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"I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise"

William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson

The Floating Signifier

A colony of small, bright-yellow, vaguely bat-like objects floats in a pool of white.[1] A spoon dips into the bowl, scooping up more of the "crunchy bat shapes, with natural flavors of honey-nut."[2] On the breakfast table stands a black cereal box, a familiar black bat in a yellow oval prominently emblazoned on all six sides.

During the summer of 1989, this bat-logo permeated American culture, appearing on candy, boxer shorts, leather medallions, earrings, baseball caps, night lights, sterling silver coins—in short, on any item capable of bearing the trade-marked image (or unlicensed likenesses thereof). The bat-logo's omnipresence diffused its meaning, reducing the wearing of a black bat in a yellow oval to a mere gesture of participation in a particular cultural moment. While the intended meaning of that participation may have varied greatly, and while many bat-logo purchasers might have had very little knowledge of the Batman mythos, the logo, at the very least, carried the connotation "Batman" and thus indicated the purchaser's acknowledgement, however minimal, of the character.

One of the more bizarre consumable expressions of bat-mania, the crunchy bat breakfast cereal pointedly referenced the *character* of the Caped Crusader, the box copy using such terms as "terrifying," "obsession," "death," "killed," and "evil doers." Though these terms may have constituted a potentially distasteful connotative frame for the tasty bat shapes, the side panel containing them sucessfully summarized most of the salient characteristics of the Dark Knight.

> His name was The Batman. A dark, mysterious character of the night, stalking the streets, defying criminals with the intelligence, athletic prowess, and state of the art gadgetry, terrifying enemies who dare cross his path.
>
> The Batman had a secret identity, that of Bruce Wayne™, wealthy playboy. At a very young age his parents were killed on the streets of Gotham City™. Later, he used his inheritance to travel around the world, seeking masters of justice and the martial arts, honing his body to perfection. A man with an obsession for justice. When he was ready, he returned to Gotham City™ as The Batman, ready to terrorize the evil doers of the city and to avenge the death of his parents.[3]

This copy suggests the minimal components of the Batman character which have circulated for fifty years in various media and among different publics; film-goers, television viewers, comic book readers, etc. The Dark Knights's identity has fluctuated over time and across media as multiple authors and fan communities competed over his definition.

The tensions in the character's identity became clearly apparent in the bat-hyped summer of '89 when a myriad of Batmen simultaneously vied for the cape and cowl—in the blockbuster film and its numerous tie-ins, the syndicated television series, the ongoing runs of *Detective* and *Batman* comics as well as in graphic novels, *The Killing Joke* and *The Dark Knight Returns* most prominent among them. The highest profile Batman, the latest site of fifty years of bat-hype, appeared in the Warner Bros. film. The scriptwriter, Sam Hamm, claimed that the pervasiveness of this particular Batman granted him automatic authenticity. "What you wind up doing when you're putting an existing character in a major Hollywood film is you're essentially *defining* that character for a whole generation of people; and most people have certainly heard of Batman, but they are probably not that familiar with it. So what you're doing becomes sort of *ipso facto* canonical."[4] The film's director, Tim Burton, similarly asserted the canonicity of the Warner's Batman, arguing that his leading man, Michael Keaton, possessed the correct attributes for the role. The Batman "is the one comic book hero who is not a superhero but a human being. Since Michael is hardly a big he-man, but looks just like a regular guy off the street he was perfect for the role."[5]

Others disagreed. Science fiction writer Harlan Ellison believed that the choice of Keaton made little sense. "Michael Keaton truly contravenes the whole point of Batman. Here's the only prominent superhero without special powers; here's one of the very best detectives who ever lived, and he's being played by a scrawny comedian in plastic armor. That, in a capsule, is the kind of erroneous thinking that dooms films."[6] Indeed, the Keaton casting had produced such widespread disappointment that the *Wall Street Journal* ran a front page article speculating

about the film's financial prospects in the face of fierce bat-fan disaffection.

The report deeply disturbed Jon Peters, co-producer of the film. "Every analyst I knew sent that to me the day it came out. It just deflated everybody. . . . Nobody wanted Keaton. . . . We were ostracized by the Bat-community. They booed us at the Bat-convention."[7] Tim Burton seemed less solicitious of fan reaction. "There might be something that's sacrilege in the movie. . . . But I can't care about it. . . . This is too big a budget movie to worry about what a fan of a comic would say."[8]

This debate over the "real" Batman replicated that surrounding the sixties' television program and reflected an ongoing series of character transmutations. Bob Kane, "creator" of the Batman, described the potential audience for the 1989 film. "Every ten years, it [Batman] changes, you see. Right now there are two factions. There are the baby boomers who know the TV show; they *don't* know the dramatic comic book prior to that, so they think the movie is probably going to be a comedy. Then there are readers who *know* the roots from which he came, that he is a vigilante, mysterious, a loner."[9]

The years since the publication of Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* have seen the greatest array of character transmutations and violations of heretofore sacrosanct canonicity. The "miscasting" of the Warner's film constituted one of its lesser heresies. Greater transgressions included the establishment of a continuing (sexual) relationship with and the revealing of his secret identity to Vicki Vale as well as making the Joker the killer of Bruce Wayne's parents and then killing him. *The Dark Knight Returns* featured a fifty year old Batman and a female Robin. *Gotham by Gaslight* set the Batman characters and locations in the late 1880's, where the Batman encountered Jack the Ripper. In *Son of the Demon*, the Batman married the daughter of an arch villain and even had a son.

This moment in the last decade of the twentieth century, then, represents the most divergent set of refractions of the Batman character. Whereas broad shifts in emphasis had occured since 1939, these changes had been, for the most part, consecutive and consensual. Now, newly created Batmen, existing simultaneously with the older Batmen of the television series and comic reprints and back issues, all struggled for recognition and a share of the market. But the contradictions amongst them may threaten both the integrity of the commodity form and the coherence of the fans' lived experience of the character necessary to the Batman's continued success.

Who is the Batman?

The very nature of the Batman's textual existence reveals an impulse toward fragmentation. Since his creation in 1939, numerous editors,

writers, artists, directors, scriptwriters, performers and licensed manufacturers have continually "authored" the Batman, with the specificities of various media necessitating the selective emphasis of character qualities. Unlike some fictional characters, the Batman has no primary urtext set in a specific period, but has rather existed in a plethora of equally valid texts constantly appearing over more than five decades. This has freed him from temporal specificity. The Batman remains untouched by the ravages of time, an eternal thirty year old, with only a very selective accruing of canonized historical events.[10]

Neither author, nor medium, nor primary text, nor time period defines the Batman. In the absence of these other markers, character, that is, a set of key components, becomes the primary marker of Batman texts: the key components of the Batman character have constituted the *sine qua non* for any Batman narrative in any medium. This exclusive emphasis on the primacy of key components distinguishes the Batman from other series/serial fictional heroes, where character figures prominently but not exclusively among the defining elements.

Consider, for example, Sherlock Holmes, James Bond and Philip Marlowe. Despite these characters' appearances in films, and even their continuation in literary form beyond their creators' deaths, their central identity resides in a series of literary urtexts penned by single authors and set in single time periods. Hence, were one seeking to define Sherlock Holmes, one would turn not to the latest in a series of numerous pastiches but would turn to the fifty-six short stories and four novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle written between 1887 and 1927. Indeed, the fan community in this case tenanciously valorizes these texts as the single canonized repository of Holmes' character, extrapolating from them the key components of the Master's identity. While a set of key components centrally identifies the Batman, the bat-fan has no authoritative repository of these key components to turn to but is faced instead with an ongoing and potentially endless stream of new texts.

By contrast, other fictional characters such as Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, though similar to the Batman in being multiply authored and not bound to a particular medium, urtext or period, differ from the Batman in that they function as actors/celebrities rather than as characters.[11] Bugs Bunny can appear in an opera, a Western, a Sherwood Forest adventure, a science fiction film, or even, as "himself" at the Academy Awards. In each case, he plays a role within the narrative as well as constantly remaining Bugs Bunny, in similar fashion to such flesh and blood counterparts as Groucho Marx.

Like Holmes, Bond and Marlowe, and unlike Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, the Batman's set of key components brings with it a particular generic form, in the Batman's case, crime fighting.[12] The latest batbible, written by *Batman* and *Detective* editor Dennis O'Neil as a character

guide for DC writers, states: "*Everything* with the exception of his friends' welfare is bent to the task he knows he can never accomplish, the elimination of crime. It is this task which imposes meaning on an existence he would otherwise find intolerable."[13]

What then are the key components of the Batman and how did we go about identifying them, given the lack of authoritative texts and the non-accruing nature of events? Of the many components that constitute the Batman at any one time, we have privileged the lowest common denominator of long lasting and recurrent components that often seem to appear in self-conscious and reductionist articulations of the Batman character such as the cereal box side panel. Even at this moment of multiple and competing Batmen, the character remains a rich man who dresses in an iconographically specific costume (cape, cowl and bat-logo). Because of the murder of his parents, he obsessively fights crime, using his superb physical abilities in combination with his deductive capacities. He maintains his secret identity of Bruce Wayne, who lives in Wayne Manor in Gotham City. He is surrounded by a supporting cast of friends and foes.

Five key components constitute the core character of the Batman: traits/attributes; events; recurrent supporting characters; setting and iconography. We briefly adumbrate these components here.

1). *Traits/Attributes.* Put most succinctly, the Batman might be said to have four central traits/attributes: wealth; physical prowess; deductive abilities and obsession. The batbible provides a more detailed breakdown of these central traits/attributes: the Batman is "tough but not brutal;" "probably the best martial artist alive, and one of the best gymnasts;" "strong and athletic;" "smart with an IQ comfortably in the genius numbers;" "trained, an autodidact;" "obsessed . . . but in the fullest possession of his mental and moral faculties;" "celibate;" and "compassionate." He is also the "heir to a large fortune, estimated at nearly 100 million dollars."

2). *Events.* Two different kinds of events constitute this component: fixed and accruing events, such as the origin story, and iterative, that is repetitive, non-identical and non-accruing events, most of which involve crime fighting.[14] The central fixed event, the origin story, is the source of many of the Batman's traits/attributes, which play themselves out in the iterative events.

Until recently, the fixed and accruing and hence, canonized, events have been few in number: the origin; the appearance of Robin and some few other central characters; and the cases related to the Bat-cave trophies. In the present moment of extreme character refraction, canonized events seems to be proliferating with implications for character

continuity and containment. The iterative events, that is, incidents of obsessive crime fighting, display the Batman's traits/attributes, constitute the dominant generic form and embody the character's hegemonic function, as we shall discuss later.

3). *Recurrent Characters.* The Batman's interactions with the good guys and bad guys around him help to define him. Characters such as Commissioner Gordon, Robin I (Dick Grayson), Alfred, and the Joker all entered the Batman's world by the early forties and have maintained a constant, though sporadic, presence. Though we use these characters here to define the Batman, these characters could themselves be defined along many of the same parameters as the Caped Crusader. For example, the Joker has traits/attributes (rhetorical mode and whimsical approach to crime), fixed and iterative events (an origin story and obsessive criminal activities), recurrent characters (Batman and Robin), setting (Gotham City) and iconography (green hair, white face, bright red mouth set in a permanent grin).

4) *Setting.* Batman/Bruce Wayne lives in Gotham City, which has the same symbiotic relationship with him as the recurrent characters. As the Riddler put it, "When is a man a city?" "When it's Batman or when it's Gotham. I'd take either answer. Batman is this city. . . . That's why we're [the Riddler and other costumed villains] here. That's why we stay. We're trying to survive in the city. It's *huge* and contradictory and *dark* and funny and threatening."[15] The fluctuating image of Gotham City relates to the fluctuating nature of crime in the Batman's world and has implications for the playing out of the Batman's hegemonic function.

5) *Iconography.* The Batman's costume serves him well in his endless war against crime. The colors which permit him to lurk unseen in the shadows and the invocation of a terrifying creature of the night both enable him to seize the psychological element of surprise from Gotham's criminal element.

While various artists have redesigned elements of the costume (shortening the ears or adding a yellow circle to the chest emblem), the basic elements of cape, cowl, gauntlets and logo have remained easily identifiable, as one would expect in primarily visual texts. Taking the cue of costume and cognomen, bat-like shapes, like the bat-prefix, abound in the Batman's world. The batmobile, the batcopter, the batarang and the bat-etcs. all serve as repositories of the bat-look: black, shiny, with a bat-wing design incorporated where possible.

Without the presence of all five key components in some form, the Batman ceases to be the Batman, yet the primarily series nature of the character permits fairly wide variation in the treatment of these

components across time and media. The elasticity of the components allows for great stretching, but in this moment of extreme character refraction, the Batman may be stretched thin to the point of invisibility.

Gritty—Graphic—Grown-up

A DC advertisement in the same issue of *Rolling Stone* that featured a cover story interview with Michael Keaton declared that the company's gritty, graphic and grown-up comics had come of age. "You outgrew comics, now they've caught up with you!"[16] The advertisment touted the current four most divergent comic book Batmen: *The Killing Joke* by Moore/Bolland, *The Return of the Dark Knight*, *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told*, and *The Batman Movie Adaptation* by O'Neil/Ordway. The simultaneous presence of these divergent Batmen, together with the advertising venue, the appeal to adult readership, and the marketing of graphic novels and special format (high-priced) reprints all signal a major shift in the comic book marketplace.[17]

In the first three decades of the Batman's existence, Bob Kane, now cited in every narrative expression as the character's "creator," took credit for the production of the majority of bat-texts. In actuality, a crew of uncredited ghostwriters and ghost-artists, all expected to subordinate their styles to the dominant Kane look, worked on the books. As Kane said, "I feel a ghost's job is to emulate the cartoonist, as near as you can, instead of recreating what he already did in his own style."[18] In this period, comic book authorship was not valorized as an expressive act and comic artists had low visibility.

During the mid to late sixties, bat-fans began to exhibit great interest in questions of authorship, using the letter columns as a forum for speculation about the identities of writers, pencillers and inkers and as a means for communicating with each other about these matters. By 1968, a fan complained, "Figuring out the authors of stories really isn't much fun now. The fad should soon be dying out because it's getting too easy." DC, replying to the letter, announced a new policy: ". . . the author-guessing fad has run its course. From now on we're giving author (and artists) credit along with each story."[19]

This new crediting of writers and artists reflected increased valorization of comic book authorship, further encouraging the fans to take an auteurist perspective of the production process. Much as film fan discourse in the sixties began to revolve around directors, comic fan discourse increasingly centered on the importance of writers and artists. As a letter column correspondent put it in 1980:

> . . . you're going to have to change your entire attitude towards "putting out" material. Unless you do so, sales will continue to plummet.

> You will have to produce, on a regular basis, "special" material by special people that will make your public *want* to buy your magazines. In the case of BATMAN, this will be like the following: stories by Archie Goodwin, Steve Englehart, and . . . artists like: Jim Starlin, Alex Toth, Marshall Rogers, . . . and similar talented, but "different," "special" people.[20]

Today, a substantial portion of published fan correspondence concerns authorship issues. The attendance of comic book authors at comic conventions both reflects and enhances their status within the fan community. Those within the industry assert that the names of well-known writers such as Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Dennis O'Neil, and John Byrne and well-known illustrators such as Brian Bolland and Bill Sienkiewicz on a cover guarantee greater sales. The emergence of the direct distribution system, which permitted more accurate tracking of individual title sales, further augmented comic-book auteurism by giving rise to a royalty system now used by both the major comic book companies, DC and Marvel. Hence, a system which effaced authorship and insisted upon conformance to the house style has given way to one which relies upon individual authorship as a criterion of quality and marketability.

This economic incentive prompts authors/writers toward maximum differentiation within the standardization imposed by the key components of the Batman character. Differential treatment of the key components can identify a writer/artist with a particular version of the Batman. Thus, we refer to Miller's Batman or Moore's Batman, further boosting their stock with fans and industry but also further exacerbating the tendency toward fragmentation of the character's identity.[21]

The language of artistic self-consciousness, however, veils raw economic reality. Since credits, royalties and other recognition have altered the fundamental relationship between the writer/artist and his[22] work, the industry can now, to some extent, accomodate employees' aspirations to create "art." This leads to the production of such specialized permutations of the Batman as the recent *Arkham Asylum*, written by Grant Morrison and illustrated by Dave McKean. The hard cover, 120-page graphic novel self-consciously constructs a fragmented, postmodern narrative relayed by overlapping and conflicting narrative voices and expressed in an evocative melange of artistic styles.

But *Arkham Asylum* and similiar books result not only from the artists' economic incentives and creative desires but also from DC's need to expand its market through product differentiation, both from other companies and within its own output. DC now produces standard format books, new format books, deluxe format books, prestige format

books, graphic novels and collected editions, differentiated by price (from one dollar to $29.95), length, ink and paper quality, as well as the maturity of the content and the mode of representation. This differentiation not only expands the market, but gains the industry an unaccustomed measure of respectability. As the Associated Press said about *The Dark Knight Returns*, it "is not like most comic books. Its printing is deluxe, its artwork is complex, and its mood is nightmarish and somber."[23]

DC publisher Jenette Kahn addressed the new marketing strategy in her monthly column.

> Of course, no one could be more aware than you, our readers, of the extensive changes in comics during the past six years. We began to publish at different price points in a variety of formats with a wide range of artistic effects and verbal story-telling. The diversity in the content of the comics gave rise to an equal diversity in marketing techniques, advertising, and avenues of distribution.[24]

While one might take issue with Ms. Kahn's causality, one cannot deny the relationships she draws among marketing, distribution and "diversity in the content." The structural incentives for "diversity"—"creativity" and an expanding market—speak precisely to the tension between, on the one hand, the essential maintenance of a recognizable set of key character components and, on the other, the increasingly necessary centrifugal dispersion of these components.

"Everything is exactly the same, except for the fact that it's all totally different."

In 1953, *Detective Comics* #195 ran a story titled, "The Original Batman."[25] Gotham City suddenly has two Batmen: the familiar Caped Crusader and a competitor, wearing a similar costume—wings instead of cape, no chest logo, bat logo on belt. The Batman decides that "This town isn't big enough for both of us," and it seems as if the Gotham authorities will back him up. After all, Gotham City has passed a law forbidding anybody to pose as the Batman. The competitor, however, turns out to have a prior claim to the name. He had performed as a circus acrobat wearing the bat-costume and calling himself Bat-man. Gotham City attorneys confirm this fact and conclude that the Batman "no longer has a right to the name." The competing Bat-man eventually forbids our hero to wear his costume any longer, effectively ending his crime fighting career. Things look bleak until Robin learns from his old circus friends that Bat-Man never performed inside the Gotham City limits, a fact which invalidates his claim to the name and the costume.

The challenging of the Batman's identity threatened Gotham City with the loss of a crime-fighter, but threatens DC with the loss of a profit-maker, a far more troublesome prospect. The company has good reason to be concerned about the the Dark Knight's character, particularly since he has experienced a number of major shifts in emphasis during his fifty year existence. Mike Gold, in an introduction to *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told*, offered a succinct summary.

> The past fifty years of Batman stories could be divided into at least five distinct eras: the earliest days—the creation of the series through the World War II years; the larger-than-life days of big clocks and surrealistic yet existential buildings; the monster days of aliens, gimmick costumes and weirdos; the short-lived "new look" Batman that stressed the more detective-like aspects of the character; the regretable and, as far as comic books were concerned equally short-lived television era; and the Darknight Detective era which, oddly, has been the longest and most enduring of them all.[26]

DC's editorial offices form one of the two central bastions of character identity, the other being the legal, licensing and rights departments of both DC and Warner Bros. While the importance of the latter has ebbed and flowed with the Batman's cultural currency at a particular moment, the former has served as the main agent of continuity, canonization and containment throughout the character's entire history.[27] At this current moment of divergent expressions of the Batman in several media, the editor of the main Batman comic books must simultaneously safeguard the key components of the character and accomodate variant expressions.

The current Batman editor, Dennis O'Neil, ensures consistent depiction of the character in the DC Comics. O'Neil oversees the *Batman* and *Detective* titles and clears Batman's guest appearances in other titles. The batbible, quoted above, constitutes the clearest expression of character maintenance through editorial guidelines. The manuscript gives a profile of the character's history, attributes and appropriate behavior, assuring continuity despite turnover in writers. DC has recently decided to impose further continuity on the Batman by linking two of the three bat-titles more closely. As publisher Kahn explained, "Another concern of Denny's [O'Neil] and mine was to make sure that next year Detective and Batman reinforced each other. . . . We weren't looking for the totally intense continuity that characterizes the Superman books; we just wanted to make sure that if Alfred has a broken arm in Batman, he's still nursing that broken arm in Detective."[28]

This editorial process has enough flexibility to accomodate some of the most divergent expressions of the Batman, at least, that is, those within the comic book and graphic novel realm. Recently, this flexibility has manifested itself in the self-consciously ambiguous constructions of some of the supporting cast. As the Joker said of his origin in *The Killing Joke*, "sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another . . . if I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple-choice! HA HA HA!"[29] The Riddler, like the Joker, refused to specify his origins, suggesting numerous possibilities. "I've always been the Riddler. I always will be . . . maybe it started by cheating in a school history test, photographing a jigsaw puzzle . . . maybe I was a carnival barker, E. Nigma, the Puzzle King, Conundrum Champion, Wizard of Quiz . . . maybe I decided to turn my talents to crime, maybe I wanted to match wits with . . . with Batman, for the glory . . . the fame . . . the buck$."[30] This strategy of accomodation delimits the realm of possibilities for character construction: a writer may tinker with aspects of the Joker's origins but a colorist may not give him purple hair.

The strategy of containment which complements the strategy of accomodation derives from DC's editorial offices and from fan response as well. The industry used to assume a total readership turnover every three years, making continuity fairly unimportant.[31] The rise of the direct distribution market, the proliferation of comic specialty shops, and the targeting of adult audiences have given rise to a more stable readership than in the past. Elements of this new readership exhibit an almost fanatical interest in continuity issues, constantly writing to question, complain or suggest resolutions of apparent contradictions. This fan pressure coupled with the co-existing divergent expressions of the character have even necessitated explicit editorial statements about the canonical and non-canonical.

> 1) By the way, the BATMAN movie (as well as the BATMAN MOVIE ADAPTATION), IS NOT a part of Batman continuity.
> 2) . . . the tale told in BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE is NOT the definitive origin of the Joker. It's simply one of many POSSIBLE origins. . . .
> 3) Since it is set about 20 years in the future, BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS is also NOT considered to be a part of normal continuity. It is a POSSIBLE future for Batman, one which may or may not happen. We're NOT saying that it couldn't happen, but it would be a shame to limit the Batman's future to this one story.[32]

Despite the deliberate ambiguity concerning the Joker's origins, a Who's Who Entry for the Joker in *Detective Comics Annual 2* incorporated the *Killing Joke* origin, while accompanying illustrations referenced this story as well as *A Death in the Family* and "The Laughing Fish."[33] This Who's Who Entry again accomodated change yet reveals the containment strategy and self-appointed canonical authority of the DC editorial staff.

While *The Killing Joke* origin may or may not be canonical, the Batman film has been declared conclusively non-canonical, indicating that the DC staff, at least, believes that the comic books truly define the character. The explicit disavowal of the Warner Bros. film appears even in the comic book adaptation written by O'Neil, the Batman editor, and published by DC. The initial splash page shows a strip of film, bearing key frames drawn from the Batman movie, superimposed over an audience in a movie theatre. In the first dialogue balloon on the page, an audience member says ". . . it's just a movie, for Heaven's sake."[34] The back cover also features a film strip design with further scenes from the movie. Editor/writer O'Neil said that he intended these film strips to bracket the adaptation and distinguish it from DC's continuity.[35]

From a legal perspective, the DC staff is right about their canonical authority—their company and not Warner Bros. holds the trademark for "Batman and all related characters, the distinctive likenesses thereof and all related indicia. . . ." as every Batman comic states. DC has gone to great lengths in protecting bat-expressions through trademarking. *The Batman Role-Playing Game* lists 174 trademarked names for people, devices and places, ranging from Batman specifics such as Batcomputer, Batmobile, Bat-shuriken, and Bat team, to bat-specific locations and characters such as Gotham City, Gotham Institute of Technology, Gotham Tennis Hall of Fame, to more general locations and names such as Chelsea and Elizabeth Powell. These 174 trademarked names, of course, include only those used in the game, not every DC trademark.[36]

The DC legal department, then, serves to safeguard character identity through trademark and copyright registration and enforcement. The licensing and rights departments also protect character identity, granting permission to use Batman images on products or in other publications. This protection ensures a uniformity of iconographic and narrative depictions of the Batman and prevents dilution of the trademark. While for fans, canonicity and thus character identity resides in the editorial staff's control of the comic books, for the larger public, character identity resides in the legal department's control of commodity circulation of the Batman and related indicia. The floating signifier of the bat-logo is essentially a legal rather than a narrative evocation of the character.

"I shall become a *bat!*"

Long term DC artist and editor Dick Giordano explained the importance of Batman's origin story.

> Let's talk about Batman's origin and why I believe it is intrinsic to his believability, popularity, and longevity. The Batman was born in a few, brief, violent moments in which a young Bruce Wayne was forced to watch the brutal murder of his parents at the hands of a street thief. . . . We can all understand Bruce's grief . . . and we all can understand his need to do something to avenge the deaths of his parents. The origin of the Batman is grounded, therefore, in emotion. An emotion that is primal and timeless and dark. The Batman does what he does for himself, for *his* needs. That society gains from his actions is incidental. . . ."[37]

The first recountings of the origin, appearing in *Detective* #33 (1939) and restaged in *Batman* #1 (1940), set out the minimal elements of a story since subjected to compulsive recountings and variations. In the 1940 version, as Bruce and his parents walked home from a movie, a nameless thug attacked them. Attempting to steal the mother's necklace, the hoodlum shot and killed both mother and father when the latter attempted to resist. A traumatized Bruce swore to take vengeance through a war on criminals. He spent several years and some of the family fortune preparing, becoming a master scientist/detective and an amazing athlete. Seeking both disguise and psychological advantage he decided that "I shall become a bat." "And thus is born this weird figure of the dark . . . this avenger of evil. The *Batman.*"

Writers have repeatedly returned to the scene of the crime and restaged the origin much as it "happened" in 1940. Though the basic events remain sacrosanct, certain details have varied. In subseqent expansions and reworkings, the Batman identified the nameless thug as Joe Chill, tracked him down and brought him to justice. A few years later, he discovered that Chill had actually been employed by Lew Moxon, whom he also tracked down and brought to justice. Such details as the film the family had seen and the cause of the mother's death (gunshot or heart attack) may vary from version to version, but the reiteration of the basic origin events holds together otherwise divergent expressions of the Batman.

The fixed events of the origin serve two rather paradoxical functions: 1) they provide the motivation for the endless iterative events necessitated by the character's series nature and 2) they help to contain the character while also containing the traits/attributes that contribute to his elasticity. The origin explains the character's continuous crime-fighting. Though, in elaborations of the origin, the Batman avenges his parents' murder by apprehending the actual perpetrators, the metaphoric perpetrators they represent (the faceless thugs, the brutal hirelings, the crime bosses) still blight the urban landscape. Every encounter with a criminal, then, raises the spectre of that original encounter.

Justice-seeking becomes an endless process, with the Batman a Gotham Sisyphus who can never reach the crime-free summit of the mountain. Just as Sisyphus may roll the rock up a different path each time but not achieve his goal, the Batman may combat different criminals with different methods but not achieve his goal. This endless repetition accounts for the non-accruing nature of most of events.

Sisyphus and Batman are primarily defined by their iterative actions: Sisyphus is the man who pushes the rock; Batman is the man who fights crime. The origin thus accounts for the predominant genre of the Batman narratives. Similarly, it accounts for the character's relationship to authority and property rights. His childhood trauma stemmed from an incident in which attempted resistance to a petty violation of property rights (the theft of a necklace) gave rise to a capital crime (murder). Bruce Wayne's father was willing to give his life to defend property and uphold the law. The son followed in his father's footsteps. To compound the irony, the successful theft of the necklace would have deprived the Waynes of a mere fraction of their millions, the inheritance of which enabled Bruce to enter upon his Sisyphean task as the Batman.

Since many of the character's traits/attributes have their origin in the Batman's origin, further examination of the birth of the Dark Knight permits us to explore the primary locus of the character's elasticity. The origin story establishes the four central attributes/traits of the character: obsession; deductive abilities; physical prowess; and wealth. In the 1940 origin, the four panel sequence following the "terror and shock" of his parent's death, shows 1) young Bruce kneeling by his bedside, saying "And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals." 2) an older Bruce stands in a smoke filled laboratory peering into a test tube. The caption reads, "As the years pass Bruce Wayne prepares himself for his career. He becomes a master scientist." 3) Bruce holds a massive barbell in one hand. The caption reads, "Trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats." 4) Bruce sits in front of a huge portrait which hangs above a fireplace. He says, "Dad's estate left me wealthy. I am ready . . . But first I must have a disguise." The sequence is completed when the bat flies in the window and Bruce derives his inspiration.

Over the years, a process of uneven accentuation and development has selectively foregrounded or downplayed certain aspects of the key components. This process accounts for both the character's containment and refraction, the elastic treatment of the character's key components allowing his narrative undulations and, thus, his longevity. The current divergent forms of the character represent an ever more articu-

late and conscious reworking of the character's original capacities rather than the addition or subtraction of key components. This holds true even for that bat-text most often touted as reconfiguring and thus revitalizing the Batman, *The Dark Knight Returns*. Alan Moore realized that Frank Miller had not created a new Batman, but had rather differentially emphasized some of the key traits/attributes. "Depicted over the years as, alternately, a concerned do-gooder and a revenge-driven psychopath, the character as presented here [*The Dark Knight Returns*] manages to bridge both those interpretations quite easily while integrating them in a much larger and more persuasively realized personality."[38]

The constant repetition of the basic origin events has turned them into the central touchstone of the character, which can be and frequently are reduced to one sentence summaries. For example, in *Batman Annual* #13, the narration states "He is a man at war. An intense, obsessed soldier fulfilling an oath he'd made a lifetime ago while standing over his parents' grave."

The merest reference to the origin events activates an intertextual frame which insists upon the Batman's motivation and key traits/attributes while permitting for variant elaboration, as such recent restagings in *Gotham by Gaslight, Arkham Asylum, Legends of the Dark Knight* #1 and *Batman: The Movie* attest. *Gotham by Gaslight,* for example, tells a Batman story set in the nineteenth century, but assures that the reader understands that this Batman is indeed *the* Batman. The first two pages retell the origin with nineteenth century trappings: the Wayne family rides home in a carriage from an evening in town and is accosted by a highwayman who murders the parents. This cues the reader to expect the other key components of the Batman character, which are indeed trotted out: Alfred and Commissioner (then Inspector) Gordon; Gotham City; etc. *Arkham Asylum* emphasizes young Bruce's subjectivity. Bruce, frightened by the film he has just seen, annoys his mother with his crying. She threatens, "If you don't stop crying and act like a grown-up, I'm leaving you right here." She does indeed leave him, as the mugger immediately appears and enacts the ritual murders. This subjectivized version, foregrounding Bruce's insecurity and terror, and focusing on his mother rather than his father, resonates throughout the highly psychologized narrative.

Menage a Trois

Television static within a blazing white bat logo followed by a tracking shot through folds of luminous material to reveal a bat-costumed dancer. Chorus lines of Batmen and Jokers in choreographed tussles.

Prince garbed as half-Batman, half-Joker. Vicki Vale—Batman tattoo on her thigh and a Joker tattoo on her back. Fragments of dialogue sampled from the film.

The multiple bat-dancers of the Prince "Bat-Dance" video most clearly epitomize the multiplicity of Batmen currently proliferating in comics and other media. Which of these dancers is the "real" Batman? Which of the proliferating Batmen is the "real" Batman? "Bat-dance," establishing identity only through iconography and a recurrent character, provides a succinct answer: "real" Batmen wear bat-costumes and fight with Jokers. As Tim Burton put it, the movie the Prince video promoted was about "a man who dresses up like a bat vs. a man who has literally become a clown."[39]

The video presents us with multiple embodiments of the Batman as well as Prince's schizophrenic Batman/Joker and constitutes a clear expression of both the current fragmentation of the Batman character and the symbiotic relationship between him and the Joker. Yet the undulations of the chararacter over his fifty year history have always entailed simultaneous undulations in the presence/absence and depictions of the recurrent characters. In the past few years, the proliferating Batmen in various media present multiple personalities of the Batman, whose psychological make-up crucially relates to the presence/absence and depictions of the two (currently) most important of the recurrent characters: the Joker and Robin.

Both the Joker and Robin characters are defined within many of the same parameters as the Batman, but the parallels between the Batman and the Joker make the Clown Prince of Crime an equal but opposite, an evil doppelganger, while those between the Batman and Robin make the Boy Wonder a dependent reflection, a son/student. The Joker's crazed opposition to the Batman sets up a narrative tension which pulls the Batman's persona to extremes, driving him to the edge of dissolution, whereas Robin's vulnerable reliance tends to reinforce his more "human" dimensions, containing him within his traditional bounds. Thus, the tension between do-gooder and revenge-driven psychopath that Alan Moore noted can be seen as a tension between the shifting depictions and the presences/absences of Robin and the Joker.

The Joker, the oldest of the Batman's continuing antagonists, has enjoyed a great deal of popularity. Between his inception in 1940 and the imposition of the Comics Code, he surfaced nearly every month in one of the two Batman titles. Portrayed by Cesar Romero in the sixties television series, he tied with the Penguin for most guest villain slots, each featured in eighteen episodes. Recently, his popularity has waxed again: the graphic novels, *The Dark Knight Returns, Arkham Asylum,* and *The Killing Joke* all feature him in key roles as does the Warner's

film. DC has recently issued a companion volume to *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told, The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told.* The film has generated Joker ephemera which accompanies the Batman merchandise—toys, tee shirts, hats, etc.

His longevity and the frequency of his appearances establish his centrality to the Batman mythos, reinforcing the key components of his character. The Joker's origin story, in whatever variation, accounts for his motivation and his iconography. In "The Man Behind the Red Hood" (*Detective* #168 (1951)), The Joker bungles a million dollar heist from The Monarch Playing Card Company and escapes the clutches of the Batman by diving into a catch basin for noxious chemicals. The chemicals transform him from garden variety thief into the familiar Clown Prince of Crime. The Joker tells the Batman about looking at himself in the mirror after the accident. Voice over narration: ". . . I looked at myself with growing horror." Panel dialogue:—"That chemical vapor—it turned my hair *green,* my lips *rouge-red,* my skin *chalk-white!* I look like an *evil clown!*" Voice over: "Then, I realized my new face could terrify people."

Both the Batman and the Joker have their origins in cruel twists of fate. Just as the Batman responded to his tragedy by dedicating himself to justice, the Joker responded to his by dedicating himself to perverse, absurdist crime. Both singlemindedly pursue their goals, the Batman striving to impose order on an unjust universe and the Joker doing his best to enhance the chaos of a meaningless world. Just as the Batman adopts a distinctive costume which enables him to blend with the shadows of the night and to strike terror into cowardly, superstitious criminals, the Joker makes the most of his deformity by adopting a jester-like outfit to strike terror into his victims. Both acquire endless accessories based on their names and costumes, the Joker striving to keep up with the Batman with his Joker-mobile, his own utility belt, etc.

Sometimes the characters themselves address their symbiotic relationship. A panel in *A Death in the Family* alternates medium shots of the Joker and Bruce Wayne, as the latter thinks, "We've been linked to each other for so long, neither of us truly understanding the bond." The Joker, too, recognizes the bond that links them together, though, typically for him, speaks of it as a game. In a story where the Joker knocks out the Batman, he stands over his unconscious body musing, "His life is mine. . . . I can crush the breath out of him . . . *effortlessly!* I can, at last, *triumph!* But such a *hollow* victory—! . . . I've always envisioned my winning as a result of *cunning* . . . at the end of a *bitter struggle* between *the Batman* and myself—him using his *detective skills* and me employing the divine gift men call *madness! No!* Without the *game* that *the Batman* and I have played for so many years, winning is *nothing!*[40]

DC publisher Jenette Kahn agreed with the Joker that his game with the Batman must continue, since the hero and villain complement each other so perfectly.

> The Joker is out of control, and in this way neither Batman's powerful mind or strength can surround him. . . . Thus the Batman and the Joker form a Yin/Yang duality, the Joker needing the Batman (for who else could appreciate the bizarre genius of his acts?) and the Batman needing the Joker (for who else, truly, could test him?) It is a world of passionate, binding opposites.[41]

The Batman and the Joker have needed each other throughout their fifty year relationship, performing a bat-dance pas de deux in which each partner measures his step to the other. The Joker started his career as a smiling killer who murdered for profit, countered by an uncomplicated, no-nonsense, vigilante Batman. In the fifties and sixties, the Joker became a relatively harmless merry prankster countered by an uncomplicated, good-natured, boy scout Batman.

Today, an increasingly out-of-control Joker is a raging madman who kills 206 people for pleasure (*The Dark Knight Returns*), shoots Commissioner Gordon's daughter and photographs her nude body to drive her father mad (*The Killing Joke*) and eludes justice by becoming the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations, where he tries to gas the entire General Assembly (*A Death in the Family*). The Batman frequently captures the Joker and incarcerates him with the rest of the recurring villains in Gotham City's home for the criminally insane, Arkham Asylum. The graphic novel of that name features the most psychotic Joker of them all, who is so insane he may be sane. A psychotherapist explains the Joker's case to his long-time adversary.

> . . . we're not even sure if he can be properly defined as insane. . . . It's quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of supersanity here. A brilliant new modification of human perception. More suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century. Unlike you and I, the Joker seems to have no control over the sensory information he's receiving from the outside world. He can only cope with that chaotic barage of input by going with the flow. That's why somedays he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He has no real personality.[42]

While this may make the Joker the ideal postmodern cult figure, it has troubling implications for the more conventional Batman, who

continually strives to make sense of that urban chaos which so fundamentally altered his life. If the randomness of late twentieth-century existence has driven the Joker into the asylum, then the Batman, who shares so much with his adversary, may belong there too, enabling the long-time partners to continue their dance in the proper setting. Indeed, the Joker offers the Batman refuge. "We want you in here. With us. In the madhouse. Where you belong." Batman, not thoroughly convinced that he doesn't belong there, admits to Commissioner Gordon: "I'm afraid the Joker may be right about me. Sometimes I . . . question the rationality of my actions. And I'm afraid that when I walk through those asylum gates. . . when I walk into Arkham and the doors close behind me . . . it'll be just like coming home."

While the novelty of a totally obsessed and even crazed Batman may appeal to readers who can afford $24.95 for *Arkham Asylum*, this degree of mental deterioration erodes the character, and may threaten his function as the series hero of an ongoing line of comics. The increasing speculation about the character's sanity over the past few years has generated DC insistence upon the Batman's clean bill of health.

> It's fashionable these days to claim that the Batman is, in his own way, as crazy as the Joker. . . . Everyone whose life has ever been touched by random, tragic chance has come away from it changed, in some way: some transfigured by rage, others by love, some by randomness itself. Bruce Wayne was touched by chance and transfigured by rage; but he's not crazy. And he never has been.[43]

The assertion of the character's sanity forms one of the central premises of the batbible. "First, let us agree that Wayne/Batman is not insane. There is a difference between obsession and insanity. Obsessed the man surely is, but he is in the fullest possession of his mental and moral faculties."

The mental deterioration of the past few years has correlated directly with the comings and goings of various Robins. The first of the Boy Wonders entered the bat-world in 1940, the writers needing a foil for their hero—a bat-Watson to serve an expository function.[44] But Robin served another equally important function. No shadowy creature of the night, this lad, his sunny disposition matching his brightly colored costume. Robin tempered the Batman's grimness, the parallel tragedy of Dick Grayson's parents' senseless death at the hands of criminals making him, in some respects, a younger version of the Caped Crusader. Robin thus shared with his mentor and surrogate parent not only a bond of sympathy but acted as a continual reminder of the vulnerable youngster Bruce Wayne had himself once been.

With the late sixties and early seventies return to the Dark Knight image, Robin/Dick Grayson, now more of a liability than an asset, was packed off to college. Making occasional guest appearances in his old pal's comics, Dick then went into the superhero business for himself, adopting the disguise of Nightwing and leading the Teen (subsequently the New) Titans. Yet even one of the most divergent articulations of the Batman, *The Dark Knight Returns*, incorporated a (female) Robin. Frank Miller explained why. "I had always thought that Robin was a real pain-in-the-ass, but I now realize what a brilliant creation it was, because it really does give a human context to Batman's character."[45] The writers of the regular series themselves also felt the need of a Robin, which Batman himself articulated after the death of Jason Todd (Robin II). "It's just that I felt so adrift when I lost Dick Grayson as a partner. The Batman needed a Robin."[46]

The Joker's murder of the second Robin precipitated a severe deterioration of the Batman's mental state, as the Batman, wracked by guilt, refused to come to terms with his grief. Two 1989 serial stories, *Batman: Year Three* and *A Lonely Place of Dying* centered around the Dark Knight's increasingly bizarre behavior, as the balance between physical violence and ratiocination which he (and his writers) had maintained shifted in favor of the former. Both Alfred and Dick Grayson express serious doubts about their friend's mental health, constantly reiterating that he has failed to come to terms with Jason's death, and that his violent and brutal responses negate everything that he stood for. As Alfred says, "I distinctly remember when . . . you said, 'We're not *brutalizers*. We've got to think with our heads, not with our fists.' Since Master Jason's death you've changed. It seems, sir, that you now do *all* your thinking with those sadly bruised and battered knuckles."[47]

The death of Robin and the subsequent profound psychologization of the Batman provoked intense fan debate, much centering around the Batman's mental state. A typical letter stated:

> His lack of reaction to Jason's death could destroy him. We all need to grieve, and a failure to do so is catastrophic, emotionally and psychologically, for the grieving person. Maybe Dick can heal the rift and, at the same time, help Bruce through this difficult time. But first Bruce must acknowledge these differences. It isn't easy for the Batman to show emotion, as it's a human weakness. If he bottles it all up, however, it will eventually explode, and he himself will suffer most of all.[48]

Only the introduction of yet another Robin could halt the Batman's decline. The mysteriously knowledgeable lad who first appears in *Bat-*

man #440 insists that Dick Grayson revert from Nightwing to Robin and pull his friend back from the brink of psychosis. In *The New Titans* #61, he holds out the old Robin costume to Nightwing. "Dick, please—take this. It belongs to you! . . . He needs a partner again. Someone to care about . . . Someone who cares about him." By *Batman* #442, Tim Drake has inherited Robin's cheery costume and fights crime side-by-side with the Caped Crusader.

But the last panel of the comic, showcasing the new Robin, contains an extreme close-up of a grinning, bright-red mouth. ". . . Easy come, easy go! HA HA HA HA. . . ." Evidently, the menage-a-trois will continue. The Joker has already dispensed with one Robin; the Batman's evil doppelganger fittingly killing off the sunny presence which ensures the Batman's psychic balance. How will the newly well-balanced Batman and his new Robin fare when they inevitably encounter the Clown Prince of Crime? We suspect that Robin will survive, for DC has learned a hard won lesson: as Batman himself said, "Batman and Robin. Maybe they *have* to be a team."[49]

"...Batman only works if the world really sucks."

Who pays Batman's salary? Bruce Wayne, of course.[50] And Bruce's money is old money, as the trappings of his existence reaffirm. A recent Diet Coke commercial, at the head of the Warner Bros. video release of the Batman movie, features "stately Wayne Manor," decorated in old-fashioned opulence and serviced by a British butler, the Coca-Cola theme scored for harpsichord reinforcing the dignified ambience. Just as the Coke advertisement juxtaposes "old world" elegance with a sales pitch, Wayne himself combines his inherited old money with savvy new investment strategies, holding vast amounts of prime Gotham real estate as well as profiting from Wayne Industries and Wayne Tech. He even has a tax shelter, the Wayne Foundation, which makes substantial contributions to charity. He's privileged, he's powerful—and, in recent years, he has increasingly shed his dilettante playboy image for that of good citizen.

Bruce's income as the source of Batman's salary metaphorically encapsulates several parallels between the day-time millionaire and his night-time alter ego. Bruce Wayne is a pre-eminent citizen, particularly through his charitable works, while the Batman is a pre-eminent state functionary. Wayne's vast inheritance places him largely outside the constraints of capitalist accumulation. Batman's vigilante brand of justice places him largely outside the constraints of the legal process. Bruce is a super-citizen, the Batman is a super-cop and both strive to

make Gotham City a better place to live, that is, to make it accord with their own values.

While Batman/Bruce Wayne, like much of popular culture, obviously supports the status quo, not so obvious is the centrality of this support to the character's identity. The particular relationship to property and the state which Bruce/Batman embodies is embedded in his origins, manifested in the iterative events and reinforced by the other key components. His inheritance and his obsession both stem from an attempt to defend property—a mere necklace—against violation. The obsession causes him to engage in his Sisyphean reenactment of that original encounter. The recurrent supporting characters of criminal ilk and the setting activate the traits/atributes and put into play the iterative events which permit him to give rein to his obsession. All these crucially define the nature of crime in the Batman's world, which, in turn, crucially defines the relationship of the Batman to the social order.

Hence Batman to be Batman *must* fight crime, *must* protect property and *must* support the status quo. Other popular heroes such as Sherlock Holmes and Superman may support the status quo, but doing so does not constitute their *sine qua non*. Holmes, for example, dealt with many cases involving no legally defined wrong-doing. But Batman cannot be Batman without crime and criminals.

The "bad" recurrent characters fall into two categories: the highly individualized costumed villains and the endless array of interchangeable criminals in mufti who recur as types, not as individuals. As we have suggested above, one of the narrative functions of the costumed villains is to provide suitable opponents for the Batman. Every crime-fighting hero must have his Moriarty. But the costumed villains do not conform to the psychological profile of ordinary criminality: they steal not because they want the jewels (the money, the gold, etc.) but because the challenge of grappling with the Batman reaffirms their identity. The Batman similarly reaffirms his own identity by grappling with them. Property becomes a kind of McGuffin and both parties, the costumed villains and the Batman, play the game for the game's sake. While the costumed villains do pose a threat to property and the social order, they do so only incidentally—their primary purpose and narrative function being to match wits with the Batman.

When the Batman contests with the costumed villains, his actions to some extent disconnect him from the social order, but his class position remains firmly fixed by his alter ego, while the villains' lack of class position further exacerbates their disembodiment from the social order. Most of their crimes involve grandiose attempts to steal high visibility items from the wealthy or the state but arise from no political purpose or social need. Instead, the villains are inexorably

drawn to capers which provide the greatest challenge and fit their *modus operandi*. The Penguin, for example, could not resist a Maltese Falcon while Two-Face would have to steal a statue of the Roman God Janus.

The highly idiosyncratic and personalized nature of the costumed villains' crimes relates to their psychological instability—the villains are always highly abnormal individuals whose crimes result from mental imbalance rather than more systemic social or political causes. Recently, the villains have been written with greater depth, more in accord with the canons of psychological realism. *Secret Origins Special* #1, for example, grounds the Penguin's compulsive criminal activity in childhood trauma. *The Killing Joke* similarly attributes the Joker's motivation to personal tragedy. The Joker had been an out-of-work comic unable to support his pregnant wife. Driven to desperation, he had agreed to participate in a robbery. Even after his wife's accidental death, the gangsters forced him to go through with the crime, during which he tried to escape into a severely polluted waterway. This "deglamorization" of the costumed villains transforms them from flamboyant madmen into pathetic losers but still insists upon the highly personal nature of their criminal activities and connects them no more closely to the social fabric.

Henri Ducard, one of the Batman's former mentors, summed up the relationship between the Caped Crusader and his costumed antagonists:

> [The Batman] . . . functions as a *lightning rod* for a certain breed of *psychotic*. They specialize in absurdly grandiose *schemes*, and whatever the ostensible rationale—their *true agenda* is always the same: to cast *Batman* in the role of *nemesis*. . . . He *always triumphs*. If he failed, they'd be *bereft*. The pas de deux would have no *point*. Like naughty children, who tempt the wrath of a stern, demanding *father*, they seek only to *shock* him by the *enormity* of their *transgressions*. It's the moment of *acknowledgement* they crave. Thus "good" conquers "evil." *True* evil seldom *announces* itself so *loudly*.[51]

Does true evil announce itself less loudly through the countless criminals in mufti who plague the great metropolis of Gotham City? Not really. In the universe of the Batman artists, phrenology and allied "sciences" have never lost their explanatory power. The nameless thugs seem driven to crime by anatomy. To paraphrase Jessica Rabbit, these criminals aren't really bad, they're just drawn bad. This "badness" extends to their apparel, which classifies them as outside respectable society.

In a very self-conscious restaging of the origin event, the Batman rescues a yuppie couple and their son from three instantly identifiable bad guys, muggers with broken or hooked noses, cauliflower ears, and low brows.[52] Each conforms to the stereotype of a different marginalized subculture: Mansonesque biker/hippy; fifties crew-cutted, leather-jacketed hood and contemporary punk. By contrast, the light hair and "clean" good looks of the yuppie family suit them to modeling the jogging suits they wear. These potential victims, like others throughout the bat-texts, resemble the Waynes, Graysons, Todds and Drakes, with their blue eyes, firm chins, straight noses, noble brows, and Anglo names much more than the nameless, though often clearly ethnic, thugs.

The three street punks who attack the yuppie family typify not only the appearance of their countless colleagues, but also their modus operandi. Most of Gotham City's nameless criminals, the lineal descendants of the initially nameless thief who murdered the Waynes, engage in similar thefts and malefactions. Much like local television newsmen, the 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. In Batman's universe, those criminals necessarily embodying a critique of the system remain ignored while the violent criminals whom he fights remain divorced from the social fabric which produces them.

The transiency of these violent criminals usually, of course, prevents any detailed elaboration of their motivation or their social origins. But even one of the most fully elaborated and intermittently reappearing of these bad guys remains largely separate from the social fabric. Boss Anthony Zucco, indirectly responsible for the deaths of Dick Grayson's parents, curiously enough experienced a childhood trauma similar to both the Batman's and Robin's. His father was killed by hoodlums for refusing to pay protection money. Young Anthony grew up in the same orphanage as young Dick Grayson, but then their paths crucially diverged—Anthony becoming a crime boss and Dick a crime fighter. The crucial difference: "Zucco was brought up with hatred, and that's what he returned to the world. Richard Grayson was brought up with love—and not even Zucco's act of murder could change that."[53] Dick is good because his parents were good, and Zucco is bad because his parents were bad, explanation for wrong-doing again being cast in highly personal terms.

Despite the fact that the perpetrators of crime have highly personalized motivations which place them outside a socio-economic context, the site of crime is paradoxically depicted as the very type of urban wasteland which would seem to provide a socio-economic context for

crimes of violence. Gotham has in the past been presented as a light and cheery playground (resembling Superman's Metropolis) for the merry pranks of the costumed villains. Of late the emphasis has been on urban decay. Commissioner Gordon recently said, "When I first came to Gotham I thought this city couldn't sink any *lower*. Every day proves me wrong!"[54] If Commissioner Gordon knew how the batbible describes his city, the word lower might take on a whole new meaning for him. "Gotham is a distillation of everything that's dark, moody and frightening about New York. It is Hell's Kitchen. The Lower East Side. Bed Stuy. The South Bronx. Soho and Tribeca off the main thoroughfares at three in the morning."

Gotham certainly looks "dark, moody and frightening," with its deserted warehouse districts, garbage strewn alleys, lurking shadows, dilapidated buildings, abandoned construction sites, and tiny people lost in dark, deserted streets loomed over by grotesquely embellished skyscrapers. As a line from the Batman script, repeated endlessly in the film's publicity, put it, Gotham City looks "as if hell had erupted through the sidewalks."[55] This representation of Gotham certainly gives a compelling image of late twentieth-century urban decay, as any New Yorker can attest, and the astute reader will certainly see these conditions as a causal factor in the high Gotham City crime rate. Yet, like the criminals, Gotham is largely removed from a socio-eocnomic context. The narratives deal with the crime rate, but not the unemployment rate; they deal with criminal brutality, but not brutalizing slum landlords; they deal with the greed of petty theft but not poverty and hopelessness—in short, they deal with the trangressions of the underclasses but not the conditions that give rise to these transgressions.

The terrifying reality of the depiction, however, tends to obscure causality while enhancing the Batman's motivation.

As Frank Miller said, ". . . Batman only really works as a character if the world is essentially a malevolent, frightening place."[56] The depiction of Gotham helps Batman to work as a character by persuading the reader to empathize uncritically with the hero's actions. Let us return to our yuppie family blithely jogging their way through the urban blight. The polarity between good and evil manifested in the innocent victims and the overarmed, oversized robbers, the dread invoked by the empty, litter-strewn streets, the unfair odds of three armed thugs against one lone, unarmed avenger of the night, all compounded by the deliberate reinvocation of the Batman's own origin/obsession, encourage the reader to urge the Batman to retributive punishment. The final panel leaves the exact nature of this retribution to the reader's imagination.

In this instance, as in any of the iterative events, the Batman fights crime, and thus serves as an agent of political domination, safeguarding

property relations and enforcing the law. Extratextually, the character and the bat-texts serve to gain consent for political authority and the system of property relations it enshrines, and thus support the dominant hegemonic order. Again we ask, who pays the salary of this agent of political domination and this supporter of the hegemonic order? One who has a great stake in the maintenance of the status quo, Bruce Wayne. This may initially appear to be a deconstructive instance of political domination: a rich man devoting his life to vigilante justice. But the Batman's origin/obsession provides an overarching route of emotional identification even for readers who might have qualms about vigilante justice. Young Bruce's witnessing of the violation of property rights—in the fullest sense of human life—both motivates him within the text and, more importantly, wins the readers' consent to a political position: the inviolability of property relations and the justification of their defense by any means necessary (short of death). The divorce of crime from larger social issues and its embodiment in crazed costume villains or brutal gangsters reinforces the acceptance of this political position.

"I'm not fooled by that cheap disguise. I *know* what you are."

The crazed shrink of Arkham Asylum believes the Batman to be the metaphoric bat that has driven him to madness.[57] We harbor no such delusions. We know that the Batman is neither Dr. Cavendish's fiendish bat nor the upright defender of the weak and innocent that he himself might claim to be. We know that he functions textually as an agent of political domination and extra-textually as both supporter of the hegemonic order and a commodity form. Does the recent fragmentation of his identity that we have discussed threaten any of these functions?

The Batman's hegemonic postion seems unassailable, triply reinforced by his definition as an obsessive crime fighter, his superhero status and the narrative centrality/authority granted him.

1). *Obsessive Crime Fighter.* Addressing the recent refractions of the Batman character, novelist Eric Van Lustbader claimed ". . . the Batman remains essentially the same, which speaks volumes about his lasting power as a symbol both of elemental fear and of protean protector against the encroachment of night's dread anarchy."[58] Lustbader here identifies that component we believe most centrally defines and contains the character—protection against night's dread anarchy, that is, against crime as presented in the bat-texts. For Lustbader, the Batman should symbolize elemental fear only to anarchy's agents. We believe that he may, in fact, symbolize an even greater fear to those

whom he might claim to aid and protect. As James Gordon said in *Batman* #7, "Yes—he works 'outside the law,' as you call it, but the legal devices that hamper us are hurdled by this crimefighter so he may bring these men of evil to justice. . . ."[59] This policeman's willingness to use any means necessary, even "extra-legal" ones, to defend the "law" provides a particularly clear, if chilling, expression of the Batman's role as as an agent of political domination. Nonetheless, his obsession, as we have explained above, serves to disguise his extra-legal dimension and gain support for the hegemonic order.

2). *Superhero Status.* Commentators on the bat-texts constantly refer to that which sets the Batman apart from other superheroes: he has no superpowers. As he himself has said, "I . . . I'm a man."[60] As editor O'Neil has said, it is the quality of human perfectibility which makes the Batman so attractive to readers, many of whom may secretly believe that they too could become a bat (with sufficient motivation and lots of training).[61] *Christianity Today* (of all publications!) addressed this utopian dimension of the Batman's character. "But while God is conspicuously absent from this universe, Batman appears to scale the heights to which a mere man can pull himself by his own Batboots. It is difficult to believe that, apart from God's grace, personal tragedy and suffering can be turned to such an advantage."[62]

But the Batman deliberately cultivates a non-human image to aid him in his crime fighting—he became a bat, after all. And the image seems to work. One of the cornered street punks who had attacked the yuppie family, exclaims, "You're not people! Nothin' like you can be human! You ain't human, so *nothing* can stop you—man, that ain't fair."[63] This non-human dimension frees him from the standards of evaluation applied to lesser mortals. To quote Frank Miller again, "I think that in order for the character to work, he has to be a force that in certain ways is beyond good and evil. It can't be judged by the terms we would use to describe something a man would do because we can't think of him as a man."[64]

Though he might be different from his supercolleagues, the Batman is still more superhero than ordinary guy and this status implicitly endorses his actions. Just as superheroes' superpowers transcend those of ordinary individuals, so does their supermorality. The Batman's intertextual construction as superhero reinforces his hegemonic function.

3). *Narrative Structure.* While narrative can be construed broadly enough to include the above two points, specific narrative devices may foster further reader acceptance of the Batman's hegemonic function. The bat-texts clearly focalize around the Batman. *Batman Comics,* of course, foreground the hero in the title, but the covers of both *Batman* and *Detective* always feature images of the Batman or at least his

distinctive iconography. The stories, in addition to granting him narrative centrality, often cede him narrative authority through point-of-view frames, first person narration, and other devices similar to those film scholars often argue create identification with a character. While we would prefer to deal with actual rather than textually extrapolated readings, dominant cultural constructions of narrative encourage us seriously to consider the implications of these narrative devices.

The bat-texts' intertextual resonance with the larger genre of detective fiction (very broadly defined) also elicits support for the Batman's activities. Though we earlier differentiated the Batman from such other series heroes as Holmes, Marlowe and Bond, he does, in fact, have a generic affiliation with them, proclaimed by the very title of his longest running comic, *Detective.* Indeed, the cover of the fiftieth-anniversary issue of this title consciously references the Batman's lineage, showing him and Sherlock Holmes together. The detective genre has traditionally privileged the hero and encouraged reader identification with him and his exploits.

Unassailable as the Batman's hegemonic function may seem, given the above three factors, some recent bat-texts may have widened incipient fissures in the Batman's construction. Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns,* the opening salvo in the Batman's high-end marketing offensive, departed from the Batman mythos by, as we have said, featuring a fifty-year-old Batman with a female Robin. But his outlawing by the Gotham City police force, his resistance of presidential authority and his fighting with Superman severely questioned the Batman's role as an agent of political dominantion and actually constituted far more significant departures. His new outlaw position caused him to reappraise his analysis of the social order and ultimately to ally with elements of the underclass he had initially struggled to contain. Significantly, however, this alliance took the form of protecting property as the Batman, at the head of the mutant gangs, prevents middle-class rioters from looting a supermarket. *The Dark Knight Returns* problematizes the Batman's role within a dominant political order depicted as irredeemably corrupt and bankrupt, and challenges a political system which could continually re-elect Reagan president while outlawing the Batman, but reaffirms the Batman's role as lone vigilante striving for a higher justice. Society may be corrupt but the Batman's honor and vision remain above reproach in this libertarian tract.

Significantly, the next texts to exploit potential fissures in the Batman's facade did so not by taking up Miller's political critique but rather by exploring the nature of the Batman's obsession. *Arkham Asylum* calls the Batman's motivation into question, showing that the Batman himself suffers from serious doubts about his sanity. *The Kill-*

ing Joke draws explicit parallels between the Joker's trauma and the Batman's, as the Joker urges his nemesis to succumb to a justifiable madness. *Batman: Year Three* and *A Lonely Place of Dying* show the Batman becoming as brutal as the thugs he fights, ignoring his deductive abilities while relying on his physical prowess to punish malefactors.

While all these texts challenge his motivation, they don't question his role as agent of political domination. Both *Arkham Asylum* and *The Killing Joke* stage confrontations between the Batman and costumed villains in isolated settings—an asylum and an abandoned fairground—environments which reflect and justify the character's extremis and thus serve to contain the broader social implications. And in both narratives, the Batman emerges intact, if not exactly triumphant, from his trial. *Batman: Year Three* and *A Lonely Place of Dying* raise doubts not about his role as agent of political domination, but about his performance of that role. If he becomes too overtly brutal neither the supporting characters (Alfred and Dick Grayson) nor the reader can contine to give him their consent.

Some recent texts, significantly in the regular titles, however, have begun to exhibit a certain self-conscious awareness of the Batman's hegemonic function, questioning the most central component of the Batman's identity—the nature of crime and his relation to it. "Anarky™ in Gotham City," (*Detective* #608–609), potentially redefines crime to include industrial polluters and real estate speculators. A twelve-year-old boy, calling himself Anarky and dressed in superhero-like garb, kills a chemical manufacturer with the supposedly "safe" sludge he is dumping into the river, and attempts to demolish a bank being built on the site of a community of homeless persons. Batman can not utterly condemn Anarky's actions or his definition of crime, but seeks to distinguish himself from his fellow vigilante. "His cause may be just—but his methods certainly *aren't.*" Alfred interjects, "Really, sir?" Batman responds. "I know, I know—my own methods aren't always legal, either. But there *is* a difference, Alfred. . . . I only use violence when it's absolutely necessary, not as a form of punishment . . . not lately anyway!"[65]

The Batman writers have presented an even blunter reappraisal of their hero's cosmology, permitting Henri Ducard to question the Batman's entire *raison d'être.* "While Batman busies himself with petty thieves and gaudy *madmen,* an *abyss of rot* yawns ever wider at his feet. He's a *band-aid* on a *cancer patient.* I am of course no *moralist,* but this Batman I think, has a very poor understanding of the *world.*"[66]

While this kind of questioning seems to represent a fairly minor component of the bat-texts and has yet to be valorized by inclusion in a more expensive format, it nonetheless constitutes the gravest threat

to the character's identity amongst the centrifugal forces we have enumerated. Yet the ™ following the name Anarky raises the issue of whether even this seemingly substantial critique will undermine the character or be incorporated as another marketing technique, for the Batman's circulation in commodity form is as important as his support of the hegemonic order. The contradictions of capitalism would thus permit the commodification of criticisms as long as they resulted in profits.

Yet the endless possibilities of containment and refraction inherent in the Batman character result in tensions, all of which act as potential time-bombs. By contrast, that expression of the character which has the widest cultural currency remains unthreatened either by textual challenges to the Batman's role as agent of political domination/supporter of political hegemony or by the centrifugal forces of commodification—valorization of authorship, market diversification. The bat-logo constitutes an expression of corporate presence/control, a point of minimal contact with the character for non bat-fans, and a magnet for discretionary income. Paradoxically a clearer manifestation of private property and the dominant hegemonic order protecting it than the character it signifies, the bat-logo floats untouched, above criticism. A resident of Gotham City recently stated, "I've lived in this city for fifty years and I've never seen any of those creeps [costumed villains]. Or Batman."[67] But he has surely seen the bat-logo.

Notes

1. The title of the chapter is taken from Grant Morrison, *Arkham Asylum* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 1989), n.p.
2. Box side panel, Batman™ Cereal (St. Louis, MO: Ralston Purina Co., 1989).
3. Box side panel, Batman™ Cereal.
4. "Writer: Sam Hamm," *Comics Interview* 70 (1989), p. 17.
5. John Marriott, *Batman: The Official Book of the Movie* (London: Bantam Books, 1989), p. 39.
6. Howard A. Rodman, "They Shoot Comic Books, Don't They?" *American Film,* May 1989, p. 38.
7. Bill Barol, "Batmania," *Newsweek,* June 26, 1989, p. 72.
8. Simon Garfield, "Batman Versus Hollywood," *Time Out: 20/20,* July 1989, p. 54.
9. "Artist: Bob Kane," *Comics Interview* 70 (1989), p. 49.
10. The Batman's mortality, of course, gives him the potential for aging, though *The Dark Knight Returns* is so far the only text to activate this potential.
11. We are indebted to Henry Jenkins, III for this insight.
12. This is not to assert that Batman has never done anything but fight crime. In *Batman*

#156 (1963) he even fights a pink space monster, but most fans and writers view this and similar science-fictional episodes as aberrant.

13. Dennis O'Neil, "A Brief Batbible: Notes on the Dark Night Detective," unpublished manuscript, April, 1989, n.p.
14. We use the term "iterative" in Umberto Eco's, not Gerard Genette's, sense. Eco defines the iterative as follows: "a series of events repeated according to a set scheme (. . . in such a way that each event takes up again from a sort of virtual beginning, ignoring where the preceding event left off). . . ." Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979) p. 117.
15. Neil Gaiman, "When is a Door. The Secret Origin of the Riddler," *Secret Origins Special* #1 (1989).
16. *Rolling Stone*, June 29, 1989, p. 43.
17. For a discussion of the rise of the direct distribution network, we refer the reader to the Parsons' essay in this volume (Chapter 5).
18. "Artist: Bob Kane," *Comics Interview* 31 (1986), p. 17.
19. *Batman* #206 (November 1968).
20. Letter from Greg W. Myers, "Batcave," *Detective Comics* #495 (October 1980).
21. This recent reconfiguration of authorship in the comics industry accords with the authorship function as described by Michel Foucault. See "What is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
22. The masculine pronoun reflects the current dominance of males at the two major companies.
23. Advertisement for DC Comics in Dennis O'Neil, *The Batman Movie Adaption* (New York: DC Comics, 1989).
24. Jenette Kahn, "Don't Call Me Chief!" *The New Titans* #61 (December 1989).
25. The quotation in the heading of this section is taken from Alan Moore, "The Mark of Batman," in *The Complete Frank Miller Batman* (Stamford, CT: Longmeadow Press, 1989) n.p.
26. Mike Gold, "Our Darkest Knight," *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics Inc., 1988), p. 14.
27. For thirty-five of his fifty years, two men, Jack Schiff and Julie Schwartz, edited the Batman titles. Most of the editors since Schwartz's retirement had worked with him as writers or artists.
28. Jenette Kahn, "Don't Call Me Chief!" *Legends of the Dark Knight* 3 (January 1990).
29. Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (New York: D.C. Comics, 1988) n.p.
30. Neil Gaiman, "When is a Door. The Secret Origin of the Riddler," *Secret Origins Special* #1 (1989).
31. Interview with Dennis O'Neil, see Chapter 2 in this volume.
32. "Batsignals," *Batman* #442 (1989), n.p.
33. "Who's Who," *Detective Comics Annual* #2 (1989).
34. Dennis O'Neil, *Batman: The Official Comic Adaptation of the Warner Bros. Motion Picture* (New York: DC Comics Inc., 1989).
35. Personal Conversation with Dennis O'Neil, September 29, 1989.

36. *The Batman Role-Playing Game* (Niles, IL: Mayfair Games, Inc., 1989).
37. Dick Giordano, "Growing Up With the Greatest," *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics Inc., 1988), pp. 7–8.
38. Moore, "The Mark of Batman," n.p.
39. Batman Card #238, Second Series, The Topps Company, 1989.
40. Dennis O'Neil, "The Joker's Five-Way Revenge," *Batman* #251 (September 1973).
41. Jenette Kahn, "Tribute," *Detective Comics* #599 (April 1989).
42. Morrison.
43. Alan Brennert, "Tribute," *Detective Comics* #600, (May 1989).
44. Bob Kane saw both narrative and other reasons for a Robin. ". . . I think it was a *bad* move to kill Robin off. First of all they were a team—it would be like killing Dr. Watson off and leaving Sherlock Holmes by himself or Tonto and the Lone Ranger, Tarzan and Jane. It's the wrong move. And, of course, it *kills* the merchandizing on Robin. . . . ("Artist: Bob Kane," *Comics Interview* 70 (1989), p. 47).
45. "Spotlight: Dark Knight," *Comic's Interview* 31 (1986), p. 32.
46. Jim Starlin, *A Death in the Family* (New York: DC Comics, 1988).
47. Marv Wolfman, "A Lonely Place of Dying," part 1, *Batman* #440 (1989).
48. Letter from Malcolm Bourne, *Batman* #440 (1989).
49. Marv Wolfman, "A Lonely Place of Dying," *Batman* #442.
50. The quotation in the heading of this section is from "Frank Miller: Return of the Dark Knight," *The Comics Journal* 101 (August 1985), p. 64.
51. Sam Hamm, "Blind Justice" Part 3, *Detective Comics* #600 (1989).
52. Marv Wolfman, "The Coming Of Crimesmith," *Batman* #443 (January 1990).
53. Marv Wolfman, "Batman: Year Three (Part I)," *Batman* #436 (1989).
54. *Batman* #443 (January 1990).
55. Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren, "*BATMAN*," unpublished screenplay, Oct. 6, 1988.
56. "Spotlight: Dark Knight," p. 37.
57. The quotation in the heading of this section is from Morrison.
58. Eric Van Lustbader, "Tribute," *Detective Comics* #600 (May 1989).
59. *Batman* #7 quoted in Mark Cotta Vaz, *Tales of the Dark Knight* p. 4.
60. Morrison.
61. Personal conversation, Dennis O'Neil, September 29, 1989.
62. Dean Husler, "Gotham Great Grows Grim," *Christianity Today*, May 12, 1989, p. 65.
63. *Batman* #443.
64. "Frank Miller: Return of the Dark Knight," *The Comics Journal* 101 (August 1985), p. 61.
65. Alan Grant, "Anarky in Gotham City," *Detective Comics* #608 (1989).
66. Sam Hamm, "Blind Justice," Part III, *Detective Comics* #600 (May 1989).
67. Neil Gaiman, "Original Sins," *Secret Origins* #1 (1989).