most
apparent in the stand-alone two-part story *Hush* (2003), which includes Batman taking
advice from an adult Dick Grayson, revisiting his affection for a deceased Jason Todd, and
trusting Tim Drake to strike out alone with complex instructions. *Hush* in general is an
exploration of Batman’s relationships with his allies and all the people he has trusted with
the knowledge of his secret identity over the years. Catwoman directly addresses Batman’s
extensive web of companions at one point: “You know, for a loner, you certainly have
yourself a lot of strings. Nightwing. Robin. Oracle. Huntress. Batgirl,” and those are just the
masked allies with which Batman aligns himself with; missing from the list are Alfred, Jim
Gordon, Leslie Thompkins, among others (Loeb Chapter 8). *Hush* deals with the necessity of
Batman depending on others, not just on himself.
Images from *Hush* – Joseph Loeb

(presented as a collage not two cohesive pages)
**Robin IV: Damian Wayne (2009 to 2013)**

Damian Wayne is the first Robin to be Bruce Wayne’s biological son. He is the offspring of Bruce Wayne and Talia al Ghul – the daughter of Ra’s al Ghul and one of Batman’s predominant foes. Damian Wayne is ten years old when he is introduced to his father and brought into Bruce Wayne’s life as the new Robin. For those first ten years of his life, Damian Wayne was trained in martial artistry, escapology, and swordplay, among other abilities, most of which deal with disguises or the efficient death of one’s enemies. Raised by a villainous mother as a soldier since, essentially, birth, Damian is arrogant and vicious, a danger not only to the criminals of Gotham but also to other members of the Bat-family. He threatens Alfred and attempts to kill the ex-Robins without provocation.

Where previously Batman had been responsible for training morally-good Robins the combat skills necessary to keep them alive, here Batman is responsible for humanizing a morally-vacant Robin who has already mastered his physical training. This is a responsibility that the grim 1980s caped crusader would have been incapable of undertaking. Robin of *The Dark Knight Returns* was included in order to temper Batman’s extreme levels of personal darkness. Damian Wayne in the 2000s is the character in this case with unplumbed depths of personal darkness, and it is Bruce Wayne, father and mentor, who
is tasked with drawing the boy out of himself and into a well-developed and balanced young man (though this is a responsibility he eventually trusts to Dick Grayson). Bruce openly admits that he is “afraid of what Damian could become without [him] around” (Tomasi “Born to Kill”) and recognizes his own capacity for uncontrollable rage that has been passed down to the boy.

Given their relationship as biological father and son, Bruce Wayne/Batman is also able to be openly affectionate with his sidekick without fear of alternative connotations. The comic universes in general have become much more open to homosexual characters in the 1990s onwards (Batwoman of the Batwoman comics and Billy and Teddy of Young Avengers being three of the highest-visibility homosexual characters), although media exposure of pedophilic priests has likely kept the dark side of adult-child relationships fresh in readers’ minds. But by designating the newest Robin as the biological son of Batman, the hero/sidekick relationship can be nearly as affectionate (if not as over-the-top) as it was in the 1960s. Team-oriented Batman of the 2000s adopts a new role as father and protector of a child who is physically but not morally capable of independence.

**The Christopher Nolan Films: 2005-2012**

The Christopher Nolan trilogy of *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) are Batman films that, while they adhere to the 1990s trend towards a team-oriented Batman, are also films that could only have been created in a post-9/11 context. The films deal heavily, both directly and indirectly, with the fears, concerns,
and hopes that have appeared in everyday discourse following the terrorist attacks in New
York City on September 11, 2001.

Of all available superheroes, Batman is perhaps the most suited to post-9/11 rhetoric.
Batman is a survivor of traumatic events, and while his history is rooted deeply in personal
history rather than the lives of thousands, he is traumatized much in the same way that those
who witnessed or were involved in the events of 9/11 were (and are) traumatized. Trauma
develops an altered definition within the context of September 11.

[Trauma is] a consciousness of utter helplessness while watching the deaths of
others; an unforeseen and appalling disruption of expectations that renders
what they witness frighteningly incomprehensible … and an ambivalence
about how to categorize this expectation-shattering phenomenon of
compromised personal agency and bodily integrity. (Muller 55)

Trauma is what characterizes Batman: “Batman’s motivation is wholly derived from the
trauma of witnessing his parents shot in cold blood” (Reynolds 67). What is sometimes called
The “Falling Man” or the “Jumping Man” trauma is the witnessing by 9/11 survivors of men
and women falling out of the burning towers too many stories above the ground to survive
the impact (Muller). Many were haunted afterward by the images, plagued by the knowledge
that there was nothing they could have done to save the falling person’s life and that the
falling person was unquestionably dead. Witnessing the stories on the news produced a
diluted version of the same effect in those who were more removed from the scene.
In each case, regardless of magnitude, Batman and the witnesses of 9/11 have trauma in common. Batman absorbs the traumatic events of his past into his methods of dealing with the present, but he does not allow either trauma or fear to destroy his life. Perhaps this is part of why Batman has been one of the most prominent superheroes to regain popularity in the wake of 9/11, as well as why the most recent film trilogy has been so successful; of all the available superheroes, Batman most understands the mindset of American viewers.

Regarding the Christopher Nolan trilogy, one of the most evident alterations to Hollywood’s usual interpretation of the Batman mythos are the films’ depictions of Jim Gordon and, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, of John Blake. Both of these characters are policemen, though Jim Gordon is gradually promoted to commissioner as the series progresses and John Blake does not appear in the comics. Unlike the Batman films from the 1960s through the 1990s, Jim Gordon in the 2005-2012 films is a central character in each installment of the trilogy. In the 1960s, Commissioner Gordon’s only role was to call Batman. Gordon in the 1995 *Batman Forever* exists to be waylaid and fooled by Poison Ivy. Gordon in the two Tim Burton movies is nearly a non-entity, adding nothing to the film but a stubborn disbelief in Batman. Commissioner Gordon in the Christopher Nolan trilogy takes an integral role in protecting Gotham City: during the climax of the first movie alone, Gordon destroys the rail system of an above-ground subway to prevent it from crashing into the heart of the city while Batman distracts the villains on board long enough to keep Gordon from being noticed. In the second film, *The Dark Knight*, Gordon leads the crusade against organized
crime in Gotham City, saves the life of the mayor when Batman is powerless to help, fakes his own death to protect his family, saves Batman’s life during a confrontation with the Joker, organizes the evacuation of the city hospitals, and is the only policeman Batman trusts to involve in his plans. The third and final installment in the series introduces another policeman, John Blake, and the two men organize the rescue of 3,000 trapped police officers, lead the rebellion against Gotham City’s criminal overlords, and are the only two policemen in the city to believe that Bane, the film’s main villain, is a real threat – and they turn out to be correct. Commissioner Gordon also tracks the villain’s trucks/patrol path through the city and plants an anti-detonation device on the atomic bomb concealed in one of the trucks.

Up until this trilogy, the police force of Gotham was inept and served to be more hindrance than help to Batman. 9/11 twisted this concept and reawakened American awareness in the ideal of the human hero. Firefighters, police officers, and medical officers at Ground Zero became the real superheroes of the United States and this appreciation has not diminished. Nowhere else is this revised mindset more clear than in the volumes of 9/11 tribute comics published by DC, Marvel, and other big names in the comic book industry. These tribute comics tackle the concept directly: story after story highlights the heroics of police officers, firefighters, ambulance workers, and even everyday citizens during the collapse of the two towers. “Of
the five compilations published, two feature almost no superheroes. In the other three, only about a quarter of the pieces … evoke the superhero in some way” (Nyberg 176). Some of the comics depict children turning from admiration of superheroes to human heroes, and some depict superheroes admiring the first responders, but most stories are about the first responders themselves. These “real world heroes went beyond the ideal of our imagination … [and embodied] the heroic acts that will define this generation as well as the heroic ideal for new millennium” (180). Superheroes, of course, had been revealed by the events of 9/11 to be “nothing more than figments of imagination, powerless in the face of reality” and it was to real-world heroes, then, that the nation turned; the men and women who had given their lives to protect and rescue other human beings became new superheroes in their own right (182). Heroism as sacrifice became a reinvigorated concept, and the heroism and courage that the citizens of New York City displayed on 9/11 are the unquestionable, resounding focus of the tribute comics: everyday heroes have come to define heroism or a new generation of United States’ citizens.

Commissioner Gordon and John Blake, everyday police officers, are as central to the Christopher Nolan trilogy as Batman is, and this highlighting of human heroes comes as a direct result of the changed mindset following the events of 9/11. Real people can be heroes,
too, and Batman himself states as much near the conclusion of *The Dark Knight Rises*: “A hero can be anyone. Even someone who does something as simple and reassuring as putting a coat around a young boy’s shoulders to let him know the world hadn't ended.” This is in reference to the first time we see Gordon in *Batman Begins* as the one police officer who stays to comfort a young Bruce Wayne after his parents have been killed and he is taken to the police station. “September 11 … defined heroes as those everyday … people who, in many cases, made the ultimate sacrifice” (Nyberg 185). Before 9/11, this much admiration and respect for firefighters and police officers as heroes would not have been present – and, indeed, *was* not present – in Hollywood movies dedicated to comic-book superheroes.

As the nation’s definitions of the hero have changed, so, too, have the motivations of its villains. Batman villains in the previous films and comics, more than anything else, are concerned with personal advancement. They steal, lie, and murder in order to get ahead in the world. The Joker from the 1989 *Batman* and the Two-Face/Riddler team in *Batman Forever* have personal quarrels with Batman, in which civilians are victims of cross-fire in a game between superhero and super-villain. In Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, “Batman’s villains are portrayed as existing only because he [Batman] exists” (Costello 168). Mr. Freeze and Poison Ivy in *Batman & Robin* had their take-over-the-world plans, but these were plans typical of Hollywood: improbable and doomed to fail, and again self-serving for the villains, who sought to recreate the world in their own images (in ice and rampant plant life, respectively). *Batman Begins*, however, introduces a new breed of villain to Gotham
City: the villain who claims that the corruption of the city has grown too great and its people must be destroyed.

Ra’s al Ghul in *Batman Begins* gives voice to the concerns that perhaps the citizens of the United States have brought retribution onto themselves. Ra’s al Ghul states that his mission is to subject Gotham to “a purging fire” as a “check against human corruption” and to immortalize Gotham City as an example of a City that has grown too corrupt and “must be allowed to die” (*Batman Begins*). The League of Shadows, of which Ra’s al Ghul is the leader, is an elite group of assassins who take it upon themselves to cut down empires that have grown too large and too corrupt. The league claims to be responsible for the fall of Rome, and the Great Fire of London, among other catastrophes that destroyed civilizations. This league is not afraid to die in the execution of its plans, and its motivations do not stem from desire for personal gain, but from its hopes for a moral and upright world. Gotham City, “like Rome before it … has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice,” Ra’s al Ghul claims, “It is beyond saving.”

This view of American society (as Gotham, of course, has always been a reflection of New York City) as depraved and toxic mirrors the assumed motivations for the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11: the United States as a nation had become too corrupt, godless, and unsalvageable; the United States must be brought down to nothing and the rest of the world must realize this and stop following its lead. The world will “watch in horror as its greatest city destroys itself” (*Batman Begins*). This reasoning is “especially appealing to the modern
day New Yorker who fears that the city may be too far gone to save” (DiPaolo 69). With 9/11 and the War on Terror, “unlike earlier national security crusades such as World War II and the Cold War,” there was “significant ambiguity from the start ... [about] the extent to which the nation [the United States] might be culpable in the emergence of this threat” (Costello 213-4). Just how toxic are we as a nation, and how much have we brought our calamities onto ourselves? Do we get the violence we deserve?

Other, equally tormenting themes left in the wake of 9/11 include the role of fear in everyday life. In the history of comic books as a whole, there have been two peaks in their popularity: the first peak during World War II and the second peak now. “Our post-9/11 era … has been one of the two times when superhero stories have resonated the strongest” (Packer 48). Upon its release in 2008, *The Dark Knight* “was not just a blockbuster, but the highest grossing film of all time” (49). This trilogy deals with fear and chaos in ways that are entirely relevant to its post-9/11 viewers, and even if the films are an escape in which all problems are ultimately solved by a man in a bat mask, nevertheless they confront questions that have been embedded in the minds of Americans since 9/11.

*Batman Begins* adopts as its main theme an exploration of “symbolism and power of fear” (Vaz 116). Scarecrow, one of the two central villains of the feature, and Batman both use fear as a weapon: Batman intimidates his foes with the Batman persona itself, and Scarecrow develops a “fear toxin” that has the potential to drive everyone in Gotham mad with panic. Bruce Wayne (prior to adopting the Batman costume) explicitly deals with fear
as something that afflicts him and he seeks to control: his fear of bats reflects the trauma of what had happened to his parents when he was a child. Bruce Wayne seeks to “turn fear on those who prey on the fearful” and in doing so, becomes a symbol of that which has haunted him for so many years of his life. Over the course of the film, Bruce Wayne learns to conquer his fear and even embrace it – thus Batman is born. And for the first time in any film, perhaps for the first time in any Batman production, comics included, Bruce Wayne adopts Batman as a symbol of hope for the people. From the 1940s, Bruce Wayne had decided on the Batman persona as a way to “strike fear into [the] hearts” of criminals – “a cowardly and superstitious lot” and the overwhelming majority of Batman stories afterward, even *Hush* as recently as 2003, have followed suit (Finger “Origin”). Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins*, however, declares, “I’m going to show the people of Gotham their city doesn’t belong to the criminals and the corrupt.” In *The Dark Knight*, he adds, “I meant to inspire good. Not madness. Not death.” Bruce wants to inspire his fellow citizens of Gotham City, to get them to stop living in fear of the gangsters who run the city. Gotham City lives in fear, but Bruce Wayne takes his personal experience with fear and wears it as a badge of courage. He sets an example for Gotham City and for the viewers: *Do not allow fear to conquer you. Fear can only defeat you if you allow it to do so.* In “the years immediately following the 9/11 attacks, American audiences craved escapism” and films such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Spider-Man* “featured tortured heroes wrestling with issues of power and responsibility that helped audiences work out their own feelings about the current state of the world without
speaking directly to those fears” (DiPaolo 18-19). But Batman does not obliquely reference post-9/11 fears: he addresses them head-on and shows us that avoidance and reconciliation are not the same thing.

*The Dark Knight Rises* deals with post-9/11 fears more directly and includes “open and barely veiled references to terrorism, the surveillance state and vengeance as a moral imperative” (Dargis 2). Bane (the primary villain in this installment) makes his debut by hijacking and crashing a plane, and then takes advantage of a packed football stadium to blow up the field and intimidate the city with threats of violence. For many, though there is an awareness that “the September 11 targets were not random, even if the victims who suffered were,” nevertheless there continues in the collective American consciousness the “fear that anyone could be a victim at any time, regardless of reason,” and this fear “became even more pervasive despite what logic might dictate” (Schopp 262). One of the tribute comics addresses this newfound fear in plain terms: “Now the only thing that feels real is the fear. The nervousness in crowded places, public places. And the ugly fear that brings out the worst in people” (Brubaker 106). People feared both the looming storm cloud of possible future attacks, as well as what threats they might encounter in their next-door neighbors if the nation fell into a sea of chaos after more explosions took place.

The villains of *The Dark Knight* are an examination of what we fear from each other as human beings. Harvey Dent, the city’s honorable “White Knight” is the only prosecutor in the city brave enough to attack crime bosses and mob leaders in court and imprison them.
There are multiple attempts on his life throughout the film, and he is held up as a hero by the citizens of Gotham for his efforts to clean up the city. After a chemical scarring by the Joker and after losing his fiancé, Dent loses his faith in the world and in people. He becomes the villain Two-Face and systematically hunts down the corrupt police officers responsible for the death of his fiancé. Harvey Dent is a virtuous man twisted into becoming a murderer, and is an emblem of what people fear for themselves and for each other. Just how far away are we from being wild dogs? The question pervades the film and the air-raid sirens featured prominently in the soundtrack add to the film’s overall preoccupation with fear and impending self-destruction.

The Joker, the other villain in *The Dark Knight* pits citizens against one another in his perverse, city-wide attempts to cause panic. The Joker fully counts on the belief that, “when the chips are down, these civilized people, they’ll eat each other” (*The Dark Knight*). During one of the film’s ferry scenes, packed boats of people are attempting to leave the city because they do not want to be involved in the Joker’s plans. One ship is full of prisoners to be transferred to another prison, and the other is full of everyday citizens who are trying to escape either solo or with their families. The Joker cuts the engines of both ships and leaves each group with a trigger to blow up the other ship, promising that if one ferry destroys the other, he will spare the ship that blew up its rival. If neither ship blows up the other, he will detonate the bombs on both. Communication between the two ferries is cut off entirely, and each ferry is left to determine its own course of action: kill everyone on the other boat to
save themselves, or die. The Joker forces us to confront our own inherent evils: Are we good people? Can we trust each other?

Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* takes the threat of self-destruction still further: he traps nearly the entire police force in the city sewers and leaves the rest of the city in a lawless state supported only by supply trucks sent by the National Guard. While *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* deal mostly with the fear and self-uncertainty following 9/11, *The Dark Knight Rises* calls out the economic injustice that plagues the United States: “The rich,” Bane explains, “The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths about opportunity. The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests and cast out into the cold world that we know and endure.” Catwoman, acting as more of a morally-grey Robin Hood, adds later, “You’ll wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us” (*The Dark Knight Rises*). Gotham here (and New York – and the United States all together) is accused of “the brutal excesses of the French Revolution” and it is here that Bane sees the worst corruption in the city; Bane insists that the only way to solve the problem is to break the systems apart and let the poverty-stricken take control of the city without police officers or employers to push them back down (Dargis 3).

Amidst all this darkness, the character shedding the brightest light and exhibiting unfettered benevolence is, ironically, the Dark Knight himself. Batman of the Christopher Nolan trilogy is one of the most compassionate Batman incarnations yet – and Bruce Wayne, not just his masked alter ego, plays a prominent role in the narrative as “the financial
caretaker of Gotham” – a socially-minded individual who uses his wealth not for himself but for others (Jensen 89).

As portrayed by Christian Bale, no longer is Bruce Wayne the “bored, wealthy idler and playboy” originally envisioned and so long in use (Kane 44). As early as the 2000s, and especially prominent in the characterization of Bale-Batman, Bruce Wayne is a man who uses his vast resources to help rebuild Gotham City as an ordinary, if extremely wealthy, citizen. Rather than as a playboy, Bruce Wayne is portrayed as “a benevolent American prince who grows from a self-involved, vengeful young man into a mature ‘Feudal Lord’ dedicated to helping the people of Gotham instead of wallowing in his own anger and personal demons” (DiPaolo 51). An increasing awareness of the disparity between the rich and poor is visible everywhere in the United States, but is made especially apparent in New York, our Gotham City. In recent years, we have developed a new vision of how the rich among us should spend their wealth, and Bale-Batman embodies the benevolent, ethical, “sane, intelligent, moral” man whom we envision as a responsible user of vast personal wealth in contemporary society.

In stories past, the narratives… deal with the transgressions of the underclasses but not the conditions that give rise to these transgressions” (Pearson and Uricchio “I’m Not Fooled…” 206). Past versions of Batman dealt with the symptoms of urban decay, but not with the source. For the most part, “Batman expends most of his energy on crimes of violence with visual potential, ignoring the visually boring crimes of political grafters,
polluters, and slum landlords” (205). Batman’s main focus in the Christopher Nolan trilogy is likewise on the villains who threaten the physical integrity of Gotham City. Naturally, his first priority is with people who threaten the lives of innocents. But as a new aspect, Bale-Batman also deals with the source: villains designed after the “corrupt corporate moguls … [and] indicted Enron executives,” who make possible the slums and extreme poverty that characterize the poorer districts of Gotham. Capitalist greed, especially in *The Dark Knight Rises*, is a major factor in the films’ complex relationships with and deconstruction of the nature of good and evil (DiPaolo 8). Those who “live off the blood and sweat of those less powerful” are called out as people who disrupt the natural order of society and threaten to destroy it with their hoarding of the society’s essential goods. The newly socially-invested Bruce Wayne does what he can with his political presence to deal with these subtler threats to the security of the people: he nearly bankrupts himself in his mission to provide Gotham City with a clean, renewable, inexpensive energy source; he funds urban renewal projects, and he spearheads the movement to financially secure Harvey Dent as the new District Attorney. When he retires as Batman at the end of the trilogy, he hands the house and grounds of Wayne Manor over to the public on the condition that they be used for “the housing and care of the city’s at-risk and orphaned children” (*The Dark Knight Rises*).

While the Batman of the comics has always retained the “no killing” policy that took root shortly after Robin’s introduction in 1940, the various incarnations of Batman in film have never taken this policy seriously. *Batman Returns* shows Batman burning a follower of
the Penguin to death with the rocket-boosters on the Batmobile. In *Batman Forever*, Batman spends the entire film explaining to Robin why killing Two-Face would be wrong, then explicitly orchestrates the villain's fatal plunge at the end of the film. Only the 1997 *Batman & Robin* is free from the Batman-caused deaths of both villains and their minions. This movie, more than any of the others, was intended for family-viewing and the largely non-violent atmosphere of the film may be attributed to the intended audience of both adults and young children. The Batman movies of the 1980s speak primarily to an adult audience, hence theshrugging-off of Batman's usual no-killing rule.

*Batman Begins* rejects this approach and tackles the origin story of Batman with an especial focus on Batman's compassion for criminals. After being told by a crime boss that he has “never tasted desperate. This is a world you’ll never understand,” Bruce Wayne abandons his manor home and his multi-million dollar business, and begins a seven-year journey of ship-hopping, stealing for food, and immersion in the criminal underworld. He survives by stealing fruit from market stalls and becoming a part of gangs that steal shipments of supplies from Wayne Industries (his own company). The film's opening scenes are of Bruce in a prison camp somewhere in Asia, eating thin soup from tin plates and getting into fights with the inmates. Before he takes up his crusade against criminals, Bruce seeks first to understand criminals, and it is this compassion for them and the circumstances that drive them to crime that prevents him from killing them. Bruce Wayne’s world-encompassing journey among the criminal underclass is presented “as one in which he sought to empathize with criminals
while not becoming one himself” (Schopp 278). This is a Batman whose innate moral
goodness and belief in the goodness of human beings prevents him from robbing them of
their lives when others would call for the same. And in protecting the innocent, Batman goes
to extreme lengths: when the Joker puts out a call to kill the one man in the city who claims
to know the true identity of Batman and has just attempted to reveal it on the news, Bruce
Wayne puts his life at risk to rescue him, even though the man is a nosy Wayne Enterprises
employee who previously attempted to blackmail him. A police car escorting the man to
safety is nearly (deliberately) hit by a pick-up truck, but Bruce drives a car between the
police car and the pick-up, the thin frame of his luxury car crunched by the force of the
impact and sandwiched between the two vehicles.

While there is no Robin in the first two films, this Batman is still a team-player in the
vein of the comics of the 1990s and early 2000s. Bruce Wayne/Batman is surrounded by a
group of trustworthy individuals without whom his mission would be impossible: he relies
on Jim Gordon, Lucius Fox (inventor and reliable head of Wayne Enterprises), Alfred (who is
here a man who is a partner in the design and organization of Bruce’s mission, and is not just
the family butler), and Rachel Dawes – childhood friend and moral compass of Bruce. In The
Dark Knight, Harvey Dent is added to the roster of trusted individuals, and the third film
adds Selina Kyle (Catwoman) and John Blake, who is the Robin of the trilogy (to be
addressed later). This Batman is not a loner, someone who has no faith in other people. This
is a Batman who frequently trusts others to relay information, keep secrets, and generally “be
decent men [and women] in an indecent time” (The Dark Knight). Bale-Batman does not insist on working alone or severing all ties with other people; he even insists, “There are always people you care about” – a lesson learned in Batman Begins and passed on to one of his allies in The Dark Knight Rises.

As a result of this supportive Bat-family, Bale-Batman readily depends on others and, rather than be the stick-in-the-mud straight man to every joke, has his own sense of humor. At the beginning of The Dark Knight, Lucius Fox looks over Bruce Wayne’s request for a revised suit and remarks, “You want to be able to turn your head,” and Batman’s response (delivered with a smile) is, “Sure would make backing out of the driveway easier.” Later, when Bruce is preparing to reveal his secret identity to the public to stop the Joker’s murder of innocents, Alfred laments, “I suppose they’re going to lock me up, too, as your accomplice” and Bruce replies with, “Accomplice? I was going to tell them the whole thing was your idea.” Bruce Wayne’s relationship with Alfred is built on mutual affection and the loose boundaries that can allow for repartee and gently deprecating one-liners delivered at the other’s expense.

Within the space of the trilogy, Robin does appear as Batman’s eventual sidekick, though the character’s role is a stark contrast to his more conventional roles in previous movies or the comics. Instead of being given an established, child-aged Robin in the form of Dick Grayson, Jason Todd, Tim Drake, or Damian Wayne, Bale-Batman is assisted by a young-adult policeman played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt whose given name (learned only at
the conclusion of the film) is Robin. This Robin is so named as a way to represent a Robin cobbled together out of the Robins from the comics: like Dick Grayson, Gordon-Levitt-Robin (GL-Robin) serves as a police officer; like Jason Todd, GL-Robin had a rough childhood in the slums of Gotham and has a fierce temper; like Tim Drake, GL-Robin discovers Batman’s secret identity, does so with little apparent effort, and becomes a brilliant detective. The role of sidekick Robin in the Christopher Nolan films, then, is present in a form at once disassociated with the comics and informed by them.

Like Tim Drake, G-L Robin operates alone. He confronts criminals and follows leads on his own, and is the only police officer in contact with the 3,000 trapped in the sewer systems. He and Batman frequently assist one another, from Robin rescuing Bruce Wayne after Bruce is shut out of a Wayne Enterprises board meeting to Batman saving Robin’s life during a brawl. The two trust each other almost immediately and Batman doesn’t hesitate to give Robin missions critical to the rescue of Gotham. During the climax of The Dark Knight Rises, Robin finally succeeds in rescuing the trapped police force and Batman pulls him aside.

“Lead an exodus [from the city]. Save as many lives as you can,” are his first real instructions to Robin. “You don’t need me here?” is the listener’s query, and Batman’s reply: “You’ve given me an army, now go.” While Batman is in charge of orchestrating the master plan, he treats Robin not like a sidekick, but as a partner. The “Lead an exodus” order is one of few scenes in which the two characters are shown together, and Jim Gordon rather than Batman is more often the character who instructs Robin and takes him on as a protégé. By the close
of the film, despite their limited engagement with one another, Bruce Wayne leaves the Batcave (with all its fittings) and Batman persona to Robin, fully trusting him with the responsibility of the mission from which Bruce Wayne retires. Robin, then, was never so much a sidekick here as he was an heir to the superhero mantle.

Throughout the trilogy, Batman’s compassion and benevolence are unflinching. Compared to *Batman* and *Batman Returns* which depicted the citizens of Gotham as pawns and mindless consumers, the citizens of Gotham City deserve Batman’s faith in them – and at no point in any of the three films does Batman give up on their inherent goodness. When the Joker tells Batman of his game with the ferries, Batman insists, “There won’t be any fireworks,” and is staunch in his belief that neither ferry will blow up the other. “This city … is full of people ready to believe in good,” he insists, and in *The Dark Knight Rises*, he returns to Gotham from half a world away, recovering from a broken back and escaping an inescapable prison in order to rescue Gotham from destruction.

Such trust is not, indeed, misplaced. The citizens of Gotham *are* inherently good people. In the ferry game as set up by the Joker, despite the initial, panicked clamor of mixed opinions, neither ferry destroys the other. The civilians trapped on one ferry take a vote, with more in favor of destroying the prisoners' boat than leaving it be, but always the conversation turns back to “We’re still here” and the realization that the prisoners haven’t chosen to activate their detonation device, either. On the prisoners’ ferry, as the deadline for a decision ticks nearer, one of the prisoners approaches the officer holding the device and
growls, “Give it to me and I’ll do what you should’ve done ten minutes ago.” The officer passes the device over with shaking hands, and the prisoner throws it overboard. In The Dark Knight Rises, the city depends on outside aid in the middle of winter to stay alive, but the situation is a peaceful one as far as is possible. In shelters, people are calm and sit together, huddled in coats, talking together in steady voices; conversations blend into the background chatter one might hear at a restaurant. The police officers who are trapped underground wait patiently for an opportunity to escape, erecting makeshift tents, playing cards, and getting along despite steadily-worsening conditions. The lines behind food relief trucks are orderly. In The Dark Knight, when given the choice between catching the Joker who has put their city through such misery or evacuating hospitals that might or might not explode, the police force, without the slightest hesitation, disperses to evacuate the hospitals.

The citizens of Gotham City want to save each other and survive together. The possibility of Gotham’s salvation frequently “shifts from a lone figure to a group, and hope springs not from one but many” (Dargis 3). No matter what the villains go through in order to prove that Gotham is irredeemably corrupt, Batman and the citizens themselves prove the bad guys wrong again and again. Gotham is worth saving; its populace is inherently good; its citizens are inherently good people.

Batman of the Nolan trilogy sees the people of Gotham City at their best and at their worst, and the best in them he knows is worth saving. And while Batman is usually given only two options – “impose order on an unjust world” or “enhance the chaos of a
meaningless world” – Bale-Batman takes a third option: impose order on an inherently just but damaged world (Pearson and Uricchio “I’m Not Fooled…” 198). “His aim is for a justice that recognizes the human capacity for good and evil and understands how context can determine what makes an individual behave in a criminal manner” (Schopp 279). Even with the films’ emphases on the debilitating power of fear and the disparities of our society, Bale-Batman’s compassion for the common criminal, self-sacrifice for the vulnerable, and belief that people are “ready to believe in good,” the “Dark Knight saga … is at once lighter and darker than its antecedents” (Dargis 3). No matter how corrupt or dangerous Gotham is, the city is not too far gone to rescue; there are still people worth saving.

**Where is Batman Going? Other New Takes on the Caped Crusader**

While Bale-Batman of the Christopher Nolan films will likely be the defining Batman of film for at least the next five years, Batman’s lines in the comic book universe are, so to speak, being redrawn and explored even at the time of this writing.

**Jason Todd: Anti-hero Batman**

The escalating darkness and cruelty of the Batman villains, as well as their frequent reappearances in comic canon (facilitated by their constant escapes from Gotham’s prisons and insane asylum) calls some of the oldest tenets of the Batman mythos into question. If Batman’s villains so easily escape their cells, and if their escapes result in the deaths of hundreds of innocent people, why does Batman simply not kill his villains? The Joker, especially, is responsible now for the deaths of thousands, if not more, and countless lives
would be saved by his death. Following his death in 1988 and his revival in 2005, Jason Todd has come to represent an answer to this.

Jason Todd, like his original mentor Bruce Wayne, is a crime-fighting vigilante who quickly adopts a sidekick (in this case a pre-teen girl physically scarred by one of Gotham’s villains). Like Bruce Wayne before him, the newly-resurrected Jason Todd is put through an extensive training regime that hones his combative and deductive capabilities, has unlimited funds, and experiences a traumatic “birth” into the life of the vigilante superhero. Bruce Wayne is funded by the Wayne Enterprises of his family and witnesses his parents’ random deaths at the hands of a nameless gunman. Jason Todd, on the other hand, is funded by Ra’s al Ghul, one of the predominant Batman villains, and digs his way out of his own coffin upon finding himself suddenly brought back to life some length of time after his own funeral. Although such an origin does not have the same thirst for the destruction of the criminal underworld that Bruce Wayne embodies, Jason Todd nevertheless becomes a sort of anti-heroic Batman, a Batman who kills his enemies instead of allowing the catch-and-release cycle of villains through Gotham’s prison system to continue. As the Red Hood, Jason Todd becomes a vigilante in his own right, though he does not stop at non-lethal means: he kills the ringleaders of crime syndicates, rapists, and those who harm children with their crimes.

Jason Todd’s method of killing his enemies one after another has not as yet endeared him to Bruce Wayne/Batman. Bruce Wayne’s “Bat-Family” includes the current and previous Robins, all except Jason Todd, and when Bruce gathers his family together for a portrait,
Dick Grayson, Tim Drake, and Damien Wayne are the three he considers his sons. Jason Todd is notably absent, and is the only one of the past Robins not invited to live in Wayne Manor with the rest of the family. Bruce also continues to keep Jason’s Robin costume memorialized in the Batcave – a memorial constructed after Jason’s death at the hands of the Joker – as if Jason is still somehow dead to him.

**Dick Grayson: Fun (and Feminine?) Batman**

Dick Grayson, the original Robin, is likewise still around, not as a sidekick but as a superhero in his own right. As Nightwing, Dick Grayson operates primarily out of Blüdhaven, a neighboring city. He retains his cheer and energy from the 1960s comics, though he has grown into an adult by this time, and his acrobatic background gives his fighting style a theatrical flair that the straightforward Batman lacks.

Even taking into consideration the team-oriented Batman of the 2000s, Nightwing stresses the importance of building relationships. Nightwing “cares about his friends – not just as his responsibility as Bruce does, but truly cares about them and for them,” and in his love for his friends, Nightwing has in past storylines “found it impossible not to care about his colleagues … and he could no longer tolerate leading them into danger” (White 272). This overt and consuming concern for comrades is in contrast to Batman’s approach, even the team-player Batman of *Hush*: in Volume Two, Batman stops to help an injured Catwoman rather than pursue the Joker, and when there is evidence of villainous tampering in the Batcave, Batman’s first concern is for Alfred. Yet when the immediate threat of danger
passes, Batman goes back to the business at hand without a glance behind: his friends are safe, now it’s time to get back to work.

Nightwing, on the other hand, does not so easily dismiss the life-threatening danger that the people associated with him are at risk of encountering. He is compromised by his affection for his teammates. This is possibly why Dick Grayson is “often said to be ‘Batman with a feminine side,’” although Dick arguably takes on the role of affectionate big brother when Bruce Wayne struggles to fully realize his responsibilities as a father (White 272).

When Bruce is supposed dead and Dick Grayson briefly takes over the role of Batman, the aggressive Damian Wayne is still entrenched in the role of Robin. This new Batman/Robin duo is a reversal of the sunny sidekick/stormy hero dynamic that has characterized Batman and Robin since the 1940s. Dick Grayson is also one of the major factors in the humanization of Damian Wayne: Damian Wayne is initially so at-odds with the ex-Robins that he threatens to kill all of them to establish his own right to the uniform, though Dick Grayson insists that such force is not necessary. Damian slowly grows less short-tempered and volatile through Dick’s concentrated efforts, and no matter how biting Damian is in his treatment of Dick, Dick maintains his belief that there is more to Damian than the monster he appears to be. Following Batman’s eventual return, Bruce Wayne insists on Dick remaining Damian’s primary crime-fighting partner, as Dick has proven to be an effective role model.
By the end of Damian’s character development prior to his death, he and Dick Grayson are a full-fledged, effective team with a warm and brotherly relationship. In “Dark Knight vs. White Knight,” Dick continues to wear the Batman costume and he is always accompanied by Damian on patrol. The two finish each other’s sentences: “We entered your trap deliberately, Miss Nemo--” “Which was obviously set by a lunatic” (Cornell) and banter both in and out of the Batcave: one reconnaissance mission begins with a two-page mission briefing/teasing session that concludes with Dick’s complaint, “You know your sense of humor kind of sucks, right?” and Damian’s response of, “I was leaning more towards esoteric,” followed immediately by Dick’s last word on the matter: “I was leaning more towards stupid’ (Tomasi “Tree of Blood”). Dick never calls Damien’s capabilities or loyalty into question as Bruce Wayne did, but trusts Damien to make the morally-right choices, shares all pertinent information with him regarding the mission, and is willing to talk Damien through the conflicts he has with his own upbringing. In the Batcave, Dick Grayson is most frequently portrayed as leaning on the back of Damian Wayne’s office chair, arms crossed behind Damian’s head. This Batman and Robin duo have
more of a partnership than a hero/sidekick dynamic, which is part of why Damian Wayne,
determined to be treated as an equal by the rest of his new family, gets along with Dick
Grayson so well.

In keeping with his reputation for deeply valuing relationships, Dick Grayson also
gets along with Jason Todd more than Bruce Wayne does. In “The Streets Run Red,” Dick
Grayson as Batman, with Damian Wayne Robin alongside, rescues Jason Todd from getting
too involved with dangerous criminals and arranges for him to rescue his sidekick, although
no one is quite relaxed or content with the partnership and it unravels quickly after the
mission is completed.

Conclusion

Whatever particular characterizations Batman is given over the course of his seventy-
year life, the hero has always been, and likely always will be, Gotham’s Sisyphus. No matter
how far Gotham City slides into misery and decay, Batman never stops trying. He never
gives up on the ordinary citizens of a city plagued by urban decay, rampant criminals, or
crippling insecurities in the face of disaster. Batman and Robin of the 1960s television show,
along with their rogues’ gallery, provided their viewers with a levity they did not find in the
tumultuous world around them. 1980s Batman grappled with the aggressive, self-destructive
world around him and though he retreats from it, he does not give up on the hope that what
is left – even what is left after a nuclear winter – can be saved and improved. Batman of the
1980s was a dark knight indeed: a hero for a time in which a populace had all but abandoned hope of escaping their difficulties unscathed.

1990s Batman, in the face of economic prosperity and technological advancement, fell to the sidelines until revived by post-9/11 concerns: “What are we afraid of? How do we respond to fear? Who do we blame for what we’ve been through?” Batman of the 2010s concerns himself with the social and economic barriers between people, with the role that fear plays in keeping the wrong people in power. Unlike Batman of the 1980s, Batman of the 2010s does not always find violence to be the best solution to the problem at hand, and Batman of the Christopher Nolan trilogy believes that the best way to defeat your enemy is to understand him. 1980s-Batman fought against corruption alone; 2010s-Batman recognizes the importance of allies and of trusting in the inherent good of humankind.

No matter how bad his world gets, Batman “doesn’t advocate burning down the world, but fixing it” (Dargis 3). In an era where a clean slate sometimes feels like the easiest way out of an ugly situation, to be able to look up to someone who believes that a solution is always possible, even if it takes a long time, is reassuring. Perhaps this reason alone is why Batman is one of only three superheroes to have never been out of print (Wonder Woman and Superman being the other two). Superman solves problems in the rose-tinted city of Metropolis, but Batman grapples with a city that is a “physical manifestation of the corruption in [its] soul” (Vaz 58). He grapples with a city that takes one step backward for
every two it takes forward, yet even after he sees human beings at their worst, he never stops believing in the beauty of human beings at their best.
Bibliography


