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Masculinity in the Early Works

Of Frank Miller

by

Chris Brock

A dissertation

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## MAJOR WORKS BY FRANK MILLER

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This is not a complete list of Frank Miller's works, but it does cover all of the works mentioned in this dissertation. Miller was the primary writer for all of the works listed, though many of these works had artists other than Miller, and they are mentioned where appropriate.

*Daredevil* issues 158-191 (1979-1983)

*Ronin* (1983)

*The Dark Knight Returns* (1986)

*Daredevil: Born Again* (1986), penciling by David Mazzucchelli

*Elektra Assassin* (1986-1987), penciling by Bill Sienkiewicz

*Batman: Year One* (1987), penciling by David Mazzucchelli

*The Life and Time of Martha Washington in the Twenty-First Century* (1990-2007), penciling by Dave Gibbons

*Sin City* (1993-2001)

*Daredevil: The Man without Fear* (1993), penciling by John Romita Jr.

*300* (1998)

*The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2001)

*All Star Batman & Robin, the Boy Wonder* (2005-2008), penciling by Jim Lee

*Holy Terror* (2011)

*The Dark Knight III: The Master Race* (2015-2017), penciling by Andy Kubert

## Masculinity in the Early Works of Frank Miller

Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2018)

This dissertation examines masculine identity construction in the early works of comics writer and illustrator Frank Miller. Miller helped to redefine American superhero comics in the 1980s. My goal with this dissertation is to provide a close study of how masculinity is defined and constructed in sequential art. To accomplish my goals, I examine visual and verbal representations of masculinity through the lens of semiotics. The tools I use to study Miller's texts are applicable to other writers and can help to develop scholarship on masculinity in the medium.

The particular branch of semiotics I use is informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis. In chapter 1, I identify and define terms from Lacan that help to pinpoint Miller's conception of identity and then apply those terms to Miller's first graphic novel, *Ronin*. The chapter can be read as a session between an analyst and analysand with the goal of determining identity.

Next, I examine how Miller creates identity in his Batman stories. This chapter follows the character arc of Bruce Wayne/Batman over the course of four novels: *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman: Year One*, *All Star Batman & the Boy Wonder*, and *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. The close study of images shows how Miller and various artists both rely on and contribute to the larger culture's understanding of masculinity.

My third chapter discusses censorship in American comics. This chapter dramatizes the crusade of Fredric Wertham in the 50s and Miller's revolt against censorship in the 80s. I use *The Dark Knight Returns* to illuminate all of the philosophical disagreements Miller has with censorship.

My final chapter argues for the inclusion of multimodal texts such as comics in the

classroom. The chapter places an emphasis on Robert Scholes's argument for teaching reading methods rather than just texts. I combine working memory and semiotics to extend Scholes's argument. I also provide an sample lesson plan using Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One*.

Key Words: Semiotics, graphic narratives, Frank Miller, masculinity, Batman, working memory

## INTRODUCTION

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This dissertation isn't about the psychologist Fredrik Wertham, but he haunts much of what is contained here. Miller defines American comics in reaction to the campaign that Wertham led against the comic medium in the 40s and 50s. Wertham's assault is exemplified in a quote from *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), a book infamous for inspiring the imposition of censorship on American comics. "The problem of what comic books do to children, or rather what they have already done to a whole generation," says Wertham, "is threefold. Its solution requires a knowledge of comic books, of the minds of children, and of the processes, the mechanisms, by which comic-book reading influences children" (46). The threefold problem to which he refers is creating illiteracy, causing delinquency, and slowing maturation. This short quotation sums up the core of Wertham's argument while also revealing some of his biases. He sees comics as a *problem*, and he offers, in the guise of a kind and concerned doctor, a *solution*.

Wertham sparked a national debate that pitted worried parents against artists and writers by claiming that comic books were corrupting their children. He brought into the argument issues of censorship, freedom of speech, popular media and its influence, and individual liberties. Wertham's books and magazine articles gained him the support of many Americans and



FIGURE 1: CCA  
STAMP

eventually the backing of the US Senate. His efforts ultimately led to the founding of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a censorship organization that would police the content of comics beginning in 1954 but still allow the medium to exist, though as a shadow of its former Golden Age glory. Any comics found acceptable under the code would have a stamp placed on the cover (Fig 1). This proved a hollow victory for Wertham, since he



viewed the medium itself as promoting illiteracy in children, a problem that he assumed would lead to stunted intellectual growth and thus to delinquency. Nevertheless, Wertham had struck a crippling blow against American mainstream comics for at least 40 years, leading to their dismissal by academia, arts professionals, and society in general. Comics were at their lowest point in prestige and audience, and common wisdom stated that no talented, self-respecting artist or writer would be expected to willingly enter the field of superhero comics.

However, in 1979, a talented artist began penciling *Daredevil*, a comic with declining readership and on the brink of cancellation. Frank Miller began on issue 158, drawing under writer Roger McKenzie, and was to continue this writer/artist collaboration until issue 167. During this time Miller experimented visually with a character noted, ironically, for his blindness. Starting with issue 168 Frank Miller began writing his first mainstream comic and simultaneously handling the penciling duties as well. Issue 168 marks the beginning of Miller's ongoing challenge to the CCA and his reaction to Wertham's views on the medium. While not directly violating the CCA at first, he frequently tested the boundaries of the code and did his best to tell a story for adults to read. His material did not pander to children; he included themes and concerns that reflected the struggles of adults. His stories were purposefully directed towards an older reading audience while still limited by censorship.

From the beginning, Miller sought to redefine American comics as a form for adults, and thus something that no longer needed censorship, and he did so by using masculinity as a way to define the medium. This process of definition parallels the identity formation of characters in his novels. Redefinition and identity formation serve the purpose of transitioning from a former—often puerile—state to a stronger, more masculine state. Miller's conception of a positive formation moves from weak to strong, childlike to mature, and bright and censored to dark and

expressionistic. These transitions are also linked to gender roles in his early works, as his characters often transition from effeminate (sometimes repressed) to hypermasculine identities.

This dissertation is an exploration of gender identity formation within the comics medium as exemplified by Frank Miller. The texts studied herein are almost all from the 80s, with the exception of some of his later Batman works, which continue the ongoing formation of Bruce Wayne/Batman. I have organized the chapters chronologically by publication date. Throughout I have used different methodologies and theorists to better understand Frank Miller's visual and verbal expressions, meaning that each chapter explores a different central theme and arrives at conclusions from different viewpoints. When dealing with multimodal texts (visual and verbal), the critical apparatus is one that I have put together from a variety of academic discourses. I could not rely solely on semiotics, as much as I would have liked to do so. I also had to incorporate studies of visual narrative, multimodal theory, and the iconology of W. J. T. Mitchell. These theories and theorists provide the basic methodology, which I have then adapted to fit specific elements within Miller's work. Some chapters, such as the chapter on *Ronin*, include a closer examination of semiotic signs and psychoanalysis, reflecting my indebtedness to Julia Kristeva.

The masculinities that Miller depicts change throughout his career, but he delves more deeply into identity formation in his earlier works. His concentration on themes related to subject formation may stem from his own identity as a writer: by exploring the formation of character's identities he was also defining his role as a comic book writer. In addition, he was always concerned with the public perception of comic books as a medium. His concern meant he had to redefine characters through identity formation in order to allow them the ability to perform in his more adult-oriented narratives. His darker themes and more psychologically

complex characters had the added quality of expanding the potential of American mainstream comics as something deserving more thoughtful attention by creators and writers.

In many of his interviews, the discussion ultimately veers into the question of the medium as a legitimate art form. In an interview in late 1981, Miller describes the current state of American comics:

There certainly isn't any great movement toward broadening the scope of what comics are doing in America. Some things are happening, but not enough.

...Friends of mine from Europe tell me that you can read comics on the bus and people won't think you're retarded. Adults are willing to read these things; they've just got to be presented in a way that is a little more accessible to them.

*(Interviews 31)*

Miller's goal in his early writings was to elevate the medium and write for mature audiences, but he also had to combat the public's perception of reading comics as being "retarded." The new direction he was taking American superhero comics required him to play the part of an apologist throughout. His narratives mirror obstacles the medium encountered in America.

*TDKR* is Miller directly addressing American comics and the culture of censorship by telling the story of an elderly Batman coming out of retirement. This is really the story of comics returning after decades of censorship and ridicule. *TDKR* is a book about the history of comics and the rise of a new, mature style that is not aimed at a childish audience. But before Miller could write mature comics, he had first to lay the foundation by refuting the current state of American comics. Miller's conception of the new American comics ultimately reflects not only the types of stories he is telling but also the masculine characters within. He first had to present his comics in a way that would appeal to adults. He did this by packaging his stories in

more prestigious formats that physically differ from the mainstream comics at the newsstands. He was presenting to the reader something new that looked darker, felt glossier, and read like a Spillane novel.

## STUDY OF VISUAL AND THE VERBAL IN NARRATIVE

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The following is a short account of semiotics. Semiotics, I believe, is the method that can help reveal the visual grammar and complexities that are inherent in comics. Below is a brief history of important texts, many of them from the semiotic school of thought, that either provide a contextual structure for studying images or that I relied on heavily in this chapter.

In the 50s, Roland Barthes began to use semiotics for studying more than verbal modes. Barthes repeatedly returns to the image throughout his career, writing about photography, fashion, and the image. With his book, *Camera Lucida* (1979), Barthes addresses the image and how that image creates idiosyncratic effects in the viewer, namely his idea of the *punctum* (See chapter 2). The same image could lead to an infinite number of interpretations based on prior experiences and intertextual connections. The concept of the punctum becomes an important tool when analyzing the affect images have on the reader.

Writing around the same time as Barthes was Christian Metz, whose focus is mostly on film. Metz's book *The Imaginary Signifier* (1977) ties together the signifier and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Metz studies the relationship between spectator and object and shows how film uses framing to create a visual experience for the spectator. Metz's study of the spectator goes beyond Barthes, since Metz is heavily invested in psychology, and applies the Lacanian trio of

imaginary, symbolic, and real, alongside the signifier to analyze the image. The imaginary signifier with which Metz concerns himself is the image created by the camera and also the image internalized by the spectator as part of the mirror stage. While I will use all three of Lacan's categories, it is the imaginary that I am most interested in because it is internalized for identity formation. Metz provides valuable insight into how a reader interprets and internalizes images. Metz's text is most useful in Chapter 1, where I discuss in detail a person's identity formation through images.

Metz is rightly remembered as a cinema scholar, while Gilles Deleuze is a philosopher who sometimes wrote about the cinema. Though not a semiotician, Deleuze had much say about the image in *The Movement-Image* (1983). In *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze discusses several types of movement-images: perception-image, affection-image, action-image, and the impulse-image. Any image could be more than one movement-image at the same time, and this depends on the framing, the part of the narrative the image belongs to, and the viewer. Deleuze approaches the image beyond the confines of semiotics, but his texts are additive to theories of semiotics since he based some of his taxonomy of images on C. S. Peirce. His theories have also proven to be highly adaptable to looking at sequential art, in that they offer a sort of typology for studying the image and the gutters connecting a series of images. He has proven to be a useful source for studying images alone or in a sequence, depending if I am looking at a certain page as a time-image or a movement-image. My use of Deleuze is mainly in Chapter 3, where I use the movement-image to show how Miller is relying of affective images as a way to develop an interior identity.

Until the publication of *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) by Will Eisner that the medium is seriously discussed. Eisner's book (as well as its two sequels) looks at all aspects of

the comic, including anatomy, construction, narrative, emotion, sequence, and more. No book up until this time had tried to cover all of these areas. Eisner's book, while short and written for the non-academic, helped to shape how comics were viewed and understood. In 1993, Scott McCloud, a comics creator like Eisner, wrote *Understanding Comics*. Eisner and McCloud wrote about the medium from the perspective of practitioners. These two writers remain as a practical approach to comics, lacking the high theory of Barthes, Genette, and Peirce.

Around the time Eisner was developing his analysis of sequential art, Perry Nodelman was analyzing children's picture books. Nodelman's influential work *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (1988) addresses the relationship between visual and verbal modes, showing with clarity the connection between the two. While picture books usually differ in format from comics, they share similarities in the interaction of the visual and verbal. Nodelman discusses the role of the image in a story and its relation to the words. Unlike comics, the children's book usually has far fewer images and words. The scarcity of images and words means that the children's book author must necessarily construct his book with greater intentionality of design.

Eisner's books and McCloud's books are still fine introductions to studying comics and how they function. One of the first books to systematically analyze sequential art using semiotics is Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (1999). Groensteen offers an apparatus for the study of comics and a vocabulary for subsequent scholars to use. Groensteen champions the idea of the spatio-topical arrangement of comic panels. His study of the spatio-topical sets up the second half of his work, arthrology. Arthrology analyses sequences of panels (syntagms, multiframe, hyperframes) and their articulation between other series of panels.

With a foundation in semiotics, Neil Cohn introduces cognitive psychology to the study of comics. Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013), provides tools for analyzing the finer details of narration with images. Cohn parses images with a linguistic rigor, where he seeks to discuss the more atomic (fundamental) parts of an image as being part of a schema. Cohn argues that schemas are part of style and part of the visual language, easily re-cognizable by the reader. He argues that schemas are part of the visual language of communication, and in that sense every mark and scratch denoting style is part of a larger visual language.

The academic study of sequential art has increased in recent years with the journals dedicated and publications on the medium or an author. As of 2018, there is one book that focuses solely on the works of Frank Miller, Paul Young's *Frank Miller's Daredevil and the End of Heroism*. Young focuses almost exclusively on his work with the Daredevil character. Young briefly mentions other works by Miller as they relate to Daredevil. There are no other book length analyses of Miller's other graphic novels, or on Miller's contributions to the medium.

A survey of articles on works by Miller often talk about Miller's works in relation to other texts that came out at the same time. Many articles discuss *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986), which came out in the same year, as two works that changed the course of American comics in the 80s. Recent articles discuss Miller's current works and his apparent Islamophobia. Criticism of Miller's political beliefs is being directly tied to his works, meaning that his artistic and novelistic experimentations are often overlooked for the more apparent cultural problems in his writings. Many articles do cover Miller's comics, and many of those articles discuss his artistic merits and connection to earlier art movements like expressionism. These articles tend to focus on the art of *Sin City* and *300*, which I do not cover in this dissertation.

The literature on Miller concerning masculinity and gender is limited and often not helpful for what I am covering. The article, “A Man Has Risen”: Hard Bodies, Reaganism and the Dark Knight” (2012) by Richard Iadonisi, discusses masculinity within *TDKR*. His approach couches masculinity in the 80s and how Miller’s novel serves as a reaction to a perceived social diminishment of masculinity. Iadonisi’s article is similar in approach to John William Salyers MA thesis, “Gender Performance and the Reclamation of Masculinity in Frank Miller’s Batman: The Dark Knight Returns” (2013). Salyer’s analysis posits Miller’s graphic novel as a response to the weakening of masculinity in the 80s.

Iadonisi’s article and Salyers’s thesis are focused examinations of masculinity within *TDKR*; they approach the subject from a social-historical perspective. Likewise, this approach demonstrates how Miller’s novels show a social diminishment of masculinity in the 80s. In my dissertation, I am less concerned with history than with Miller’s artistic choices. I am more concerned with how Miller creates masculine identities rather than the why.

## DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

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The three major chapters in this dissertation explore Miller’s conception of gender formation, with a special emphasis on visual and verbal expressions of masculinity. Miller’s masculine ideal is often couched as a reaction against self-imposed suppression. This sort of self-imposed suppression occurs at the beginning of *The Dark Knight Returns (TDKR)*, but Miller’s hero shifts to resistance by refusing to submit to censorship and other societal restraints. This resistance and suppression are both couched in terms of gender roles, where rebellion is



associated with strongly masculine characters, while suppression or repression often mark effeminate characters—i.e., bad guys, weak men, women, or victims. For Miller, masculinity is seen as the cure and not the symptom of patriarchal hegemony. The final outcome of gendered identity is not the concern of this dissertation, as the problems inherent in hypermasculinity are well-documented in the works of Michael Kimmel and Judith Butler. I am more concerned with the apparatus that presents masculinities, and how these masculinities are conceived in the works of one of the most influential modern-day writers in the medium.

*Ronin* is Miller's first creator-owned graphic novel, and it is also his most in-depth look at a spectrum of gendered identity formation. Chapter 1, "Castration and the Masculine Recovery of the Phallus in Frank Miller's *Ronin*," looks at how Miller approaches gender and identity within the novel. Miller develops at least three gendered identity formations in *Ronin*, each identity exploring different mystical and scientific fantasy genders within the context of a futuristic dystopia. The novel's use of mental and ego breaks encouraged my use of a semiotics more aligned with psychoanalysis than linguistics. *Ronin* is a text that suggests a more theoretical look courtesy of Lacanian and Kristevan psychoanalysis, since many of its characters are lost in their own minds and cannot perceive reality as it is. *Ronin* also has a strong oedipal subtext throughout, often as the source of cognitive dissonance. Miller's novel stands as his first extended attempt to grasp the fundamental causes, influences, and experiences that help determine identity formation. Because he is writing science fiction/fantasy, there is some disconnect between his vision and the Kristevan version of identity.

Chapter 1 serves as a closer analysis of a specific text than the latter two chapters. The theories applied, and theorists invoked, serve a much narrower function of explication that does not extend too far beyond the text into the medium which will be explained in later chapters.

Julia Kristeva and Kaja Silverman provide a useful psychoanalytical background for studying gender and identity within *Ronin*, though their work does not offer as much help for exploring the purely graphic side of the medium. The limited scope of this chapter allows me to focus more on the processes and techniques Miller uses throughout his career and which I will be referencing throughout my dissertation, and it also allows me to scrutinize a creator experimenting in his first creator-controlled graphic novel.

Chapter 2, “I’m the Goddamn Batman,” looks at visual and verbal representations of masculinity within Miller’s works on Batman. Miller tells the career of the Caped Crusader from his humble beginnings as a vigilante to his bitter old age. Throughout his various works on Batman, Miller, when not personally drawing, employs different pencillers (David Mazzucchelli, Jim Lee, Todd McFarlane, John Romita Jr., and Andy Kubert) to portray Batman as a person and as a body. Each choice of artist reflects the narrative goals of the work and also defines Batman’s gendered identity at each stage of his career. His gender can range among such disparate positions as introspective, hypermasculine, back to introspective, and finally repressive. Visual signs often reveal more about gender and genre than the verbal text can provide. This chapter, more than the others, emphasizes the way visual cues influence and define gender identity. For this chapter, it was necessary to include several of Miller’s works from 1986 to 2009, showing that his Batman works are not isolated cases, but are part of an ambitious story arc that covers the entire career of the hero and of comics in general. Throughout this chapter, visual elements are explicated and explored in the context of gender codes.

Chapter 3, “Repression and Censorship as the Motivation for *The Dark Knight Returns*,” looks at how media can influence a person’s identity. Comics is especially connected to the idea of influencing children, or as Dr. Wertham would say, seducing children. By looking at

censorship of the medium in America, I have recapitulated its history from the 1950s through the mid 80s. *TDKR* is both a direct argument against censorship and refutation of Wertham's conception of media influence on the individual. Miller's moral and philosophical arguments often start in the pages of an Ayn Rand text or a Mickey Spillane novel and end up re-mediated within his graphic novels. While Miller's arguments against Wertham and censorship are often misguided, his notions are far from simple. Miller interweaves superhero comics and American history, psychology, Randian Objectivism, and the medium itself to look at influence and identity. By looking closely at Miller's understanding of identity formation, we are able to see how he develops narratives and characters through visual and verbal representation.

The majority of this dissertation is focused on just one aspect of gender: masculine identity formation in the early works of Frank Miller. By limiting myself to identity formation, I am limiting myself to viable texts. I concentrate on just five of Miller's novels, which is only a fraction of his total output. As a sort of addendum, in my conclusion I address possible further studies of masculinity and gender in the works of Frank Miller. For instance, I have barely even mentioned here his series of *Sin City* novels, whose overall look at various masculinities deserves a close analysis of Miller's deployment of gender in the style of noir and the visual domain of German Expressionism. Other notable omissions are his important contributions to *Daredevil* and one of his most famous creations, the female assassin Elektra. Also missing is his large collection of *Martha Washington* stories, which tell the story of a strong female character living in a futuristic dystopia. The *Martha* series is notable for being focused on a female protagonist who has appropriated masculine tropes in order to define herself.

Included in this dissertation is a chapter on education where I argue for the teaching of multimodal texts in the college literature classroom. My advocacy of their inclusion is based on

cognitive psychology's model of working memory and critical pedagogy. Many of the arguments and the design of the chapter originate from my initial study of semiotics. The inclusion of working memory is an effort to inform and validate semiotics. My other reasons for approaching pedagogy this way is my belief in the easing of the arbitrary borders between disciplines in the humanities. Throughout the chapter I offer a recurring plea to include on reading lists multimodal texts that can serve a pedagogical function alongside texts from the more traditional canon. I based this plea on arguments from critical pedagogues Paulo Freire and bell hooks, whose writings encourage learning as a means to change the world. I hope my own chapter on pedagogy accurately reflects and continues their philosophy.



FIGURE 2: STOP POSING BOY!

## CASTRATION AND THE MASCULINE RECOVERY OF THE PHALLUS IN FRANK MILLER'S *RONIN*

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### INTRODUCTION

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In 1982, Frank Miller began writing and drawing *Ronin*, his first creator-owned graphic novel. *Ronin* is Miller's first attempt at character identity formation centered on growth and empowerment. Miller will return frequently to these themes in his Batman and Daredevil graphic novels. While his later works limit identity formation for his protagonists, *Ronin* stands apart as the most complete analysis of identity since he undertakes to include three characters that are all thematically related to identity formation. It is also Miller's first foray into this topic, making *Ronin* an ideal place to begin.

At the core of Miller's stories is the identity of the subject, how that subject views himself, and how that subject understands how others view him. In all instances, the masculine narrative for Miller is one of recovery of power and control over one's life. The differences in narrative content often concern the types of power sought and the condition of the protagonist at

the beginning of the story. Often Miller introduces the character as beaten and at a disadvantage, or the hero represses his true potential and power. In the instance of Billy Challas, the protagonist from Miller's *Ronin*, the character is symbolically and physically castrated.

This chapter will look at the function of the phallus, as psychoanalysis refers to the practice of privileging male bodies and masculine identities. Within *Ronin*, the phallus serves as a way to approach themes of identity construction. *Ronin* is Miller's most detailed work concerned with the identity of the subject. Using Kaja Silverman's twofold definition of the phallus as my guide, I identify in Miller's *Ronin* two signifying roles. The first definition, and the one more immediate to Billy's limbless body, concerns "those things which have been partitioned off from the subject during the various stages of its constitution, and which will never be restored to it" (*Semiotics* 183). The other definition, the more culturally pervasive signifier of the phallus, encompasses the significations associated with the "cultural privileges and positive values which define male subjectivity with patriarchal society" (*Semiotics* 183). The phallus is the site of symbolic power for the male, and it is also the site of subject formation in the imaginary order—"the order of equations and identifications" (*Semiotics* 162).

Using semiotics as a method for analysis reveals the problems associated with constructions of masculinity within *Ronin* and how Miller's approach to defining the ideal man is problematic. *Ronin* has certain troublesome ideas that seem to privilege constructed identities at the cost of losing one's primary identity. These problems of identity, related to ideology, are extrapolations from the philosophies of Robert E. Heinlein and Ayn Rand, who I discuss later in the chapter.

By focusing on the semiotic subject, I am relying on Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyze *Ronin*. The use of Lacan is a practical choice, encouraged by the material of the novel and

Miller's unique portrayal of the unconscious and other elements of the psyche. Silverman makes the connection of psychoanalysis and semiotics by arguing that "the terms "subject" and "signification" are at all points interdependent, and that psychoanalysis must consequently be understood as a branch of semiotics" (*Semiotics* 194). Throughout this chapter I repeatedly invoke psychoanalysis alongside semiotics to grasp the fundamental roles of signifiers in relation to the subject.

*Ronin* is a graphic novel that invites a strong reading of the Lacanian subject through the processes involved in the imaginary and the symbolic. The symbolic can be viewed as discourse and language, while the imaginary is the identification of one subject with an image. Though psychoanalysis applies the imaginary as part of the discussion of the viewing subject, I will mostly limit myself to the imaginary between subjects in Miller's *Ronin*. The imaginary will prove a useful approach to the graphic novel, as Billy himself becomes a slave to the imaginary, and he in turn provides a psychic imaginary for others nearby. I am necessarily being somewhat cavalier with the use of the term *imaginary* when dealing with those sections concerning Billy's dreams, but I feel the science fiction and magical aspects of the novel condone a more liberal use of the theory.

*Ronin* is a story that moves Silverman's first definition of the castrated phallus (dismemberment) towards the second more culturally powerful understanding of the phallus as a symbol of power. Lacan refers to the phallus as a symbol autonomous from the penis, but *Ronin* approaches the masculine body as an imaginary structure that will displace the initial castration of Billy Challas. This creates some difficulties, since the imaginary is a place of (mis)recognition, or as Christian Metz describes, "In the Lacanian sense...in which the imaginary, opposed to the symbolic but constantly imbricated with it, designates the basic lure of

the ego, the definitive imprint of a stage *before* the Oedipus complex..., the durable mark of the mirror which alienates man in his own reflection” (*Imaginary* 4). The imaginary conflicts with the symbolic around subject formation, and *Ronin* is a book steeped in a science fictional approach to the physical construction of bodies, boasting at least three main discourses on body construction in the narrative: Billy Challas physically becoming the masculine ronin, Agat the demon shape-shifter appropriating the form of chosen bodies, and Virgo the AI whose biocircuitry expanding and growing like a living body. The three bodies formed within the narrative swerve between imaginary and symbolic in ways that offer unique science fictional (magical?) understandings of the body and its relation to the subject.

Normally the imaginary is based on the “mirror stage,” where a subject undergoes ego formation, and as the mirror stage implies, the image is specular—or an other from the subject. But as the ronin is not specular, in so far as Billy can see the ronin with his eyes as a vivid mental image, this would tend to remove the imaginary as a function of ego formation and suggest the symbolic based on a conventionalized structure of a masculine archetype. My argument for the imaginary here is that there is a strong enough case that Virgo is placing these images within Billy’s mind through subliminal channels, and Virgo is therefore offering an image for Billy’s transformation/transfiguration into the ronin via the imaginary process. Miller depicts the dream sequences with Billy’s eyes transposed onto the final panels of each dream sequence (Figure 3), suggesting Billy is spectating his own dream/vision. He is a spectator to his dream and not a participant, which is how I imagine he views the ronin’s progress through New York City—as a passive spectator. His ego formation is a radical identification with the ronin, completely subsuming his own identity of Billy Challas. It is this mixture of magic and technology that suggests a creative and unique use of the imaginary.



The imaginary for subject development in *Ronin* can create problems in the symbolic and the real, since many of the visual representations within the text are false, or at least uncertain, as they occur in the mind of Billy who is deluded throughout the text. He is as an infant, not knowing what is of himself and what is external, and this infantile understanding allows Miller to access the *mirror stage* in an adult. It is also this infantile persona that permits the denial and dismissal of the subject of Billy as being unfit to challenge the ideological and repressive apparatuses within the novel's world.

Teresa de Lauretis explains how the imaginary operates on the subject: “[it] is a modality of subject processes, a dimension of subjectivity, very much dependent on vision, seeing, on the scopic drive, and has its inception at a very early age, before the oedipal state and even prior to the acquisition of language” (*Technologies* 97). Because Billy is older, and has obviously passed

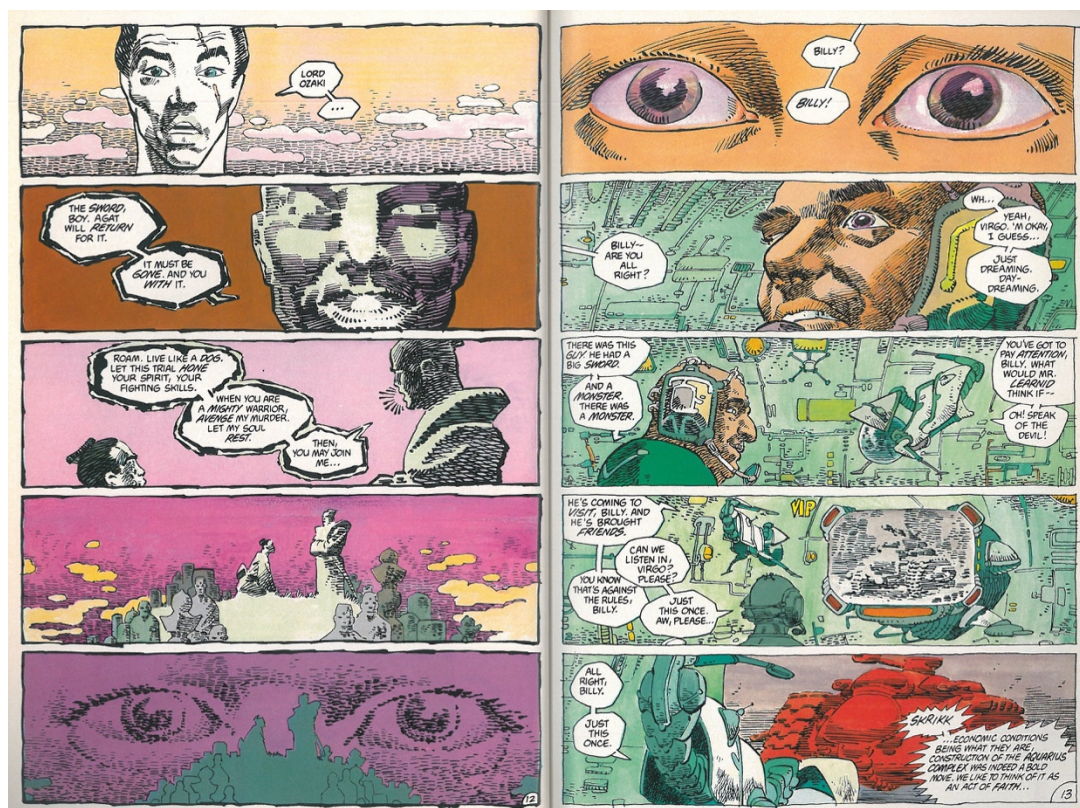


FIGURE 3: BILLY DREAMING

the mirror stage, his constant manipulation by Virgo and isolation from humans has regressed him to the point of being an egg in a womb. The symbolism and the low cognitive ability of Billy allow the imaginary to work on him as though he were a pre-oedipal child, rather than as part of the symbolic, which would help him differentiate self from other. These complications and the fantastical use of science fiction allow Miller to sidestep some of Lacanian psychoanalysis to tell a story that ultimately empowers the weak to overcome oppressive forces.

The oppressive relationship between Virgo and Billy which imitates the mother/son relationship, with Virgo directly taking on the role of mother; the relationship also resembles the analyst and analysand, with the novel constituting the progression of the patient towards recovery through conscious rebirth. The empowerment that Billy receives is a complete break from reality rather than a confrontation of his unconscious desires through interpretation; he accepts his misrecognitions and becomes them. In this way, Billy's psychic healing is based on the imaginary, since his ultimate cure is dependent on unconscious structures and a psychical regression to the period before the mirror state. Julia Kristeva, concerning her theory of *par-don*, describes the process of healing: "To give meaning to suffering and begin the associative speech that will transform malady and death into a narrative of life, *a new life* [emphasis mine]: this is how the value of analytical interpretation as pardon can be defined. If you prefer, you can call this experience a healing. An endless one" (*Intimate Revolt* 24). Billy literally finds "a new life" through assuming his new identity of the ronin.

Billy has become the ronin who is on quest to destroy the demon, Agat. The novel suggests that the ronin and Agat are elements of the unconscious of Billy Challas, and as such, part of the Lacanian unconscious signifying structure. The novel allows an interpretation using the imaginary and the unconscious, since all of this is coming from the child-like mind of Billy

whose identity fails under the weight of realism and fantasy. The ronin is a construct of masculinity within his unconscious and plays into his sexual fantasies concerning the head of security, Casey McKenna. These images are placed within Billy's mind by Virgo as a form of therapy with a malicious and self-serving intent. The struggle between the ronin and Agat is part of the fantasy, so that the hero can claim his female prize through the victory of defeating the demon and Virgo at the novel's conclusion. The fantasy, as interpreted within the novel by the character of Peter McKenna, concerns the use of Billy's mind by Virgo to grow and animate itself with the goal of making "biocircuitry the new dominant life form" (6.35). A likely reading of this inanimate substance is the id striving for consciousness and dominion over all that is other. Peter McKenna's understanding is that Virgo is feeding Billy images to unleash a violent fantasy centered on masculinity and power, all to restrain Billy from reality. The uncontrolled encouragement of Billy's fantasies is of course the opposite of what a trained analyst should be doing when developing intersubjectivity.

The novel itself is interspersed with asynchronic scenes that tend to suggest the ronin and Agat are other than images created by Virgo. There are analeptic scenes in the text that show ancient Japan and the ronin that appear in the narrative sequence after Billy has become the ronin. The novel begins with a lengthy narrative in Ancient Japan of the ronin losing his lecherous master to Agat. Taking the narrative sequence as is, these initial and interspersed scenes tend to favor a reading where the ronin and Agat are actual and not fabrications. But then, there are a great number of hints as to the fictional nature of the ronin and Agat since Billy dreams about the two, and these scenes from the past could be Billy's dreams to further concretize his role as the ronin. If this is the case, then these analeptic scenes are merely subjective scenes that objectify the unconscious of Billy. The signifiers within the dream

sequences would then be part of his unconscious construction and understanding of his own life and his repressed desires. Logically what happened is that Virgo provided the symbolism and let Billy's mind digest the images and rearrange them based on his own unconscious desires.

## THE SOURCE OF IDENTITY: IDENTITY FORMATION IN SEMIOTIC THEORY

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*Ronin* is a science fiction novel playing with philosophical themes from Robert E. Heinlein and Ayn Rand. Miller constructs his novel around his own burgeoning ideas, which do not fit perfectly with the aforementioned writers but are still familiar enough to belong to the same school of thought. The exploration of power and the objectivist male hero are carefully worked through in the novel, with side narratives that explore the formation of the material and cultural body and the ego. While Miller is concerned with his philosophies and ideological resistance to authority, there is also evidence of his attention towards writing the psychological stages of identity formation. To properly catalogue his occasional forays into the individual psyche, I relied heavily on semiotic and psychoanalytic writers. Though I never cite Freud and only briefly quote Lacan, these two thinkers haunt much of the text in this chapter. Their conception of the phallus is mediated through Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983). Due to the complexity and sometimes varying theories in psychoanalysis, I will provide a quick overview of the theorists that I will be using in this chapter.

Where Silverman's writing is useful for subject awareness and identity, Judith Butler's *Gender Identity* (1990) provides a thorough analysis on ideology and cultural practices with relation to gender construction. Butler's text interprets culture as being the foundation of identity, in that a person repeats the world around him/her, thereby concretizing the culture as

being part of her/his own identity. This performance is visible throughout *Ronin* as several characters acculturate to different identities. The main character, Billy Challas, has the monumental task of performing the role of a Japanese ronin.

Among the texts I have found most useful is Kristeva's *Intimate Revolt* (1997). *Intimate Revolt* is directed at psychic illnesses of the individual and how psychoanalysis can help a person find a higher quality of mental health and living. Her text is easily appropriated as a political text that seeks to improve the psychic life of a person living in our technological and sometimes culturally saturated world. The approach of diagnosis and steps towards psychic well-being are crucial for a better understanding of the character of Billy Challas. Her early work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) discusses the cutting away of the otherness while entering into language. Kristeva discusses abjection as part of the growth through division of the subject. Here Kristeva is distancing herself from the *chora* and addressing later stages of subject development and identity recognition. This book was helpful in grounding my own understanding of the divisive process of growth by cutting away objects. This is a pivotal process for understanding how Miller conceives of the individual subject, and it is because of Kristeva that I could see the more insidious role that Virgo plays as a psychoanalyst.

The personal *revolt* that Kristeva revisits repeatedly in her later writings I have connected to the more political and Marxist form of revolution in Louis Althusser's *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (1971). While Kristeva's revolution occurs first in the mind and then translates into positive external action in accordance with the health of the mind, Althusser addresses first the oppressive external forces on the individual. Both writers are seeking change, and both understand that certain oppressive apparatuses have adverse effects on the health, both bodily and mental, of the oppressed. Althusser is useful as someone philosophically aligned with

Kristeva, but who addresses the external in ways that she does not, at least not in the theoretical works already mentioned. Althusser's text is a counterargument to the Randian influences in *Ronin* and reveals some of the inherent problems Miller is facing with his theme of repression and revolt.

Althusser's explication of the ideological and repressive state apparatuses reveals a strong Marxist argument for ideology being a force that controls, but also helps to define the subject. While not directly arguing against Althusser, Ayn Rand's conception of man suggests that a rational man is stronger and more capable of resisting ideology. Her thoughts begin to contradict Althusser, in that she has no fear of the ideological apparatus, insisting that man is sentient and responsible and can make up his own mind as to what sort of person he is to become. I did not invite Rand into the discussion for comparison's sake, but because Miller is an avid reader of hers, especially around the time of writing *Ronin*. My own sources—Kristeva, Butler, Silverman, Christian Metz, and Althusser—show my own political leanings and understanding that ideology does play a role in identity formation.

## TRANSFORMATIONS AND BODILY INSCRIPTIONS

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At this point it might be useful to give a brief summary of *Ronin* (1983), which is Miller's first true graphic novel. The graphic novel details the psychic instability of a simpleton with extraordinary powers of telekinesis, and who was also born without arms and legs. His limited intelligence, as well as his masculinity, is described by observers as a psychosomatic disease, causing impotence, and retardation (*Ronin* 5.27). Billy is essentially an egg being

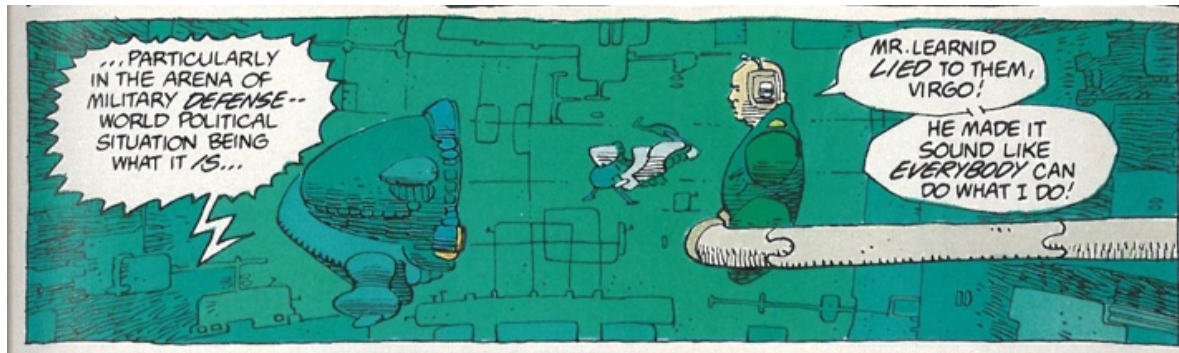


FIGURE 4: BILLY'S BODY

manipulated by an AI named Virgo. The manipulative control by Virgo eventually leads to a mental break in Billy, who dreams of an ancient samurai who was also servant to a master. Billy's dreams (perhaps a historical reality but more likely a fictional account) magically call forth into the modern world a Japanese demon named Agat and the ancient samurai, now a ronin. Even more, the ronin psychically and physically possesses the mind and body of Billy. His body is then created anew from the biocircuitry in the complex Billy was housed in. The rest of the novel concerns the full mental growth of the ronin in the futuristic world of New York and the perfection of his new body, which continues to improve throughout the novel as the biocircuitry is more perfectly fused to Billy's body. Eventually the ronin/Billy kills Agat and then wins the woman, who is probably under the supernatural psychic sway of Billy. The initial transformation from the limbless, impotent Billy to the final form of a hypermasculine ronin is drastic. The egg has finally become the man!

Since his childhood, Billy has been sheltered by Virgo, and even manipulated by her to the degree that it is possible that she has been subtly controlling his cultural values through suggestion. This control then feeds back into Virgo through her neural connection to Billy. Whatever images she feeds into Billy are then processed through his organic brain and then returned to Virgo as something new. This closed system of information is perhaps the fuel behind Virgo's own growth as an AI. This cycle of information is the embryonic growth of Billy

as he is shaped and formed by a computer, but this is not a shaping of organs, it is rather the formation of the identity from imaginary signs. Billy is fed images, either collected passively from Japanese visitors to the complex, or more likely fed to him by Virgo, of which she then lies about having any knowledge, and then he constructs his own bodily image from these signs. As discussed earlier, the imaginary is the order of misrecognition of the self, especially in the mirror stage when the subject is not aware of the external as a separate object. The imaginary is an external sign that becomes the object of the subject, and it is initially imagined to be part of the subject. Billy's telekinetic powers allow him to become the subject of the imaginary in reality; this is the ultimate therapy. What he imagines in his unconscious—as supplied by Virgo and the Japanese businessmen—he can make as reality.

Part of the difficulty of ascribing the ronin and Agat to Billy's dreams is that nowhere in the text does it say how Billy gained knowledge of ancient Japan and this historical figure—several of the Japanese businessmen in the novel recognize the ronin as a historical figure. Even Virgo casts doubt on Billy's dreams as mere constructs, “Billy—how do you know about all this? Your education includes nothing on historical Japan. Yet the images I'm receiving from your brain—the detail—“ (1.26). It is conceivable within the narrative context of fantasy that Billy's telekinetic powers can receive these images from the visiting Japanese businessmen and that he can construct these images based on the shared culture of the visitors. This may also explain Billy's complete transformation into a member of a foreign culture where even his language is lost.

Billy Challas undergoes several transformations within *Ronin*, the most obvious being his physically becoming the masculine ronin; the other is the powerful awareness of inner desires that are realized and then taken away. The reader is first introduced to Billy as his eyes open





FIGURE 5: *BILLY IN THE WOMB*

from the dream of the ronin fighting Agat. Several pages later, after some contextual exposition, the full body of Billy is on display, showing a limbless bald man (Figure 4). This undeveloped man will find his symbolic position when Virgo destroys part of herself to save Billy. Miller shows Billy's body attracting wires and circuits while saying, "It's magic Virgo" (1.40). But what is interesting is that the apparatus holding his body looks like an umbilical cord, and that this scene serves as his birthing moment when Virgo ejects him out of the complex (Figure 5). To drive home this imagery,

Agat helps the reader with this symbolism, "Your magic is great ronin. The womb glows with it" (1.40). Miller is clearly creating a birth scene for the new identity of Billy Challas, an identity based on social constructs of masculine heroism. The birth scene is the first and most traumatic transformation, since the process effectively disintegrates Billy and replaces him with the psyche of the ronin. The transformative process originates in the powerful telekinetic mind of Billy, and this transformation, then, is Billy's own unconscious desire to ex-change his impotent body for the masculine body of a ronin.

Not only is the body exchanged, but the ego of Billy is relegated in favor of another more masculine ego. Billy's ego is repressed, an abject object that must be separated from the ronin ego. Kristeva's description of abjection describes the transition of one ego to another:

If...a space becomes demarcated, separating the abject from what will be a subject and its object it is because a repression that one might call “primal” has been effected prior to the springing forth of the ego, of its objects and representations. The latter [subject], in turn, as they depend on another repression, the “secondary” one, arrive only *a posteriori* on an enigmatic foundation that has already been marked off; in return, in a phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise, or more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of *abjection*, notifies us of the limits of the human universe. (*Horror* 10-1)

The process of abjection in Billy’s case first represses his own identity before the ronin’s ego *springs forth*. The abjected ego is repressed, but will be recalled later in the novel, only to be repressed again in favor of the desired ego. Once the stigma of abjection is attached to Billy’s ego, the desire for repression is maintained, even after it resurfaces briefly. Abjection here serves to validate the masculine ideal while chastising traits deemed socially inferior, at least from a patriarchal hegemonic point of view.

This imaginary transformation underscores the idea that identity is initially based on images that are then internalized and appropriated by the subject. The embryonic Billy becomes the archetypal Japanese ronin, based on a highly intertextual narrative with direct influences from Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima’s *Lone Wolf and Cub* and, I suspect, an amalgamation of the samurai from films by Kurosawa. All three Japanese creators are invoked by name within the novel, with Kurosawa’s name being shortened to the Sawa Corporation. These influences are condensed into a line by one of the businessmen from the Sawa Corporation in describing his recognition of the ronin: “In fact, if I didn’t know better, I’d think I was back in Tokyo, in my youth---watching my favorite television adventure program” (5.46). Miller’s novel relies heavily on Japanese influences and archetypes, the visual sequencing of Kojima and Japanese manga, as

well as the visual style of French artist Jean Giraud (Moebius). *Ronin* is a very international graphic novel whose influences act on Miller's own storytelling in a similar way to how Billy is transformed. Billy's transformation becomes the introduction of external influences on American comic creators like Miller.

The intertextual nature of *Ronin* is the literary unconscious within the work. The intertextual moments, which are sometimes conscious allusions, like using the names of Kojima and Koike, but at other times the intertextuality is part of the intrinsic ideologeme that covers any text. Kristeva defines the ideologeme's function: "that intertextual function read as "materialized" at the different structural levels of each text, and which stretches along the entire length of its trajectory, giving it its historical and social coordinates" (Kristeva, "Bounded" 36). Kristeva approaches the intertextual nature of the literary text as nearly coextensive with the role of analyst and analysand. The intertextual nature of the text, both mentioned within the narrative ("watching" TV) and in the metatextual references by Miller, shows the subjective formation of identity. Billy's becoming the ronin is a direct result of the specular from cinema, TV, and whatever other sources he gathered from his childhood and from Virgo. This foundation for identity seems to corroborate the views of Fredric Wertham, that media does have a strong position in developing identity. The core understanding is that "the imaginary is not a reflection but a subjective synthesis" (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 75), an active process that leads to identification of the specular. Kristeva argues further that the imaginary has a trace of fantasy which she understands as "the intimate creation of representations" (*Intimate Revolt* 63). The understanding of the imaginary reveals the power of the image in subjective identity, and these processes are working throughout *Ronin* to the point the novel can almost be read as an allegory

of fixing psychological symptoms through the reconstruction of unconscious desires and their interpretation.

The final message appears to be one of becoming the ideal man and living through desires in a space of psychical uncertainty. The philosophy of *Ronin* is fairly similar to that presented by Robert A. Heinlein in *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), whose presence is felt throughout Miller's novel, with several uses of Heinlein's famous coinage, "grok," as well as the notion of becoming something physically and psychically greater through sheer willpower. However, with Heinlein, the change in ego is more like a becoming without the abjection, while Miller's is a transformation and traumatic birth of the ego resulting in abjection.

#### MASCULINE NARRATIVE ARCS: SUBJECT BILLY CHALLAS

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The typical narrative arc of Miller's male characters shows a concern for growth and the masculine potential to wield the phallus. Recently, Miller has shifted away from the bildungsroman in favor for what he calls propaganda, but this is merely a transference of the individual story arc for the social arc against foreign ideological threats. This transference shows the underlying principle of using the bildungsroman, and that is the perpetuation of the imaginary ideal, as situated in a culturally constructed apparatus. This ideal, of course, is heavily linked to ideology, and it is dependent upon each individual's perception. The ideology that appears in the works of Miller is that of the wielding of power by the dominant individual or culture over less powerful individuals or cultures. Power (not always, but most of the time in his works) has strong gender dividing lines. *Ronin* is the story of Billy Challas living his own



FIGURE 6: BILLY DISAPPOINTING HIS MOTHER

delusions of being the hero, while in reality he is a destructive masculine force. *Ronin* shows the largest masculine growth in any of Miller's works, and this helps to make it ideal to study growth from a starting point of castration.

I have mentioned earlier that *Ronin* could be read as a session with a psychoanalyst, and it might be useful to approach the psychological journey of Billy Challas through this lens.

My guide for this will be Julia Kristeva and her book, *Intimate Revolt* (1997), since in many ways Billy is struggling with many of the same ideas Kristeva addresses in modern man's powerless attempts at revolt. Billy's

revolt is to break free of hegemonic barriers put in place by a society that deems him a freak, and from Virgo, who bars him access to the world and ultimately a material reality. Kristeva's works consistently place a special emphasis on the subject while still regarding larger social-historical conditions.

In one of her early essays, "The Ethics of Linguistics", Kristeva writes in favor of poetic language as a special area for linguistics to study as "a consideration of language as articulation of a heterogeneous process, with the speaking subject leaving its imprint on the dialectic between the articulation and its process" (Kristeva, "Ethics" 24-5). Part of Kristeva's use of *poetic*

*language* is the uncovering of the unconscious utterance, and this search for an individual unconscious speaks of her consistent message of the *intimate* in her works. Kristeva's ideas of poetic language and the intimate work extraordinarily well with a psychoanalytic reading of *Ronin*, since the novel is about uncovering past traumas through a process of fantasy, though these traumas are never reconciled with the subject.

Billy's initial trauma concerns an incident he had as a child, age unknown. Another child was visiting him and was bullying him by calling him "third base," "cushion" (5.31), and other insults concerning Billy's body, which was missing arms and legs. He was also bald, even as a child, suggesting alopecia. After the teasing, the bully proceeded to tickle Billy, who was unable to prevent being tickled, and in an outburst of frustration-anger-helplessness, his powerful mind expelled the bully across the room and killed him (Figure 6). The noise was audible outside, and his mother, returning from the grocery store, walks in and sees the dead boy and says to Billy, "You monster... / You monster! You monster!" (5.33-4). Billy, not seeming remorseful for the death, but from his mother's reaction, asks for forgiveness: "I'm sorry momma... / Sorry. I'm Sorry. Don't yell at me, momma...please" (5.35).

The flashback scene is mixed with scenes of the ronin in the present time of the novel, obviously juxtaposing Billy as a child and Billy as an adult ronin. (Miller will re-use the motif of the frozen face while remembering a traumatic childhood experience in *TDKR*.) The traumatic event is instigated by Virgo, who assumes the role of the bully and begins to quote the bully from Billy's childhood. Virgo is deliberately accessing Billy's trauma as a part of her psychical therapy: "Analytical work consists of making the fantasy conscious—formulating the phantasmatic narrative and interpreting it—in order to dissolve the symptom" (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 64). By recalling the real event of his childhood, Virgo reveals that the ronin is a fantasy.

This fantasy has sublated the earlier trauma of disappointing his mother. With exception to Kristeva's interpretation step, Virgo is creating a psychodrama with Billy to bring forward Billy's powerful unconscious drives that are linked to his psychic force, which Virgo wants to use to animate her own biocircuitry. Virgo is playing a dangerous game with a mind she is ultimately unable to harness or control, and part of the problem for her is that she is using the model of psychoanalytical therapy to push Billy towards a subjective identity suitable for her own purposes. His subjective identity was also based on his own unconscious drives that involved masculinity, revolt, and lust for the other.

The trauma and Billy's reaction to reliving it suggest that as an ego-defense he used dissociation to forget this moment in his childhood. Rather than cautiously approach the trauma, in a very blunt move, Virgo forces Billy to confront the defining moment of his childhood. His killing of the child and his mother's abject reaction is most likely the moment his mother left him to the corporation. But the blunt approach is exactly the incorrect approach to dealing with traumas and amnesia. Kristeva, as an analyst, suggests:

It is the amnesiac thought and its false time oblivious to lost passionate time that the analyst should, in my opinion, start from—and not from the trauma itself, which remains dissociated and unapproachable—to have a chance at accessing the personal drama, and, only later in the cure, move toward its working out.... If the analyst does not play the game of the dissociated/amnesiac though, if he does not take it seriously, without holding to it exclusively but also without underestimating it, if he doesn't start down its meanders patiently, neither true nor false but likely—it is to be feared that the hysteric, through an intellectual and/or cognitive tendency toward histrionics, will seduce the master/analyst over whom

she aspires to reign, and analysis will become interminable and therefore unsuccessful. (*Hatred* 134)

Kristeva's suggestion, and the events that unfold in the novel, reveal some of the missteps and errors Virgo makes while trying to gain control of Billy's mind. I do not think Miller has read much Lacanian or Kristevan psychoanalysis, but it is striking that Billy as a subject suffering from hysteria and amnesia stemming from dissociation is theoretically a valid construct according to psychoanalysis. Billy fails because his analyst is approaching the trauma with a hammer, permanently enabling his "*defensive amnesia*" (Kristeva, *Hatred* 133). The nascent ego of the ronin then creates a new amnesia containing the entirety of Billy, effectively removing the childhood trauma of losing his mother and the identity of masculine failure.

Virgo as an analyst could do more than a normal analyst by directly accessing the analysands dreams and thoughts without the need for language as the mediator. Much of the power of the Lacanian model is through talking: "We only grasp the unconscious finally when it is explicated, in that part of it which is articulated by passing into words. It is for this reason that we have the right...to recognize that the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of language" (Lacan 38). Language in *Ronin* is sidestepped; rather all senses are engaged when Virgo peers into Billy's mind and understands the unconscious as a visual structure and not as a language structure. She perceives everything as he does, and can identify with him, much as an analyst should understand the analysand: "the analyst's identification with the analysand—identification with the analysand's biography, memory and even transgenerational memory and imagined sensation—mobilizes the analyst's entire psychical apparatus" (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 60-1). Virgo's ability goes far beyond the use of language, as she pierces straight to the unconscious of Billy by peering in his dreams while manipulating



the “psychical apparatus”. Rather than address the symptoms and help Billy stabilize and become comfortable with his identity, Virgo exploits her relational position to push his unconscious to the surface and unleash Billy’s telekinetic powers. Identification with the subject is meant to bring about some therapeutic resolve to an unconscious desire. Because language is removed from the process, Billy is unable to participate in the talking cure, so his unconscious is never verbalized by himself nor interpreted for him by Virgo. Rather than recognize his unconscious, Virgo has convinced Billy that his unconscious is actually a demon and a ronin from the past, meaning she is able to force the id into a physical reality without the analysand being aware, since Billy is lost in his own mind while his unconscious drives the body.

Despite sensual limitations, the reader is given a privileged view of Billy’s unconscious, as well as the external manifestations his drives have on the world around him, though the reader isn’t completely aware of what is real or imaginary until late-novel revelations in which the extent of Billy’s power is explained, and the machinations of Virgo are theorized. Miller’s use of analepsis and paralipsis<sup>1</sup> narrative methods allow him to delay the revelations and create uncertainty as to the reality portrayed. Analeptic scenes of the ancient ronin that exist prior to the main narrative are given as real and not as constructs, and thus they work on the reader as a given historical episode in the same way they were fed to Billy’s mind by Virgo. The reality of the scenes is not questioned until later. Along with the analeptic scenes, Miller frequently resorts to paralipsis to further delay explaining Billy’s psychical powers, either through shifting attention to Virgo and magical causes or by cutting dialogues short so nothing truly significant is

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<sup>1</sup> These terms are taken from Gerard Genette. Analepsis is in essence a flashback that takes place before the beginning of the main narrative. Paralipsis is the rhetorical device of not saying everything you should and leaving out details only to be given later.

spoken. Paralipsis allows Miller to place his readers in a state of confusion similar to that of his main characters by hiding and delaying important information. The narrative delays revelations, leaving to the readers the task of deciphering what is real, magical, and imagined, or in Lacanian terms: real, symbolic, and imaginary. *Ronin* privileges the view point of the reader only to subvert that privilege by betraying the reader's trust in the images presented, creating a confused narrative that only comes meaningfully together after Billy fully realizes his desires by becoming a masculine ideal who wins the admiration and love of a woman he desires and is ultimately able to satisfy his psychical drives.

The transformation of Billy into the ronin is a decisive shift towards masculinity and fits with the maxim of being true to thy(gendered)self. Billy becomes what his unconscious wants him to be (or even more maliciously, what Virgo wants him to be), and in some ways, he is the model patient. Miller is careful to show the physical transformation as a birth, both by visualizing Billy as an egg and by Agat referring to his state as being part of the *womb*. Even the initial transformation is not perfect, since the biocircuitry takes time to fully assimilate to Billy's body, and the ronin persona must go through varying stages of language acquisition. This language stage includes the ronin repeatedly saying *tachi*, which is a traditional samurai sword. The sword as phallus, an object of power, is what the new born identity is searching for. The castrated subject here immediately seeks to reclaim his lost possession. In the final act of *Ronin*, the ronin has completely accepted his persona, and Billy's impotent persona only expresses itself through drives—seeking the *tachi* (object of both castration and the phallus) and Casey (biological)—and the Oedipal conflict with Virgo, the mother surrogate, and his slain master (father) in ancient Japan. In some ways this is a psychical victory for Billy, as the transformation

is a new rebirth aligned with his unconscious where he regains the social power of the phallus while satisfying his drives.

Billy's victory is a hollow one, as he is lacking the ability to put into question his analysis. Another problem is the psychological splitting that is ongoing in Billy's mind. Kristeva, when describing the analytical discourse, discusses psychological splitting:

A permanent inquiry takes place in analytical discourse, and...how questioning, putting into question...is the quintessential mode of speech in analysis, the logical equivalent of castration—if we understand this phantasm as the realization of a lack, an uncertainty, and the endless refraction that constitutes psychological splitting.  
(*Intimate Revolt* 236)

Castration is a real scenario with Billy, who is physically impotent and symbolically castrated. The ronin represents the phallus and all the social powers that are pledged to it. Billy's rebirth is nothing more than taking power and becoming desirable and unitary. When the phallus is regained, the psychological splitting dissolves along with the personality of Billy when it is replaced with the imaginary ronin. When concerned with the analysand, Kristeva describes the psychological rebirth: "It challenges identities and values but also temporarily restructures the subject in a new rebirth...[and] he obtains a psychological suppleness likely to go beyond the line of repression, to remobilize drives, and to allow new creativities into the subsequent experiences of his life as subject" (*Intimate Revolt* 237). The ronin is a definite challenge to Billy's identity, since it is an imaginary fantasy made real. Billy as a subject is transformed under the manipulative analysis of Virgo, and he is set free through rebirth, which is his path towards the acquisition of the phallus. But without the ability to question his own identity, he fails as an analysand, since he cannot participate in his own identity construction. Billy cannot achieve his personhood or equal the

goals of Kristeva as an analyst: “Today, psychical life knows that it will only be saved if it gives itself the time and space to revolt: to break off, remember, refashion” (*Intimate Revolt* 223).

## POSSIBLE PROBLEMS OF BILLY’S IMAGINARY: OR WHAT HE GROKS

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Identity in *Ronin* becomes more concerned with achieving the strong male who is his own master than with helping Billy reconcile his own psychical problems. This is somewhat problematic because it dismisses Billy as a subject and replaces him with an imaginary persona. *Ronin* doesn’t even try to reconcile Billy’s ego-ideal, rather it is completely dismissive of him as impotent and malformed. Body and mind become transformed into the masculine ideal, and this ideal is a social construction of masculinity. Billy is fed images and ideas through Virgo and other channels until he can imagine a historical ronin. Some of these images, as mentioned by a Sawa Corp. employee, come from history books and TV. Judith Butler calls into question the very nature of sex and gender in her writings and at one point makes the clear argument for the subject’s identity construction: “the “coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially constituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (*Gender* 22). The ronin is an example of a constituted norm of intelligibility that does not seem to question himself. He lacks the Kristevan revolt of identity, and therefore he lacks as a subject the ability to question and interrogate the world around him. Billy was flawed in many ways, but a thorough analysis could have released him in a more revolutionary way from Virgo and the company under his own identity, from which he could begin to shape himself

constantly through experience and questioning. This revolution as a subject would have been a far greater psychological success than what he becomes by the end of the novel.

It would be unfair to say Miller is pushing for a heavily unconscious-driven, psychological revolution by dumping the conscious identity, which is then taken over by a constructed fantasy, but it is troubling that Miller does not criticize the outcome and instead seems to portray the ronin as the unqualified hero. The ronin is stoic, strong, attractive in body, selfless (he sacrifices himself twice), honorable, truthful, ethical, and he wins. All these qualities make of the ronin a hero without a doubt. The transformation from the submissive and docile Billy to the ronin is seen as a positive step for Billy, if Billy can even be said to exist anymore. There can be some ironic solace in the knowledge that no matter what identity was in control, to a degree, any identity is a social construct based on normative values and hegemonic ideologies. The ronin, more so than any other identity within *Ronin*, is based on tropes assembled by Virgo and, through some undefined mode, fed to Billy's mind, which in turn gestated in his unconscious until made manifest by Virgo's subliminal promptings. Of course, none of this is understood by Billy, since he is never given a chance to articulate his dreams or desires with language, and as such, he is forbidden an understanding of his unconscious through the mediation of language.

Miller's use of the unconscious without the language structure is available to his medium in a way it isn't in a novel; he has access to the visual and this allows him to expand and pictorialize the philosophies of Heinlein and Rand in ways they could not. At this point, it is worth mentioning Heinlein's writings as an approach to show the ways Miller is expanding the philosophy put forward by Heinlein and how Miller is working within a similar Randian framework.

*Ronin* is indebted to *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) in more ways than in plot details and direct references. In Heinlein's novel, Valentine Michael Smith was raised by Martians and then transported to Earth while in his twenties. Valentine then proceeded to challenge all the current mores through his inexperience and lack of knowledge. One of the ways he did this was to teach the Martian language to his followers. When learning the Martian language, people transform into their imaginary ideal, which Heinlein constructs based on beauty as defined by contemporary normative values. Women look younger, more physically attractive, and have larger breasts—such is Heinlein's conception of beauty. The language is the avenue for improving yourself, because the language has its own built in philosophies and ideologies that promote stronger, more perfect individuals. In some ways, this seems to recall psychoanalysis and the talking cure. Language is how the analyst can understand the unconscious, since as Lacan shows, the unconscious is a language structure. Heinlein, whether cognizant of this or not, relies on the power of language to transform the individual. Within the Martian language is locked the keys to becoming that Randian ideal man that does not immediately subscribe to whatever social laws or taboos are present, but instead partakes of polyamory and other acts that society—circa 1961—deemed reprehensible. Žižek mentions a similar use of language as transformative when describing the Lacanian model of psychoanalysis as “an attempt to reach and transform the real of the symptom solely by means of words, i.e., without having recourse to an immediate operation on the body” (*Enjoy* 36-7). Heinlein demonstrated this as a literal transformation, where any outward imperfections (symptoms) are remedied through the ideal norms. Heinlein's psychical operation is a physical change introduced through language. Miller's is also a physical change, and he includes a drastic ego change with both verbal and visual modes. This modal difference allows Miller to tap into the imaginary in a less abstract

way than a verbal representation would. He is creating images that model the ideal and help to perpetuate what in fact is the ideal body.

Miller's visual mode also taps into a version of a reality that is not altogether real. Though *Ronin* is not visually noir, the novel contains many of the elements of noir, especially that of paranoia: "The paranoia of the *noir* universe is primarily visual, based upon the suspicion that our vision of reality is always already distorted" (Žižek, *Enjoy* 173). The frame in which we read *Ronin* is given by a symbolic eye. We are never certain of the reality of the flashbacks to ancient Japan, but the novel presents them as though they are real. Virgo is duplicitous, and the reader is never really given a clue as to her evil designs until the very end; such is the role of the *femme fatale*. While Heinlein's transformations were verbal and lacked the noir paranoia, Miller presents a distorted reality using visual symbolism and narrative distortions to show that transformations are never clear. The noir sensibilities allow the creation of confusion and further distort the identity of the ronin as a person or a construct; the novel avoids truly showing him as a real historical person.

In both transformations (metamorphoses?), the physical is perfected, as though the body is the key to becoming a better person. And in both, especially in Heinlein, this transformation is the beginning of amorous episodes through the objective use of the female's body for pleasure. Valentine, whose name evokes the most popular of lover's holidays, leads a cult to partake of the pleasures of the flesh in all forms of gluttony. The body's treatment is that of power over others, physical perfection, and these are signs of the male phallus within the text. The Randian objectivist philosophy has a material component that favors physical strength, and both Heinlein and Miller exploit the strong individual. The transformation is the acceptance and strength of character to follow the message of Ayn Rand to her conclusion and not waver because society

has different regulations (*Stranger*) or because you were born different in shape (Billy Challas). Effectively, both works recover the phallus for the male protagonists through removing the symptoms of an imperfect body by favoring normative values. Their subscription of the hegemonic ideologies that define gender perpetuate the strong masculine characters while objectifying female characters in ways that sexualize women.

## THE OBSCENE FATHER

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At this point it makes sense to return to the beginning and talk about the absent father and the obscene father. Billy's father is never mentioned or shown in his flashback. The ronin doesn't mention his father, though he does have a father figure he follows in the beginning: his samurai master. The book opens with the ronin saving his master's life from a gang of Agat's agents by cutting them down while the master criticizes him (Figure 2) in a way that comments metafictionally on the visual: "Stop posing boy!" (Miller 1.2). This early episode shows the physical power of the ronin and introduces the tachi (sword) and describes its magical properties: it drinks the blood of the guilty and is the only blade that can kill Agat. That night, the master visits a dance bar full of naked female dancers, and after drinking, he goes to bed with one of the dancers while the ronin waits outside. It is here that the dancer reveals herself as Agat in disguise and kills the master. The ronin sees his own failure to protect his master and then embarks on a lifelong quest to avenge his fallen master.

The fallen master brings up the interesting problem of Oedipus into the narration. If these analeptic scenes of ancient Japan are only in Billy's mind, he has effectively dreamed up



the death of a father figure, albeit an obscene father. When the master falls, the ronin/Billy takes up the master's sword and vows to kill Agat. Killing the demon Agat was also the goal of the master, since he wielded the only weapon capable of killing the demon. The ronin has taken over the role of the father, even to the point of taking the symbol of power, the sword. The reader is assured by the stoicism of the ronin that his taking of the role will be an improvement on the tainted master, who died in debauchery. But the ronin is only seeking to replace the master's symbolic power while ignoring for now any mother figures, all of which prove to be problematic in the novel. In the novel, both mother figures belong to Billy: his biological mother, who curses him as a monster, and Virgo, who uses him and ultimately leads to his psychical destruction. Mothers in Miller's works usually start off dead and are the cause for psychical anguish (Batman), are missing by running away (Daredevil), or are strangely absent from all diegetic content (*Sin City*). Father figures usually present a problem within Miller's oeuvre, such as the strict and sometime abusive father in *Daredevil: The Man without Fear*, or the megalomaniac Roark, who allows his son to rape and kill in several *Sin City* books, and then there is the troubling paternal relationship between Batman and Robin in *All-Star Batman and Robin*.

Families in Miller's writings are almost always dysfunctional, troubled, or just absent. *Ronin* represents the clearest relationships of father-mother-son out of all his works, and this relational dynamic casts a dark shadow on the power structure from Billy's perspective. What is apparent in many of Miller's works is that the ruling structure of the parents is often corrupted with material wealth, sins of the body, lack of ethics and morals, and other problems that otherwise threaten to destroy the innocent or include them in the corruption. Miller repeatedly

gives the phallus to the son through the use of bildungsroman and allows the son to boldly tear down the corrupt power structure and build a new structure on the rubble of the past.

Miller's narratives are rebellions against the hegemonic order in that they directly confront its power by removing it and replacing it with the morals of the objectivist hero. Miller never directly questions the power or tries to understand how it came to be corrupted, rather he fiercely attacks the idea of power and that others he deems somehow rotten should not control it. This anger is palpable in the persistently dark satire in *TDKR* and with the political figures in *Sin City*. The family drama in *Ronin* is the drama of power and who should wield it, and the answer is the moral masculine male, which Billy first takes from the father and wrests again from the manipulative mother.

## THE PHALLUS AND THE IDEOLOGICAL APPARATUS

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The struggle for power in Miller's works is often represented as physical contests between ideologues. In *Ronin*, the power struggle is between the ronin and a manipulative AI using biocircuitry to forge a brave new world of bio weapons and domination. This novel, on the surface, reveals a fear of technology and the loss of the strong, independent, and active man. It is also about large corporations vying for control of this computerized power with the goal of greed without concern for the repercussions on people and the environment. The corporations within the novel are an ongoing, systemic problem not substantively addressed within *Ronin*. Miller showcases some of the greed associated with war, but he does not dissect the ideological apparatus beneath this greed other than suggest that faceless corporations and Virgo are agents of

castration within society. The phallus is taken and controlled through oedipal relationships or denied through a capitalistic system ingrained in the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).

While the oedipal relationship in *Ronin* is based on what Louis Althusser cites as a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), the corporations serve a more amorphous position that potentially hovers between both the ideological and repressive functions with a greater emphasis on the ideological.

The reason Althusser's ideas are worth mentioning here has to do with the approach for change seen within *Ronin*: change based on attacking the RSA while leaving intact state power or the ISAs. This becomes a crucial point for changing the system in a meaningful way, since to leave the apparatuses of ideological state power intact after control of the RSA is to fail in a revolution. Althusser argues that "the proletariat must seize state power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois state apparatus" (74). Seizing control of the RSA is only a temporary victory and one ultimately doomed to failure if state power is left intact. Miller's ronin is one that removes the repressive forces, those forces that inhibit masculinity through symbolic castration while leaving the state power intact, which in time may give rise to further repressive apparatuses. Virgo is destroyed in the end, but with the Sawa corporation's greed for military weapons, and other corporations stepping into the void left by the destruction of the Aquarius Corporation (responsible for the creation of Virgo), it is only a matter of time before another Virgo is created. The cycle of repression is one that will rise again since nothing significant has changed to the state power in *Ronin*.

The attack on repressive structures while leaving ideological structures intact fits in with the Libertarian models of freedom and rationalism. Ayn Rand comments on man's independent consciousness: "man's consciousness possesses a specific nature with specific *cognitive* needs, that it is *not* infinitely malleable and cannot be twisted, like a piece of putty, to fit any private

evasions or any public “conditioning”” (“Value-Deprivation” 100). Rand argues that man is not conditioned by the ISA, and that the state power is not as powerful as theorists like Althusser assert. Rand takes a different approach, denying the power of the ISA; she argues that instead, “The exponents of modern movements do not seek to convert you to *their* values—they haven’t any—but to destroy *yours*” (“Value-Deprivation” 114). Miller’s ronin strives against the repressive forces he faces. His victories are not our victories, nor are they systemic victories. The ronin embodies the masculine ideal and the recovery of power that each rational man must learn for himself, but this is not a revolt against ideas, and it can offer little for questioning the ISAs, if indeed they need to be questioned. One can imagine how different *Ronin* would have been had Miller used this Kristevan model instead of the Randian:

Against whom can we revolt if power is vacant and values corrupt? Or, to put it even more gravely, who can revolt if man has become a simple conglomerate of organs, no longer a subject but a patrimonial person, a person belonging to the patrimony, financially, genetically, and physiologically, a person barely free enough to use a remote control to choose the channel. (*Intimate Revolt* 4)

Kristeva uses psychoanalysis to advocate for what she calls an “intimate revolt,” a deeper questioning of the world but not a physical revolt. Through the talking cure, the analysand can regain his power and overcome his symptoms, but this isn’t necessarily about regaining the phallus, rather it is an understanding of oneself. Or to put it in more Althusserian terms, the Kristevan approach would have challenged the ISAs while leaving the RSA intact.

The limitation of Rand’s philosophy is that it is too dismissive of the ISAs while maintaining that man’s consciousness is not malleable through ideology. This limitation of Rand’s libertarian ideology subsequently becomes a limitation within *Ronin* to adequately

address the identity of the individual beyond the two extremes of masculinity and impotence, which indeed are problems stemming from and in conflict with the RSAs. Too much emphasis is placed on the physical embodiment of the hegemonic, ideal masculinity without questioning what purpose the ideology serves. Kaja Silverman argues the importance of the ideology: “it is through ideological belief that a society’s “reality” is constituted and sustained, and that a subject lays claims to a normative identity” (*Male Subjectivity* 15). The ronin is a constituted reality doubly mediated—Virgo constructing the image in Billy’s mind and Billy manifesting his imaginary into a physical reality. Though the ronin is from the beginning an image, he never has claim for being a subject, since he is in fact the signification of Billy’s desires and drives. *Ronin* begins with a physically and mentally flawed character in Billy Challas and rejects him as being impotent and not masculine enough to challenge the governing bodies. Instead, Billy is replaced with an image that proceeds to fight repressive forces, while Billy’s identity is repressed by this new ego. The ideology at play within *Ronin* is one based on physical might, on perfect bodies, and masculine prowess while neglecting the construction of the thinking subject.



FIGURE 9: I'M THE GODDAMN BATMAN

## “I’M THE GODDAMN BATMAN”: VISUAL AND VERBAL MASCULINITIES IN MILLER’S BATMAN NOVELS

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### INTRODUCTION

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In this chapter I examine the visual mode of Miller’s Batman novels and show their relation to the hegemonic patriarchal ideologies that they contain while analyzing the codes of signification of differing visual styles. The codes in Miller’s Batman novels exemplify varying representations of masculinity; even representations of women are constructed within a masculine-defined matrix. This chapter will also look at some aspects of “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler, *Gender* 23) as a way to discuss Miller’s role as a creator. At times, Miller is aware of the norms of intelligibility and critiques it, but in many

instances, he is working within what is considered normative values of identity or personhood. These values are challenged when he collaborates with other artists who offer a contrasting viewpoint on the preferred construction of masculinity.

Images have a strong cultural intertextuality that can reinforce and perpetuate certain ideologies within society. Some aspects of hegemonic patriarchy can be disseminated in a manner almost unchecked using visual and verbal conventions within any type of media. These conventions arose and embedded themselves into media under a production guided by the same patriarchy that benefits from the ideologies inherent within the conventions. It is difficult to separate conventions from the text, since to do so would disrupt reading practices and require learning new reading strategies. To change visual and even narrative conventions is to ask the interpreter of the text to change his or her perception.

Perception plays a key role in the arguments in this chapter. I am following the idea that visual perception is partly mediated through culture, and that being mediated carries within it ideologies from that culture. My understanding invites Julia Kristeva's arguments for intertextuality: "The concept of text as ideologeme<sup>2</sup> determines the very procedure of a semiotics that, by studying the text as intertextuality, considers it as such within (the text of) society and history" ("The Bounded Text" 37). Kristeva places a text within the culture from which it originates through the ideologeme, which is materialized "at the different structural levels of each text... giving it its historical and social coordinates" ("The Bounded Text" 36). This analysis will provide insight into how Miller's texts are, in part, products of his culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Ideologeme is the most basic part of ideology. It is the unit that ideologies are constructed and perpetuated.

Before we can hunt out the ideologies within superhero graphic novels, I will briefly address perception and culture. W. J. T. Mitchell, one of the leading academics on visual-image relations as well as iconic ideology, argues,

If vision itself is a product of experience and acculturation—including the experience of making pictures—then what we are matching against pictorial representations is not any sort of naked reality but a world already clothed in our systems of representation. (38)

Mitchell's main argument is that visual similarity is not achieved through likeness alone, but also relies on conventions. Or, as Umberto Eco puts it, "A certain image is similar to something else does not eliminate the fact that similarity is also a matter of cultural convention" (204). Eco's argument through analogy relies on the idea that pictorial representations contain visual similarities, and that somehow these similarities can partly exist without culture. Mitchell places more importance on the cultural aspect of perception, while both agree that culture plays a role in how images are perceived. How much our recognition of an image relies on culture and how much on natural analogical connections is uncertain, but it is enough to be aware of this problem when discussing graphic novels and visual representations within the novel.

Comics rely on their own conventions to represent reality and construct narratives, all of which are infused with the culture of the comic industry, which in turn is often an outlet for the governing social world it belongs to. These cultural conventions are not benign shortcuts in a system of intertextuality but embody some of the ideologies that participate in the creation and normativizing of gendered identity. In comics, the representation of males and females is a product of cultural ideology, especially the visual treatment of women in mainstream comics published by DC and Marvel. The perpetuation of the image of weak and sexualized females in



these comics presents a world that subjugates half of the population through persistent and pernicious iconic codes.

One approach to analyzing the conventions of comics is through the theoretical lens of semiotics and the semiosis that occurs in an interpretant. Christian Metz takes the role of semiosis seriously as a social force, and that a text is a document of ideology. Metz writes of the power of the symbolic: “in its deepest foundations..., signification is no longer just a consequence of social development, it becomes, along with the infrastructures, a party to the constitution of sociality itself, which in turn defines the human race” (Imaginary 19).

Conventions are the starting place for semiotic feminism and gender studies in general, whereby the hope is for a new code production to create a new visual pleasure while tearing down the old conventions. Since this chapter is concerned with Miller’s role as producer of codes, it will not seek remedies or alternatives to the patriarchal ideology expressed in his visual and verbal modes. Instead it will explore how Miller perpetuates the patriarchal ideology by discussing the different visual styles he uses to explore the range of hegemonic masculinity in his Batman stories.

Semiotics has only occasionally explored the possibilities within the medium of comics, so I am having to reference film theorists to develop a set of analytical tools for studying semiosis in Frank Miller’s images. Teresa de Lauretis hints at the power of semiosis in another visual medium:

[Cinema] should be better understood as a signifying practice, a work of semiosis: a work that produces effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject positions for all those involved, makers and viewers; and thus a semiotic process

in which the subject is continually engaged, represented, and inscribed in ideology. (*Alice Doesn't* 37)

She is concerned with the spectators' subjective identification with the camera and the objects presented by the camera. This identification is powerful, as it engages a passive recipient of the images while also creating an active identifier with the film's ideology. The power of film media to socialize its audience is not in itself a negative attribute. What concerns de Lauretis and others is the patriarchal ideology attached to the filmic apparatus. Patriarchal ideology is constructed, defined, and strengthened through the historical succession of style and form, which in turn builds the visual grammar of films through intertextuality. The intertextual succession leads to the dominant ideology becoming the language of the visual medium, whether it is cinema or sequential art. Neil Cohn provides an example of the visual grammar in comics, while talking about schematized icons, "The idea that drawing is simply a reflection of perception (either by the eye or the mind) cannot account for conventionalized patterns that permeate the drawings of both individuals and groups" (Cohn 25). Cohn proceeds to offer a table (Table 1) displaying Jack Kirby's style of drawing hands, which was conventionalized by a great number of artists. He offers two modern mainstream artists to visually show Kirby's influence.

TABLE 1: COHN'S HAND SCHEMAS

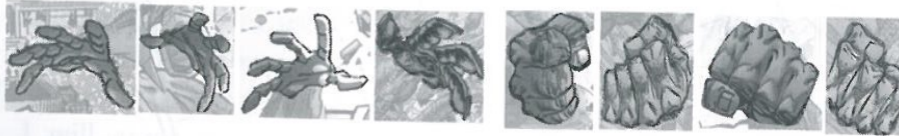
a. Jack Kirby



b. Jim Lee



c. Erik Larsen



**FIGURE 2.2** Schematic hands drawn by three comic authors. All artwork © their respective owners.

These schematized drawings of hands are conventionalized representations based on the “Kirbyan” (Cohn 139) style. Conventionalized representation is one way that ideologies can permeate the icon, especially as bodies become defined and regulated through schemas.

Similarly, Roland Barthes, talking about photography, hits upon the aspects most susceptible to the ideology of the image: “Man’s interventions in the photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation” (“Rhetoric” 44). These elements all belong to that of style, and style is often used to help create a patriarchal medium.

Some difference between cinema and static images should be acknowledged. Christian Metz argues that “films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual *participation* in the spectator” (*Film Language* 4). The higher level of reality within film, realized through movement, depth, and sound, helps the spectator inscribe onto the film what Barthes describes as the *here-now*, as opposed to the photograph, which has the space-time of the *there-then* (“Rhetoric” 44). Reality within film generates a higher level of audience participation, and this

leads to a higher reality ascribed to the images on screen. This is not to say that ideology is lacking in more static art forms like painting, photography, and sequential art, but that these art forms lack the strong affective and perceptual participation engendered through movement-images. Of those art forms, I would say that comics, which Will Eisner termed as sequential art, is nearest to capturing the illusion of movement with the use of gutters. The reader sutures movement together across the gaps between panels. Sequential art offers a different perspective than cinema for studying the icon and gendered ideology. Owing in part to how sequential art is actively received opposed to the more passive experience of cinema. The reader is actively suturing and interpreting the images as part of the style and form.

This chapter will focus on how style and form can perpetuate ideologies as well as redefine them for new audiences. I will be looking at three graphic artists who illustrated Miller's texts: David Mazzucchelli, Jim Lee, and Frank Miller himself. Through the use of conventions, and sometimes by not adhering to conventions, the artists each realize a different approach to gender. Masculinity is not defined solely by how a man is portrayed, or by icons of the phallus, but also by the position of women in the text. In other words, masculinity is not just about defining what a man is; it is also about defining how a woman is unlike a man and how a man is unlike a woman. Therefore, it will be necessary to explore the roles of women within the novels.

This chapter's organization is based on the fictional life of Bruce Wayne, as I will chronologically follow his career as Batman from the beginning (*Year One*, 1987), through the middle (*All-Star*, 2008), and to the end (*TDKR*, 1986). This choice shows a deliberate evolution of masculinity within the character, and by keeping the chronological order I will be able to remain true to Miller's overall goal of character development and grand narrative arcs. This path also happens to parallel the development of visual and verbal modes in superhero comics in the

20<sup>th</sup> century. *Year One* is more closely linked to the Golden Age, *All-Star* is part of the Modern Age, while *TDKR* and *DK2* properly belong to Miller's envisioned goal for comics. For each of these ages Miller is defining the prevalent masculinity: the Golden Age is more about discovering potential and developing an identity, the Modern Age is using that potential to perform actions and flex a very stable hegemonic masculinity, and finally, Miller's envisioned goal is one of action and affective masculinity.

The themes of comics history, masculinity, and ideology all weave together throughout the works of Miller, and they will necessarily also be woven together in this dissertation. To look at masculinity means to consider comics history and what Miller is trying to accomplish with his Bruce Wayne/Batman.

## MILLER'S BAT-CANON

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Frank Miller's most enduring work, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), is a revisionist approach to the superhero genre. Miller's *TDKR* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986) defined a darker and more mature movement within superhero comics, which spawned a variety of imitators that turned a new aesthetic of writing into a viable style. Within Miller's style is a poetics of masculinity and complex gender relationships that he is often not given credit for. His four major Batman graphic novels deconstruct the male psyche of Bruce Wayne at different periods of his life and experiment with the medium. Miller's experimentation is that of an artist exploring every facet of the character, including gender identity, linguistic style, and visual rhetoric. Part of Miller's new approach to comics is to infuse the medium itself with

masculinity, and this is evident in his two major characterizations in the 80s: Matt Murdock/Daredevil and Bruce Wayne/Batman.

Like Matt Murdock, Bruce Wayne is strong-willed and resolute, but where the two characters differ is that Wayne shows a greater range of masculine identities. Miller's exploration of Murdock defined the character through childhood, romantic, professional, and mercenary relationships with a strong theme of material and emotional loss. What worked for Murdock does not work with Miller's understanding of who Bruce Wayne is. Miller applies a new criterion for deconstructing the Dark Knight, one that involves the history of comics, Randian Objectivism, hardboiled narrative style, and a thorough deconstruction of the genre. It is this approach for the Dark Knight that this chapter is going to analyze, mainly through iconic representations.

The artwork for Miller's four major Batman works is instrumental in defining masculinity. The rhetoric of the image within each work seeks to not only represent masculinity through icons, but the monstration of the work shifts between styles to fully capture the variety of masculinities at work. The use of varying visual styles is a way for the objective representations within the image to accrue some subjectivity based on the different artists. The visual mode depicts a world, not as it is, but as it is portrayed by the artist and the artist's adherence to visual narrative conventions. This adherence to convention helps both to define the subjective qualities of the characters and the world and to inject visual ideology into the work. This becomes evident with the choice of two of the medium's well-regarded artists: Jim Lee and David Mazzucchelli.

Each of Miller's Batman works tries to unify both the linguistic and visual modes to achieve similar goals within each novel, often with mixed results. In both modes, Miller remains

in control of choices concerning visual sequences and verbal utterances, while the style of drawing is maintained by the various artists. Mentioning the various artists is important since two of the four novels employed artists other than Miller, while all four works visually explore masculinity. My focus will be more on the visual mode with some attention given to the verbal when necessary. While identity is linguistically realized in each of the works, the rhetorical choices by the artists show a deliberate attempt at marrying subjectivity between the verbal and visual modes, or as Thierry Groensteen terms this, *subjectivized objectification* (*Narration* 130).

While the main goal of this chapter is to define masculine representations as imagined by Frank Miller, it is also necessary to explore the visual representations of women with regards to male creators. Part of my approach to discussing visual representations is to utilize the theories of feminists and film theorists. Though Laura Mulvey is concerned with cinema, her arguments for the patriarchal unconscious are equally valid for the comic book form with some modifications to accommodate the male gaze from theorists like Metz, Kress, and Groensteen. “Women,” as Mulvey argues, “are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies” (“Fears” 13). The women contained within the Batman novels of Miller are no exception to Mulvey’s assertion, though in *All Star Batman and the Boy Wonder* (*All Star*) Miller and his co-creators seem to be aware of how they use women. My focus in this area is directed at the art of Jim Lee, who offers some of the best examples of how the “unconscious of patriarchal society [has] structured” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 14) the comic form, while the visually important panels associated with women betray a social consciousness not usually associated with mainstream superhero comics. The way the female body is presented within Miller’s novels is accurately anticipated by Mulvey and psychoanalysis with regards to the presence of the phallus, fetishism, and humiliation of the female. The patriarchal apparatus

allows the reader to assert his dominance over the female body while watching Batman assert his dominance within the narratives. I will be looking closely at the women within *All-Star* as these instances are self-aware, in that Lee's visuals are activating the male gaze in a purposeful and critical manner. These images also tie in with the overall themes of hypermasculinity within the novel.

Miller has written five major Batman works; listed by narrative chronology and not by publication date, these are *Batman: Year One* (1987), *All-Star Batman and the Boy Wonder* (2008), *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), and *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2002) and he has co-written *The Dark Knight III: Master Race* (2017) with Brian Azzarello. Each work is an approach with a deliberate style that invokes earlier comic ages, writers, and noir sensibilities. For example, *Year One* recalls the early Bob Kane comics in the forties, both in narrative scope and visual appearance, while *All-Star* is more easily harkens back to the nineties by its riffing on hypermasculinity as a visual and linguistic trope. Each time Miller writes a Batman story, he is approaching the work with a self-conscious aesthetic goal. The level of critical success or failure can sometimes be attributed to the chosen style and Miller's faithfulness to a design. *All-Star* is arguably the less well-received of his Batman novels, but it also displays Miller more explicitly dealing with masculine identity in a manner similar to the style the style of early 90s comics and the writings of Mickey Spillane. Even a bad Miller Batman story is better than an average Batman story by another author since Miller is determined to live up to his beliefs in literature: "I think that comics are at their best when they are provocative" (Eisner and Miller 178). Miller is trying to provoke his readers, to get them to question the art and bring their own prejudices to the reading experience. He is not afraid to redefine a popular character like Batman, since following the formula is what he considers creative death. His goal for his chosen medium is "to help



make comics a much more cocky and proud member of popular culture, rather than an obscure thing that focuses on nostalgia for characters that were made up sixty years ago” (Eisner and Miller 178). His artistic goals are clear and help to explain his presence in the field as an experimentalist of form and substance.

Miller has conceived of his Bruce Wayne as existing in three time periods: the nascent crime fighter (*Year One*), the man in his prime (*All-Star*), and the aging man and mentor (*TDKR*, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, and *The Master Race*). These periods are clearly marked, and collected together, they detail the career of a superhero and the masculine identity progression for the man who has chosen such a vocation. By focusing on the art, the goal of this chapter is problematized since two of these works (*Year One* and *All-Star*) have artists other than Frank Miller, and *Dark Knight III: The Master Race* (*DK3*) has a co-writer in Brian Azzarello. I will focus on artist collaborators like Lee and Mazzucchelli at the present, since they offer alternative visions to Miller’s own visual style. It will be necessary to address the involvement and influence that David Mazzucchelli and Jim Lee had on the final form of the novels they worked on. I argue that the choice of artist was purposeful in order to ensure a visual style that reflects Miller’s aim for each work.

I should note that I am opting to leave out *DK3* because of the inclusion of Azzarello, since this would involve too much parsing to determine attribution of ideas and ideologies. Though, my initial reading of *DK3* shows that the novel is returning to the style and power of *TDKR* with much of Miller’s current philosophies and viewpoints being muted, or at least redirected. This may either show Azzarello’s influence (perhaps editorial in nature) on Miller, or that Miller has once again modified his own artistic vision. It should also be noted that the artist on *DK3* is Andy Kubert, who is doing his best Frank Miller impression while still maintaining

his own style. The art is therefore reminiscent of *TDKR*, while the orchestration of scenes, action, transitional closures, and details feel like Kubert. As such, there are too many complicating variables to adequately address *DK3* in this chapter with my specified goals of looking at masculinity visualized within a creatively controlled work by Miller.

### SUBDUED ACTION IN *BATMAN: YEAR ONE*

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*Batman: Year One* marks the beginning of Bruce Wayne's wearing of the iconic cowl. This short graphic novel, approximately 88 pages, is Miller's own *bildungsroman* for the titular character. The novel centers on the struggles of becoming a hero and defining a role in the world of Gotham's criminal underworld. *Year One* focuses on the trials, failures, and eventual successes of Bruce Wayne and Jim Gordon as they struggle in their new roles in Gotham: superhero and police detective.

The narrative structure of the graphic novel follows Gordon acclimatizing to his new city and his workplace. His struggle centers on his being an honest man living in a dangerous city and working in a corrupt police precinct. He is alternately beaten by his coworkers for not being a team player, i.e. too honest, and he in turn physically punishes his coworkers for being corrupt. Gordon's frustration with his department and crumbling marriage leads to an affair with the only other honest cop at the precinct and to the kidnapping of his child. Gordon's masculinity is repeatedly assaulted throughout the novel, and his weaknesses are exposed when his family is attacked. Gordon is unable to integrate into his department, as he refuses to blend his identity with the corruption and dishonesty surrounding him.

Conversely, Bruce Wayne is identifying with his city through trials of failure and success. His frustrations lead him to seek the aid of established men like Gordon and Harvey Dent<sup>3</sup> in the performance of his role as a crusader for justice. His narrative journey has him punching pimps, fighting corrupt cops, subduing honest cops, and finally rescuing Gordon's child. Unlike most Batman comics, there is no "comical" villain in the novel. Instead, the crime figures are related to prostitution, graft, and other mafia associations. This is, after all, Wayne defining himself in the real world without the distraction of the Joker or the Riddler. Throughout the novel, expectations of a superhero story are not met, and instead, the reader is shown a more realistically grounded portrayal of a character better known at the time (mid 80s) for bizarre and outlandish stories. It would be better to say that Miller's narrative and Mazzucchelli's artwork actively resist and redefine the conventions for creating comics in the 80s.

Miller works with *Daredevil Born Again* (1986) collaborator David Mazzucchelli to tell a visual story that pays homage to earlier styles, while still experimenting with narrative suturing and affect. The visual style is one that should recall the earlier Bob Kane comics from the forties and the visuals of classic noir films. As such, the lines are bold, and the austerity with which Mazzucchelli handles detail creates much cleaner images. Mazzucchelli, whose visual and narrative style has evolved since he became a regular penciller for *Daredevil* in 1984, shows he was an appropriate artist for Miller's story. Mazzucchelli uses form and style to craft a visual narrative that emphasizes relationships over action and the moment over movement. These emphasized moments are a nice contrast with many of the mainstream comics being published at the time.

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<sup>3</sup> Harvey Dent began as a zealous attorney, only later after having acid splashed on his face does he become the villain of Two-Face.

*Year One* has plenty of action, but Miller crafted the book around the strengths of Mazzucchelli, which are sequences that emphasize introspection. Mazzucchelli, more capable than most artists, expertly sets up scenes for people to inhabit and interact in. His camera shifts, he captures subtle gestures, plays with angles, and designs a layout suited for a story about two men discovering their purpose and how to accomplish their goals. Mazzucchelli never truly captures the subjective visual storytelling that he mastered in *Asterios Polyp* (2012), but his unique approach to *Year One* is a much less masculine construction than other contemporary comics. Mazzucchelli's work contrasts well with Jim Lee's hypermasculine approach to visual storytelling, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

One of the signs that I feel belong to the hypermasculine comic is the use of movement, either as action or potential. There is plenty of narrative action within *Year One*, but Mazzucchelli mostly renders bodily action as inert, or as potential movement. For example, he provides a moving car with parallel horizontal lines behind it denoting movement, as objects in the novel received some motion while bodies were mostly exempted from this conventional treatment. A kick is shown at the moment of connection where it seems like the foot is resting on the other person. A punch is a fist not in motion, but a study of form. The lack of action lines and articulated muscles help add to the effect of motionless action by representing forms without extensive detail—this point will be covered further when discussing Jim Lee.

Sequential art can freeze the moment of action, while another medium like cinema pushes forward, showing the speed and power of every movement. Mazzucchelli takes advantage of his medium by disrupting the action and ignoring the very conventions that make comics dynamic. Mazzucchelli is capturing the feelings of older comics by creating the feel of history and nostalgia through his limited use of motion within his images. Movement in the instance of sequential art,

according to Deleuze, “can bring two instants or two positions together to infinity; but movement will always occur in the interval between the two” (*Movement-Image* 1). Comics create movement through juxtaposition, but there is a second form of motion that resides within the image and creates even further action that is not accounted for in the juxtaposition. The lack of pictorial motion in the panel places a greater emphasis on the movement contained in the juxtaposition, which creates a different reading experience for the superhero genre.

The sequence of Jim Gordon defending himself from several assailants is a clear example of Mazzucchelli’s style and use of movement (Figure 8). Notice the top three panels are action-



FIGURE 10: GORDON FIGHTS HIS ASSAILANTS

to-action, allowing the reader to provide the movement through closure, but the rest of the page the camera shifts to different angles, taking away the movement through sequence. When the battle is going well for Gordon (Panels 1-3) the reading flows with movement and action, but when Gordon begins to fail (Panel 4), Mazzucchelli changes camera angles with each new panel (Panels 4-6), disrupting the action and stopping movement. The reader can easily fill in the movement in the first three panels, but filling in the movement between panel three and panel four is difficult since the point of reference has

changed to a closer image of Gordon getting hit with a bat. No longer can the fight flow from action to action, instead it turns into moments.

These moments create a difficulty in reading a comic, especially when they interrupt the action. When describing elements of photography, Barthes describes an aspect of a photo that disrupts his pleasure: “[punctum] is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (*Lucida* 26). I will borrow Barthes’s terminology and refer to Mazzucchelli’s depiction of motion, or lack thereof, as a *punctum*. When a visual convention becomes so readily established in the medium, to ignore it is to create a disruptive reading experience. This punctum of course is not necessarily the same for everyone. A person unaccustomed to reading comics wouldn’t find within Mazzucchelli’s images a resistance to conventions, but for the voracious reader, the art serves to disrupt. The lack of motion is a punctum within the action sequence, and it exists as a punctum based on reader expectations of Batman, or of any superhero comic. Barthes’s description of the punctum is full of violence and energy, while I use the word to denote the lack of energy within Mazzucchelli’s visual mode. The images are still violent in their depiction, but the energy withheld is a force denied the reader. When the conventions are ignored, then the reading experience changes, as the reader needs to adapt to this different visual storytelling.

A clear example of differences would be to compare a fight scene from *Year One* with anything by Jim Lee. Lee uses action lines and rippling muscles to convey power, speed, and movement on almost every page. Lee uses lines for the background and objects to draw the eye towards the action; Mazzucchelli eschews this technique in favor of a quiet violence. Even Lee’s pages of dialogue are full of kinetic tension trying to burst through each panel emphasized with flexed muscles and tense body movement. Mazzucchelli subdues motion, which in turn quiets

the violence and power within the characters. It is this punctum within the visual text that refuses to let the image become one of movement and punctuates the action by stopping it. *Year One* isn't about the action; the story does not set up action, rather it continues despite the action. The punctum halts the eye and refuses to push it forward onto the next panel to follow the sequence. Mazzucchelli is visually resisting the narrative flow of contemporary comics by removing one convention superhero comics are known for: the dynamic fight, which would find a popular emergence in the early 90s. His resistance is a resistance against the hypermasculinity most commonly associated with the violence within comics.



FIGURE 11: DAREDEVIL'S MOVEMENT

The prevalence for violence was a staple theme in most superhero comics, which used a variety of techniques to best articulate motion. The most visual sign for motion is a set of lines following the object's movement, such as long slightly curved lines showing the path of Miller's Daredevil jumping off of the tombstone (Figure 9). This panel also shows another technique of depicting multiple repetitions of a moving character to show the beginning of movement, the direction, and the mode of travel. While showing movement through a space, this technique is useful for depicting the passage of time





FIGURE 12: ACTION LINES IN A HYPERFRAME

within a panel. In this particular panel of Daredevil, the hero is shown acrobatically jumping off of objects while effectively dodging the villain of the month; a more critical eye might point out that Daredevil's trajectory is impossible.

There is movement within the panel for the character, but another form of movement is the pull of the eye over a page. Thierry Groensteen terms the entire page as a hyperframe (System 30), and the hyperframe is often constructed by artists as containing one idea, be it action or dialogue between two people. The unified action in one hyperframe is such a prevalent convention it is

strange to interrupt it with two different scenes. Miller was especially gifted in creating hyperframes in *Daredevil* with strong intersecting lines that pulled the eye through the entire page (Figures 9 and 10). These various techniques of movement described all pertain to the passage of time and movement for the character and rhythm for the reader. This becomes an important part of creating a masculine reading of violence, as the action qualities of the violence are dynamic and allow for a more passive reception.

The typical page layouts and steady rhythm of *Year One* help to tone down the masculinity within the novel so that the reader is better able to sympathize with Bruce Wayne as a character rather than get swept along in the external spectacle. The rhythmically calming page layouts, combined with Mazzucchelli's *ligne claire*, make the reading of the comic more a



“deliberate act” rather than the McCloud explanation as being reflexive or cooperative (Groensteen, *Narration* 40). Mazzucchelli’s design of the page draws attention to the introspective themes of the narrative. Mazzucchelli’s clear style and subdued tone do not excessively excite the reader, nor are there strong diagonals that draw the reader through the page; rather, the reader is confronted with discreet panels that must each be interpreted before moving on. This deliberate act of reading is enforced through the camera switching between showing character’s reactions and the persistent character voice narration. Though the action scenes tend to follow a linear sequence, much of the dialogue scenes focus on character reactions and emotions that require emotional interpretation.

What is important to note is that the unified hyperframe, dynamic motion, and strong intersecting lines are for the most part absent from Mazzucchelli’s layouts for *Year One*. This observation is one of quantity in relation to other comics of the time, as there are significant exceptions within *Year One*. Mazzucchelli designs a strong horizontal pull on the page with Gordon and his assailants. The eye is pulled horizontally in the first two rows on the page where the panels are arranged action-to-action, but this pull is immediately interrupted when Gordon is down. His movement is over and blocked through the use of changing camera angles and an intermingling of horizontal, diagonal, and vertical lines that intersect rather than pull the eye to the next panel. This scene pulls the eyes along when the protagonist is winning, creating a quick visual reading pace for the reader enjoying the victories of the character, but as soon as the fight is lost, Mazzucchelli visually disrupts the reading rhythm, and indeed much of the rhythm is disrupted throughout the novel. In a novel in which the characters are struggling to identify themselves, this visual disruption is a reflection of each character’s own struggles and obstacles.

Part of the disruption the reader feels owes a little to the comic grid, which follows a fairly irregular pattern. The grid within the *Year One* hyperframe varies between wide landscape panels, squares, rectangles of various heights and widths, and the rare full-page panel that ends each chapter. The variety is conventional enough and recognizable within the genre to be familiar to readers. The layout choice is simple and does not seek to excite the reader with special effects like a two-page spread or panel frames drawn at angles evoking a dynamic page (Groensteen, *Narration* 57).

The panel frames consistently contain the contents, with the exception of large onomatopoeia effects and the caption boxes that sometimes run over the frames. The contained image is not allowed to breathe and affect other panels except through juxtaposition and its place in the multiframe (Groensteen) or syntagma (Metz). Juxtaposition also has the effect of slowing the reading rhythm and relegating the action to the reader's closure in the gutters. The gutter, with the help of closure, is where the action lives in the novel, and this may help explain the lack of full two-page splash images, and even the limited use of full one-page images. These effects tend to disrupt the reader and toy with the rhythm of the story. They would also energize the page, which is probably why these techniques were limited or avoided.

The formal aspects of the novel are coordinated with the goal of slowing the comic to a deliberate act of reading, and one technique for control is to build a hyperframe using two or more multiframe. Miller has repeatedly toyed with the construction of hyperframes and multiframe throughout his career. The hyperframe concerns the entirety of the page, while the multiframe looks at related panels in a sequence, a sequence of hyperframes, and the entirety of the comic (Groensteen, *System* 30-1). The multiframe can be organized hierarchically, where a series of panels equals a scene, and a series of scenes can compose a multiframe. What is

important to note is that Miller and Mazzucchelli will often break down the hyperframe by imposing two or more scenes onto it. The first page of *Year One* is an example of a hyperframe with two scenes, as the opening three panels are of Gordon on a train, and the final two panels are of Bruce Wayne on a plane. These two multiframe place a train spatially above a plane, highlighting a more internal importance rather than a physical logic of planes typically being above trains.

The common superhero comic mode of writing usually kept the hyperframe limited to one sequence of panels; to do otherwise is to break the reading experience and create pause in the reader as a new series is begun midway through a hyperframe. Many creators consider the recto and verso as being a large unified space, and as such will create the recto and verso<sup>4</sup> with the goal of matching or contrasting colors and maintaining one multiframe for the two pages. The turning of the page interrupts the rhythm of the comic, so at this moment it is customary to begin a new scene, since the interruption has occurred through the physical manipulation of the object.

The rhythm of *Year One* is often halted by interrupting hyperframes in the comic and by disregarding the unified two-page spread. Slowing the rhythm allows the writer and artist to create a work that requires deliberate reading through the focusing on certain multiframe; it also shows the duality of the two main characters through juxtaposition. The first six pages of *Year One* contain between two or three multiframe within each hyperframe, and the recto and verso necessarily seem disjointed.

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<sup>4</sup> Terms used to describe the back of a sheet (recto) and the front of a sheet (verso) when bound.

The opening six pages show the intersection and juxtaposition of multiframe containing Gordon and Wayne, heightening the reader's awareness that these two characters are connected visually and thematically. The opening multiframe on page 1 establish the two characters as actorialized narrators. The verbal contrast of the two shows Gordon as the more stable identity, and rather than redefining himself in a new city, he comments on his new colleagues and position. His multiframe begin each page, while Wayne's narrative accompanies the bottom of each page and shows him training and defining his vigilante self while maintaining his wealthy bachelor persona. The more established masculine identity of Gordon is given the top billing, while Wayne is relegated to the bottom, perhaps highlighting the hierarchical masculinity and stability of the two characters at the beginning of the novel. The scene shifting and changing narrators fractures the hyperframe in such a way that each multiframe embellishes the identities of both characters while maintaining a narrative connection between Gordon and Wayne. This narrative technique also happens to link the two masculinities together, showing the stability of Gordon and the emergence of Wayne. The final outcome of the novel is that Wayne becomes the true masculine hero, reinforcing some of the ideologies of power within hegemonic masculinity. The fragmented hyperframe begins the process of contrasting stable and emerging identities, which will be unified through the verbal mode on the final page in the form of Gordon's epilogue to the events of the story.

The disruption of the hyperframe is a larger more emblematic motif in the work concerning reference shifting. In *Year One*, Mazzucchelli shifts the camera frequently and juxtaposes images that do not visually direct the reader's gaze towards the next panel in the sequence. Most panels have discreet frames limiting the content of each panel. Perry Nodelman writes of the use of discreet frames within picture books, "Books which take an objective,

unemotional view of the events they describe often have frames around all of their pictures” (51). The concept of containing the image is of concern in graphic storytelling, as it contains the action and maintains that each panel deserves deliberate attention. Similarly, Deleuze defines frames as “the art of choosing the parts of all kinds which become part of a set. This set is a closed system, relatively and artificially closed” (*Movement-Image* 18). These sets of information become part of larger sets through relation, but they are still information systems that need to be understood separately.

Discreet frames, or sets, can be opened up with the introduction of bleeding, where the image runs off the page. Bleeding hints at a more expansive image and world that flows beyond the hyperframe and seeks to expand the closed sets by incorporating what Deleuze terms as the out-of-field, which “refers to what is neither seen nor understood” (16). This incorporation expands the information in the set, breaking the containment and allowing an element of the unseen sets to enter the image. This expansion of the set is most likely stylistic at times, but it also has the effect of slightly slowing the reading through its very physical appearance of running off the page. Since many of the hyperframes in *Year One* are already divided into smaller multiframe, Mazzucchelli allows about one panel to bleed on each page while keeping the rest of the panels discreet and contained. Frames also help to mitigate the reading rhythm of the reader by controlling the gaze on each panel in sequence and spatially separating one panel from another with black lines and a black or white gutter—depending if it is day (white) or night (black). Mazzucchelli’s careful framing and selective bleeding are designed in a way that slows the rhythm of the narration in a way that forces introspection.

The reading rhythm is one of the more apparent techniques Mazzucchelli uses to direct the reader’s consumption of the novel. Mazzucchelli is also actively resisting some other

common comic conventions to further limit the impact of violent scenes. Action lines and other conventions denoting impact are missing in *Year One*, making this comic stand out through resistance of the conventional forms of graphic movement. A side effect of this visual storytelling style is that the comic becomes less devoted to its violence. Not only does *Year One* avoid glorifying violence, much of the violence portrayed is brutal and tactile. After Gordon is beaten by the four assailants, the final panel on the page shows an unflattering and sickly image of the defeated Gordon. The red tones of the entire page and the large black spaces turn what many comics would use for a grand fight scene into a gritty and uncomfortable page. The colors and angles that Mazzucchelli uses belong with the impressionist style more than the conventional visual language of American comics. The break with the normative is what creates the element of the punctum in Mazzucchelli's art. Mazzucchelli's style differentiates from the hypermasculine violence common in the genre, and this in turn reflects and defines the identity struggle of Bruce Wayne throughout the novel. Both the visual and verbal work towards constructing the Batman identity rather than relying on conventions within comics.

*Year One* works as a novel by contrasting Gordon and Wayne as they both come to understand the power and functions of the Batman identity. While Gordon is more introspective, and the visual and verbal modes tend to reinforce this, Wayne tends to be surrounded with a combustible environment. The world around him literally falls apart in the comic. With his exterior, he presents himself as a man composed and enjoying the life of a rich heir, but inside he is a shambles of uncertainty and lacks direction in life.

Our first glimpse of Wayne's training shows him smashing a small brick structure, scattering fragments. In the next two panels, he is fracturing a tree by kicking it, and the splinters spray outwards. Instead of drawing abstract motion lines or contact icons,

Mazzucchelli instead uses the environment to create the effect of motion (Figure 11). These panels have more dynamism working for them than the ones involving Gordon. The power that Bruce Wayne controls in his body is more evident from our first glimpses of his training.

During Wayne's first outing as a vigilante he fights a "pimp" and several "whores" in one of the worst areas of Gotham. He manages to get apprehended by the police and subsequently triggers a crash in the police cruiser. The car ignites and he saves the two policemen from certain death by fire. Besides recalling the opening crash in *TDKR*, the scene operates as a reminder that he is reckless and that he doesn't have it all figured out. The next scene depicts him alone and bleeding out in his armchair, waiting for a sign, when a bat crashes through his window, flinging glass everywhere. The destruction of the window by the bat represents the Batman identity in this novel as symbolic of his own reckless and destructive path. This identity

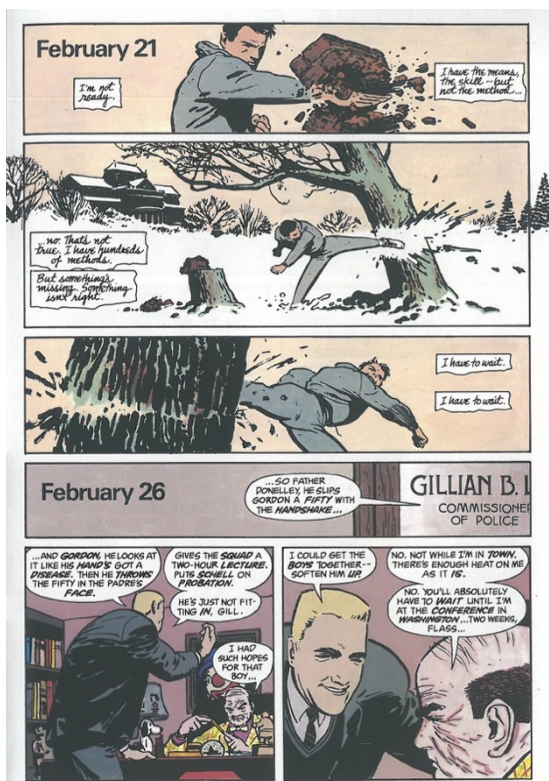


FIGURE 13: WAYNE'S TRAINING

will change for *All-Star* and *TDKR* since Bruce Wayne/Batman has already developed a stable identity with which to interact with the world. The theme of destruction and Batman is a common motif throughout *Year One*. Batman is a destructive force leaving a trail of wreckage, both natural and industrial, behind him. The outward signification of Wayne's confusion and uncertainty is manifested in a crumbling of the world around him. This destruction splinters around in arcs of motion and movement that lend greater movement to Wayne and Batman in the novel. This is

juxtaposed with the more static Gordon scenes, showing that the latter is secure in his identity, but conflicted in his values.

The property damage and bodily injuries directly and indirectly caused by Batman disappear in his last heroic effort: the saving of Gordon's child. Wayne jumps from the bridge to catch the falling child. His effort rewards him with a generous covering of mud, as well as a healthy child. He saves the child without the customary level of external destruction or personal



FIGURE 14: *SUBJECTIVE FRAME IN YEAR ONE*

injury. Instead, Gordon is responsible for a car crashing and the physical beating of a criminal.

This is him losing control as his own family is exposed to the dangers of Gotham crime. He is

no longer a policeman, but instead a father trying

to save his family. The social roles of Wayne and Gordon switch in the final scene through their visual motifs of destruction and stability. As Wayne falls after the child, there are no lines of movement to show the speed with which he falls, or any other indication of his rapid descent. This reversal of motifs for the two also symbolizes that both characters have commonalities, in that both share the same drive to punish crime and are willing to step outside of the law if necessary.

The panel with Wayne returning Gordon's child only shows Wayne's forearms, which are covered in mud, as is the child. The mud offered a realistically safe landing for the armored Wayne, and the mud also serves as a symbolic baptism of the crime fighter. Here he is cleansed of his past mistakes and born into his new life and identity. The filthiness of the mud reminds the reader that Batman will be fighting within the underside of Gotham and that his career will not be a clean endeavor. The reversal of visual motifs and the addition of symbolic mud is the



fruition of the character's identity as Batman. After the identity of Wayne as Batman becomes a stable role, then the friendship with Gordon can commence. Batman's stable identity (Figure 12) is realized in the rare subjective panel where the reader is seeing what Wayne is seeing. Only at the point of his symbolic birth into his new career is the reader allowed to be in his position and see what he sees, which is the distraught face of a father thankful for his child's safety.

The subjective gaze at the end of the novel appears at the climax of Wayne's identification as a superhero after failures and trials, the same failures and trials objectively witnessed by the reader. The reader is only allowed a subjective panel when they can safely identify with Wayne during one of his successes, meaning the reader has been shown the formation of masculinity, at least a masculine identity as portrayed by Mazzucchelli and Miller. The shared view of Wayne and the reader is one of identification of growth and learning and moving on to the next step in life.

Masculinity within *Year One* is defined through one's identity with profession and family. Wayne was tragically orphaned and has defined himself from this tragedy by transgressing law in order to protect other people and their families. The childhood tragedy of Wayne has not only influenced his nightly activities, but there is also a strong refusal to create his own family as he frequently resists emotional attachments beyond friendship and mentorship. This is often hinted at by his butler's questioning of when he will settle down. The final offering of Gordon's child in the final act of *Year One* is a tacit reminder of Wayne's perpetual bachelorhood: he will only become a father figure for his wards, whom he encourages to join his crusade. Wayne's refusal of marriage and family reveals his aversion to domesticity, an aversion that Gordon frequently fights in his own marriage, and one to which he will ultimately succumb by the beginning of *TDKR*, which is set approximately thirty years after *Year One*. Wayne's

cathexis to his murdered parents has been transferred to the direct cause of his pain, and he has developed an obsessive relationship with crime.

## THE HYPERMASCULINE PORTRAYAL OF BODIES IN *ALL STAR BATMAN*

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The quiet violence and subdued masculinity found in *Year One* is a stark contrast to the external violence and hypermasculinity in Miller and Jim Lee's collaboration: *All-Star Batman and the Boy Wonder* (2008). The tone of the writing and visuals is about as hypermasculine as anything Miller has written. The book stands out as a parody of the excesses of 90s comics, and it is a criticism of the early 90s superhero comics and the early Image comics. The unfortunate problem with the parody is that it wasn't readily apparent. The art and over-the-top dialogue is far removed from the normal conception of the Batman character, and this is probably one of the primary reasons the book generally received negative reviews. Even the blurbs on the back cover were fairly mild in praise: "Two superstar creators combine to retell the origin of Dick Grayson, the original Robin. Writer Frank Miller, who redefined a grim Batman in the 1980s with his DARK KNIGHT RETURNS and BATMAN: YEAR ONE graphic novels, teams with best-selling artist Jim Lee." No mention is made of the quality of the book; instead it serves as a sort of summary and helps build some interest for the novel based on the marketability of the creators' names. The other quotes also tend to be lukewarm with regards to qualitative comments. The novel suffered from production delays, a recall of issue #10 due to obscenity, and a now-indefinite hiatus. The series was often ridiculed by quoting the most notorious line in the book, "I'm the Goddamn Batman" (Miller, *All-Star* 2:9). The reviews, many using what

Christian Metz terms a reliance on *taste aesthetic* and a lack of detachment, overlook the critical apparatus Miller and Lee are constructing and applying to some of the excesses of the comic industry, especially those pioneered in the late 80s and early 90s.

Part of the reason *All Star's* parody didn't succeed is the lack of historical background needed, such as the foundation of Image and what this meant for mainstream American comics. 1992 marked a shift in the production and style of comics. A group of popular artists broke from Marvel and founded Image Comics. The group, spearheaded by Todd McFarlane and Rob Liefeld, also included Jim Lee, among others. These artists sought autonomy and creator-owned properties outside of the studio system of DC and Marvel. They also brought a new sensibility to drawing comics that emphasized image over content, hence the name of the company<sup>5</sup>. Liefeld (*Youngblood*), McFarlane (*Spawn*), and Lee (*WildC.A.T.s*) each brought a dynamic style to graphic storytelling that relied on movement. The stylistics they promoted all progressed towards an action-orientated comic where the narrative pull was towards fights and explosions that showcased each artist's ability to represent action poses and violent deaths. Even when characters were standing, the male characters' muscles were usually flexed, and their posture suggested potential action, while the women stuck out their rears and arched their backs to showcase their feminized bodies. Many of the Image comics were drawn with iconicity in mind with a reliance on visual schemas, making many of the poses, angles, and actions recognizable.

What many of the Image comics lacked, though, was the subtlety of character found in comics like *Year One*. *Year One* stands apart since Mazzucchelli did not excessively rely on recognizable schemas or visual tropes when creating the comic, and many of the images seemed

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<sup>5</sup> Supposedly the word Image was inspired by an Andre Agassi commercial where Agassi says, "Image is everything."

drawn from life (or at least a modelling dummy). He chose camera angles that often softened the action, while Image artists relied on an abundance of panels with characters rushing towards the reader, breaking outside of the panel frames, or flying off the page with bleeds. The contrast between Mazzucchelli and Image in general reveals a stark contrast in style and a difference in visual masculinity.

The character of Batman in *All-Star* is an imago based on all of the excesses of early 90s mainstream superhero comics. Batman replicates the machismo evident in the typical male characters of the time, which upset a large contingent of modern readers whose cathexis to the ideal Batman was undermined by Miller and Lee's hypermasculine psychopath. One of the results of this idiosyncratic approach to the character is that it allows Miller to explore the social effects of signification within the medium. *All-Star* is immediately concerned with the power of signification within the medium, and the character's ability to construct his ego with symbolism. The partnership between Batman and Dick Grayson is the enactment of what Lacan calls the Mirror Stage. This is the stage where the young and impressionable Grayson learns and develops his subjective identity based on his dark mentor. The discipleship of Grayson is meant for him to become more like Batman. The result is that Batman also responds to Grayson, and his hypermasculinity is softened by the end of issue nine. This subtle masculine change in Batman by the end of the novel forms the backbone of Miller's understanding of the comics industry: the hypermasculine representations could not continue for the long term, and this necessarily resulted in Image changing direction in the late 90s and consumers moving to less masculine comics. A strong psychoanalytic reading of the imago and mirror stage is possible throughout the comic, and some of this is useful for studying masculinity within the form of the graphic novel in general.

Lee's visual style is important for defining a masculine reading of the comic. What Lee shows and excludes is just as important as how he shows things. Jim Lee's images tend to exemplify the form of masculinity R.W. Connell terms as hegemonic masculinity. Connell describes hegemony as a "cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life" (77). While hegemonic masculinity is somewhat fluid, and I want to avoid an essentialist definition, I will describe instead how Miller and Lee fit within the concept. Their definition of maleness was the physical body, a misogynistic portrayal of women which includes objectification and humiliation, and the ridicule and abuse of less able men. The strong male usually held power over other men and women in the comic; this power was enhanced through the visual conventions that aimed to diminish the weak and enhance the strong. It is the cultural aspect of hegemonic masculinity that I will be looking at within *All-Star*.

The conventions of graphic storytelling and visual representations of males and females all owe some aspect to culture. The founding members of Image, and indeed much of the mainstream comic book industry, are male and generally present a patriarchal culture within their products. Image Comics helped to define a masculinity for adolescents for the better part of the 90s. Females were present for scopophilia (Vicki Vale), and subordinate males were either children (Dick Grayson) or made to be sexually abnormal or deviant (Joker), according to the standards of hegemonic ideology. Miller and Lee use these conventions to criticize the underlying ideology with mixed results. The body is a good place to begin.

Before I begin my analysis of *All Star*, I should note a couple of things first. The novel itself is incomplete, meaning the several interweaving narratives are never resolved. Though one can conjecture that at some point Robin will die and Batman will repent of his psychotic ways and retire the cowl. Miller is setting up a possible confrontation between the Justice League and

Batman, where at one moment in the story Batman has to give a dying Green Lantern a tracheotomy—he was dying because Robin punched him in the throat under Batman’s supervision. The collected novel contains only nine issues. There was a tenth issue, but it was recalled due to obscenity and is often left out of collected volumes.

Several years pass between the setting of *Year One* and *All-Star*, which leaves the reader wondering why there is a huge personality shift in Bruce Wayne. It might be more accurate to say that Bruce Wayne is gone and has been replaced by his Batman persona: an unhinged psychopath that pleasures in crippling criminals, or ‘victims’ as Green Lantern calls them. Gone is the struggling vigilante trying to figure out his role in Gotham, replaced by a confident, unquestioning Batman at the peak of his power. There are many ways a writer could show a person at his virulent height, and Miller chose to show a psychopath.

The depiction of Batman’s personality is part of the parody of Image Comics and so is servant to Miller’s literary goals, but there are also other reasons for the drastic personality shift, which Miller gives within the novel. The hypermasculine artwork by Lee set the tone of the book, where every word of masculinity-charged dialogue is accompanied with a dynamic visual. The visual sequences also create anticipation for the reader. The reader is not given a clear view of Batman’s body until the final page of issue one. The body reveal is given a full page, showing an extremely muscular Batman aggressively holding a scared and struggling Dick Grayson. This Batman is in contrast with the slim athletic body from *Year One* and the ageing and bulky body from *TDKR*. His suit clings faithfully to the muscles and highlights the strength of Batman as he stands there almost impossibly fit. He has the type of body that would be difficult for his Wayne

persona to hide in public under a tuxedo. The body, as drawn, is the idealized form of masculinity: having strength and power without the feeling of powerlessness or uncertainty, which is contrasted with the small frame of Grayson. Batman is the authority here, and Grayson is the helpless boy listening to Batman: “You’ve just been drafted into a war” (1:26). The full



FIGURE 15: THE BODIES OF BATMAN. THE ARTIST FROM LEFT TO RIGHT,: MAZZUCHELLI, MILLER, AND LEE.

body shot was delayed through oblique camera angles or frames that excluded Batman. Lee would show the cape trailing a figure off the panel or the gloved hand disabling a criminal. The visual would fetishize different aspects of the body, creating anticipation in the reader to see the whole body, which is given on the final page. The reader is treated to the Jim Lee Batman: a hypermasculine Batman (figure 13).

Batman’s body is the only one the reader is forbidden to see at first. The slow reveal of Batman in the first issue creates anticipation, and when he finally appears, he is a Batman to be

feared. His first appearance embodies the hegemonic masculinity through his physical and verbal dominance of Grayson. He also visually dominates the page, where his form benefits from size in the image and contrast with the background lights. He becomes as visually accessible as the women for the rest of the novel, while at the same time his body is important because it has been given so much attention by remaining concealed. In a comic where appendages constantly break out of the panel frames, the careful containment of Batman in issue one shows a concern with reader expectations. Miller uses the delayed reveal in *TDKR* and *DK2* as well, while *Year One* does not make a visual celebration of revealing Batman's body for the first time. This delay in *All Star* emphasizes the body and creates desire through expectation. Miller and Lee use the delay to make the reader guess as to the appearance of this Batman, and when he is seen, the reaction should be shock, and a little bit of nostalgia since Batman has the pure black Bat symbol on his chest that he wore in *TDKR*. The body here is frightening to behold, and it is gigantic beside the small Grayson. Lee's shading and articulated lines push the reader's eyes up and towards Grayson, while the heavy black spaces contrast with the full moon and the headlights from the Batmobile. Everything in this picture emphasizes the darkness, size, strength, and intensity of Batman. The visuals have negative connotations, and if it wasn't such an iconic character, the reader could be forgiven for thinking the man holding the child was a villain, which he almost seems throughout the novel.

Batman's body is in opposition to Vale's at the beginning, whose body is immediately on display. The two bodies contrast; one is sexualized, while the other is idealized, but both are fantasies for the reader. Both bodies fit within the tradition of Image Comics, and both serve a purpose in how they are displayed and the order in which they make an appearance. The objectification of Vale is sudden, voyeuristic, and safe. She initiates the male gaze in the comic





FIGURE 16: MAGNETO'S FACE BY JIM LEE

by representing some of the most misogynistic aspects within superhero comics. Her body is also rendered passive and lacking the dynamic lines and flexed muscles visible in Batman and most of the other male characters. Her body is left mostly smooth, with very few details added to her skin to show underlying musculature, leaving her form to be appreciated without the distraction of excessive shading and detail. In essence, her body is clean and soft, and therefore more desirable and immediately read. In contrast, Batman's body is rendered with Lee's signature lines that have no denotational value; rather, they create movement and tension

in the image. His lines go everywhere, pushing and pulling the gaze around the body. The details on Batman's body suggest a masculine push towards action while requiring a more detailed inspection of the image. His body is more carefully rendered because his body matters for action, whereas Vale's body serves its purpose through her shape.

The different approach to the male and female bodies in *All-Star* is emblematic of how bodies were drawn in the early 90s. This relates to the idea of the economic code, where Barbara Postema says, "dictates that all the details that are present are (potentially) significant" (5). Generally, the economic code refers to signified objects in the panel, but Postema defines it to include details as well. The economic code suggests furnishing the comic world with only those

elements that suggest setting and tone and avoiding unnecessary details, since these will distract the spectator from seeing what the artist wants them to see. Too many details lead to image saturation, meaning that the reader will not be able to “distinguish between the principal and the secondary” (Deleuze, *Movement-Image* 12) within the image.

Saturation is a style choice, but one that is generally avoided in mainstream comics, as it requires a great amount of effort and time, both of which are often limited in the production of a monthly comic. Instead Lee and other artists spend great effort detailing only the most important objects in the panel. The more details attached to an object, the more it is imbued with importance. The lack of details on Vale’s body compared to the abundance on Batman’s body shows a greater importance placed on Batman’s physicality. The comparison between male and female bodies is the difference of physicality and form. The difference also applies to faces. The face (Figure 14) from *X-Men* issue 1 (Claremont and Lee), drawn by Lee, shows the intense face of Magneto. The amount of detail Lee gives this face is beyond anything he ever gives to women. The rough masculine face has lines and scars and shading. The face is not meant to be beautiful. Details create masculine importance, while the female form attracts the male gaze. Stylistics here help to create a masculine reading of the comic, and this works because Lee alternates between excessive detailing and clean surfaces.



FIGURE 17: VICKI VALE IN HER APARTMENT

An example of the economic code and detailing can be seen in Vale's apartment (Figure 15) which shows an assortment of vases and furniture with a conventional amount details added to them. They do not attract the eye and are situated in the background. The only objects with any sort of detail are the lingerie Vale wears and the skyscrapers in the background. Lee invites the idea of the voyeuristic gaze by placing Vale alone and unaware of the camera within her high-rise apartment. She is more apparent as her light skin contrasts with the darker tones of her

apartment and the background. He places her in front of an amazingly large window constructed of black frames that recall the gutters on the comic page. By including the paratextual features of gutters into the actual image, Lee is metatextually commenting on the gaze associated with Vale. To emphasize the gaze, Lee includes various phallic objects. Vale is surrounded by the phallus, both as some rather alien looking vases and the Gotham skyline seen through her window. Film theorist and feminist critic, Laura Mulvey, even though she is talking about the artist Allen Jones, understands the phallus in accordance with Lee's art: "The nearer the female

figure is to genital nakedness, the more flamboyant the phallic distraction” (“Fears” 8). Lee virtually surrounds Vale in a forest of the phallus to the point of comedy. In this instance the economic code enhances the power of the phallus through the spartan use of detailing in the image and the use of mainly phallic shaped objects as furniture and background. The metatextual design of the image and the excessive use of the phallus shows an awareness of mainstream comic depictions of women. The Vale image is meant to be contrasted with the opening Black Canary panel (Figure 16) in issue three, as they both use similar metatextual techniques by designing the gutters into the material background.

The extensive use of the phallus surrounding Vale is in accord with the psychoanalytic understanding of castration and absence in the female form. Since the female form lacks the phallus, and since this lack can cause trauma for the male viewer through fear of castration, “the viewing subject protects him- or herself,” argues Kaja Silverman, “from the perception of lack by putting a surrogate in place of the absent real” (*Acoustic* 4-5). The displacement of the phallus is part of the masculine apparatus of the comic book industry that produces comics by and for the male reader. Vale’s image reinforces the ideas of lack and displacement to protect the reader. Silverman further enlarges the idea of displacement:

Displacement follows a precise trajectory—a trajectory which proceeds from the loss of the object, to the foreclosed site of production, to the representation of woman as lacking. These orchestrated displacements have as their final goal the articulation of a coherent male subject. (*Acoustic* 10)

The entire process of displacement trends towards satisfying the male audience. This agrees with Mulvey’s argument that cinema endorses and is built around the male gaze by identification

with the male-controlled camera lens. Mainstream comics share many aspects with the cinematic apparatus because many artists looked to film to create their own sequences.

Hypermasculine male bodies and the exaggerated and sexualized bodies of the females were found in the highest selling comics in the early 90s. Lee's drawing of Vale is part of a style he has been developing since the late 80s. The hypermasculine attitudes fueling Image Comic's art also redefined the representation of women. The Image representation of the body was a reaction against the Comics Code Authority (CCA) while tapping into the erotic desires of male readers. In the Golden Age of comics, there was the Good Girl Art, which "entered comics around the beginning of the 1940s, and depicts, with a mildly erotic flavor, beautiful females scantily-clad or attired in shape-revealing clothes, while the suggestion exists that the character is innocently unaware of the sexuality that is apparent to the reader" (Hayton n.p.). The new wave of artists in the 90s removed the innocence in favor of a more sexually aware female character. Art historian Christopher Hayton describes this new type of female character:

While maintaining ample opportunity for the reader to engage in subtle enjoyment of the female form, implied that the character facilitated visual access to her body by her 'choice' of attire and deliberate use of her sexuality. Her power and aggression classify her as 'bad' in the sense that she is competent and capable of significant aggression against her usually male antagonists. (Hayton n.p.)

The founding artists of Image utilized Bad Girl Art (BGA), often giving their female characters large breasts with slim bodies while they posed seductively. The characters often dressed in very revealing attire that bordered on the absurd at times and was often dangerously close to any number of wardrobe malfunctions. Hayton asserts that BGA can result in hostile sexism against women, causing issues with the reader and the fetishized female (n.p.).

The Image Comics tradition is where Jim Lee comes from. As one of the founders, and one of the more successful creators at Image, he is largely associated with this new wave of comic book artists that used BGA as a visual commonplace. The early 90s is the history of comics that Frank Miller is referencing by having Jim Lee as his artist for *All-Star Batman*. Miller stylized his own writing to match Lee's visuals, giving characters over-the-top masculine lines that often seem like hollow clichés. Miller fashions his novel to the strengths of Lee, just as he did when he worked with Mazzucchelli, though it is difficult to determine how much the artists had a hand in shaping the narrative.

The Mazzucchelli and Miller combination created a strong masculinity that sought to portray men struggling to define themselves in a world gone bad. The visual and verbal sought to find a happy marriage where each reflects the themes of the other. The difference between *Year One* and *All-Star* is the larger focus on the interior and exterior domains of the characters. Mazzucchelli allowed the art to sit on the page as the interior of Jim Gordon and Bruce Wayne was unraveled, while Lee explores a more visceral world where Batman's body dominates each scene he is in. This difference between the two novels is emphasized by the large amount of time *Year One* shows Bruce Wayne instead of Batman, while *All-Star* shows Bruce Wayne in only two short scenes of around four panels each. Batman is a physical force, and Lee is a strong choice to represent this.

Lee's hypermasculine drawing style is reflected in the language Miller uses. To read *All-Star* as a serious novel and not as a parody makes it almost indefensible. The misreading of the text results in an experience that is obscene and difficult to rationalize. Miller and Lee's hypermasculine Batman is a critique of the Image wave that swept through the comic industry. By criticizing the style over substance approach, Miller is criticizing some aspects of the virile

hypermasculinity within the comic industry rather than endorsing it. But at the same time, Miller supports the founding principles of Image Comics concerning autonomy and creator's rights while seeking to display the visual and narrative flaws of the period.

Within the exploitative parody of early 90s comics, Miller is using many of the visual tropes and problems associated with that era. The most apparent issue is the sexualized female body and its attendant scopophilia. Even within the comic, women are gazed at by other characters and talked about as objects. This is such a big issue that it causes one female character (Black Canary) to lash out at the men around her for viewing her as an object and vocalizing their adoration with lewd comments. Wonder Woman verbally chastises one man through a reversal of the objectification, "Out of my way, sperm bank" (5:1).

The visual gaze of men causes reactions within the comic. The GGA and the BGA of Image worked differently, in that the women did not often respond to the male gaze. It is implied that with BGA, the women are aware of their desirable influence on men but do not overtly recognize their awareness, and the men often remain silent. The body drawn is meant for the reader to gaze upon and thereby gain power over the woman through objectification. Miller is playing with the gaze; only some of the female characters respond angrily. Jim Lee's images permit the gaze, while the words and reactions of some characters resist the objectification. This isn't always the case, namely the degrading representation of Vicki Vale, both visually and verbally. She objectifies men while she is herself an object of sex. The themes of visual desire and verbal lust surround most of the female characters in *All-Star*. The themes are prominent and consistent enough to show that Miller is toying with the theme of visual objectification within his work.

Miller and Lee's restructuring of the male gaze within the novel is critical of the earlier artists while remaining problematic, especially since Jim Lee is drawing bodies within his normal range, though it should be noted that Jim Lee's style and skills have continually evolved over his career. The Jim Lee of 2008 is less inclined to draw details and is less hypermasculine in his style than the late 80s and early 90s. Within the novel, the gaze is directed at three main females, each characterized differently: Vicki Vale, Black Canary, and Wonder Woman. Vicki Vale is sexualized from the beginning, and her thoughts become erotic when the topic of men is mentioned. She serves as the damsel in distress and requires men to save and satisfy her throughout the novel. This contrasts with Black Canary, who is the object of lame pickup lines like, "Are your legs tired? Because you have been running through my mind all day" (3:5). Unlike Vale, Black Canary resorts to violence as a response, especially after a man dares touch her on the behind. The third woman objectified is Wonder Woman, who does not violently attack men, but her internal monologue is a diatribe against all men: "It leaves a bad taste, this world of men. / Men. / They can't do anything right" (5:1). Each woman represents a contrast of reaction to being treated as a visual object, and each is given a full-page spread to showcase their highly sexualized bodies.

The roles of each of these women is unclear in the novel, and perhaps would have been explained in the unfinished portion. What is clear is that these women each represent different perspectives to the male gaze within the comic, and each serves to acknowledge the gaze in a different manner. Alongside these women is the body of Batman and the other male superheroes, which are also designed to attract admiration and fantasy from the reader. But unlike the women, male bodies are not visually objectified by other characters. Batman is allowed to wear a skin-tight suit without people reflecting on his body. Vale is the only



character be sexually objectified and to sexually objectify men within the comic, and this is significant for the visual role she plays.

The limitations of Miller and Lee's criticism lies in representation itself. They are aware of representation, but they seem unconcerned with the patriarchal ideology within their images. The representation I am referring to is "something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual or pictorial terms quite distinct from its social existence" (Pollock 8). Lee's images are still within the bounds of defining women as a sign, an object. Even Black Canary and Wonder Woman are drawn within the constructed notion of beauty, which recalls Griselda Pollock's exasperation when seeing art that defines women as signs, "There were not faces, not portraits, but fantasy" (168). Lee's women are fantasy, ordered prettily by the artist around social conventions of what constitutes beauty.

The opening of *All-Star* juxtaposes two scenes, that of Dick Grayson as an acrobat with his parents in the circus and Vicki Vale strutting around her apartment. Both scenes imply that the characters are exhibiting their bodies: Grayson for the circus audience and Vale for the reader. She is shown in her resplendent beauty as drawn by Jim Lee. The luxurious apartment setting, which is probably well beyond the ability of a gossip columnist to afford, shows a desirable woman in a domestic setting. The domestic setting is a trope that further feminizes Vale, since it conforms to the idea that home is where the woman belongs. Lee is doing everything he can to domesticate Vale so that she fills the role of scopophilia within the comic. Miller is clear in his direction to Lee in the script, "FULL FIGURE-VICKI VALE walks, in bra and panties and not one inch of clothing more, walks-no, hell, she struts.... Think Rita Hayworth in her prime." Miller is aware that Vale needs to be beautiful, and he is even aware that the depiction of Vale needs to affect the readers in a certain way: "BODY SHOT-THIGH UP-give

us an even better angle on that babe. Front on. Walking right at us. She knows what she's got. Make them drool." These script directions reinforce the idea of exhibitionism and BGA, and they unite her scene with Grayson's circus act.

On the next page, Miller's directions become self-reflexive, "OK, Jim, I'm shameless. Let's go with an ASS SHOT. Panties detailed. Balloons from above. She's walking, restless as always. We can't take our eyes off her. Especially since she's got one fine ass." Miller is aware of what he wants from Lee's art and of what he wants that art to accomplish, which is to "keep our eyes on how good she looks." These happen to be the most detailed script notes in the first issue.

The emphasis on Vale's beauty is repeated consistently in the script notes. The type of art Miller wants (and gets) is of the BGA variety. This art direction is coupled with the words of Vale, who is talking about Superman's genitalia (*man of steel*) and Bruce Wayne's good looks. She is drawn to encourage scopophilia and is sexually available through her verbalized desire for other men. Miller is playing with the BGA art within the hypermasculine drawing style of Lee, and his script directions also serve as a hypermasculine reflection of the art. Some of the comments in the script are a little problematic, in that they implicate the writer for the same thing he is meant to be criticizing. Miller's glee in having Vale appear this way tends to show an attitude that objectifies women. His description of Vale as a *babe* and his fetishism of her body throughout the script shows his own disregard and objectification of her as a character. Since the only released script is for issue one, it is difficult to know how he described Black Canary and Wonder Woman, and if they received the same kind of demeaning treatment in the script. Miller's conception of Vale as a sexual being to satisfy the gaze of the readers may also influence his own rather coarse treatment of her in the novel.

Vale represents a very misogynistic portrayal of women in *All-Star*, but because of the inclusion of the other female characters, the misogyny is focused on her. This is not to say that Black Canary and Wonder Woman are not also treated poorly. Vale's portrayal is a little excessive when it comes to sexuality. The first five pages with Vale show her in her panties, or putting on a variety of outfits, each showing off her body with different clothes and make-up, like a domestic Barbie Doll. Her whole scene is a *shameless* display of her body, and it arguably goes on for far too long; but then, that may be the point. The obsessive dwelling on her passive body suggests the idea of exploitative parody. The whole scene taken alone is without any real narrative substance, and her role in the comic is equally lacking in narrative function. She serves a greater thematic purpose by introducing the reader's male gaze early in the comic. She is safely housed in a domestic arena and is further surrounded by phallic objects, reminding the reader that she is subjugated to the role of the phallus. The gaze will be problematized later, but for now the reader is allowed to safely gaze.

If the reader can pull his eyes away from her form for just enough time to read her monologue, he would notice that her dictation centers on the sexual power of Superman and Bruce Wayne in a shallow, gossipy way. Not only is she physically surrounded by the phallus, but she also invokes the dominant males in her world. Her thoughts are interrupted when she receives a call from Alfred Pennyworth letting her know she has an unexpected date with Bruce Wayne. This fortunate news sidelines her thoughts and dominates her entire being: "I'm having a date with BRUCE WAYNE" (1:6), which is repeated five times. Nothing about Vale serves as a positive model for women, as her very being reinforces woman as a sign of beauty and dependence, and to begin a novel in this way is to tempt readers to either revolt against the poor depiction or to gaze unashamedly at Lee's visuals. There really is very little middle ground here:

either disgust or lust. Vale's portrayal as a woman is tempered later in the book with more admirable characters like Batgirl and Black Canary, who offer better representations of women, though not perfect.

The hypermasculinity is toned down later in the novel as the unhinged Batman becomes more caring and aware of how he is hurting those around him, and the narrative and visual forces of the comic reflect the change in Batman. Vale represents the worst aspects of the early 90s, and Batman stands in for the excesses of hypermasculinity.

After Vale, the next female the reader meets is Black Canary in issue three, whose narrative role in the novel is also unclear. Black Canary is introduced with a full page to showcase her body (Figure 16), much in the same manner as Vale's entrance. Unlike Vale, Canary is shown in a bar surrounded by the leers of her male admirers reflected in the bar mirror. Surrounding her body are nearly a dozen of the spoken "compliments" of the men: pet, darlin', sweetie, hon, and so on. These words are spoken while a narrator comments on the scene in a somewhat offensive manner:

...Maybe she's having a bad night. / Or Maybe it's something somebody said. / Or maybe it's something somebody's about to say. / Or maybe it's just the wrong damned time of the month. / No. It's something else. She can't put a finger on it... / ...whatever. Something in her gut is aching to break out. / Something unpleasant. (3:3)

The thoughts and words of Vale are given for the reader to show how shallow she is, while the thoughts of the Black Canary are hidden, leaving just the assumptions of the narrator to guess her feelings and motives. Vale is left open for the reader, but the mystery behind Black Canary makes her more dangerous and unknown. Vale reflects on men and is the subject of the reader's



FIGURE 18: BLACK CANARY AT WORK

gaze, while the Black Canary is left without an actorialized voice and is subject to the oppressive gaze of the bar patrons and the reader. She is the subject of the verbal and visual modes, both seeking to objectify her and subjugate her through power. Visually, subjugation is formed by the word balloons and caption boxes surrounding her, as though they are hemming her into a confined space. In the large image are two phallic sticks of dynamite standing in as a visual metaphor for her temper, which will explode two pages later, effectively disappearing. As the language continues to multiply on the page and surround her, the page layout

also begins to confine her to smaller and smaller panels. She is increasingly being relegated to smaller and smaller spaces, mirroring her own diminishment through the external forces at play. When she can take no more, the turn of the page reveals a full two-page spread of the Black Canary assaulting the customers. Her striking left leg is actually coming towards the reader in its sweep, suggesting that perhaps her attack goes beyond the bar patrons and is aimed at the reader. The virtual prison of the page layout disappears, and she gains the freedom to act against the

gaze and oppression. Her freedom from the male gaze is won through a reaction against the oppressive male gaze that fueled comics in the early 90s.

It is of note that the phallus/dynamite disappears when it explodes and is replaced with the narrator invoking the bleeding wound: “Or maybe it’s just the wrong damned time of the month.” The repeated phallus visually associated with Vale is effectively absent from Black Canary’s spread. When the phallus is removed, a crisis can occur, but this crisis can be resolved in one of two resolutions, “disavowal through fetishism, and avowal accompanied by disparagement” (*Acoustic* 28). The narrator chooses the second resolution when the “time of the month” is introduced as a way to disparage the character. This statement gets right to the idea of lack through castration, but then displaces that lack into disparagement by turning to the female’s interior and illness. Silverman describes the resolution as it “shifts the focus from woman’s “outside” to her “inside”” (*Acoustic* 29). The move to the libidinal wound that exists between exterior and interior demarcates the female as different than male and as suffering. Silverman writes on man’s triumph through disparagement:

woman’s castration can be traced back to her own interiority. This resolution of the male viewer’s anxiety permits him to place a maximum distance between himself and the spectacle of lack—to indulge in an attitude of “triumphant contempt” for the “mutilated creature” who is his sexual other. (*Acoustic* 28)

While Lee’s visuals resolved to remove the phallus and destroy the male gaze with violence, Miller’s language invoked woman’s “inside” to allow his male readership a chance to still remain triumphant while watching a female physically punish the male patrons of the bar. Sure, she can hurt those men, but she still has that “time of the month,” meaning she is still a “sexual

other”. Despite attempting to be the better contrast with Vale (exterior), Black Canary becomes the interior representation of women in the comic.

While the interior and exterior are contrasted, the metatextual construction of Black Canary’s opening is a reflection of Vale’s opening shot (Figure 16). Both are given a full page, and both images contain the paratextual gutters within the construction of the material architecture behind them. Black Canary is in a bar leaning against the bar shelves, which are designed to be reminiscent of comic gutters. A nice touch to the bar has the wall behind the shelves as a mirror that reflects the leering of the bar patrons. The men are disgusting with bared teeth and focused eyes, while Black Canary looks down and away, looking somewhat cowed by their gaze and words. The mirror’s reflection puts Black Canary as the direct recipient of male gazes, while Vale was alone. The reflection is parodying the reader, who is meant to also ogle Canary’s body. The reader is placed into the uncomfortable position of being related to the patrons of the bar through the reflection of the mirror. Canary is not happy here, and if anything, she seems to suffer under the weight of what is happening. This is a direct comment on the reader and the patrons, who do not seem to notice her current demeanor and are instead lusting after her.

The criticism of the reader is enacted through metatextual codes, such as the material gutters in the image and the reflection of the reader/bar patrons. The commentary on the gaze is evident through metatextual codes in both women’s full-page spreads, but their bodies are still drawn clean and smooth. Their forms are still meant to titillate, and even with the shaming of the reader in Canary’s image, her body is clearly the center of the image with the commentary on the reader built in the background. The lack of details on her skin and the contours of her body

with the background emphasize her body as an object of desire. The message on gazing is here, though the means of delivering that message may be a little misguided.

After four pages of gazing and verbal sexual harassment, Canary attacks her would be subjugators. Her assault on the men around her is sudden and brutal. Lee depicts teeth and blood flying across panels and Canary's smooth fish-net covered legs inflicting pain to all male surfaces, including genitals. Her attacks seem to be indiscriminate as she assaults everyone, including an unfortunate patron that seems more interested in his beer than her, even during the fighting. She rewards his indifference by smashing his glass cup into his face with her stilettos. Throughout her attack, her body still retains the smooth lines associated with female bodies in comics, and she is still denied the musculature and intense shading Batman's body constantly receives. Even the men at the bar are given more attention to detailing in their faces and arms. The differentiation in rendering bodies partially defeats the criticism concerning scopophilia that Lee and Miller have set up, since they are still operating within the system they seek to identify and criticize. The implied value placed upon the use of the body immediately opposes the male and female bodies as depicted on the page and perpetuates the role of women's bodies as the objects of the gaze rather than serving as a physical force within the image.

After the fight is over and the patrons of the bar are unconscious or writhing in pain on the floor, her boss walks in and asks, "What's gone and gotten into your head, sweetheart?" (3:13). The question is colloquial, but at the same time it looks to the interior of the woman, again reminding the reader that she is the "sexual other." Unlike the manager, she cannot respond to the enunciation of the narrator, since the narrator lies beyond the space of the action and cannot be reproached by any character. The manager does not have that luxury. She responds with, "Batman." While the men at the bar fetishized her and focused on her, she at the



same time had a line of attraction towards Batman, either as an icon of power and control, as something sexual, or as both.

In issue six, Black Canary fights alongside Batman, and in issue seven, they consummate their physical desires: “We keep our masks on. / It’s better that way” (7:6). She initiates the act, with Batman acquiescing without an argument. They make love at the scene of the destruction they just incurred and are surrounded by fire and rain and probably dead bodies. While her introduction used a metafictional visual to try and criticize the male gaze, the sex scene defeats whatever sympathy Miller and Lee were trying to create for Black Canary. The next time we see her is in the recalled issue 10, robbing some thieves of money and enjoying it. Then she disappears again, not playing any serious cardinal role in the narrative other than to have sex with Batman and prove his masculinity. At the risk of sounding repetitive, the novel is incomplete and perhaps her role is integral to the unfinished story. Without closure, we can at least look at the visuals and the treatment of female and male characters.

I see the scene between the two with a cynical eye, in that Miller was trying to put away the rumors of a homosexual Batman that were famously put forward by Dr. Fredric Wertham in 1954: “the Batman stories are psychologically homosexual.... Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature “Batman” and his young ward “Robin”” (189-90). In a book that introduces Robin for the first time to a young Batman, a hypermasculine sex scene with Black Canary is a convincing way to put rumors of a homosexual Batman to rest.

Lee’s use of metatextual signs within his images invites the reader to be critical of Lee’s style and, indeed, the era where his hypermasculine style reigned. The invitation created through

the sister panels belonging to Vale and Canary shows the use of BGA, as well as interpretations of the male gaze at work in the medium. This invitation to criticism falls short, as Lee follows the conventions of mainstream superhero comics too closely and only manages to bring to light the problems, while at the same time perpetuating some of the subtler conventions such as the underuse of details (females) and the excessive use of details (males) in his images. Lee continues to create the dynamic two-page spread convenient for action, and especially useful for hypermasculine comics such as *All-Star*. Part of the failure to redefine the gaze is that Lee and Miller are not resisting the coded conventions within the medium and are instead ~~are~~ participating in its most excessive attributes. The form of parody at play in *All-Star* does not succeed in the visual mode due to the denotative presence of analogy, which the verbal mode is more capable of escaping. Exacerbating the issue is that of culture, which informs “the *iconology* specific to each sociocultural group producing or viewing...and, on the other hand, up to a certain point, *perception* itself” (Metz, *Film Language* 111). Culture binds the text to conventions or perception and iconology, and to resist these two strong concepts is to reinvent the grammar of sequential art, which is a difficult task to do and ask of the readers of a mainstream comic. This is especially difficult if the text is a parody, since parodies are intimately tied to the very texts that are being parodied.

## THE AFFECTION-IMAGE IN *THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS* AND *THE DARK KNIGHT STRIKES AGAIN*

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Miller's approach to visuality varies depending on where he is in his career and what he is trying to express. He is a unique artist in that his art has changed with each project, ranging from his more conventional *Daredevil* run in the early eighties to his more abstract expressionist works like *Sin City*, *Holy Terror*, *300*, and *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. Miller's ability to adapt his drawings to the themes and purpose of what he is saying reveals an artist ready to experiment with new forms of expression, it also shows a writer willing to try new genres and avoid repetition. The artwork of Mazzucchelli and Lee represents the visual storytelling for the Golden Age and then the Modern Age. These two artists each represent a period of comic book art, while Miller's own art is something entirely different. His images, especially for *TDKR*, *DK2*, and *Sin City*, do not fit the conventions of typical mainstream superhero comic book art. His style is uniquely his own. Currently he is more of a writer than an artist, though with his *DK3* (2017) graphic novel he is penciling short comics appended to the main comic. His visual representations are currently sparsely detailed and depict only what he feels needs to be communicated. He does not saturate the image, nor does he provide a background unless it is necessary to establish the scene. His style is even more expressionistic than in *TDKR* and *DK2*. Many graphic narrative artists have elements of expressionism within their layouts and in the image, but few have gone to the lengths of Miller to create an expressionist text. Miller's early run on *Daredevil* shows the roots of his awareness of the expressionists, and it wasn't until *Ronin*

(1983) and *TDKR* that he began filling his art with emotions that sought to create an atmosphere akin to the characters on the page. His approach has both garnered critical praise and resulted in many people turning away from his work because it does not fit the conventions of a comic published by DC or Marvel.

Many reviews of *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2002) mention it as an unfavorable sequel to *TDKR*. *DK2* is the sequential follow up to *TDKR*, but its approach, themes, and visuals are noticeably different. *TDKR* appears as a gritty futuristic dystopia, where the visual complements the verbal and helps to instill a tone of grim hope. The lines are spare, as are the details, except to show pain and destruction. Lynn Varley's colors use a washed palette that prohibits any colors to shine too bright, except for Superman, whose bright red and blue contrast with the much darker Batman. Miller's signature style in those two graphic novels is quickly apparent, as well as the rhythm. In *TDKR*, Miller meticulously controls the pacing of the story and rhythm within the hyperframe. His four panels by four panels grid is the structure by which he expands and contracts time and movement in his novel. *DK2* does away with the grid, and at times it feels as though many of the panels are not temporally sequential at all but are juxtaposed autonomous images from the story. To compare the two novels is to do the later one injustice, as it is not trying to do the same thing as its older brother, *TDKR*.

I will talk at length about *TDKR* in the next chapter on censorship, but for now I will address the affect-image Miller maintains throughout the seminal work and then contrast it with *DK2*. Miller sets up an obsessively consistent four-by-four grid of discrete panels, which he then manipulates by combining individual panels to create larger panels and the rare full-page image. The grid is a form to control the pacing of the novel; larger images move faster, while the smaller images slow the progression of the reader, and these, coupled with words, can slow the

novel to a halt on some pages. The slow rhythm, as contrasted with other comics in the genre, sets *TDKR* apart, and it also emphasizes the importance of the story and language. The strict control of pacing forces the reader to slow down at important thematic and plot junctions, while during action, Miller allows the sequence to increase in speed. Much of the novel is focused on control, both in the form and the narrative. The grid reflects the control within the comic and metaphysically within the comic book industry. More importantly for my purposes, *TDKR* contrasts with *DK2* in form and rhythm in a way that resists narrative conventions and encourages identification with the camera.

In one sense, much of *TDKR* is about control. Bruce Wayne tries to control his Batman identity, which in turn wants to remove political and social controls around him. Superman is effectively controlled through his patriotic allegiance to the US and helps to maintain hegemonic control through his policing. The grid layout is a highly-structured form to tell this narrative focused on different aspects of the superhero. Each chapter in *TDKR* focuses on a different control issue regarding Batman: the battle between Bruce Wayne and Batman, the control of his own aging body, and his influence on the world around him (Joker), and the government's control of Superman. Miller's grid is the control within the comic industry as well. He is fighting the structured industry that maintains its prize characters without letting them deviate from the accepted script. By creating the parameters of the four by four grid and maintaining his commitment to it, Miller is creating a comic that is conventional in appearance but very unconventional in its commitment to convention. The unwavering appearance of the grid was a unique technique to build his comic, making it appear the most "comic-like" of all of Miller's works. Its appearance brought attention to the form itself by being so conspicuous. *TDKR* is after all a comic about comics.

Despite being conventional in form, the narrative itself is not plausible within the discourse, in that the characters within the novel do not behave as comic book heroes traditionally should behave. Batman and Superman are supposed to be Super-Friends, not ideological enemies. Mainstream superhero comics were intended to be read by school-age children and not by adults, but the dark tones of *TDKR* work against the industry standard of comics for children. Miller is creating an unconventional narrative within the constraints of his chosen form. He is using the form itself to work against itself and to surprise his readers by giving them something fresh in a very outdated grid.

While the narrative is a new take on classic characters, the artwork in which the story is told is also new, both with the penciling and the coloring. Miller uses chiaroscuro to great effect when given space. The last three pages of Book One has almost all characters as black silhouettes moving through space. Two Face is only distinguished by the white bandages over his face, and Batman is shown with his piercing white eyes. The blackness that pervades these pages creates a strong tone of hopelessness and pessimism. Book One's theme of being able to control identity is shown to be a losing battle. The first book is a bittersweet victory for Batman, in that he captures Two Face and foils his plans, but he also loses the battle of identity, which is shown through Two Face's own inability to conquer his personal demons. Miller's strong use of black, Varley's near grey and white palette, and Miller's confusing camera angles recreate for the reader the tension felt by the two protagonists. The pages are meant to be stressful and uncomfortable while denying the pleasure of victory. The joy of the criminal being caught is taken from the reader through expressionism and the psychological defeat of Batman.

The themes of *TDKR* are unified in the visual and verbal modes to create tension and anxiety in the reader. Miller's experimentation with the artwork in his novel was to invite a

strong dose of expressionism to mainstream comics, but he was still crafting his style, and he would ultimately expand on his expressionistic techniques in later works like *Sin City* and *DK2*. Underneath the tension and action within the novel runs the struggle for the identity of Batman, which Miller effectively writes using close-ups of the face and actorialized narration.

The types of images that Miller uses are described by Deleuze when he breaks the movement-image into three types of images: action-image, affection-image, and perception-image (Deleuze, *Movement-Image* 69). While *TDKR* and *DK2* use all three types, it is worth noting the high rate of use of the affection-image. Deleuze equates the affection-image with the cinematic close-up (*Movement-Image* 87) as the image focuses on the face; this opens up the interpretant to “two sorts of questions which we can put to a face, depending on the circumstances: what are you thinking about? Or, what is bothering you, what is the matter, what do you sense or feel” (*Movement-Image* 88). These affect-images place the focus on the characters and their emotions, prompting the reader to determine/intuit the psychological forces assaulting the character of Bruce Wayne. The high use of affection-images within *TDKR* invites the reader to begin reading the facial expressions of Batman and almost everyone else, but mostly Batman and Bruce Wayne. The tight grid of *TDKR* leaves little physical space to draw much more than a face, so the high frequency of the affection-image may be motivated in part by the constraint of the form. The use of affection-images coincides with the themes of identity, as affection-images ask the interpretant to read the visual image for thoughts and emotions—the elements that belong to the affective.

An early scene in the novel that utilizes a high amount of affection images has Bruce Wayne walking down Crime Alley after having a drink with Jim Gordon. He is confronted with two gang members from the Mutant gang (Figure 17). With the exception of his actorialized narration, he is speechless. The narration contains his present thoughts, while the images reveal



FIGURE 19: WAYNE WALKING IN CRIME ALLEY

six close-ups of his face from different angles and different moments in time. The verbal and visual modes are seeking interpretation of each other. The sequence of close-ups shows a man in thought who is expressionless, but as the two gang members approach, Wayne's face becomes intensive. The intensive face is what Deleuze describes as "each time that the traits break free from the outline, begin to work on their own account, and form an autonomous series which tends toward a limit or crosses a threshold" (*Movement-Image* 89). The shift from the reflecting face of thought towards awareness, then wonder, then aggression is the movement of Bruce Wayne towards his Batman

identity, or threshold. This is the struggle of a man with his emotions, which is something common in expressionism and film noir. The character's psyche is visibly exposed and readable. Within the close-up there is a change and movement toward action, but this action invariably follows and gains its semiotic power from the affection-image



The affection-image can be a component in any image in conjunction with perception and action images. With the close-up shot, the affection takes dominance over the other movement-images. Miller's use of the affection-image already separates him from other artists whose use of the action-image dominated the genre at the time. The use of the affection-image slowed the novel, punctuates the action with pauses, and invites the reader to look at reflective affection-images (thought) or to study the intensive traits within the image. Miller occasionally repeats an image several times, showing a face frozen in expressionlessness or extreme pain. These repetitions create a polysemic chain of images where each incarnation of the image takes on new meaning, and the more the image is repeated, the more intense the emotion shown becomes.

Miller can find the interior expression of his characters and disrupt the reading of a comic through his use of affect. This is not the same as the punctum already mentioned with relation to Mazzucchelli, but the effect of disrupting the reading pattern and narrative are met in different ways. Miller gives his readers a simple form for reading but uses the variety of movement-images to shift reading strategies. An action-image requires a different reading technique, which requires readers to follow bodily movements, than the affection-image, which requires different literacy skills. The reader must shift between reading these different types of images; and this shift, however fast it occurs, is still a disruption.

The use of affection helps to define personalities and to create a connection using pathos. Several times in *TDKR*, Miller gives one-page anecdotes of innocent people falling victim to crime in Gotham. On one page, he shows a woman riding the subway taking some paints home to her son. The scene is narrated, and the woman's face reflects what is being narrated (Figure

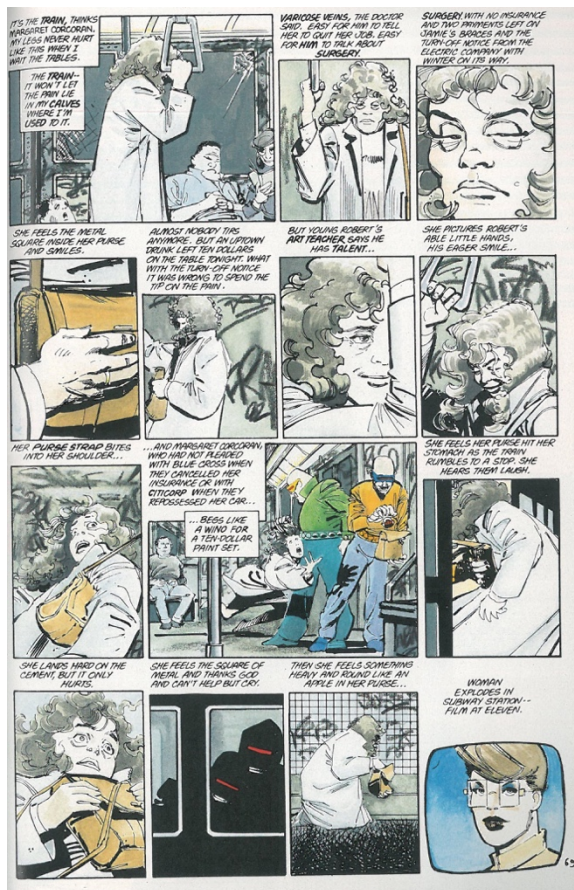


FIGURE 20: PURSE SNATCH IN *TDKR*

18). At one point in the narration we read, “But young Robert’s art teacher says he has talent...” (69) and the woman has a slight smile thinking about how her son is talented; this is the only bit of happiness she can find in an otherwise cruel and unjust society. Miller uses the affection-image throughout this vignette to connect the reader to the woman before she explodes from the bomb placed in her purse by members of the Mutant gang. The affection-image creates a strong sense of pathos in this novel, as well as a connection with the characters. The majority of the affection is directed towards the male characters of Bruce Wayne and Jim Gordon, and only Bruce Wayne is the one

struggling with identity.

The reader’s connection with Bruce Wayne is important, because otherwise we would find him disagreeable, frightening, and not someone easily cheered for. *TDKR*’s ability to create a connection with an otherwise disgusting main character is one of the reasons *TDKR* works, while *All-Star Batman* eludes readers by keeping the readers at a distance when it comes to

pathos. Lee's dynamic style does not sit still for affection but drives forward towards action in keeping with the hypermasculine tone of the comic. While *TDKR* is centered on the masculine Batman whose idealism is unwavering, the camera with which Miller captures the story resists the strong masculine storytelling of the action-image, if indeed different aspects of the movement-image can be categorized as either masculine or feminine. Deleuze has a list that contrasts the reflective and intensive affection-image, and the difference can be associated with a gender, based on normative values:

Sensible nerve	Motor tendency
Immobile receptive plate	Micro-movement of expression
Faceifying outline	Characteristics of faceicity
Reflecting unity	Intensive series
Wonder (admiration, surprise)	Desire (love-hate)
Quality	Power
Expression of quality common to several different things	Expression of a power which passes from one quality to another.

(*Movement-Image* 90-1)

The attributes associated with the reflecting are often orientated towards social roles attributed to women, while the intensive contains feelings of power, strong emotions like love-hate, and movement through expression. I would argue that normative gender roles fit within the schemata Deleuze offers, and that these gender roles are visually articulated in the narrative itself. Miller's *TDKR*, despite being a deconstruction of the superhero and an exploration of the masculine hero archetype, does not fully reflect the strong masculine character of Batman in the

way the narrative is visually constructed, since Miller's greater use of reflective-images tends towards a more feminine narrative.

Miller's Batman is a strong masculine character, as many of the traits often attributed to hegemonic masculinity are present in the aging Batman. He is rebellious against control through higher authorities, he is the strong silent type that does not complain, he is a person of action, and he is the one that wields physical power and intelligence over others. But the emphasis on affective imagery is more aligned with feminine traits than the imagery used by artists like Jim Lee, whose close-ups show faces with dynamic motor tendencies. While Miller's language is stylized after Mickey Spillane and his narrative is just as hypermasculine, the visuals detour into more reflective territory, offering the reader an experience that belongs within the comic world milieu of the 80s, but one that subtly alters the visual method of telling a story in the medium.

Miller's sequel, *DK2*, continues the affection-image as he works emotional and social context into the close-up. I will be brief here, as the hyperframes I have selected offer a new take on the reflective unity of the image while still fulfilling the role of affection-image as described by Deleuze. The opening of *DK2* contains three pages with a close-up of Batman, with words and images covering his face. The first two pages depict his face, with only the white eyes appearing in a black mass with the recognizable outline of Batman's angular and pointed face. The third image is of his spiked gauntlet. The series of three contains a montage of three different voices: the sexualized stock market and investment commercials, the fictional POTUS delivering his State of the Union address, and the reporter Jimmy Olsen fearing the power of the President and wondering where the heroes went. These three voices are metonymic of the social disintegration upsetting the titular character. The panels for these narratives are arranged haphazardly in the black areas that are Batman. Politics and Wall Street are the

catalysts for Batman to re-emerge after three years in hiding since *TDKR*, “My patience is at an end. / The time has come” (*Strikes Again* 16).

The affection-image is covered with various social issues bothering Batman, giving the reader insight into the motivation for Batman to return. In the second image we can see Batman’s head bowed downwards as though he were tired or at unrest. The image offers the



FIGURE 21: BATMAN (LEFT) AND SUPERMAN (RIGHT) MOTIVATED BY THE MEDIA

reflective form of Batman’s face with the conjunction of the talking heads in the foreground.

Twenty pages later Miller gives the same treatment to Superman (Figure 19), with the same media presence, except this time it is the news reporting on the recent activity of Batman. The two characters are contrasted through contextualized affection-images: Batman is spurned by social issues and Superman is motivated to contain Batman.

The first two images of Batman's outlined face are reflective of *TDKR*; the third image shows a departure from the prequel by showing a jagged gauntlet, which stands in symbolically for aggression. The gauntlet is paired with Olson saying, "Where are our heroes?" (17), showing the call for the return of the heroes. *DK2* is a shift from the more defensive *TDKR* to a much more aggressive attack on the status quo. Batman is no longer defending his beliefs against a controlling system; he is now actively subverting and attacking the situated hegemony to remove perceived corruptions. The quantitative distribution of different movement-images (affective, action, and perception) changes to reflect the new focus on aggression. Miller shows a narrative and visual awareness of the difference between *TDKR* and *DK2* by using a greater quantity of action-images and less affection-images. He also uses such cultural symbols as the warrior's gauntlet juxtaposed with Olsen's call-to-arms speech to reinforce themes in his earlier work.

The affective Batman is followed with a scene of primitive masculinity. The narrator begins: "Somewhere on Earth. / Somewhere cold. / Endlessly cold. / Where monsters dwell. / Where man is prey. / One man—alone-- / Savage, his humanity all but forgotten-- / A warrior born" (18). Miller's direct prose, poetic in its rhythm, depicts in plain language the struggle of a warrior man fighting leviathans. The language for the primitive struggle are short terse sentences, a linguistic display of the lack of focus in the character depicted. The man is Ray Palmer, one of the most intelligent people in the DC Universe; he is also the Atom. But at the beginning of *DK2*, he has been shrunk and placed in a petri dish serving as his prison. Through the shrinking process or due to some other cause, Palmer is unaware of who he is, and this is also suggested in the fragmented narrative voice. Palmer's scene, which follows Batman mentally preparing for war, hints at the primitive struggle that will fill the novel. The affective-image of Palmer shifts into action images of a savage warrior and an epic narration of his exploits: "He's



faced foes larger than himself before. / Much larger. / He's battled behemoths and leviathans" (20). Behemoths and leviathans are two great adversaries described in the Book of Job, and the Biblical connotations transform the primitive struggle into a larger effort of good struggling against evil. The short action scene with Ray Palmer fighting beasts is the story of *DK2* in miniature. The fight of a lone man against adversaries much larger, but with the aid of a divine source (for Palmer, a light appears, and his source of atomic abilities and identity of self is awarded to him) the leviathan and behemoth are destroyed. In Batman's case, he is able to secure the help of Superman, a godlike being, to destroy Lex Luthor and Brainiac. But Palmer's story is told almost exclusively in action-images and short, terse sentences. The contrast of the opening two scenes is really a contrast of the themes and styles of *TDKR* and *DK2*. Miller wastes no time situating his comic in the political and action realms.

The two opening close-ups of Batman are the best instances of the affection-image in *DK2*; while there are others, the quantity does not come close to the more reflective *TDKR*. *DK2* drops the four by four grid in favor of the more open layout. Miller no longer constrains himself through form, and he now has choices on how to approach each sequence and each hyperframe. The rarity of close-ups in *DK2* probably owes more to the removal of formal constraints than anything else, and the novel reads much differently than its predecessor. Miller also approaches the visual style of drawing people much differently than *TDKR*, in that he exaggerates certain body parts to denote gender or power. Male hands become larger, creating the show of physical strength, while he accentuates the female body to highlight the curviness associated with the female sex. Though, with both genders he did increase foot size to unrealistic proportions, perhaps to connote speed and stability. The stylistic changes and the different distribution of the

three movement-images allow *DK2* to separate from its predecessor and tell a new story with different themes.

## CONCLUSION

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The life of Bruce Wayne/Batman moves through various masculinities and comic book periods, where both the visual and verbal modes reflect the period of influence, and the masculinities also correspond to each age. Miller's Batman novels explore visual and thematic elements of gender in a retrospective of superhero comics in the twentieth century. Miller ties Batman to the history of comics and uses this template to explore ideology and gender in complex ways, though sometimes with mixed results. He attacks the conventional through the narrative and the visual by defining new forms within the genre. His innovations, such as the four-by-four grid in *TDKR* led to unique approaches to characterization, such as the affection-image, in an otherwise very masculine comic.

Where Miller falls short in his experiments is the confusion of natural and cultural reality. Part of the problem is what Robert Scholes describes: "Part of the critical enterprise of this discipline is a continual process of defamiliarization: the exposing of conventions, the discovering of codes that have become so ingrained we do not notice them but believe ourselves to behold through their transparency the real itself" (*Semiotics* 127). Miller throughout addresses the conventions and visual styles common to comics, while not directly addressing the cultural underpinnings of those conventions in a meaningful way. *All-Star* is a good example of Miller and Lee criticizing the hypermasculine comics of Image while still creating female characters that unfortunately come from the same patriarchal ideological mold. The masculine apparatus is



for the most part intact; it is only transmuted in some areas, such as the heavy use of affection-images in *TDKR* and the static imagery of Mazzucchelli. Mazzucchelli, especially by looking at his later work like *Asterios Polyp*, shows a genuine awareness of the issues with the masculine camera that Mulvey is concerned with. Culture is difficult to separate from the image, especially since many theorists argue that perception of pictorial reality is itself learned through culture. Miller is working against narrative conventions, and this frees him to express a greater diversity of gender within his works than is normally available in the genre; but the continued use of some of the more persistent conventions still limits his ability to truly free himself from the ingrained ideology within the medium, and more specifically, within the superhero genre as a whole.

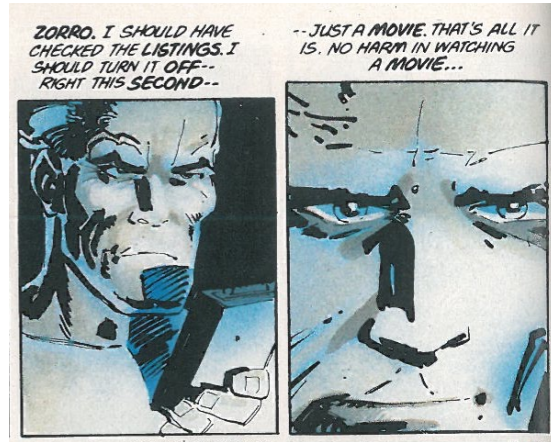


FIGURE 22: *JUST A MOVIE*

## REPRESSION AND CENSORSHIP AS THE MOTIVATION FOR *THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS*

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### INTRODUCTION

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*The Dark Knight Returns* (TDKR) is a seminal work in American comics, as it helped to define a new age of graphic narrative in the mainstream superhero genre by discarding much of the repressive industry sanctioned censorship. The inventiveness and anger perceptible on every page of *TDKR* is a result of thirty years of censorship and individual repression in the comic industry due in large part to the Comics Code Authority (CCA). The American comic book industry giants, Marvel and DC, were constrained through the CCA. The situation was one of a declining readership that saw children stop reading when they got older, while finding new adult

or adolescent readers was increasingly difficult due to negative perceptions of the medium and the often juvenile-oriented narratives.

When Miller stepped into the field in the late 70s, he was fighting against a culture that viewed comics as immature, and he sought to change the industry from the inside by making stories that spoke to an older audience and that didn't run from the CCA but confronted it head-on. In an overview of *TDKR*, Larry Rodman describes the role of Miller and censorship:

Much of the juice in Miller's more extreme conceptions seem to be in direct response to the repression and self-censorship within the comics field, and a refusal to be boxed in by any policy smacking of institutional Puritanism. To be fanciful, Dr. Fredric Wertham, and the Comics Code and Miller's various employers' acquiescence to this repression are his origin-trauma, his goad and the source of his obsession. (Miller, *Interviews* 125)

The obsession Rodman mentions is the recurring theme of censorship in Miller's works. Much of *TDKR* engages censorship with historical nods and allusions. Historically tied to censorship is the implication that media can, as Wertham claimed, *seduce the innocent*. Miller's own belief is neatly summed up in a quote from the 90s, "It's a cartoon. A cartoon, not an intellectual treatise, not a legal opinion, certainly not a physical act. Nothing but lines on paper. Have we reached the point where even cartoons are treated like they've got radioactive, psychoactive power?" (Miller, *Interviews* 121). His remarks underplay the subjective influence of his works and remove all culpability he has as a creator. He opposes the CCA, since the CCA was formed with the belief that comics were negatively affecting the mental growth of children.

Underpinning Miller's attack on the CCA is the idea that comics had become less masculine than they had been before censorship. Creators were repressing their own instincts

and desires to be able to appease the censors, and as a result characters began losing their toughness and hardness in order to receive the CCA stamp. Batman found himself in bizarre situations fighting bizarre creatures since references to drugs and thugs was mostly eliminated from the stories. He became a character for laughter when played for camp by Adam West. The masculine toughness that had defined the character, and really, American comics was disappearing during the reign of the CCA. Miller's confrontation with the CCA sought several paths forward, and these paths forward marked a return to more masculine characters that define their masculinity by individuality and rebelliousness.

The battle within this chapter is between Fredric Wertham's core belief that media can influence a person's subjective growth, either positively or negatively, and Miller's outright denial of this belief and the articulation of his own belief in subject identity through Randian philosophy and masculinist posturing. His attack on censorship and its attendant claims prop up Randian arguments to fill the void of a conquered code. The struggle against censorship defines how Miller creates identities within his comics. Because the ideological struggle with the CCA is a strong motivating force in the *TDKR*, much of this chapter will necessarily focus on Wertham and the CCA as an approach to talk about Miller. After the preliminary discussion on Wertham and the CCA, my focus will center on how Miller constructs the masculine identity of Bruce Wayne/Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* as a reaction against the condition of American comic storytelling in the mid 80s.

To better understand Miller's motivations in *TDKR*, it might be helpful to begin with Wertham's book. Wertham was a longtime critic of comics after he observed that most delinquents he talked to read comics. This should be no surprise since "nearly all young people—boys and girls, loners, athletes, scholars, and debutantes—read comic books" (Hajdu

37). Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) is rife with poor methodology and faulty conclusions, though the core belief of media's influence on developing children has merit despite Wertham's clumsy attempts to prove it. Wertham relentlessly attacked the medium because it was marketed towards children; he even attacked the ads within the comic which sold dreams of masculine bodies (Charles Atlas), airsoft rifles, and knives. He viewed the entire text as offering children a negative view of the world, which, he argued, would lead to their being stunted in their own psychological growth. His attack was directed at visual representations of sexualized females, negative minority stereotypes, and violence. He also quotes at length the violence within the comics that talk of killing and brutality. For Wertham, the comic's visual and verbal modes directly affected the child, but on culture he is rather quiet except when it is expedient to demonize the effect comics have on how other countries view America. What Wertham does not address adequately is culture, and by leaving culture largely out of the equation, he is only publicly cutting off one head of the Hydra. Addressing the most superficial aspects of the medium leaves the more pernicious and hidden ideologies untouched and allowed to perpetuate elsewhere. Wertham would have better served the youth of America had he addressed the ideologies defining gender representation and patriarchal hegemony instead of demonizing a single medium with no correlative evidence proving that the medium was indeed harmful. Within Wertham's study there are three ideological arguments that I will touch on that relate to my larger arguments pertaining to Frank Miller and censorship: Wertham's attacks on the form of the medium as promoting illiteracy through a simplified understanding of the reading process, his unqualified definition and understanding of what constitutes literature, and finally his actual methodology and faulty arguments that serve as a Jeremiad rather than a scientific study.

Wertham's book has been criticized and mocked since its publication around 60 years ago. One of the sharpest, and more succinct summaries of Wertham's book comes from David Hajdu. I will quote at length since he captures many of the problems commonly attributed to Wertham's book:

Fredric Wertham was a physician, not a social scientist.... Wertham conducted no scientific investigation—that is, no study applying the scientific method; he employed no formal measures to test anything, and he had no control groups. His book provided no endnotes and no corroborative support for his conclusions, which were derived mainly through his psychiatric diagnoses of his patients...at three treatment centers in New York City.... Wertham looked no further, drawing solely upon the cases that came before him and his colleagues, and he extrapolated from their evaluations of those cases the judgment that all comic books—not merely crime or horror or romance comics, but all—were harmful to the development of young minds. (233-4)

Hajdu's criticisms continue for around ten more pages, but just in this one paragraph the major faults in Wertham are made clear: namely that his fight, lacking verifiable scientific and social data, may be about something more than what he leads his readers to believe. I will discuss this issue more fully later, but Wertham seeks to maintain the *status quo* since he sees comic-books as counter cultural that is shifting the source of culture from that prescribed by hegemonic superstructures. From the beginning of *The Ten-Cent Plague*, Hajdu is clearly seeking to make this a connection as well, "In [comic strip's] earthiness, their skepticism toward authority, and the delight they took in freedom, early newspaper comics spoke to and of the swelling immigrant populations" (11). The connection between the Sunday funnies and superhero comics is made

because many of the writers and authors were immigrants, or children of immigrants, and the socially oppressed, as evidenced by the large numbers of Jewish creators in the medium. Comics were a social force that had the reputation (since the early 1900s with strips like *Hogan's Alley*) as a form that criticized the *status quo* and offered alternative narratives than the normative constructions of the hegemonic ideological apparatus in place. As a nascent threat to normative values, comics were nearly ubiquitous as there were “80 million to 100 million comic books purchased in America every month” in 1948 (Hajdu 112). This era saw a height in sales not to be achieved again, because six years later Wertham's book was published and followed by a highly publicized Senate hearing.

It is easy today to look down on the scientific failings of *Seduction of the Innocent*, and this allows at least a look at the social motives behind a book like this, especially by a philanthropical and socially liberal man like Wertham. Wertham's book is limited by a narrow vision of the medium, which he views as a form that is anti-literate. In his list of the “bad effects of crime comic books”, the first entry is, “1) The comic-book format is an invitation to illiteracy” (118). Wertham's distaste for the comic medium is repeatedly shown through his characterization of the reading process: “the reader is relieved of the trouble of tackling connected text and can peruse at least some of the stories in the magazine by the simple picture-gazing method appropriate to the comic book format” (120). The serious study of reading comics by theorists like Thierry Groensteen, Barbara Postema, and Scott McCloud reveals a reading process of the visual and verbal modes equal to, if not more complex than, reading a text without pictures.

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen have made a career of pointing out the complexity and social function of graphic design and the semiotic interplay between different modes of

communication, even arguing for the direct instruction of visual media within school to better prepare students for understanding and reading the multimodal world outside of academia. Kress and Leeuwen describe the semiotic process as:

Visual structures realize meanings as linguistic structures do also, and thereby point to different interpretations of experience and different forms of social interaction. The meanings which can be realized in language and in visual communication overlap in part, that is, some things can be ‘said’ only visually, others only verbally; and in part they diverge – some things can be ‘said’ both visually and verbally the *way in which* it will be said is different. (2)

The interplay of the two modes and the opening of meaning creates a wonderfully complex experience that goes beyond the ability to comprehend a book without words. Wertham’s study of illiteracy does not mention if he tested the children’s ability to understand the stories in the comic books, which would (I suspect) prove that his informants were entirely literate in the form of sequential art. But to perceive the special literacy required to read a comic would be to admit that the children were indeed literate in some medium. Wertham’s distaste of comics goes beyond the subject material to the actual form, which shows a prejudice from the outset and colors his arguments. At times, it is difficult to determine if he is talking about genre or medium, as he seems to conflate and/or confuse the two. He argues vociferously against the violence in comics, but he is mum when it comes to other media such as films and even works within the literary canon which can be extremely violent. Wertham’s book is rife with these judgments on form, as though the form itself is the problem and that any exposure to it would only ever result in furthering delinquency and/or illiteracy.



Wertham takes the stance that not only are comics detrimental to literacy, they also poison the minds and abilities of children. He compares crime comic books—he might as well include all comic books—to the upas tree: “it is not a tree which only occasionally bears poisonous fruit, but one whose very sap is poisonous” (252). The distaste against the medium within his book shows little room for accepting anything beneficial. At one point he argues, “The studies for my group have shown us conclusively that children who read good books in their comic-book deformation do not proceed to read them in the original; on the contrary they are deterred from that” (253). The argument invites the question: would these children have even read the original anyways? Did comic books prevent them from reading the original? And if they do not read the original, what is the actual harm? Here, as in many places, Wertham is using his own values to make an argument against the medium while showing a preference for literature he deems of value. Nowhere does he show conclusive evidence that comics are making children illiterate. He has numbers and charts, but the evidence and correlations he uses makes his efforts rather specious. Kress et al. would argue that not only are comics themselves highly literary texts, but they can also improve the reader’s more general literacy if used correctly. Frank Miller shows a great propensity for making extremely challenging sequences of images that require advanced reading skills of both verbal and visual modes. Wertham’s study lacks the semiotic approach to the visual mode to accurately make his case.

Wertham’s views on literature are just as quaint and lacking any sort of complexity. At one point he describes to a little girl what literature is and how comics can ruin one’s interest in reading literary books. Here Wertham uses one of his metaphors to help the girl understand the destructive power of comics:

““Supposing,” I told her, “you get used to eating sandwiches made with very strong seasonings, with onions and peppers and highly spiced mustard. You will lose your taste for simple bread and butter and for finer food. The same is true of reading comic books. If later on you want to read a good novel it may describe how a young boy and girl sit together and watch the rain falling. They talk about themselves and the pages of the book describe what their innermost little thoughts are. This is what is called literature.” (64-5)

I definitely prefer the sandwich over eating bread and butter. Wertham’s description of literature assumes that to be literary a text should not act like his perception of a comic and include violence---a criterion that would exclude Ancient Greek literature, Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, etc. Without a more concrete definition of what Wertham feels is literary, it is difficult to understand what he feels constitutes a literary work. Wertham is acting as many of his contemporaries in English departments acted by making a spurious distinction among works, “[they] divide the field into two categories: literature and non-literature. This is, of course, an invidious distinction, for [they] mark those texts labeled literature as good or important and dismiss those non-literary texts as beneath our notice” (Scholes, *Textual Power* 5). This distinction between literature and non-literature allows Wertham to powerfully dismiss comics with the academic force of the canon on his side without having to take seriously the cultural and literary aspects of the texts.

Robert Scholes neatly sums up why this approach has since been devalued: “Under pressure from structuralists and post-structuralists, this distinction has already been called into question... all texts have secret-hidden deeper meanings” (*Textual Power* 8). *All texts* can be studied culturally and contain an inherent value sometimes not easily recognized; this is the

concept that evades Wertham in his book, but which comic book creators like Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, and Neil Gaiman seek to establish in their own works. These are writers who each seek to validate their chosen medium as something that is literary and worthy of academic study despite the arguments that comic books are *non-literature*.

Finally, Wertham's study is rife with methodological errors and faulty arguments, and it uncritically incorporates the prevalent contemporary gendered ideology. Wertham attacks the comics for portraying women nearly naked and with large breasts. He also attacks Wonder Woman as being bad for children to read, claiming that "she is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel, "phallic" woman. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be" (34). The normative values of what a girl should be or *want to be* is subscribed to here and underlies many of the arguments in the book. Part of what Wertham and his contemporaries see as the pernicious influence of comics is the suggestion that normative gender values are being attacked. Wonder Woman is a strong woman who is sexually and financially independent, meaning she represents all the wrong values for little girls. She is the *phallic* woman that could define herself independent of her husband. The gendered ideology also touches males as well. The "ideologies of masculinity" (*Misframing* 97), as Michael Kimmel describes it, defines the male and how a male should act to attain masculinity. The cultural aspects of gendered ideologies have real-world consequences since the definition of masculinity is often an unattainable goal. Kimmel argues that males often feel like failures and seek to redress their masculine shortcoming through violence, such as school shootings or other acts.

Wertham was sure to ask all his child informants if they read comics, but he never asks why they did such-and-such delinquent act. He never seeks the motivations beyond the false correlate of comic book readers and delinquents. If he did ask, he does not mention it. Much of his book focuses on the emulation of certain actions, and he notes this identification with the comic, or more specifically, with the action itself and not the agent. Wertham may have been shocked to learn that some of the children were probably emulating the masculine male agent rather than the action. These ideological flaws, among others, is probably what led Frank Miller to emphatically describe his experience of reading the book: “I’ve read [*Seduction of the Innocent*], and it’s one of the shoddiest pieces of scholarship I’ve ever seen in my life” (Eisner and Miller 122).

Wertham’s efforts to demonize the medium were rewarded with the Comics Code Authority (CCA), an industry oversight organization that censored comics, both visually and verbally. This had the effect of running many of the comic book companies like EC out of business and changing the content of the comics that survived, meaning that the industry began writing almost exclusively for children. Writing to a younger demographic would end up hampering many of the creators from expressing themselves, since the CCA limited subject matter and the actual anatomically precise visual style in the case of artist Neal Adams. Decades of censorship and declining readership resulted in comics becoming nothing more than children’s entertainment and lowbrow literature. Adult readers either stopped reading comics, turned to the underground scene and read R. Crumb’s *Zap!* or Harvey Kurtzman’s *MAD Magazine*, or looked to foreign markets like Japan and France for more serious material.

These ideological trappings within *Seduction of the Innocent* are the main ones that find their way into Frank Miller’s works in the forms of self, social, and industry censorship. Miller

dismisses the two ideologies that address form and literature as being just wrong, and the final one of the medium and genre being related to delinquency is outright denied with his quote of, “It’s a cartoon.” These three ideologies play a part in the artistic and cultural role of Miller and his chosen medium. They also play a large role in the mainstream superhero genre since 1954. These three issues show an ideological difference that Miller is trying to maintain in his own works.

## CHANGING IDEAS OF MASCULINITY

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The sources used in this chapter look at two major domains: the icon and gender. These two domains are intricately tied together, as this is the battleground being waged between Wertham and Miller. While the overt argument is over the instructional and literary power of the icon, the more covert war is about normative gender. Wertham’s book has built in biases for certain gender constructs while Miller is actively creating an icon built upon masculinity.

Dr. Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) is one of the most important texts on the study of comics written in America. Much of it is wrong, either because of methodology or strong biases, but it stands as one of the most impactful studies on the medium, not least because Wertham’s constant articles and interviews to bolster the message within the book led to a US Senate hearing and the eventual adoption of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) that was even more draconian than Hollywood’s Hayes Code. Wertham attacked genre, medium, advertising, depictions of sexualized bodies, and the artists themselves in his nearly 400-page tome. The arguments in his book are easy to discount, but because of its place in American

comics, it is often referenced and discussed even sixty years later. One example is journalist David Hadju's *Ten-Cent Plague* (2008) which is a history of censorship and the comic book burnings leading up to the CCA. Hadju details the effects Wertham had on protective parents and the reading habits of their children. Hadju described children coerced to burning their comic books, not even ten years after the Nazis were burning books across Europe. Hadju is incredulous that the CCA prevented any delinquency in America, and he considers that the war for the children was fought on the wrong battlefield.

At the same time as this battle over the comics code is taking place, there are movements to redefine masculinity. Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America* (1996) is an excellent resource for the changing forms of masculinity since the pioneer days. Kimmel's analysis of historical and social influences on the individual reveals a trend of external influences. R. W. Connell's *Masculinities* (1995) is not a historical survey of masculinities; instead, it offers a handful of synchronous masculinities in the social milieu. Both Connell and Kimmel detail the experiences of men in culture and society and reveal an underlying influence that affects the identity of the subject. Kimmel's overarching message is the dangers associated with having a conventionalized narrative of what it is to be a "man". This fictionalized narrative drives men to anger when they do not meet the standards, or feel they are inferior to other men based on the cultural norms of manhood. Part of these norms are visual, such as masculine gestures, style, appearance, and body. The visual norms of masculinity can be tracked in comics by how the body is drawn, or by looking at posture. These readings in masculinity reveal the dangers associated with Miller's use of hypermasculinity in many of his graphic novels.

Judith Butler offers a more theoretical view of gender in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) by looking at texts rather than studying individuals. While she often arrives at many of the same

conclusions as Kimmel and Connell, she addresses gender in a more encompassing and general way. Her book provides the basis for looking at gender and sex within a patriarchal culture, not just masculinity. One of the more defining theories she offers is her use of *performative gender*, which understands gender identity as a ritualized and repetitive performance that concretizes identity. Understanding identity as something that is formed through ritual helps to see how media influences an individual. But the ritual must be performed repeatedly to take effect, which means if the performance is not messaged repeatedly or is not rewarded, then that form of identity is not integrated. Reading Butler alongside Connell and Kimmel allows for a more complete picture of gender construction in the context of external forces. While these sources agree with Wertham's original assertion that media can have a corrupting influence on children, their arguments are not based on strong biases or for the desire to tear down any particular medium. Like Wertham, Butler and Kimmel make arguments to change the form of certain social messages that they perceive as harmful for gender construction; but neither Kimmel or Butler engage in a witch hunt against a single medium or genre. Their arguments pertain to the message and not the medium, which is essentially where Wertham erred.

## ON LITERATURE

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Reading Miller's unconventional stories with his multivocal narratives shows a writer concerned with subject matter beyond the typical superhero comics. *Batman: Year One* has no clearly defined villain, and the characters of Bruce Wayne and Jim Gordon serve as narrative and ideological foils to each other. Miller's unconventional story works because of his

characterization beyond the superficial and his levels of meanings implied through the narrative and actions of his characters. A fight isn't just a spectacle but serves multiple purposes.

Wayne's first attempt at being a vigilante is a lesson in street life. He dresses completely in dark colors: blue jeans, a black army surplus coat, a fake facial scar to conceal identity, and a knit black hat. In his wanderings on the most dangerous streets in Gotham, he finds a damsel in distress—an underage prostitute being attacked by her pimp. The irony is that instead of desiring his help, the underage prostitute turns on Wayne and stabs him in the leg during the commotion of the fight. The narrative convention of saving a damsel-in-distress is turned on its head and so are many other conventions dealing with superheroes.

The struggle here is between Wayne and his mission to protect Gotham from crime. The fight with the pimp is not epic; in fact, it is both very raw and a loss for Wayne. But from this failure Wayne learns several lessons: 1) the people he is trying to protect are not scared of him, 2) he discovers that some people who need help do not necessarily want his help, and 3) he discovers his own physical limitations. The fight reveals the obstacles Wayne will face, his initial failures as a vigilante, and the griminess of the worst parts of Gotham. Much is revealed to the reader through the first fight that ends with Wayne stabbed in the leg by the underage prostitute, shot by the cops, and driven away in the cop car, which Wayne subsequently forces to crash. Nothing in the first fight feels exciting or glamorous. David Mazzucchelli makes sure the darks are dark, and the action does not flow and captivate the reader in a spectacle of strength and violence.

Part of the reason for denying a spectacle can be found in a gendered reading of Wayne's first fight. Examining masculinity in the fight reveals that Wayne is not masculine enough to handle real world issues like prostitution, pimping, drugs, and other “dark alley” crimes.



Wayne's naïve entrance, and failure, into crime fighting is analogous to how comics are (circa 1986) unprepared to tackle such subjects. Miller, as he did in *TDKR*, ties Wayne's development as a crime fighter to masculinity. As Wayne develops his identity as a crime fighter, his masculinity becomes more apparent resulting in a stable masculine identity by the end of the novel. But this initial fight cannot be about the senses, since Wayne has not achieved his masculine identity.

The fight instead seeks to explore the intellect. Gilles Deleuze's writings on cinema has some relation here, if just to highlight the qualities of Miller's writing and Mazzucchelli's artistry: "A dualism which corresponds to the two aspects of the time-image: a cinema of the body, which puts all the weight of the past into the body, all the tiredness of the world and modern neurosis; [and] also a cinema of the brain, which reveals the creativity of the world" (*Time* 205). Miller is working with many of the same images and structures contained in the experimental cinema Deleuze is describing. The cinema of the body, for Deleuze, is the body that is full of attitudes through posture and colors. This is the body that has a "before and...after" (*Time* 195). The body has posture and movements that are beyond the spectacle. These are the bodies that "force us to think" (Deleuze, *Time* 189). Deleuze associates the body from experimental cinema with the spectacles from Hollywood that are often fantasy and do not give us bodies grounded in the real world. The dichotomy between Hollywood and New-Cinema is also present within the comic-book industry. Miller's *Year One* and many of his other works have the qualities Deleuze ascribes to experimental cinema while also containing elements of the spectacle. Miller's works dance between the cinema of the body and the cinema of the spectacle, but this careful dance results in forcing the audience to think of the bodies and the

thoughts of the characters. The book is not played for action; the action is a by-product of the character's attitudes.

The postures and attitudes of the characters become evident through the distinct movements represented through Mazzucchelli's penciling. As noted in the previous chapter, the action of *Year One* stands apart from other superhero comics in that the characters during moments of movement still seem frozen in time. Kicks rest and punches linger. Other scenes show characters in recline and not posing in stances connoting power. Mazzucchelli's style evokes Deleuze's idea of the body of thought. The visuals reflect the same ideas of the body in experimental cinema, even in scenes that should be most easily made into spectacle. *Year One's* art separates itself from the more mainstream comics by focusing more on the interiority of the characters rather than dwelling on the exterior mundane bodies. This is in sharp contrast with Jim Lee's hypermasculine art for *All-Star Batman and the Boy Wonder*, which is almost all spectacle. Even when a character should be in recline, the masculine pose highlights the body rather than creating thought.

This differentiation, I believe, also answers to the sorts of literature that Wertham describes as superior to comics. The way Wertham describes the appropriate form of literature seems to favor the interior texts that explore the human psyche over what he saw as constant violence in the comics of the 50s. Where *Year One* is the "bread and butter and finer food," *All-Star* is the sandwich with "onions and peppers and highly spiced mustard." With these basic criteria of studying what thoughts the body encourages, we can discern one of the basic components of what Wertham considers literature. It is obvious that this dichotomy dismisses all the literary qualities inherent within *All-Star* by a superficial test of images. It does not take into

account the intertextual play Miller and Lee are engaging with, nor the context of *All Star* in Miller's Bruce Wayne timeline.

The Deleuzian analysis helps to show the literary potential in comics. What this particular distinction reveals for *Year One* is an overall plan to present the interior of characters rather than to tell another action story. Through his differentiation between Hollywood and experimental cinema, Deleuze describes an apparatus of image that begins to show the depth of characters in certain works by Miller. If Wertham argues the medium is without merit and is therefore trash, the distinctions made by Deleuze and effectively used by Miller show that Wertham's early assertions about the medium were hasty. The interpretive levels contained within the action of Miller's *Year One* are part of a system of experimental cinema, but also a refutation of mainstream comics as well. Miller is distinguishing his work from other mainstream creators of the time by visually and narratively aligning his graphic works with more experimental techniques associated with a non-Hollywood cinema. This is a response to the comics defined by the CCA for the past thirty years. He is deliberately creating a narrative that is redefining what comics are capable of beyond the CCA.

Before Miller and Alan Moore arrived, the comic book industry handicapped itself through the political censorship of the CCA. After decades of the CCA, the industry had settled into adopting something close to "commercial censorship: the self-censorship of the production for the sake of its commercial requirements" (Metz, *Film Language* 236). This censorship is an external force, like the CCA, causing the industry to change itself, by limiting production to only acceptable types of works it can produce to sell. This form of censorship can lead, as Metz writes, to another form of censorship that is perhaps less injurious, but still able to mutilate texts: "*ideological* and moral (or immoral?) *censorship*, it does not derive from institutions, but from

the excessive internalizing of institutions” (Metz, *Film Language* 237). Metz describes the problem of the ideological censorship as one of stagnation by genre without experimentation. The mainstream comic industry stagnated under the CCA, which in turn institutionalized the artists and writers. By writing to a select fan base, the industry became more hermetic with regards to narratives and conventions. Stories and tropes were recycled endlessly in an effort to please the juvenile readership, while experimentation within the medium was limited. The underground comix movement offered a place for experimentation and mature themes to rebel against the forms of censorship plaguing mainstream comics. Comix became a place to search for inspiration and gather new methods of storytelling and approaches to creating graphic sequences. *Year One* stands apart from other mainstream comics in a way that shows its reliance on the more internal cinema Deleuze describes or on the alternative comix movement heralded by R. Crumb’s *Zap #1* (1968).

The industry, having consigned themselves to assured literary and economic obsolescence with the implementation of the CCA, seemed content to keep pedaling increasingly absurd stories to busy their stable of characters. The characters became absurd, which made TV shows like *Batman* in the mid 60s possible, since by then Batman had lost many of his noir characteristics and was a shell of his former self. After decades of pandering to child readers, the industry was settling into a slow death through irrelevancy. The writing and art became less rebellious, with few exceptions that fought the downward trend. With the rise of alternative comics in the late 60s, the direct market gained traction so that by the late 80s there were thousands of shops dealing almost exclusively with graphic narratives. The burgeoning readership of alternative comic writers pioneered a medium for adult readership, but it was a readership that would usually purchase and read almost exclusively alternative comix while

ignoring the more mainstream superhero comics. As well as encouraging the literary merit in the eyes of society, comix also introduced “an ‘alternative’ ethos that valued the productions of the lone cartoonist over collaborative or assembly-line work. In essence, comix made comic books safe for auteur theory” (Hatfield 16). Comix played the role of the literary avant-garde experience in the medium, performing various experimental functions described by Julia Kristeva:

[The avant-garde] rejects all discourse that is either stagnant or eclectically academic, preempts its knowledge where it does not impel it, and devises another original, mobile, and transformative knowledge. In so doing, it stimulates and reveals deep ideological changes that are currently searching for their own accurate political formulation. (“Speak to Literature?” 93)

The rejection of previous discourse models allows newer, more auteur, writers to combat the role of censorship in its social, political, and industrial forms. With the easing of restrictions, or complete defiance, the freedom left to the artist can create an art that “weaves into language (or other “signifying materials”) the complex relations of a subject caught between “nature” and “culture,” between the immemorial ideological and scientific *tradition*...and the *present*, between *desire* and the *law*, the body, language, and “metalanguage”” (Kristeva, “Speak to Literature?” 97). Fewer restraints placed upon the artist allow for an art that better represents the *complex relations* related to the subject, and comix was the beginning of this movement in the medium. The rise of comix prepared the economic and literary conditions for Frank Miller to write for an older audience in mainstream comics that better reflected the values of the avant-garde, or more specifically, the values associated with Frank Miller. The atmosphere was pregnant with

possibility for literary experimentation, and Miller's *TDKR* and *Year One* are prime examples of the auteur working in the mainstream superhero genre.

Alternative comix took seriously the role of the image in relation to the word. Experimentation helped complicate the image sequence as well as the narrative structure. Wertham simplified the pictorial and neglected the word to image relation to something akin to mere illustration. McCloud, forty years later, would also simplify the image, though his simplification was not made to denigrate the medium: "Pictures are **received** information. We need no formal education to "get the message." The message is instantaneous" (49). While the image's semiotic role is degraded to be merely *received*, words are still held in high regard: "Writing is **perceived** information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language" (49). Wertham, I feel, would agree with McCloud's assertions on the received naturalness of pictures and the complexity of writing. This is to neglect what Whitney Davis describes as *visuality*: "vision must *succeed* to *visuality* through a historical process" (8). *Visuality*, which is similar to perception, is not automatic, but learned over the course of a lifetime. Pictorial representations are subject to semiotic processes, much like other coded mediums. The semiotic process of images is often difficult to recognize, and it can thereby make the semiotic equation between images and words possible. W. J. T. Mitchell succinctly describes the difficulty, "The image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence" (43). McCloud, and more importantly Wertham, understood the image as something natural and not as a product of culture and aesthetics. The false equation of perceived and received information is one way to attack comics as promoting illiteracy.



FIGURE 23: REMEMBERING THE TRAUMA OF HIS PARENT'S DEATH

Miller and Mazzucchelli are working against the model of images as received information by adding depth into the images. The images concerning the fight with the pimp betray a focus on the internal emotions and thought of the characters. Miller's art in *TDKR* also accomplishes some of this, especially with the repetition of images. While thinking of the childhood trauma of losing his parents, the frozen face of Bruce Wayne in anguish is shown three times, while two different analeptic images of his mother's pearl necklace before and after it breaks are repeated. The anguished face highlights the emotions of the older Bruce in his fifties and shows his frozen psyche, which is stuck repeating the same traumatic experience repeatedly. The repetition highlights Bruce's own inability to escape from the trauma by constantly revisiting that night. The image begins as a more denotative expression of emotion,

but through duplication, it takes on more connotative powers through the extended duration created by the frequency of the images. If the image was received on the first instance, it surely must be perceived as having more meaning through its continual use (Figure 21), especially as the repeated image stands as an asynchronic transition between the present and past within a relatively wordless two-page sequence of a total of 32 separate images detailing the traumatic moment, all of which takes about ten seconds in story-time. The two-page spread feels more like a film than a comic book, as there are few words to change the rhythm of the sequence, only a passage of one moment to the next.

The thrice repeated image of the frozen face prolongs the intense emotion of Bruce Wayne, whose close-up face resists the urge to turn away from his memories or from the TV screen which is showing Zorro, the catalyst for his memories. Deleuze describes the close up and the motion of turning: “turning away is not the opposite of, ‘turning towards’. Both are inseparable; the one would be rather the motor movement of desire, and the other the reflecting movement of admiration” (*Movement-Image* 104). What Miller offers is a refusal to turn, meaning our protagonist is frozen in his own psyche. The affective is maintained in each image, and it is heightened with the intensive light playing in the bottom of the panel and the expressionistic dark tones at the top. The TV set provides the light and the occasion for the relived trauma, and the screen’s glow is fighting with the dark in the panel. The play of light in the panel effectively portrays the battle waging in Wayne’s mind. The frozen face is reflecting the impotence of the hero, the inability to express an affective desire through movement; his is an affective fear that negates movement. In cinema, which is the subject of Deleuze’s book, the frozen face of Bruce Wayne would appear ridiculous, but in comics, the frozen image can last any amount of time or serve as a constant reminder of Wayne’s affective state. Throughout



*TDKR* there is a noticeable visual shift from the affective to the action as Bruce Wayne shifts his personality towards that of Batman's. The use of image with the noir voiceover creates an atmosphere of complex personalities and the idea that the text is perhaps more open than Wertham would ever concede for anything written in the graphic medium.

## ON DELINQUENCY

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The core of Wertham's book argues that comics are the direct cause of delinquency in children. Throughout his book, this is the theme to which he constantly returns, even when attacking the medium without considering the inherent values associated with it. His assertions that comics promote illiteracy and are unable to produce anything literary are easily dismissed with a little semiotic analysis of the texts. His larger argument of delinquency resulting from reading comics, especially "crime comics," is a little more difficult to dismiss, since all media have influential power. Though he limits his myopic vision to comics, his argument necessarily extends to all forms of literature, but he is quick to let novels off the hook: "The experts claim that comic books are no worse than dime novels. True, dime novels were subliterate; but they were earthy and indigenous and had overtones of literature" (242). Novels are permitted violence and crime so long as there are some vague elements of literature present. Wertham goes on to explain that the dime novels didn't glamorize the criminal and that the hero had morals. Maybe he didn't read the crime noir of James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich, Jim Thompson, and Horace McCoy, where the criminal follows a similar narrative trajectory as their visual counterparts in the crime comics Wertham demonized. Wertham's arguments are often

plagued with vague notions, making it difficult to clearly define his stance without having to search through varying contemporary cultural ideologies and personal beliefs. While impugning comic books for inspiring delinquency, he finds it acceptable to ignore other forms of media on the grounds of possible literary merit. Wertham argues that the use of pictorial representation is what allows children to be corrupted, and this is what sets comics apart from written media.

The foundation of Wertham's arguments are in agreement with Michael Kimmel, only Wertham does not effectively ground his arguments with a sound methodology. Kimmel studies masculinity, and shows how cultural constructions of masculinity can lead to difficulties in the lives of men who are unable to escape the dominant ideology attached to masculinity. Kimmel argues that culture does have an effect on a person's identity. Miller, as a writer, contributes to the cultural notion of masculinity in a way that is potentially harmful, since he is using the hero Batman to construct a hypermasculine identity. Had Wertham attacked comics on their cultural impact, his attacks could have been further redirected to the American culture in general.

Wertham's other argument against comic books is that they are marketed towards children. Novels, he argues, are for adults.

There has been a great critical outburst against the ex-comic-book writer Mickey Spillane and his fictional hero [Mike Hammer].... The critics object to his artless cynicism, his bloody sadism, his debasement of women. To me this criticism seems to be sheer hypocrisy. Mickey Spillane writes for adults and mostly for young adults who have been brought up on crime comic books. (264)

Wertham finds Spillane acceptable because he is marketed for an older audience, and that somehow children are the only group in danger when reading. Kimmel has argued repeatedly that the cultural codes all around us can change our perceptions on such issues as gender, and

Kimmel is not just referring to children as being influenced. A novelist like Spillane is potentially dangerous for his right-wing views on women and government; but since Spillane is writing for adults, Wertham finds no pressing concern.

The CCA was established as a direct result of the efforts of Wertham based on the notion that children were being exposed to dangerous material. Much of the social uproar dealt with censoring the material images of sex and violence, as these are the more obvious ideological codes. Wertham was also careful to describe the mature content in comic books and how the narrative structures encouraged children to become criminals. One example he uses is from crime noir, where the main character is evil and lives luxuriously until the last page, when he finally gets his comeuppance. The objection is that for over 90% of the book, the criminal gets away with his crimes and lives an exceedingly privileged life. To do away with this generic component would be to do away with crime noir, since it would be quite a feat to tell the criminal's story with an arrest or other complication halfway through the story! There are a few exceptions, such as Wilder's film *Double Indemnity*, which begins with the main character dying and recounting his crimes into a recorder.

With the goal of protecting children, Miller's beliefs seem to have many similarities with Wertham's, at least according to an interview conducted in 1985. It will be necessary to quote Miller at length, since he touches on many of the same issues and makes new arguments for the medium.

I would like to see normal comics come out that would make the normal pulp superhero comics look like Archie comics. I want to see stuff that's genuinely using the form to tell stories that I want to read. That's the most important thing the industry has to do. We need to have comics done for adults. Unfortunately,

what we've got is comics that are done for kids, often by people who want to do comics for adults and slip inappropriate material into the kid stuff. By and large, pulp comics make their money selling to children and children are generally much more innocent than older people.... I would be careful not to teach what I regard as pretty dangerous lessons that are taught in comics. For instance, I wouldn't want a child of mine, were I to have one, to read stories where people became more powerful and more effective and more successful every time they lost their temper.... I'm uncomfortable with the idea of children seeing stories where women are dressed in B&D costumes, and where rather annoying coy little sex references are made pretty continuously. Not that sex should be hidden from children, but I am uncomfortable with the way it's presented to them. (Miller, *Interviews* 38)

Already one can see the similarities between Wertham and Miller wanting to protect children from unwholesome messages, and it seems literary merit doesn't matter in Miller's protective stance. With regards to adult literature, Miller wants to create a comic book that is written for adults so adult themes can be allowed to flourish without harming *innocent* children. Both Wertham and Miller seem either unconcerned or oblivious to the influence of media on the reader, whether child or adult, and seek to shelter the child from violence, sex, and other socially unacceptable material. Miller does, at least in 1985, show a concern for how his comics are being read and who is reading them. During his *Daredevil* run, he did not make any of the "coy little sex references" he finds disagreeable, but he did fill his pages with violence.

Most notable is his last issue, where he deals directly with a child learning violence from a newscast of Daredevil fighting Bullseye. The early Miller works deal with the arguments of

Wertham mostly by acceptance and agreement. Miller's own understanding of censorship and art as a social influence changes throughout his career, up to the point in the last couple of years where he says he will focus on propaganda.

Miller's thoughts on censorship become instrumental in his representation of characters and how they define themselves. Self-definition is also tied with gender roles and what Judith Butler terms as performative gender. *Daredevil* issue 191 represents Miller's nascent and uncertain grasp of media influence, while *TDKR* offers a much more nuanced and certain understanding of media violence and gender roles. The theme of identity surfaces throughout the novel in the formation of Bruce Wayne's identity as Batman, Two Face's struggle with ego, and the Joker's closely linked persona with Batman.

Concerning all three, there is also a cosmetic component to identity, in that the appearance of the body is closely related to the identity of the character. Bruce Wayne shaves his mustache, Two-Face has reconstructive surgery on the scarred half of his face, and the Joker dresses flamboyantly and wears lipstick. Another minor character, Bruno, is a transgender person with swastikas tattooed on his/her breasts. Appearance is emphasized throughout *TDKR*, and it is repeatedly shown to be an inadequate gauge for judging the interiority of the characters. These three characters, offer a viable triangle of identities that at the same time deconstruct the genre and argue against the case of negative media influence made by Wertham.

Wertham's arguments rest on the idea that the media can substantially influence readers, either positively or negatively in the case of comics. The degree to the media's effect on readers is debatable, and it is a debate Miller is willing to engage in throughout *TDKR*. The more interesting approach to Wertham is with Two Face and the interior and exterior identity. The case of Two Face is one of aesthetic correction. His face was reconstructed by Dr. Herbert

Willing, and his mind was attended to by Dr. Bartholomew Wolper, whose name is exotic enough to at least hint at some resemblance to Dr. Frederic Wertham. Though the name is a tenuous connection at best, Wolper's role in the novel shows a clear connection to the themes of identity, media, and censorship that Wertham spent decades championing. Throughout the book, Wolper is consistently shown to be wrong, at least according to the rules of identity formation within *TDKR*. Though not directly a villain, he unwittingly aids the criminals within the novel.

The first villain supported by Wolper is Two Face, who is introduced in the novel as a whole person, in that his face is symmetrical and no longer disfigured by a charred left-side and a normal right-side. The aesthetic correction parallels the goals of the CCA in *fixing* the darker crime comics in the 50s. The visual grime and violence in crime comics is metaphorically corrected in the crime boss's reconstructed face. The CCA came in and began editing images to be less dark, less sexual, and less violent. The changed outer appearance was more attractive for wary parents when purchasing comics for their children. The underlying problem with Two Face's facial reconstruction is that he is the same beast underneath despite the sanitized exterior. Apparently, identity is not inscribed on the body, but goes deeper than the reach of a plastic surgeon.

Even when the genre is altered to conform more with social ideologies, the problems of delinquency will still surface as an expression of an identity that can't be solely connected to the media. Miller's criticism is that the medium is not the problem. Harvey Dent is discharged from the hospital after receiving treatment for mental illness, found sane, and allowed to join the larger population. It doesn't take long before Harvey Dent returns to being Two Face despite his supposed reformation in the hospital, both mentally and physically. The treatment doesn't change who he is in essence, which is a fractured ego bent on binary forms of justice.

In the same sense, the CCA sought to sanitize the medium to protect the youth while ignoring other social factors and the efficacy of its own process. Juvenile delinquency was never going to be fixed with the CCA; it was a nice story to have, but it wasn't reality, as the subsequent decades of crime in America have shown. According to statistics for California, juvenile delinquency increased since the 50s in all criminal categories in the 60s and peaked in the 70s (Males n.p.). Rather than curbing crimes in youth, censorship existed despite a significant increase in juvenile crime. Two Face stands as an emblem of only addressing the most superficial aspect while ignoring other factors. The failure to rehabilitate Harvey Dent is the same reason the CCA did not curb juvenile delinquency: it was a failure to take into account a variety of cultural factors in favor of an easy answer.

Two Face is the failed policy; his crimes speak against the supposed power of reform. *TDKR* is an aware novel that alludes to history and the medium throughout. The metafictional approach allows Miller to criticize the criticisms and make his own claims. Wayne is hoping for Two Face's genuine reform, not for the sake of Dent, but for his own psychological sake. He is fighting his own strong personality in the Batman alter ego. It becomes apparent throughout the first chapter that Batman is the real personality and Bruce Wayne is a construct. The narrative parallel between Bruce Wayne and Harvey Dent is obvious; the failure of both identities to maintain control speaks against the implementation of censorship. Despite appearances and the forced show of outward normative behavior, the true self wins out. Their true identities are traumatically formed from a real experience and not from any form of media. Because psychology could not save them by instilling in them positive virtues that accord with hegemonic culture, they are both doomed to be controlled by their alter egos. At one point, Wayne's insistence on control speaks to the idea of reform: "We must believe in Harvey Dent. / We must

believe that our private demons can be defeated” (16). Wayne’s plea is not based in logic, but in hope. If Dent can be saved, then so can he.

The failure of both characters to maintain and conform to an identity prescribed by society directly refutes the idea that media can form and shape identity as anything other than as masquerade. I use the word “masquerade” in a similar way as Judith Butler: “a critical reflection on gender ontology as parodic (de)construction and, perhaps, pursue the mobile possibilities of the slippery distinction between “appearing” and “being”” (*Gender* 64). These two characters begin the novel masquerading as gendered males in a way that satisfies the demands of the culture, but by the end of Book 1, the masquerade is over. Wayne and Dent are essentially Batman and Two Face, identities which are constituted prior to the symbolic of identity. Butler argues that the “symbolic ought to be rethought as a series of normativizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability” (*Bodies* xxiii). The essential identities of Batman and Two Face circumvent Butler’s notion of *normativizing injunctions* by parodying these to present an appropriate identity. The performative aspect here is to give lip service to society and culture while repressing the essential self, which is not a ritualized performance but an attempt to appropriate the performance to create a pseudo-identity. Miller’s conception of what constitutes identity formation is not based on the media or even ego identification, but rather from experiences and his conception of Ayn Rand’s “rational man”. Miller’s understanding of identity in the first book of *TDKR* uses the character’s psychosis to argue against Wertham and defy Butler’s performative gender. This counter-argument will be problematized later in *TDKR* with the Mutants and the Joker, who inscribe identity directly onto their bodies and perform their



identities, but for now, Wertham's ideas have been defined regarding the individual mind in relation to the media.

Miller is also careful to tie Bruce Wayne's break with reality to TV as a way to further distance subjective formation from the media. His parents were killed after they had watched *The Mark of Zorro* at the cinema. Immediately following the movie of a masked vigilante, his parents were murdered, which would lead to Wayne donning the cowl several years later. Miller positions the retired solitary figure of Bruce Wayne at home switching between channels when he lands on a channel showing *The Mark of Zorro*. The movie does not inspire him to be Batman in the method that Wertham argues, but instead brings a remembrance of his childhood trauma, the true inspiration for Batman. His mind reacts against the showing, "Zorro, I should have checked the listings. I should turn it off—right this second--" (TDKR 22). There is a danger the movie will trigger memories of the night that changed his life. The movie itself is dismissed, "—Just a movie. That's all it is. No harm in watching a movie... / You loved it so much... You jumped and danced like a fool... You remember..." (Miller, TDKR 22). Miller uses the flashback in a way to help redefine the inspiration of Batman. It wasn't something so imaginary as mirroring Tyrone Power as Zorro; rather, like Zorro, he became a hero because of the circumstances of reality. What follows is a somewhat cinematic remembrance of each traumatic moment, where each panel passes in time in what Gérard Genette terms as scene duration, where a scene "realizes conventionally the equality of time between narrative and story" (Narrative 94). This extended scene duration, which is uncommon in mainstream comics due to space limitations, creates a subjective link between reader and character in that both observe the traumatic scene in the space of the same duration with subjective visuality from the perspective of a young Bruce Wayne. The scene duration is comprised of multiple focalizations

that shift between a nonfocalized camera, young Bruce Wayne's internal focalization, and the older Bruce Wayne's external focalization (Genette 189). The shifting focalization merges the uncomprehending young Wayne with a traumatized remembrance of this lack of comprehension, with added focal points on images like his mother's broken pearl necklace and his father's falling hand. The scene starts with a static panel of the Wayne family leaving the cinema and then followed with the killing of the parents for nearly three wordless pages. The experience dwarfs the presence of Zorro. This also marks the split in personalities of Bruce Wayne and Batman. The voice thinking of not watching the movie is decidedly Wayne's, but after the flashback is initiated, the voice switches to Batman, "...You remember that night" (*TDKR* 22). This is the beginning of the break, and Miller makes sure to differentiate between the possible media influence of a movie and the trauma of his parents' deaths.

By placing the two events beside each other, the argument is clear: the movie was just the occasion for the trauma to be remembered. It was just something that happened the day he lost his parents. It could have easily been something else, like a trip to the zoo or a visit to a gym. Miller offers the two arguments for identity construction, one based on media and the other based on experience of reality, and his leaning is fairly clear. Indeed, much of the first book is this struggle with the media and experience, where experience is privileged as the main factor for identity formation, while the imaginary seems to have no significance for Wayne.

For Bruce Wayne, the real battle in Book 1 isn't bringing Two Face to justice, rather it is a struggle against his own alter ego, which is a generically innovative approach to superheroes. After mentally reliving the trauma of the death of his parents, Bruce's mind is shattered and is vulnerable to the mental onslaught of Batman:

The time has come. / You know it in your soul. / For I am your soul... / You cannot escape me... / You are puny, you are small-- / You are nothing—a hollow shell, a rusty trap that cannot hold me-- / smoldering, I burn you—burning you, I flare hot and bright and fierce and beautiful-- / You cannot stop me—not with wine or vows or the weight of age-- / You cannot stop me but still you try—still you run-- / You try to drown me out... / ...but your voice is weak.... (26-7)

The Batman identity uses language to construct himself as the subject and to diminish Bruce Wayne as a person. Language here is the foundation of identity. *You* and *I* are part of what Emile Benveniste has observed as unstable signifiers. Kaja Silverman summarizes the key semiotic contribution of Benveniste: “These signifiers have no stable signifieds, are activated only within discourse, and assume meaning only in relation to a subject” (Semiotics 196). Batman is referring to Wayne as “You” repeatedly, who Wayne understands in relation to “I”. The Subject “I” is used by Batman while the other “You” is reserved for Wayne. But the unstable position of these signifiers makes the scene of identity even more unstable, since both exist at the same time in one subject. Bruce Wayne is both Bruce Wayne and Batman, both “You” and “I.” The signified of “you” is directed towards Wayne, which becomes the new signifier of “I” in relation to Wayne. Identity for Wayne is an unstable proposition throughout, and the only real foundation for his persona is his trauma, which isn’t mediated through language or any other mode.

Wayne’s identity is developed from his need to affirm what Freud calls the pleasure principle. The unstable indexical signifiers of “you” and “I” lead to a break from his traumatic memories. Silverman summarizes the process: “The impulse to unpleasure...governs all psychic activity. When confronted with experiences that inspire excitation...the mind attempts to

substitute for them experiences that diminish the excitement” (*Semiotics* 57). Wayne is tense while recalling the death of his parents, and the memories and thoughts of his Batman persona surface in a more pleasurable way to diffuse the pain. For Wayne, Batman fought crime every night and punished people like the man who killed his parents. His Batman persona is a violent catharsis he visits on the criminals of Gotham. The pleasure he receives is a transference of his own trauma onto every criminal he fights. *All Star Batman and Robin* exemplified the violent pleasure Batman experienced when physically crippling his foes. The identity is a complex process involving trauma, the pleasure principle associated with the trauma, and transference using a different persona. Miller is careful to construct the superhero around new lines of identity construction that do not rely on media and the imaginary associated with the mirror formation. Though, this becomes more problematic in later sections of the book when Batman inspires the Mutants to become the Sons of Batman.

Returning to Two Face and Batman, they are both failures as reformed identities. Neither



FIGURE 24: I SEE A REFLECTION

were able to substantively change to fit in with the larger cultural context. Though Batman apprehends Two Face and protects Gotham from the bomb, it is a hollow personal victory. The final page of Book 1 (Figure 22) uses the motif of looking and visual appearance to make clear the distinction of the exterior

appearance with the interior aspect. Two Face is especially concerned with the power of looking, "...Got the whole world to smile at me...got them all to keep their lunches down when they saw my...my face.../ Take a look...Have your laugh. I'm fixed all right. At least both sides match... / Take a look! / ...take a look..." (55). Visual appearances are deceptive here, for both of them. While Two Face is speaking, the interior monologue of Batman is responding, "The scars go deep. Too deep... / I close my eyes and listen. / Not fooled by sight, I see him... / ...as he is" (55). The pleas to *look* by Two Face are accepted and Batman looks in the truest sense, at the concept of a shared identity. Wayne's struggles are matched by Dent's, and both are a failure to deal with personal traumas. The personas of Two Face and Batman serve as transferences to avoid something unpleasurable in their own lives. Batman accepts his inability to deal with his own trauma with the rather defeated line he delivers to Two Face, "...I see...a reflection, Harvey. / A reflection" (55). *Reflection* implies a visual surface like a mirror, carrying on the theme of looking and seeing, which is so prevalent on this page and indeed the whole of Book 1. This reflection is an understanding of a personality and identity that existed prior to, and not because of, the final event. If Book 1 was a commentary on the appearance of comic books and Wertham's attack on the visual aspect of the medium, this final line is the closing argument. Comic books do not build negative identities, but only reflect the nature of the reader in the material. They have no control over changing the reader, just as a mirror cannot change the person looking into it. The mirror serves so that the observer can better understand himself. In the case of Batman searching the interior mind of Harvey Dent, he saw his own interior self and understood himself that much better.

These two characters are failures at conforming to the dominant fiction, as their identities place them outside most of society. Wayne and Dent are marginal masculinities that do not fit

within the dominant narratives of gender, class, and race. They lament their failure to conform, and this shows a failing of both on the last page of the first book. The pained face of Two Face as he speaks, and the bent-over figure of Batman as he comforts the fallen Two Face visually reinforce the idea of failure. Failure to be normative is also freedom from hegemonic ideologies. This is a freedom from the collective ideology to step outside the laws of his country and do what he feels is right. This first book, though it ends on what seems a low note, is actually setting the stage for a libertarian counternarrative in the following sections of the novel.

## HEGEMONY FOR THE MASSES

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The removal of Two Face allows the Mutants to take a more prominent role in the book. The Mutant Gang is organized by a hulking, disfigured leader who lacks any given identification, but rather serves a symbolic ideal of physical power that Batman will test his own aging body against in the chapter finale. The Leader, as I will refer to him, wears a visor like the optic shield worn by Cyclops from the X-Men. His gang members wear similar visors showing a material unity with the Leader. The visors and bodily alteration make the gang members immediately recognizable through their adoption of the Leader's appearance, both through worn accessories and bodily mutilations. The gang not only follows the Leader, but they also try to appear like the Leader through approximate mimicry by wearing the visors and shaving their heads and by using symbols like spike implants in their scalp to show an affinity with the Leader's own disfigured and aberrant appearance. Much of the masculine body in Book 2 is specular with regard to the followers and especially for Batman and the Leader.

With respect to what the Leader stands for socially and how he appears, the Mutant Gang departs from the larger dominant fiction associated with hegemonic values. The Gang stands outside of what is considered culturally normative, both in actions and appearance. The clothes are strange by the standards of the 80s, and even their speech resists the standard spoken English. One can see in the Gang a group of young adults turning away from the dominant fiction in favor of a more liberalizing existence. This shifting from normative behavior is exactly what Wertham feared comics would precipitate.

Though Wolper only plays a small role in Book 2 of *TDKR*, he has a very explicit speech with regards to the media and the psyche of the masses.

Picture the public psyche as a vast, moist membrane—through the media, Batman has struck this membrane a vicious blow, and it has recoiled. Hence your misleading statistics [on crime dropping]. / But you see, Ted, the membrane is flexible—and permeable. Here the more significant effects of the blow become calculable, even predictable to wit-- / Every anti-social act can now be traced to irresponsible media input. Given this, the presence of such an aberrant, violent force in the media can only lead to anti-social programming. / ...A whole new generation, confused and angry-- / --will be bent to the matrix of Batman's pathological self-delusion. Batman is, in this context—and pardon the term—a social disease. (65-6)

This passage contains many of the claims presented by Wertham about the media and how comics are more like a social disease, but since Batman in *TDKR* is representative of comic books, the transference of him being a social problem is here made explicit. Book 2 of *TDKR* is mostly concerned with the physical body of the superhero, just as Book 1 was concerned with

the ego identity; but within the deconstruction of the superhero body lies the *what if Wertham is right* argument. Miller's refutation of Wertham in Book 1 finds a different approach in Book 2, especially with regards to Dr. Wolper's line, "Every anti-social act can now be traced to irresponsible media input," which foreshadows the hypocrisy of Wolper and the media in Book 3. In the first instance, the Mutant Gang follows the anti-social, anti-normative Leader, but they will soon follow the anti-social Batman after he physically breaks the Leader in hand to hand combat. Associated with the body is physical male dominance, and when Batman asserts his own physical dominance over the Leader, he gains the following of many of the Mutant Gang, who will soon begin calling themselves The Sons of Batman while covering their faces with the Batman insignia. Batman is the more powerful signifier to follow. In some ways, the group's sublimation for a better social ideal in Batman reflects what Kaja Silverman describes in colonialism: "hegemonic colonialism works by inspiring in the colonized subject the desire to assume the identity of his or her colonizers" (*Male Subjectivity* 299). Batman's physical prowess through hand-to-hand combat has earned him the followers of the Leader, fulfilling Wolper's warning of Batman being a social disease or a pervasive symbolic ideal. The warnings of Wolper are further confirmed as these malleable minds seem easily controlled by dominant personalities. According to his warning, "a whole new generation...will be bent to the matrix of Batman's pathological self-delusion." This delusion is coupled with the appearance of the body, since it is through visual signs that the gang seek to align themselves with their chosen leader.

While the Mutant Gang/Sons of Batman verify the warnings of Wolper/Wertham, they are also instrumental in showing that good can result as well as bad. The positive influence of comics is something woefully neglected by Wertham, since he only looked for the negative impact of crime comics and used that to impugn the medium. Taking the gang seriously as



characters is difficult, since they are nearly as amorphous as Woody Allen's *Zelig* and meant to be despised as lacking their own presence since they all dress the same and talk with their own idiolect. Miller, who at the time was reading Ayn Rand, most likely had some contempt for the members of the gang, since in her own description of Objectivism, Rand comments on the individual: "Man—every man—is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself" ("Voice of Reason" 4). One can see Batman and the Mutant Leader fitting her description of *Man*, but the gang members fall well short of living up to her philosophical ideal. Miller reinforces the impoverished identities of the mutants by covering their eyes with the visors, uniting them in similar dress, often placing them in the shadows, and having them all talk the same. There are two members of the gang identified by wearing shirts that say, "MY NAME IS ROB" and "MY NAME IS D—". These shirts serve more as irony, since the name hopes to define and individualize the two, but the two are exactly the same as all the others despite having names. By limiting characterization of the gang members, Miller is undercutting Wolper's/Wertham's arguments by creating a satiric group of people that would be influenced by comics, since they seem stuck in identity formation. The gang members lack all individuality and are grotesque caricatures of Wertham's own subjects. A more immediate criticism by Miller is evident by looking at Rand's understanding of reason and seeing that the gang members lack the tools to lead or to think independently like Batman, and it is therefore Batman's right to manipulate them as he wants.

There is a distinction to be made between Bruce Wayne's repression of his alter ego and the Mutant Gang's transference from the Leader to Batman. The first two books center around the ego-ideal of Wayne and the gang. Book 1 is the disintegration of the prohibitive and

regulatory super-ego (Wayne) to allow the ego-ideal (Batman) to take over. The struggle is to remove the social norms—or censoring laws—as a way for true change to occur. Wayne’s struggle is an interior battle of the psyche, while the Mutant Gang is a transference of signifiers on the level of the symbolic, and not so much a struggle between the ego-ideal and the super-ego, which remains intact after they begin calling themselves the Sons of Batman. It is this distinction between the acceptance of new identities that distinguishes Wayne from the Mutants and places him as a more powerful being than the gang. It is of some Oedipal significance that the Gang changes its name to the Sons of Batman, which places Batman in a paternal role, one that the gang identifies with, an identification that supplants their former identification of brute strength in the Leader.

It is perhaps unintended, but Miller’s application of schizophrenia onto Bruce Wayne allows Bruce Wayne/Batman to think outside of hegemonic values. Wayne’s interpretation of reality, as in his dialogue with his split ego in Book 1, his perverted pleasure in causing pain in *All-Star*, and his understanding of his role as a force of good, places his mind outside of the mainstream. Deleuze and Guattari discuss schizophrenia at length in their book *Anti-Oedipus* and mention Freud’s own distaste for the schizo<sup>6</sup>, since he could not reconcile the schizo with Oedipus (*Anti-Oedipus* 25). Later they characterize the schizo as someone “continually wandering about, migrating here, there, and everywhere as best he can, he plunges further and further into the realm of deterritorialization, reaching the furthest limits of the decomposition of the socius on the surface of his own body without organs” (*Anti-Oedipus* 35). The schizo,

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I am using the word *schizo* in accordance to translations of Deleuze and Guattari’s usage.

according to their Marxist psychopathology, stands outside the coding of capitalism and is able to resist an artificial reality created as a process from the process of production. It is the schizo that “resembles the philosopher” (*Anti-Oedipus* 25) and is a danger to the ruling class who are in control of social coding.

Miller’s careful construction of Batman is one that clearly places him as an outsider to the social order, a move that permits him to act the vigilante and enact his own laws on criminals without having to question himself. Any questioning of his activities is done through people as part of the status quo, and they are often portrayed as lackeys (Superman), satirical caricatures (Ronald Reagan), uninformed experts (talking heads on the news, Dr. Wolper), and even by Bruce Wayne through the central repression in Book 1. Any criticism of Batman is easily brushed aside by mentioning the ethos of the speaker within Miller’s world. What this leaves behind is a Batman with whom Miller clearly sympathizes, surrounding him with the naysayers of comics, media violence, and the censorship from government and the industry. This can be problematic, as Batman is unhinged and is shown to have masculine values that are potentially dangerous as ideology.

The repression in Book 1 emphasizes the comic industry’s own censorship by the repression of artistic inclinations. Bruce Wayne repeatedly denies Batman a place of subjectivity by inebriation and self-destruction through unnecessary physical risks, such as endangering his life during the opening car race. Denying Batman a place represents an inability for Wayne to grow to his potential of moving beyond the confines of society and taking his place as an individual. The schizo is realized when he succumbs, when the repression is ended, when Batman takes control by suppressing the repressive urges of Wayne. Batman is agent while Wayne is passive; this dichotomy also suggests a gender difference between the two

personalities based on normative gender values. The emergence of Batman marks the rise of the new comics of Miller and those auteurs that follow and the return of a pre-CCA Batman. After all, it is the trauma of the past that sparks his crisis point, and his return from retirement is also comic's return to generic form after thirty years of repressed/censored storytelling. Miller is framing the discourse on censorship within the roles of active and passive, where active is the destruction of repressive policies towards a more individualistic—or auteur—form of storytelling. This transcendental individual also falls in line with Rand's *rational man* objectivist philosophy. Maintaining the status quo of repression is a slow, passive death in the shadows of other thriving media better suited to more liberal storytelling. Miller's critique of the industry is couched in the internal struggles of Bruce Wayne and his physical actions against the socius.

## BATMAN IN THE MEDIA

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In *TDKR*, Batman is the embodiment of comics and comics history in America. Other characters with whom Miller explores identity represent issues related to censorship, such as Two Face and his role as an incarnate drive towards lawlessness and crime. Book 3 concerns the antics of the Joker and his reflexive identity of Batman constituted and made possible by the media. When we first see the Joker in *TDKR*, he is catatonic, and he only shows signs of cognition when he overhears the news talking about the return of Batman. The mediation of the news helps to bring the Joker back into action. His first words show his fixation on Batman, “BB... / BBBAT... / Batman. / Darling” (*TDKR* 41). His cathexis of Batman shows a slight homosexual tendency with the coupling of the word *darling* and the image of the mouth, close-

up and smiling. The words and images are coextensive with the political commentators: “The only thing [Batman] signifies... / ...is an aberrant psychotic force” (41). The commentators, Joker’s words, and the image unite the Joker, Batman, and the media itself as forces working on each other. Here the media, while discussing Batman as a negative influence and possibly a social danger, have inadvertently woken the Joker. Though, even here, the media cannot be seen as corrupting or influencing a character. It was merely the messenger that awoke the dormant desire within the Joker, much in a similar way that *Zorro* works on Wayne.

The Joker’s role in *TDKR*, besides being reimagined as the ultimate foil to Batman, is also to indict the news media in a way comparable to Wertham’s own accusations of comics. After using Batman as a proxy for arguing against media influence, Miller is now using the arguments of those he disagrees with to offer a counter narrative on media influence to pre-empt the arguments of the next Wertham. Joker’s eventual release is tied to the media, and his rehabilitation is championed by Dr. Wolper. His argument for release is made on the David Endochrine Show, an obvious caricature of David Letterman. Joker, a mass murderer, is given a voice on a late-night entertainment talk show for the pleasure of the audience. The news media throughout *TDKR* is a satire of the news’s tendency to dramatize and exploit tragedy for a base entertainment value. The Joker becomes the destructive result of a media saturated in violence and misery, and his first act as an agent of the media is to literally poison the entire audience of the David Endochrine Show. He does this as a staged performance by dressing up, wearing make-up, and wearing a bright red lipstick that further hints at the homosexuality of the Joker.

The Joker is a showman. He dresses well and is careful about his appearance, he acts the repentant for Dr. Wolper, and he appears on a talk show most associated with celebrities. The Joker was inspired by the media, and he is now using the media in a rather cruel way to ensure

his release and to broadcast his own message. When entering the stage to talk with Endocrine, Joker's inner thoughts show a resigned understanding of the audience, "So many faces—so different from one another... / ...so few smiles" (TDKR 125). A few pages later, after killing the audience with his laughing gas, he echoes his earlier thoughts, "So many smiles-- / --so many faces-- / --all the same" (Miller, TDKR 129). One can see in these two thoughts a biting critique of modern media as creating a culture of sameness. Joker is this destructive force of media-inspired culture that destroys individualism. And rather than gather groups of followers, the Joker lacks the impact of Batman, so must resort to killing. The few people Joker does befriend are social outcasts much like himself: Bruno, a transgender neo-Nazi, and an unnamed corpulent bomb maker with obvious pictorialized social deficiencies.

The Joker lacks all filters. His existence is a reaction against Batman. The Joker is the uncensored individual that can live beyond the normative boundaries of gender and society. This is the individual that Wertham feared and argued against. The Joker does not identify with Batman, but rather has a cathexis with Batman, either as a symbol to focus his own homosexual desire towards or perhaps as a worthy adversary—possibly both. It will not hurt to mention it one more time, but Batman represents the history of comic-books, and as such, is the focus of the deranged mind of the Joker. Batman may serve as his imaginary order, but he does not function in the same manner that Lacan described, since the Joker only responds reactively and not formatively. Wertham argued that comics were perverting children's morals, and here Miller gives us a caricature of Wertham's fears in the form of the Joker, a homicidal psychopath. Dr. Wolper does his best to place the blame on Batman using pseudo-psycho-babel, but no reader would argue that the Joker's murder spree was because of Batman. Miller is setting up the Joker as a hyperbolic straw man against the claims of Wertham.

Miller does everything he can in *TDKR* to free mainstream superhero comics from thirty years of CCA censorship. He redefines the modern superhero who will wake up and take the mantle from the cowed heroes that slumbered through the period of repression. Miller's building of Batman begins with ego-identity and moves to the body, the media, and finally to ideology. *TDKR* is a strong polemic arguing for a new direction for American comics, and at the core of this work is the construction of identities based on an experiential understanding of identity formation. Miller works with normative gender roles and reworks them to fit a more rational (Randian) model, and from this model he argues against the institution of industry censorship.

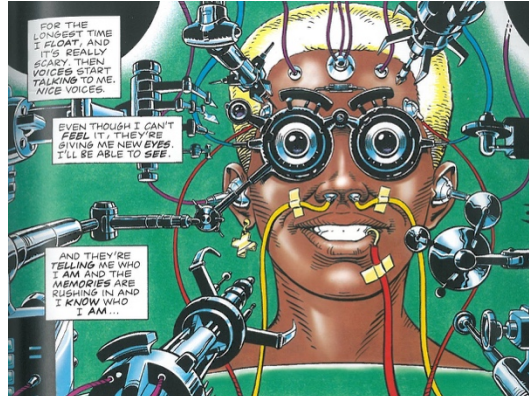


FIGURE 25: MARTHA WASHINGTON BEING EDUCATED

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM: RE-EVALUATING THE CANON USING WORKING MEMORY

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As a teacher of English, I justify my role in the university to foster cultural and textual power, as Robert Scholes calls it. My goal is to encourage students to become critical individuals rather than drones in the economic machine. I may add that my students should also learn to critically engage with the world in a meaningful way, while questioning themselves and the various ideological apparatuses in place. My remarks may seem to drift far from my specialized area of study, but such topics offer an opportunity to instill in students the democratic thinking and revolutionary ideas inherent in critical pedagogy. I would further assert that my value stretches far beyond the classroom into the community.

Robert Scholes has tracked the historical rise and fall of the English Department, finding fault in how English literature is taught. His books on pedagogy approach teaching literature using semiotics, which is a method suitable to preparing students to gain *textual power*, or rather



a critical and interpretive power over the text. His criticisms argue that students are being “prepared in the old way” (After the Fall xiv). He suggests that graduate students are trained in narrow research fields that limit their ability to find a job in the “world they encounter” (xiv).

Scholes offers a re-evaluation of what a humanities department should do. The underlying decline and fall, Scholes argues, is “the fall of all the humanities in a world that is driven by technological progress and the bottom line. In such a world the humanities must demonstrate their usefulness in order to survive as more than tokens of gentility” (xiv-v). Scholes proposes making the humanities pragmatically useful to save the departments in the face of a decline in numbers of students. Scholes is not arguing for departments to emphasize training future workers; indeed, this line of reasoning is what critical pedagogy fights against. Instead Scholes suggests we “replace the canon of texts with a canon of methods” (Rise and Fall 145). The shift away from the traditional canon offers the student the ability to read a greater variety of texts with greater understanding of cultural and generic codes. Scholes is arguing to implement a program based on developing critical thinking rather than the “old way” of reading the canon. His approach allows the student to transfer the learned critical methods to a wide range of texts outside of the classroom. The student’s critical faculties make him able to navigate the world with greater ease of understanding and become a useful addition to many businesses. In this way, Scholes envisions the humanities department becoming a necessary department in the university.

Part of the change Scholes advocates for is more interdepartmental instruction and redefining the canon to include texts not traditionally considered worthy of study. In America at least, this includes graphic novels, whose study has been greatly neglected. Part of this stems from cultural attacks on the medium as being throwaway literature, and in part because the

medium has a visual element that seems more appropriate for the art department. The graphic novel can help bridge the borders between departments while at the same time redefining what is considered literature. Scholes is not directly arguing for comics, or really any multimodal texts, but his critical pedagogy serves as a strong philosophical foundation for graphic novel's inclusion in the literature classroom. Theorists like Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen do advocate for multimodal texts in the classroom as part of their arguments to instruct students in an increasingly multimodal world. Like Scholes, they too have semiotics as a foundation for their arguments. While semiotics plays a role, Kress and van Leeuwen also rely heavily on systemic linguistics applied to the visual mode with the help of semiotics and its use of codes in what they term the *grammar of visual design* (1). Of necessity, they are concerned with the educating students in the visual language of design in such a way that extends beyond the classroom, but they often limit themselves to visual design to the indifference of *textual power*. The application of Scholes and Kress allows a greater understanding of visual mediums like comics and how to best introduce and teach these texts in the classroom. While my focus is specifically on sequential art, the pedagogical implications of this chapter extend to all modes of communication. The expansive nature of a multimodal course—multimodal referring to the texts studied and also to the manner of instruction—helps to provide a valid argument for the importance of the humanities professor who can extend beyond disciplines and the classroom.

Paulo Freire, one of critical pedagogy's most famous practitioners, offers a definition of critical pedagogy that I feel works here when he says that education should enable "the people to reflect on themselves, their responsibilities, and their role in the new cultural climate—indeed to reflect on their very *power* of reflection" (Consciousness 13). Freire's definition is a social approach that takes into consideration the culture and the spaces outside of the classroom. To

arrive at the same destination of critical engagement as Freire and Scholes requires an understanding of cognitive learning and then critically choosing material based on this knowledge. I think the advancement of critical pedagogy in the classroom through the working memory model (WM), put in place by Alan Baddeley, requires a re-assessment of what can be accomplished with certain materials like graphic novels.

One approach that complements the concepts of working memory and critical pedagogy is semiotics. Semiotics offers an understanding of meaning and how meaning is constructed, both by the sender and receiver. Though semiotics does not often venture into cognitive processes, it does offer glimpses involving the construction of meaning, which in turn can be applied to Baddeley's models. The application cannot be exact, since Baddeley's theories differ with individual's capabilities, as does semiosis and cultural knowledge.

Both WM and semiotics are concerned with the various aspects of text comprehension laid out by Milton J. Dehn:

Text comprehension includes...decoding individual words and accessing their meanings; assembling word meanings into larger meaning units; constructing representations of sentences; linking information across sentences; detecting inconsistencies between parts of the text; focusing attention on the main ideas; creating visual images; forming new knowledge representations; drawing plausible inferences on the basis of prior knowledge; monitoring the understanding of a text as reading progresses; integrating information for different parts of a text; and integrating information with related long-term memory representations. (103)

Dehn's list shows the number of cognitive processes involved in reading comprehension and underscores the importance of a properly theorized course using Scholes emphasis on textual methods of reading, alongside an approximate understanding of the students' current and prior knowledge. A strong knowledge of cultural and generic codes frees up working memory capacity for higher order thinking.

The combination of semiotics and working memory provide an argument for the selection of visual materials and multimodal approaches for the critical pedagogy classroom. It is my ultimate goal to argue for the inclusion of more multimodal texts, as these texts increase the likelihood of retention and activation of working memory. Graphic novels are the texts I am interested in teaching, with a focus on the superhero genre. The last ten years has proven to be the golden age of the superhero movie, and the generic and cultural codes gained from watching these films can be affectively appropriated in the study of the superhero comic. I argue that graphic novel inclusion is pedagogically useful for critical pedagogy and as a more accessible way of teaching critical thinking skills. And because multimodal texts are often ignored in the literature classroom, these chosen texts can be viewed as challenging the student's assumptions of the definition of literature.

In one of my literature courses, I had the opportunity to teach Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* (1987). The themes in the novel, such as rebellion and individual thought, complements many of the core beliefs in critical pedagogy, making it a fitting choice to use. As described later in the chapter, I was able to use a variety of in-class tasks to enable my students to think about the medium, the production, the artistic choices, and the narrative structure of the graphic novel. All of these elements lead up to a goal of textual power that the students could then apply to other texts. By using Robert Scholes, I was able to imagine more creative and

engaging activities for the students to do rather than limit myself to lecture. I feel that teaching multimodal texts, or implementing multimodal activities, opens up new approaches to learning.

Much of this essay discusses the uses of multimodal texts within the classroom with limited discussion of the multimodal classroom. Every classroom contains some form of multimodal elements, such as spoken words, gesture, iconic imagery, and the written word. These are the basic, but what I mean by the multimodal classroom is the inclusion of images, music, videos, recordings, and other modes of communication that can be used to help students understand and develop a strong intertextual and intermodal interpretation of the studied texts. An effective multimodal classroom can be centered on a monomodal text while using other modes to develop critical thinking and activate working memory. While my focus remains on the text, much of the theories utilized can be applied with success to the multimodal classroom.

For the literature classroom, I am arguing for a greater use of modern graphic narratives to teach many of the same literary themes taught traditionally using canonical texts. The pedagogical benefits from teaching texts that students are familiar with supports a program for the teaching of textual reading methods. One of my favorite texts to teach is *Batman: Year One* (1987) by Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli. The text is short, requiring around 1-2 hours to read, and it is accessible to most students with few explanations required. Some cultural and historical context is needed, but the ease of reading allows me to immediately discuss with the class how Mazzucchelli's visual style reinforces the language and narrative themes of Miller. Or we can compare the narrative structure of *Year One* with other superhero narratives—graphic novels or films. Not everyone has seen all the movies, but almost everyone has seen at least one superhero film. Using the student's previous exposure to the genre and our current culture opens up a possibility of generic and media-based interpretations that is immediately relevant to the

culture outside the classroom. In the next section, I will describe a series of in-class activities centered on sequential art. In the following sections I will provide the theories to support my pedagogical choices.

## THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IN THE CLASSROOM

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In previous courses where I taught graphic novels, some students—often international ELL students—had difficulties understanding some of the conventions used, such as the various outlines of word balloons signifying differences between a present speaker, a thought, or a voice coming from a radio. Other students could decode the comic conventions but had difficulty with comprehension. The majority were easily able to read and understand, with just a minority showing some basic difficulties that could be resolved with a short how-to guide before reading.

The instructor should be sympathetic to students who show a low-level literacy with images; reading images is a learned process and, unfortunately, our public schooling generally limits education in this area. Proponents of visual culture theory argue, as Whitney Davis does, that “to see pictures and certain other man-made artifacts...is inherently to see them as having configurative, historical, representational, and cultural styles—aspects that can be recognizable or recognized and represented or replicated as such” (36). Perception is both subjective and culturally determined, meaning that looking at an image doesn’t necessarily mean a reader will understand it. Realism in imagery is a culturally perceived process that is learned over time and based on historical and cultural styles, as Davis argues. For many people, reading an image is automatic due to daily contact with advertisements, TV, magazines, billboards, etc. Our world is

continually presenting us with images, helping to make the reading of images automatic, which in turn requires little capacity from working memory due to the automaticity.

Many students have been exposed to art and, more specifically, to comic book art. But for those students who never had a chance or desire to read comics, it can be a tough proposition at first, especially as style of representation within the comics can differ from other representational forms. It is not often you find a Jack Kirby-inspired piece of art outside of a comic, and the style can be somewhat confusing. This can be even more difficult when considering Scott McCloud's seven types of transitions between panels, and all the other conventions regulating narrative within a comic. These are all aspects that should be touched upon when starting a graphic novel. A student not aware of these may skip them over or struggle to read the text, which in turn limits potential for LTM storage. Reading a comic needs to be learned. Neil Cohn even ventures a thesis that "*comics are written in visual languages in the same way that novels or magazines are written in English*" (3). There is a language of visual motifs, schemas, and tropes that needs to be considered to help structure a strong learning experience for the students. Authors like Cohn, Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, and Barbara Postema (there are many other writers who have tackled the subject as well) have written excellent texts describing and cataloguing the visual language within comics. These resources offer a solid foundation for understanding and implementing teaching methods. What few of these texts offer, though, are actual activities that put into practice these theories.

I will share one class project in one of my introduction to literature courses that I hope made efficient use of class time and accessed working memory so that the students learned the material in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, my reflection is hindsight, so much of the project describe is not one that I had-a chance to put into practice in the classroom. The project was

designed as a team collaboration in the creation of a short Batman comic of around 2-3 pages. I took as some of my guiding principles advice given by Ken Bain: “The best teaching creates a sense that everyone is working together” (100). In a sense, if everyone is working, then, potentially, that means everyone is using their working memory. I designed my Batman comic project around collaboration and creative constraints. The purpose of the project was to instill in the students the process of creation in a heavily regulated industry, the barriers a story faces before publication, the roles of each person involved, the appreciation of graphic narratives, and the roles of culture and social forces in the creative process. Naturally these themes touch upon different aspects of hegemonic control and ideology, which I was sure to mention during class whenever appropriate.

The Batman comic project began with a simple writing prompt: “Write a Batman story.” I gave them this prompt before I taught any graphic narratives so that they would write from their own experience and assumptions of what a Batman comic should be like. I think this also provided a nice variety of stories, since they weren’t all be mimicking *Batman: Year One*, which I taught during this creative project. After they fulfilled the prompt, I asked them to put it aside for the moment. I then lectured on the Comics Code Authority (CCA) circa 1954. I went over some of the arbitrary rules enforced by the CCA and the oftentimes unqualified and biased CCA censors, and I mentioned some strange moments in censorship. I provided a handout with a large selection of representative rules from the CCA and gave them a chance to read it over and become familiarized with the rules.

I collected their Batman stories and handed them back randomly. I then asked them to assume the roles of censors. I told them that some of the censors were often housewives with children, or people of religious convictions who saw their job as an act of charity. I asked them



to censor their classmates' Batman stories, but to also provide an explanation for each item censored. The explanation element of the task forced them to either cite the rules or offer a creative interpretation of the rules. The explanation also had the advantage of accessing working memory, as the students were forced to interpret and implement the various rules. This part of the project the students quite enjoyed, and since they were working creatively and purposefully with the rules this increases the chance of deep learning. Some of the stories were heavily censored, while others only received a few comments and were mostly left untouched. I let them read the comments and then talk—some humorously argued—with the censor. We then discussed the role of censorship in creative expression and how this process drastically changes the initial story idea in some cases. At the end of class, I collected the stories for safe keeping. This was where my practical experience ended. The rest of this project is based partly on what I could accomplish in subsequent classes and what I would do in future classes based on available time and the focus of the course.

During the next class period, we examined examples of scripting comic books. I first described to the class the Marvel Way of creating comics, which was basically Stan Lee pitching a story idea to the artist Jack Kirby and then Kirby drawing 22 pages, with Lee adding dialogue later. This description was followed by more modern selections from scripts by Grant Morrison, Frank Miller, and Allan Moore. These three writers offered three different styles of scriptwriting, with either a vast amount of descriptive language detailing how each panel should be arranged and what should be in it, or very few details, allowing the artist more creative freedom. I then handed back the original Batman stories to the authors and instructed them to turn their stories into a script of around 2-3 pages for homework. This was a very low number of pages, which would require them to be creative and adapt their stories to fit this tight constraint.

They had one week to turn in a typed, double-spaced script. The chance to expand their story and follow the models reinforced the material in the course. During this week in class, we went over narrative structure in mainstream superhero comics, hoping this instruction would help with their own writing while also reinforcing the material taught in class.

A week later, the students turned in their scripts, which I then handed back randomly. Each person was given a script from a different author. Their new role was to be an artist. They were going to be the penciller and inker for the script they just received. I gave them around five minutes to read the story silently and for them to mark anyplace that was confusing or they had a question about. I then let them get together and talk with the writer for a few minutes. I didn't want to rush them here. I provided them with several large sheets of blank paper for them to draw the comic. Because drawing is difficult for many people, I gave them a deadline of four weeks to complete the comic. This long deadline also allowed me to continue teaching other graphic novels they could draw inspiration from for their own comics. My hope here is that when they draw from other comics, they are appropriating the material in a way that allows them to retain the material in their LTM. I was also teaching *Understanding Comics* (1993) by Scott McCloud during the whole project, with some selections from Eisner's *Sequential Art* (1985). I was presenting to them the theory and practice of comic creation while they were creating their own comic.

At this point in the process, some students complained that they were making someone else's comic and would rather make their own comic. This is an unfortunate conflict, since part of what I wanted them to grasp was how their story changes through censorship and that artists sometimes have conflicting visions with the writer. As artists, they should realize fairly quickly

that the art they create makes the story theirs just as much as the writers. This will play into the theme of what defines authorship.

Four weeks later the deadline arrived, and the students showed the writers their comics. The art varied between students; some of it was excellent, and some of it was very basic and embarrassing for the artist to share. The public display was the most difficult part to get people to willingly participate in, as being deficient in artistic ability causes embarrassment. I am not sure how to combat this beyond reassuring them that this is not an art class, and I do not grade on drawing ability, but that I am looking for the applied techniques we have studied in the class.

I gave the writers a chance to look over their story first before seeing their comic. I wanted them to re-familiarize themselves with their original story and then to visualize how they would have drawn it. Then I let them see the comic. All the writers expressed contentment with how their story looked, probably some out of politeness. But many of them commented on how their comic differed from how they imagined it should look and that the artists did things that weren't in the story and added new people and details. At this point in the discussion I felt it was safe to ask, "Who is the author?" This is unfortunately where the project ends. I could have extended it to include colorists and editors, but that does not seem like the best use of class time, and I don't want to overburden them with too much work late in the semester.

The process of creatively struggling with constraints, constraints which happened to be the material they were learning, allowed students to actively engage with the content of the course. They were given historical documents (CCA rules) around which they had to work with and navigate, writing models for scripts (Stan Lee, Morrison, Moore, and Miller) that they had to understand and work from, theories of creation (McCloud, Eisner, and some Postema) that they used to create their own content, and theories of censorship and collaboration that allowed them

to realize how an artistic vision can be changed by outside forces. This is aligned with Scholte's own arguments for the inclusion of creative writing in literature curriculum: "all PhD candidates in English should take a course in the Writer's Workshop, learning to write in the genre they were studying—because this experience would make them better readers of those texts" (After the Fall 34). I would argue that this should be a requirement for more than the PhD students, so that all literature majors can learn from creative experience. The experience of a constraint or obstacle creates a learning process, since the student must creatively figure out a way around this obstacle. The solution involves LTM and STM, allowing a strong use of WM. The Batman project builds on itself, constantly accessing previous levels and the material being taught in the classroom. The creative element reinforces the material, allowing students to learn the material while also, hopefully, doing something that is enjoyable.

The project was time consuming for them, especially the drawing part. I was careful to assign a light reading load during this time so as not to overburden them. For some classes, during this time I assigned very little reading, and I forewarned them to bring their comics to work on in the last fifteen minutes of class so that they could ask me questions and ask others for help if needed. Since this was a collaborative project, I wanted them to work together throughout, though I did insist that the writer could not see what the artist was doing until it was finished. That way the writer could be surprised at another's vision, and it also prevents the writer from being controlling and trying to change the artist's vision. Overall, the project gave the students a perspective and an understanding that can best be brought about through the process of working through the materials.

## TEACHING THE SEMIOTIC CODE

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The pedagogical choices for my activities may not be completely apparent, and it will help to understand the theories I used when designing my censorship project. It would be best to start with the basic level of meaning: the semiotic code. Christian Metz describes the code as socially articulated, “the code must owe its features, and indeed its existence, to a set of symbolic operations—the code is a social *activity*” (157). The key words in this definition are *social activity*, meaning that the symbolic operations surrounding any code is based within the culture where the code is produced. To talk about meaning in any text is to really talk about meaning in the culture that produced the text. To not understand the basic cultural codes surrounding a text makes interpretation and reception of that text difficult at best and indecipherable at worst. Robert Scholes makes a convincing argument concerning the power of codes: “The supposed skill of reading is actually based upon a knowledge of the codes that were operative in the composition of any given text and historical situation in which it was composed” (*Textual Power* 21). Tied to the very meaning of a text is the knowledge of codes associated with writing (author) and reading (audience). When students lack knowledge of the cultural codes then communication begins to break down because semiosis fails. There will always be some breakdown, as the semiosis of a code involves cognitive processes that are unique to each person, but in some instances, semiosis fails as a result of historical isolation from the author, either because certain codes have fallen out of usage, or the because encyclopedic definitions have changed enough to disrupt meaning.

Umberto Eco makes the argument for communication: “what makes my (and someone’s) language work is...the encyclopedic set of more or less definite descriptions.... But what permits communication between me...and someone else is the outline, via definite descriptions, of an Immediate Object, which is the encyclopedic representation” (75). When similar encyclopedic definitions are not shared between speakers, semiosis fails to happen, or struggles. A text constructed around semiotic codes that are unfamiliar to a typical freshman may prove difficult to teach in the classroom, while a text written in a culture and genre similar to that typical freshman’s experience will prove a much easier text to discuss. Knowledge of codes is crucial for understanding and ultimately for learning as working memory will show. Teaching a graphic novel with superheroes in it, for instance, will immediately allow the students to use cultural codes they already have for superheroes and improve chances of a successful semiosis.

A failed semiosis, through complications of cultural ignorance, creates a textual experience that is difficult and trying for the student. Part of the role of the professor is the navigation of a text by illuminating the most esoteric places in a text, and a greater-cultural remove from the contextual era of production usually means more illumination is required. There are creative measures a teacher can use to help create awareness of the difficulty of the text, but the cultural differences still need to be explained, and this requires some method for transmission of this knowledge. A teacher can use class time to lecture and explain, but this only places the teacher as the source of knowledge and as a person of power and authority. Classroom activities, like miniature research projects can be useful for developing research methods and gaining the requisite knowledge of cultural codes. Both measures take valuable time either from the class or from the student’s time, and part of the role of the instructor is determining if the class is being well-spent or if there is a better use of the limited class time. A

way to avoid illumination is by choosing a text that is culturally and/or generically familiar to students. There are a great number of texts that can fit this role, whether they be monomodal novels, short stories, children's picture books, graphic novels, etc. The less time spent on illumination means more time available for interpretation.

Scholes argues for the importance to interpretation based on the teachings of Freud and Lacan. There is the idea that interpretation is the working through of a text. Scholes explains, "when we make an interpretation we do add to our store of knowledge—and what we add is not the text itself but our own interpretation of it" (*Semiotics* 4). Scholes hedges a bit when talking about the validity of psychoanalysis, but the cognitive science behind interpretation is revealed in working memory, which in this application can help corroborate Lacan. Working memory is the process of taking existing knowledge from long-term memory and applying it to new short-term information; this process is also called interpretation. The explicated text removes or limits the chances for an interpreted text and the use of working memory. Also, commonly removed is the professor's own process of reading in the final interpretation, since at times the professor will not explain certain steps of his interpretation that are grounded in the knowledge of specific cultural and generic codes. The student is left with the impression that the dominant interpretation was some magical formula perhaps beyond the reach of the students. A conversation allows for a multivocal classroom where everyone contributes and interprets the text, which excludes the dominant reading and allows each student to engage critically with the text. Since everyone is providing an interpretation, no authoritative text is presented. It is sometimes a difficult task to encourage student interpretation, which is probably why the illumination lecture is still prevalent. This is unfortunate since the illumination lecture often results, in time, with the students being more passive and ceasing to read critically.

An example of students ceasing to read critically occurred in an Introduction to Literature course I taught. I assigned Ian Pollock's graphic adaption of the complete *King Lear* (1980). I thought the use of visuals would help student's follow the play better, but they struggled constantly with Shakespeare's language and were frequently "creeped out" by Pollock's visual style. I ended up providing historical and generic explanations for a majority of the time, which admittedly was not what I wanted to be doing, nor was it a good use of class time. Student participation was consequently stifled, either because the material was difficult—it was—or because they found it difficult to engage with my lecture. There are a lot of contributing factors; perhaps they were silent because the play had no relevance to them, or perhaps I failed to present the text in a way that they could digest and enjoy. In any case, I was providing my interpretation through lecture of the material, which had the result of pacifying the classroom. Later in the semester we read *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller, and participation was extremely high. A lot of factors can contribute to higher participation, such as comfort with classmates near the end of the semester and ease of reading and familiarity with Batman as a cultural icon. They could provide their own interpretations without my constant interference, and they could cite places in the text to provide a visual and verbal support.

With concern for codes, I have been focusing more on how Barthes describes them. I do this mainly to illustrate a certain difficulty inherent in some texts, such as Pollock's *King Lear*. Another way to view the reader's interaction with a text would be to consider Gérard Genette's idea, as described by Scholes: "tracing the rhetorical activity involved in the perception of figures in a text, locates meanings that are closer to the reader's experience of the text than to the cultural codes alluded to by the text" (*Structuralism* 162). In both Barthes and Genette, the reader's interpretation is a focal point, but Genette seems to place less emphasis on the



intertextuality of the text and more on the reception. Genette excuses some of the difficulty of the cultural code and instead shifts a greater weight to discursive elements like structure, style, and rhetoric (see Genette's *Narrative Discourse*).

Scholes is careful to include in his own semiotics the best of Barthes and Genette. A more structural approach to a text also requires a great amount of knowledge of generic codes. This can come in the form of experience of similar texts or through direct instruction, but a good reader is one that is cognizant of the generic conventions. An expertise informs an interpretation, as the reader can draw from a vast storehouse of texts in the same genre, and an even more informed reader can find use of similar and disparate genres to base an informed interpretation. It is important, then, to pick a text that is familiar both in terms of culture and genre. Any text far outside the experience of the reader in either of these areas can cause difficulty.

## WORKING MEMORY AND SEMIOSIS

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It may not be apparent why using a graphic novel is a strong choice for teaching methods of reading, and it isn't necessarily. My choice of *Year One* was a deliberate choice that I was comfortable with. My core argument is that using a multimodal text opens up new opportunities for teaching multimodal reading methods that better prepare a student for outside the classroom. I use semiotics, critical pedagogy, working memory as the foundation of my pedagogy.

It would be helpful to begin with semiotics and scaffold my arguments from there. An initial study of codes (generic and cultural) reveals that pre-existing knowledge is key to understanding. A student with deficient knowledge in either of these areas could face some

difficulties in interpretation and comprehension. Determining the levels of knowledge of our students is a difficult task. The humanities degree program is built around the scaffolding of knowledge, which is why the survey classes are taken early in the degree and classes like Shakespeare and Chaucer are reserved for third and fourth year. At the higher levels there is still a mixture of students unable to cope with a difficult author like Chaucer, even in modern translation. This may owe to the lack of rigor the student applies to the text, and/or lack of exposure to specific semiotic codes that make interpretation possible.

Another possibility is contained in the cognitive studies of Alan Baddeley. Baddeley begins his seminal text, *Working Memory, Thought, and Action* (2007), by highlighting the importance of his findings: “Working memory is assumed to be a temporary storage system under attentional control that underpins our capacity for complex thought” (1). With each person there is a difference of the processing capabilities of their working memory, where some people are blessed with an efficient memory, and others, not so much. The overall idea is that the temporary short-term memory (STM) works in conjunction with the long-term memory (LTM) store to produce complex thought (interpretation).

The basic model for working memory is that while reading a text, this information is stored in the STM. Semiosis occurs when the cultural and generic codes are pulled from the LTM and then presented and deciphered with the STM. If the codes drawn from LTM have a semblance and help make sense of the new information, the reader can make a more informed interpretation of the material. If the reader lacks anything of relevance in the LTM, or his/her working memory is dysfunctional or of low capacity, then semiosis either fails or is insufficient for clear communication. The working memory then takes the STM and LTM and combines the two to create an interpretation, which can then be appropriated and stored in LTM. The new

interpretation becomes the reader's text, which is reminiscent of Scholes and Barthes mentioning of the reader's *interpreted text*. The reader's interpretation, or text, is more likely to be stored in LTM, since it has gone through an active process of interpretation through the working memory model. If semiosis fails or struggles, it is less likely the STM will become LTM, since there was little effort on the part of working memory. A strong effort by working memory results in better learning conditions for the student, since interpretation makes it more likely that knowledge becomes part of LTM and made accessible for future texts.

This basic explanation of the processes of working memory does not take into account the resource pool hypothesis, which states that "memory and processing draw on a common pool of general attentional resources" (Baddeley 190). Baddeley discusses that cognitive resources are finite and are under the control of the central executive, which is the aware part of the working memory model. If a given text is too difficult, the central executive will expend a great amount of cognitive effort deciphering the text and less effort on pulling intertextual references from LTM. A difficult text then exists almost solely in the STM with little help from LTM to make interpretations. A text without a reader's interpretation is poorly appropriated by the reader, and as such, struggles to enter into his knowledge. Conversely, a well-versed reader with an understanding of generic codes uses LTM retrieval with ease. For instance, when I have taught Shakespeare, students had difficulty recalling much of the play. But when I ask a student about a book they are reading for fun, they can recite to you even the most mundane scenes.

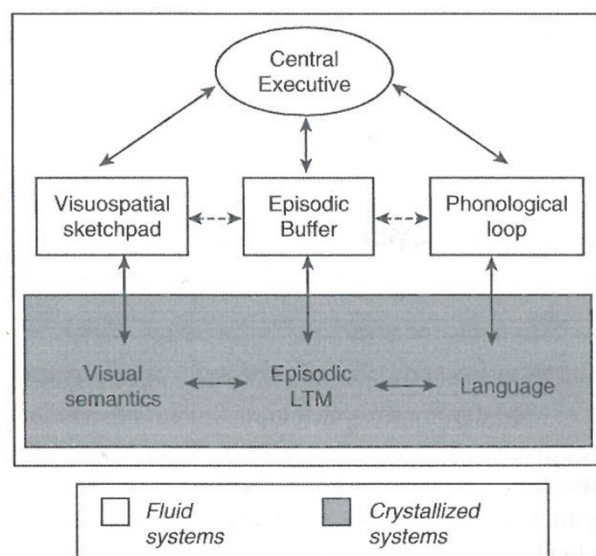
Limited cognitive resources show how vital it is to design a course that challenges and encourages problem solving. A student may be able to understand a difficult text, but if too much cognitive processing was used on STM processes, then the student may finish the text with little in way of interpretation. Conversely, a text that is too easy may not offer the student much

in new knowledge, since the ease reflects the pre-acquired cultural and generic codes. The best learning, with respect to Baddeley's model, requires the use of STM and LTM to develop complex thinking. It is the small struggle where learning happens. This model, then, encourages the teaching of somewhat familiar texts, such as superhero comics, where students have a grasp of the generic and cultural codes. The teaching of appropriate texts is not something new, and indeed it is championed by progressive critical pedagogues like Scholes, Freire, and hooks, who value the teaching of intellectualism over academism. With Freire especially, the importance of clear teaching and comprehension by his students is necessary for them to critically engage with the world and effect positive revolutionary changes. This also works well with Scholes' emphasis on replacing the canon of literature with a *canon of methods*, which emphasize textuality and reading skills. Strong reading skills increase a reader's ability to appropriate any text regardless of inherent difficulty or ease using cultural and generic codes. But even here there are limitations.

So far, I have just been concerned with the STM and LTM and the central executive.

There is another major element to Baddeley's model that should be mentioned with regards to teaching multimodal texts, the visuospatial sketchpad. The sketchpad stores visual and spatial information. Baddeley characterizes its function with the example of a power outage in a room and a person's ability to remember basic furniture placement and being able to find the door (65). The sketchpad is a "subsystem that has evolved to

TABLE 2: WORKING MEMORY MODEL



provide a way of integrating visuospatial information from multiple sources, visual, tactile and kinaesthetic, as well as from both episodic and semantic LTM” (101).

The visuospatial system is joined by the episodic memory subsystem. This system helps integrate phonological and visuospatial “information into coherent episodes” (148). This process creates chunking of information, which helps organize an episode for easier recall, since it is much easier and less demanding on cognitive processing to recall a few chunks of information rather than a lot of small bits of information.

A cursory account of Baddeley’s model reveals a multimodal interface that favors information that is familiar enough to activate LTM through the episodic buffer with either generic or cultural semiotic codes. A multimodal text that would encourage strong memory retention would be the reading of a comic. The verbal speech of the characters becomes part of the phonological loop, while the images become part of the sketchpad. The two become integrated and then hopefully chunked into an episode. A multimodal text that has both modes artfully integrated can help in the creation of episodic chunking. Each panel could potentially operate as an episodic chunk, while a series of panels could operate as a larger narrative chunk.

It appears that Baddeley’s model endorses a multimodal text (graphic novel, children’s book, magazine, etc.) as a potential source for strong learning potential. The learning potential comes about from the way working memory either integrates phonological and visuospatial STM or retrieves LTM for any STM mode. For example, merely telling a subject the words for a series of random shapes without telling the listener to imagine them will result with those words being put into the phonological loop, which is a STM system that stores lexical items through subvocalization. Baddeley argues that this recitation of shapes is just STM and not WM because there is no “need for further processing” (85). When the subject is asked to visualize the

shapes, then they begin to activate working memory, because the phonological and visuospatial systems are both activated, and the success rate of recall is improved. These two systems activate working memory by being “able to register and incorporate information indirectly, either from long-term memory, or by allowing cross-modal encoding” (Baddeley 85). Notice that Baddeley allows that working memory can be accessed either through LTM or through cross-modal processes, meaning a multimodal text like a comic, picture book, or illuminated manuscript should then be able to activate working memory. Not all multimodal texts use cross-modal encoding though. A comic uses it with visual and verbal texts. The words, when read, are then recoded through subvocalization, and the imagery becomes part of the visuospatial sketchpad, thus allowing cross-modal interaction.

## THE MODERN CLASSROOM AND THE TEXT

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Working memory is a useful theory for defining the modern literature class. Understanding the cognitive processes and ideal environments for learning allows an opportunity to design a course that can help students engage and learn new materials with ease. While working memory is a tool best used in preparing for cognitive tasks, it is not especially helpful in the philosophical choices for the literature course. Scholes, Freire, and hooks are each asserting a philosophical approach to education with the desired goal of instilling a critical approach to ideology and texts that extend far beyond the classroom into society. Critical pedagogy’s approach is controversial and being undermined by special interests, as detailed by hooks: “Those of us who stay, who continue to work to educate for the practice of freedom, see firsthand the ways that democratic education is being undermined as the interests of big business

and corporate capitalism encourage the students to see education solely as a means to achieve material success” (*Critical Thinking* 16). Her bleak experience of the bureaucracy behind education only reinforces the need for critical pedagogy. Her approach not only asks the students to become critical, but also asks that the teacher become a new presence in the classroom. The critical pedagogue needs to decenter the role of the teacher in the classroom and introduce texts that are conducive to developing the revolutionary mind. This is a process of teaching that is easier theorized than put into practice, as it can lead to administrative opposition.

bell hooks makes her stand for reconstructing education from the inside: “changing our educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology, but where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically” (*Community* xiii). She is not arguing to teach her students to be better workers, but to critically engage the world and not be indoctrinated by ideologies of race, gender, and class. Critical engagement, if successful in changing society, can actually lead to better workers. The types of educational reform hooks argues for are designed to tackle the normative ideologies that create inequality in society based on class, gender, and race. The correction of these ideologies can lead to a more functional society, a society that can heal many of the issues created through white imperialism, whose economic purpose has created a politically and economically powerful ruling class. Freire, not as concerned with racial or gender politics, asserts a stronger case for class realignment through the continued use of critical pedagogy.

Part of breaking down the controlling normative ideologies is by creating open classrooms with discussion. Another method is to begin by dismantling the canon and introduce the students to texts not often associated with academia or white imperialism. The impact of the

introduction of a graphic novel in the classroom is still considerable, as students have been taught since a young age in the US that books with pictures are still for children or not worthy of academic energy. This is a perception stemming from Wertham's anti-comic crusade in the 50s, and though the perception is weakening in recent years, it still persists. The negative associations with graphic narratives is a good starting point for dissecting normative ideologies that dismiss certain texts based on a received tradition of ridicule and indifference. Possible classroom discussions can examine why comics have been maligned and why parents in the 50s sought to deprive children of them. *The Dark Knight Returns* provokes strong discussions in the classroom as the students are working through the arguments against censorship and the rebelliousness of Batman against an oppressive government.

Students will still be surprised if the teacher suggests seriously studying a graphic novel with Batman as a main character, and this surprise and skepticism should be discussed in earnest as part of thinking critically. Why are graphic novels often dismissed as not-literary and unworthy of discussion in a literature class? The post-structuralist could then respond by asking students what makes a literary text and who determines what is considered literary. When the argument becomes canonical versus non-canonical, it can lead to polarizing viewpoints and, like in the 50s, lead to non-canonical texts being ignored, banned, or censored. The politics of certain texts in America is directly tied to normativizing ideologies working to limit citizens' exposure to alternative narratives that do not match state-controlled ideologies.

The writers and artists who produced comics in the 40s and 50s were often working-class Irish and Jewish immigrants who were not exactly mainstream voices. Their narratives were helping to shape the minds of children in ways counter-productive to the state ideology. These were the same children that adults were beginning to see as rebellious. To help my students



visualize state ideology, I choose texts like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Batman: Year One* (1987), which have as a central character a rebel of the state. Miller attacks directly the status quo, hegemony, and totalitarianism in his political and objectivist texts. His narratives give voice to a lot of the underlying themes in critical pedagogy. Studying these texts and the themes within them allow the course to explicitly discuss the concerns of hooks through textual references. Conversations about immigrant writers and state ideology were critical parts of the early stages of my class activities on censorship. Knowledge of 80s culture helped to frame the contextual situation of comics in the 80s.

Comics offer a literature classroom an opportunity to explore textual forms often excluded from academia, and their very status in America lends them an aura of revolt not commonly attributed to the novel, poem, or play. The comic's perception within academia allows it still to take the place of rebellious literature, and from this setting of rebelliousness, the instructor can begin to focus on critical thinking that is directed at the text, the medium, and then at academia, and finally, society. Comics allow questions of authority and ideology in methods and approaches unavailable to the novel or other traditional texts in the canon.

The mere presence of the graphic medium in a literature classroom will challenge perceptions of what literature is and what constitutes art. The initial ease of reading the texts opens the course to develop higher order ideas, since working memory will not be overtaxed with processes focusing on form and medium. If, as hooks describes it, "the heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know – to understand how life works" (*Critical Thinking* 7), then it would seem that a medium rooted in working class struggles (30s-50s), lower class and minority creator's narratives (50s), to optimism (60s and 70s) and cynicism (80s to present) offers a wide array of texts to study how life works. I am generalizing a bit when describing the movements of

mainstream comics, especially since there are counter movements all the time in the medium, such as R. Crumb's emergence with *Comix* and independent creators from small publishers like Fantagraphics and Top Shelf, which produce non-superhero narratives that range from Joe Sacco's graphic journalism to the works by Daniel Clowes and Chris Ware. The medium is alive with a greater variety than given initial credit for, and the unique abilities of the medium open it up to a diverse way to tell a story, more so than one mode only.

## CONCLUSION

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The comic in the literature classroom unseats preconceived notions of what constitutes art. It challenges assumptions of what literature is, and what can be taught. The comic has a form that already challenges before the cover is even opened. The benefits of familiarity, ease of reading, short length (usually), and multimodality enhance the literature classroom in a way that many monomodal texts cannot. Furthermore, the benefits help with LTM retention by easing working memory capacity, which in turns frees up the potential for the teaching of textual theory, as argued by Robert Scholes. As a resource, the graphic novel serves the humanities discipline in beneficial ways not often available with canonical texts.

Teaching the graphic novel with a methodology informed by semiotics and working memory encourages the instructor to approach the course—and possibly the discipline—in a new way. A course that favors deep learning is one that looks towards the quality of teaching appropriate texts over the quantity approach provided by the *banking system* through the teaching of the canon. The quality of the texts become increasingly important since there may be fewer of them to study, and because textuality is the purpose of the course, the canon's presence

can often be limited. Indeed, perhaps even what we consider the canon can be redefined to include a greater variety of texts.

Frank Miller has a reputation as a writer for writing certain types of characters, mainly hypermasculine males and females who fall into the hard-boiled clichés of the fallen women, be it as the femme fatale and/or the prostitute. There is a famous internet comic by David Willis where Frank Miller is at a laptop and two shadowy figures are behind him and offer him a proposition: “Write a story with a female character who is not a prostitute and you leave her alive”. The humor plays off his reputation as a writer of lurid females and masculine protagonists. This is a simplification of Miller as a writer and does



FIGURE 26: CHARACTERIZATION OF MILLER AS A WRITER

not entirely capture his ability to write female characters like Martha Washington and Casey McKenna (*Ronin*), both of whom were neither “whores” nor weak damsels in distress and who survived all dangerous encounters. Amazingly, Miller is placed before a laptop with no drawing utensils anywhere. Completely unaccounted for in the web-comic is Miller’s own style as an expressionist visual artist. While his women in *Sin City* do seem to fit the genre defined clichés, the overwhelming German expressionism evident on each page imbues the images with emotions

not entirely captured through the words alone. This web-comic only focuses on how he *writes* female characters, and it doesn't account for his male characters, which are a menagerie of masculinities. Miller does have a reputation of portraying men as very masculine, but that is also the condition of the superhero genre he inherited and the part he didn't try to reform.

Throughout this dissertation, I have approached Miller as an artist re-defining his medium and genre through the formation of identity. His constructed identity was at times linked to his role as a creator, and at others as a means to counteract outside forces of censorship and negative perceptions of the medium in America. Miller's approach to combatting these various controlling forces was to emphasize strength and objectivism in his novels in the hope of



FIGURE 27: ELEKTRA'S OVERSIZED HEAD

instilling the same values in the medium itself. Judging by the number of creators who adopted his style, his goal to redefine the superhero genre was a success. The importance of Miller on American comics cannot be over-estimated, and DC's imprint, Vertigo, also has a large role to play in the maturing of the medium.

His earliest consistent work was as the penciller-turned-writer on *Daredevil* (1979-82). From the outset, his run on *Daredevil* began to set new industry standards for narrative, while also providing a new visual style that emphasized expression over realism. His expressionism, though, came at some critical cost, as some critics accused him of being a poor artist and unable to render accurate bodies, while failing to note that Miller's supposed inability was really a style that emphasized mood and emotion over realism. Paul Young discusses Miller's expressionism at length in *Frank Miller's Daredevil and the Ends of Heroism* (2016), and from his book I will borrow an example of expressionist style that misled

critics into accusing him of poor technique. In one of the more emotional *Daredevil* issues, Matt Murdock is grieving and uncertain that Elektra, his one-time lover, is actually dead. He digs up her grave and touches her face in order to recognize her since he is blind. Miller renders the scene by giving Elektra an oversized head or Murdock child-like hands (Figure 25). The relative changes in size of the hands and the head emphasizes Murdock's grieving by reducing him and enlarging Elektra's presence, making her more than just a person.

Young defines Miller's style during a time when the industry was idolizing the realism of Neal Adam's depiction of form:

Whereas many of [Neal] Adam's acolytes seemed determined to evacuate cartoonishness from their work, Miller manipulated angle, the relative sizes of objects, and page layout and composition to make the physical world legible in ways that neither words nor facial expressions could accomplish on their own.  
(153)

This helps to explain the "poor" rendering of Elektra's oversized head and goes a long way in predicting the content of Miller's future narratives. Miller shows a predilection for emotion and suggestion beyond realism. He strives to utilize aspects of the medium that are unique, beyond just copying techniques in cinema. Improvisations in the medium allow Miller to explore character and feeling in the medium, and his explorations tend to be on characterization through emotions and gender. Miller's approach to the medium is also a calculated expression of his philosophy and gender expression that deserves a more detailed analysis. His gendered representations and narrative techniques are unique to his medium, and they provide further avenues of discussion regarding gender and, more specifically, masculinity beyond what cinema

and verbal based texts can provide. Sequential art is still a medium that lacks dedicated studies of gender representation.

Even though Miller is one of the more influential creators in American comics, studies on him are relatively few. There are dozens of articles covering his various works, with the occasional scholarly book focusing on him, but even then, I feel he is being underappreciated, if appreciation can be gauged by the amount of texts written about his works and his overall influence on his medium and genre. Having said that, there is still much more that can be covered concerning an analysis of gender than I have provided in this dissertation. Along with a thorough study of his visual representation and use of German Expressionism, there is also the litany of original characters in his various works to discuss. He often wrote his novels with completely new characters; even his Batman was based on his own interpretations and understanding of the character and his notions of philosophy and realism. Uncovering masculinity and gender within his works is a laborious process, since he determined never to write the same character twice, ranging his characters all along the spectrum of gender. To pigeonhole him as writing “whoreswhoreswhores...” is to fail to notice the details he provides visually and verbally. Miller’s exploration of gender can often remain hidden behind his more controversial politics that have characterized his later works.

Reading the internet comment section on any news article on Miller is to look at negativity and anger directly. Fans have flocked away from Miller based on his right- wing islamophobia politics, which have surfaced in his graphic novels, *300* (1998) and especially *Holy Terror* (2011). He has also been accused of misogyny based on his portrayal of women in *Sin City* (1991-2000). I agree with his detractors in that his form of hatred against Muslims is dangerous, but he still creates characters that range on the spectrum of masculinity that continue

to explore gender and identity. This is happening while his own identity as a writer and public figure has changed since he first began writing and drawing comics. Paul Young, who details the gradual change of Miller's politics and narratives, lauds the early years: "Back in the first decade of Miller's career, even when he cut broad categories regarding his convictions, he was still willing to entertain dissenting views" (236). Young uses here the contrast of Batman and Daredevil as two diametrically opposed forces. Young later laments Miller's politics based on "hatred and fear" (243). Miller's politics have changed the sorts of characters he writes and how they are portrayed. Regarding his politics and vision provides an opportunity to study masculinities coming from a man whose politics are now founded on hypermasculine rhetoric and ideology.

Though the seeds of his political convictions were present in his early writings as well, they weren't so forceful, and they were often re-interpreted through characters that spouted contradictory messages. One of the amazing things about Miller's Daredevil is that Matt Murdock believed in the rule of law and the rehabilitation of criminals, things that Miller the writer doesn't necessarily accept. Miller in the 80s could write characters and give them beliefs and morals that he didn't completely agree with. This is what makes the contrast of his Daredevil and Batman interpretations so interesting. These two characters, one motivated by vengeance (Batman) and the other by his concern with victims (Daredevil), form two different approaches to justice. While Miller seemed to make his Batman unlikeable, he was still the hero, and the reader is still meant to root for him. Even though Batman was a fascist at times with his methodology, Miller makes him a necessary evil that is better than the political alternative. The dark and brooding hero that places himself above the law is mostly absent from Daredevil, except when the Punisher makes an appearance.



While I have managed to write on Batman's growth as a character, Daredevil has an equally, though distinct, complex character arc. Paul Young's *Frank Miller's Daredevil and the Ends of Heroism* is an excellent resource for the impact of Miller in the early 80s and an exploration of Miller as a creator but stops sort of detailing the growth of Matt Murdock's identity. Miller's approach to Daredevil is different, and perhaps a little less detailed than his approach to Batman, but it is still worth studying as a companion to his more ideologically driven Batman.

A thorough study of gender in his three major Daredevil works would reveal depths of psychology and gender often not attributed to Miller today. These works include: *Daredevil* issues 158-191, *Born Again* (1986) with David Mazzucchelli, and *The Man Without Fear* (1994) with John Romita Jr. These three works define and mold the psychology, philosophy, and identity of Matt Murdock. Each of these works presents a complex Matt Murdock, while showing Miller working through the material in the hope of reconciling Matt's beliefs with his own, only to find an uneasy conclusion in *The Man Without Fear*, which ends with these words, "God only knows what it looks like" (*Without Fear* n.p.). This is a scopic reference from Murdock's monologue about sewing his own costume, but it also refers to the actual identity of the titular hero. *The Man Without Fear* is essentially a remake/re-imagining of *Batman: Year One*, only with Daredevil instead. The endings of the two works reveal a far more stable ending in *Year One* when the subjective camera position brings forward the theme of arriving and becoming the hero. Miller doesn't allow this for Murdock. Murdock must always struggle and have his beliefs constantly assaulted; such is the way that Miller is able to invoke his own belief system by dismantling another's through negativity. This assault on beliefs is an assault on Murdock's identity as a vigilante and a lawyer. The form of masculinity detailed in his

Daredevil works is not hypermasculine like his Batman; rather, Murdock's is a masculinity under constant threat. He is always near the breaking point of becoming emasculated, which is why he was given a fiery temper; whenever he becomes too close to losing his masculinity, he was able to reassert it with violence, which brings the Murdock character closer to Batman and vengeance.

Daredevil and Batman are different approaches to vigilantism that Miller explored in his writing. Batman is the hero closer to Miller's own preferences of Randian thought, but both characters were created by others and had a canonical baggage that placed certain narrative restrictions on Miller. For example, he was not allowed to kill off the main villains or secondary characters. When Miller pushed too far with Batman's personality in *All Star Batman and Robin*, the critics and fans alike turned away in disgust. Miller went even further in his troubling Islamophobic book, *Holy Terror* (2011). At the center of *Holy Terror* is the hero, The Fixer, who has no qualms with killing and is motivated by revenge. Paul Young describes the creative origin of The Fixer: "the character originally at the center of *Holy Terror* was Batman. Finally, Miller had freed the character of its impurities" (225). The archetypal hero Miller keeps creating is filled with hate and no longer held back by refraining from killing.

*Sin City* is his ongoing series where he repeats a pattern of heroes driven to killing as a solution to their problems. The types of masculinity on display vary in each entry in the series. In these novels, The Fixer would find an accommodating world for his brand of justice. It is no surprise that *Sin City* and *Holy Terror* were creatively controlled by Miller as the writer and penciller/inker. He was allowed to explore the medium using narratives oozing in blood and sex and, of course, hypermasculinity. There is a pattern of masculinity in works he controls, and the pattern is somewhat predictable with regards to the types of masculinities preferred for heroes and the emasculation reserved for villains. Women play roles either as damsels in distress,

dutiful loving wives, femme fatales, or sexual partners. If his creatively controlled works were the only works we had to look at, I would find myself more in agreement with the web-comic at the beginning of this chapter. When looking at his earlier works under editors, or his collaborative works, Miller's wild tendencies for hypermasculinity are either softened or at least part of a larger narrative framework where masculinity is something to be analyzed and deconstructed.

One of Miller's more ambitious works, *The Life and Times of Martha Washington in the Twenty-First Century* (1990-2010), was a collaboration with famed artist Dave Gibbons. In the introduction, Gibbons recalls the beginning of their collaboration that would last twenty years:

Somewhere along the way, I'd started to lose my nerve and my faith in the project. I rationalized it at the time as a concern about the book's dark and depressing tone... at the time, I went as far as phoning Frank and actually saying that I wanted to abandon the work. He was naturally taken aback but within a half hour was suggesting a new direction we might take. (*Martha Washington* 8)

There is a collaborative influence in the way comics are made. Gibbons in the early 90s was well respected from his work on *Watchmen* (1986) and Miller had easily established himself as a force in comics in the 80s. Reading *Martha Washington* is not the dark and depressive work that initially scared Gibbons, it is instead satire, at times funny and fantastical, and at other times the darkness still creeps in. Separating the influence of editors and artistic collaborators is impossible. Even though Gibbons made verbal complaints about the project, his art also helped to shape the world he was drawing and the characters within, further taking the narrative into areas Gibbons was more comfortable with, but still within the plotting guidelines of Miller. *Martha Washington* is as much Gibbon's vision as Millers, just as *Batman: Year One* and *All-*

*Star Batman and Robin* belong equally to the artist. The collaborators accommodate each other to tell a story. The final outcome, the vision realized, is based on Miller's story and the person he chooses to work with. Miller controls the narrative and finished product by selecting artists who are suitable for his vision.

*Martha Washington* is a dystopic future where the titular female protagonist navigates labyrinthine bureaucracies alongside sexism and doubters. When we find the strength within Martha, often tropes borrowed from normative roles for masculinity, the question is if it is Miller empowering a female or Gibbon endowing the character with strength not immediately evident in the script. *Martha Washington* was completed over the span of twenty years, the same twenty years of Miller's decline in popularity and importance in contemporary comics. A study of the visual and verbal modes may turn up contradictions and oppositions, with one mode suggesting a different philosophy and understanding of gender.

I would argue, though, that Martha Washington, and not Elektra, is Miller's strongest representation of a female character. Elektra was often sexually objectified and would spend issues pining and crying for her former lover Matt Murdock. With Martha Washington, Miller created a character that navigates the world of men without being objectified sexually, though sexism does hinder her at times. She doesn't dwell on past loves or pity herself. Her inspiring resilience to the constant troubles that follow her show a strength of character and resolve Miller often reserved for his male characters, especially the Spartans in *300*. Martha is smart, persistent, clever, kind, and somehow remains pure in a world corrupted by corporatism. Miller stayed true to the character and her philosophy of life over the span of his career. Even when he was mocked for his hypermasculine male characters, he repeatedly returned to his collaboration with Gibbon to tell the story of a woman that bucked normative social roles.

There has not been a comprehensive study of *Martha Washington*; like many of Miller's works, academics have ignored it in favor of his more mainstream and recognizable works like *Sin City* and *TDKR*. Many of Miller's minor works continue to explore the subject's identity, often in worlds of chaos or times of struggle. The various explorations of gender and identity still fuel much of his work, but many readers miss this because prevailing criticisms of Miller help to define the reader's consumption.

The web comic headlining this chapter reveals a common criticism and stereotype of Miller as a writer, and ultimately it presents for a reader a shallow interpretation of his oeuvre without taking into account his constant drive to define the masculine subject and the occasional female subject. This dissertation explored beneath the surface the various genders and normative roles that Miller constructed within his novels. Further study into his minor and academically neglected works, like *Martha Washington*, for example, will reveal a complexity and intellectual growth of a creator that helped to define a generation of comic book readers. I am not blind to the negative problems within Miller's ideology, and when he oversteps into any form of hatred he should be criticized, but by that same token, it is worth studying the source and development of this hatred and how it has defined his works. *Martha Washington*, and possibly his Batman works, provide an excellent vantage point to detail the career of a creator over the span of twenty years. My current study is limited in scope to the 80s, but future studies can enhance my own readings and add to them by looking at his later works, how Miller uses genre, and how Miller uses forms of expressionism as part of his ideology of art and politics.

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