

Ouachita Baptist University

## Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

---

Honors Theses

Carl Goodson Honors Program

---

4-16-2021

# I Believe a Man Can Fly: Three Essays on the Themes of Superheroes

Trayton N. Armstrong  
*Ouachita Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors\\_theses](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Trayton N., "I Believe a Man Can Fly: Three Essays on the Themes of Superheroes" (2021).  
*Honors Theses*. 805.

[https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors\\_theses/805](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses/805)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Carl Goodson Honors Program at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

# I Believe a Man Can Fly: Three Essays on the Themes of Superheroes

Tray Armstrong

Ouachita Baptist University

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Amy Sonheim for her patient, unwavering guidance throughout the entire thesis process. Without you, there would not be any flourish in this project.

Thanks to the amazing Bugtruck students, faculty, and staff over the past three years for their toleration of my superheroic rambles. Our discussions are the backbone of these essays, and I hope to have many more.

Finally, a huge thank you to the Carl Goodson Honors Program and the committee over the Tiger Research Grant for awarding me two grants to pursue this project with every possible resource.

## Table of Contents

|                                                   |    |
|---------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Introduction: Origin Story</b> .....           | 3  |
| <b>Superman: The Hero in All of Us</b> .....      | 5  |
| <b>Batman: Redemption of Tragedy</b> .....        | 23 |
| <b>Spider-Man: Power and Responsibility</b> ..... | 40 |
| <b>Conclusion: When Heroes Unite</b> .....        | 55 |
| <b>Bibliography</b> .....                         | 59 |
| Comic Sources .....                               | 59 |
| Electronic Media Sources .....                    | 62 |
| Secondary Sources .....                           | 67 |
| Cover Image Sources .....                         | 68 |

# Introduction: Origin Story

Since the late 1930s in American pop culture, superheroes have been a staple. From comic books to toys to film franchises, superheroes appear in almost any and every medium. From aliens to superhumans to sorcerers to soldiers, superheroes can be anything or anyone. Yet, throughout the entire course of superhero literature, there are some consistent themes that constantly recur. These constant themes can be difficult to see for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the difficulty of obtaining comic book storylines. Because many superhero stories are told through the medium of weekly comics as opposed to novels, graphic novels, or movies, all of which either contain complete stories between their beginning and end, it can be difficult to obtain a full run of a story or narrative, particularly if that narrative is divided across multiple titles. While there are plenty of books that give background on superhero stories,<sup>1</sup> few of them trace themes from the larger genre of comic book heroes. For that reason, this thesis project aims to identify some of these themes presented across the narrative of the three most popular and recognized superheroes: Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man. Superman, the iconic and archetypal hero, often deals with the pressures of being a hero and what that means in a modern context. Batman, on the other hand, tends to delve into trauma and what that means to move forward through that trauma. Spider-Man's stories wear their message on their sleeves, discussing power and responsibility over and over again.

While every theme presented in this thesis can be discussed through each of these characters (Superman is not the only hero whose stories touch on what heroism means), I have selected these specific examples because they have some of the strongest and most prolific

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Superman: The Complete History – The Life and Times of the Man of Steel* (1998) by Les Daniels or *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Book Revolution* (2004) by Ronin Ro.

narratives centered on these themes. This is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion of these themes within the superhero genre, simply a jumping off point for readers who wish to examine this facet of popular culture. I hope to be able to give some understanding to why superheroes are so popular, prolific, and vital to American culture as well as give a framework for understanding what conversations often occur within the superhero narrative.

# Superman: The Hero in All of Us

When discussing superheroes, there is one character that comes to mind almost before the word leaves the mouth. Superman. He is the quintessential superhero. Born on a dying planet, the baby Kal-El is sent to Earth in a rocket ship. Adopted by kindly surrogate parents Jonathan and Martha Kent, the child, now named Clark Kent, develops fantastic powers. He can run faster than a locomotive, has the strength of a hundred men, and perhaps most impressively, he can fly. But none of this is enough to make a character



1: *Superman*, drawn by Dave Gibbons. (Moore & Swan, 2009)

lasting in cultural consciousness. There are plenty of characters in literature and popular media who can perform incredible feats. In fact, during the Golden Age of comics, spanning the late 1930s to the early 1950s, there were a slew of “Superman clones” that shared some of his power-laden identity. The most serious copycat was Captain Marvel from Fawcett Comics, which DC managed to sue and prevent the publication of the character for years on end (Morrison 34). Yet, when someone mentions the term “superhero,” most people don’t think of the big red cheese that shouts “SHAZAM” to change back into his boyish counterpart. They don’t immediately think of

the billionaire with a suit of advanced armor or the teenager bitten by a radioactive spider. People almost always go to the farm-boy from Kansas who can fly. Of course, this could be due to the similarity in the wording. Superman has a bit of a monopoly on the term superhero from a lexical perspective to be sure, but the reason for Superman's proliferation in our modern media seems a bit deeper and more complex to me. Superman is not popular simply because he was the first superhero. Though there were costumed characters before him, Superman was the first to find such widespread popularity and schoolyard acclaim in defining the budding genre of superhero fiction. The most famous and recognizable of these prior superheroes was a character called the Phantom. *The Phantom* newspaper strip began in 1936, three years before *Action Comics #1* and Superman's debut. The character Phantom has appeared in a multitude of comic strips, television shows, and a live-action movie in 1996 (Sanderson). Superman, in his longevity of popularity, represents our vision for the type of hero we as a society want to be: powerful without overbearing, kind without being prideful, and wholly good.

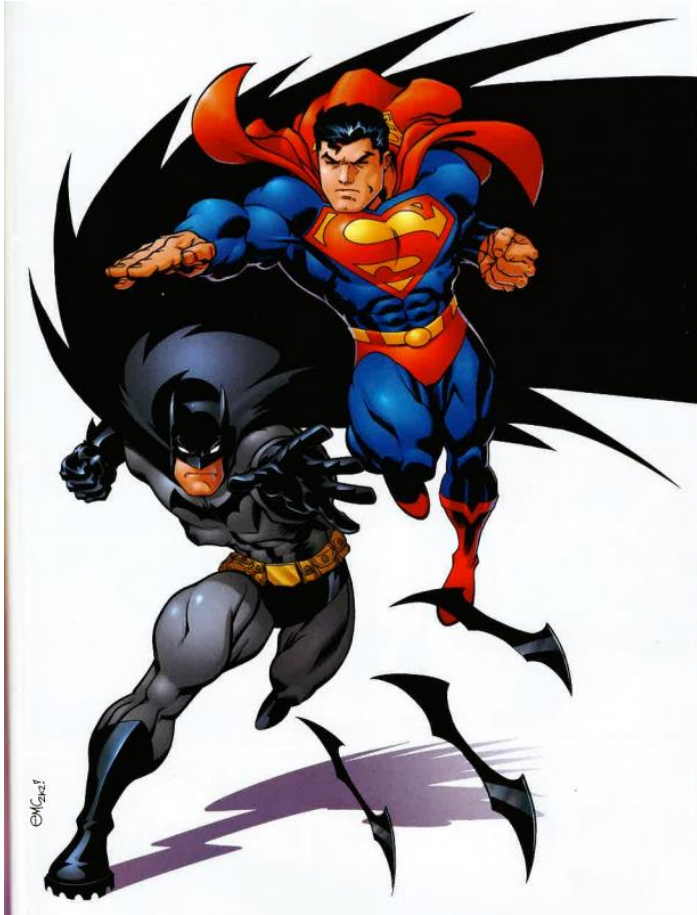
It will be helpful, at this point, to define what a superhero is before examining how Superman contributed and helped shape these definitions and how other characters have used his example in some way to help further define and qualify the term superhero. There are two parts to this definition. The "super" and the "hero." Super is an adjective. It is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "exhibiting the characteristics of its type to an extreme or excessive degree" ("Super"). For Superman's first few appearances, this definition of "super" fit the characteristics of the hero. He was the "super-" man. "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!" (*Superman* 1940). The miracle superhero was little more than the physical extreme of human capabilities. Humans can run, but Superman can run faster than a bullet. Humans can be strong, but Superman can stop



a train with his bare hands. Humans can leap about three feet, but Superman can leap over a thousand times that height.

The original Superman (1939) had only the abilities of a demigod, a human taken to the unbelievable extreme, but nothing extra. It was only later, after more time and more creators began to write the character, that the fantastic powers began to manifest themselves. Nowadays, “super” in the context of superheroes often means something beyond human, though it can also debatably mean more technologically advanced within the context of superhero stories as well. Unaided, self-sustained flight, heat vision, and x-ray vision are some of Superman’s powers that were added later and have remained to this day. No human can fly or shoot lasers from their eyes, but Superman can. He is beyond human, and this is reflected in his origin. He explicitly is not human. He is Kryptonian, an alien from a destroyed planet that gets his power from our yellow sun, an aspect of our planet different from Krypton’s red star. Superman is not supposed to show us a physically perfect version of ourselves. He is the impossible ideal, the man who can do the impossible without struggling. “Super-” in comics has come to mean extraordinary, beyond the normal capacity of a human body, or supernatural. In many ways, the definition has expanded since its inception in 1939. There are now more imaginative powers than Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster could have envisioned when they created their character. Some heroes can ride on electrons through phone lines, others can communicate telepathically with the very Earth, yet others can twist the very fabric of space-time itself. But the definition of super has, in some ways, also narrowed, and a phenomenal example of this narrowing is Superman’s equal and opposite: Batman.

Batman was conceived as the polar opposite of the Man of Steel. Whereas Superman had come to Earth from the stars, was raised by a farming couple in Kansas, and possessed powers



2: *Batman and Superman* (Loeb, McGuinness, and Turner 2014)

unobtainable by normal human standards, Batman was an orphaned child who may have had a fortune, but no inhuman abilities to speak of. His greatest power was his mind, his ability to brawl with Gotham's seedy underbelly second to his ability to outthink it. And when he debuted in 1939 in the pages of *Detective Comics*, he was every bit the superhero that Superman was. Even though Bruce Wayne was human, the feats he accomplished seemed anything but.

While Superman's powers grew, only

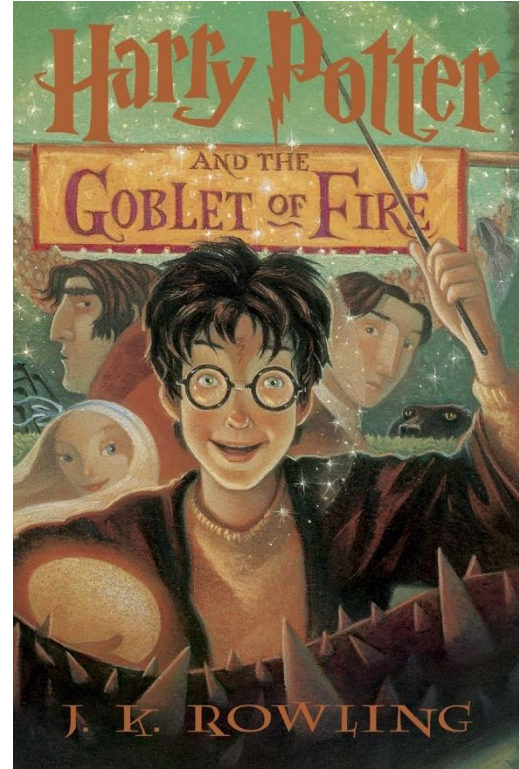
Batman's arsenal of gadgets did the same, never the man himself. Though he was a creature of the night, Batman never gained the ability to vanish into thin air or turn into a swarm of bats. He was simply a man using his wits and preparation to see him through his own crusade for justice.

While we will discuss Batman in detail later, I discuss him here to note that his "superhero status" is constantly debated. In one sense, he is a true superhero, as he is the peak of human physical and mental ability. He is the culmination and celebration of human resiliency and determination. In another, however, he is denied the status of true superhero because he does not have any of the powers and extraordinary abilities that seem to be required for "superheroism" in the modern definition. Because Superman's power set grew from his original,

more human-seeming cache of abilities, characters that are only human look woefully average in comparison. Superman raised the bar of excellence. For this discussion of superheroes, then, I will use a broader definition of “super.” “Super” can mean anyone who can perform feats far beyond the scope and ability of average humans.

“Hero” is a bit more complex in definition. In reality, this is part of the reason I write these essays. The definition of hero is paramount to what makes a superhero. Anyone can have powers and abilities, very few make the cut to superhero. Many become supervillains, and some become super-anti-heroes, but very few can claim the title of true superhero. The Merriam-Webster definition of hero is “a person admired for achievements and noble qualities” (“Hero”). Superman also greatly helped shape the comic book use of the hero, but he was not the one to whom we can credit shaping heroes as a whole. Unlike superpowers, which were just coming into their own in the 1930s, though they, too, had been around in different ways for a long time, heroes were tried-and-true literary characters. One of the earliest heroes to resemble our modern superheroes is Beowulf. Beowulf was a warrior of great renown in ancient English lore, able to overcome great trials and monsters to fight for what he believed in. While he had fantastic strength and unmatched wit in his story, what set him apart from the rest of his men was his ability to overcome his obstacles, regardless of his flaws or weaknesses. Even in his last battle against the dragon, Beowulf survives long enough to slay the creature and glimpse the hoard of gold earned before perishing. This classic definition of hero has persisted throughout human history, appearing again and again in mythology such as the legend of King Arthur or the Ragnarok Cycle of Norse mythology. What makes a good hero, strictly by the classical definition, is standing above the crowd both in a physical sense and a moral one, confronting challenges directly (often with physical force), and being able to overcome threats.

In more modern narratives, the definition of hero has shifted a little. An emphasis on power can now be secondary to an emphasis on connection and empathy. Take Harry Potter or Martin Luther King Jr. as examples, one fictional and one factual. While Harry Potter was a wizard with magical abilities that set him apart from his average cousins, the Dursleys, he was really no more powerful than any other average wizard. He had the inherent magical abilities that grew throughout the course of the narrative, but his true strength lay in the relationships he had forged throughout his time in Hogwarts. He could not defeat



3: *Harry Potter* (Mary GrandPre 2000)

Voldemort on his own, he needed the rest of the school to rise up with him and reject the evil before them. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. was a hero who didn't need physical force to be effective. He stood against the racism of his time through social force and community because he knew it was morally wrong and backwards to treat someone differently on the basis of skin color. In many of his speeches, he eschewed rioting and physical violence as answers in favor of empathy and understanding for the neighbor. Though these two are almost entirely inversions of the classical heroic archetype, they nevertheless qualify as heroes, perhaps even better ones.

It is also worth noting from these examples that while they didn't choose violence as the solution, Potter and MLK were not opposed to using force in defense of self or others when the situation required it. Potter constantly gets into wizard duels with Draco Malfoy throughout his time in Hogwarts and eventually grows up to be an Auror, the magical equivalent of a police

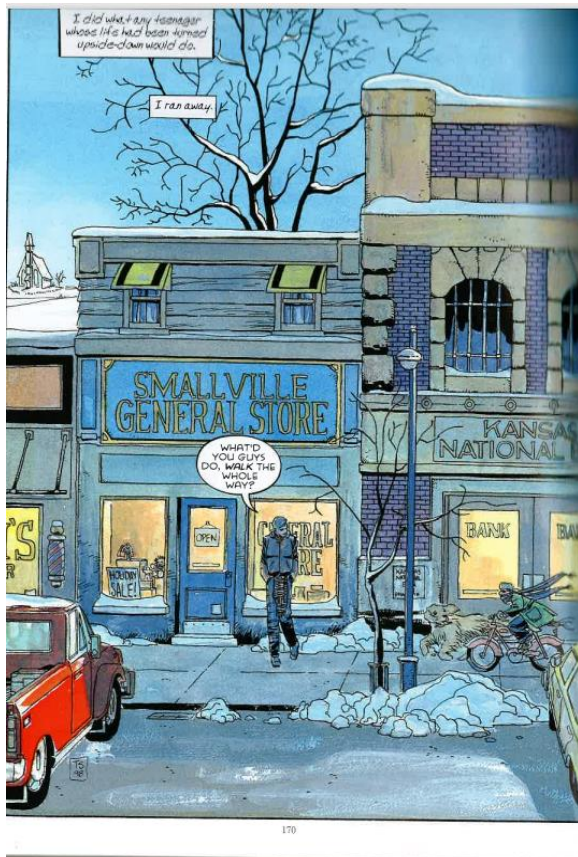
officer. MLK preached nonviolent protest, but never wished for his people to simply let themselves be abused for the sake of being abused, keeping several firearms in his house and sometimes on his person.<sup>2</sup> His status provided him great political power, and had he called for violence, people would have listened, as with his own equal and opposite, Malcom X. These heroes never were without power. They were capable of great violence and destruction, but choose a calmer, nonviolent route. They were not harmless; they were simply men of peace. Within this context, then, we can safely define a hero as a character with the ability to do right, who overcomes trials placed before them, and generally has some interpersonal connections that root them to reality.

Superman is the original superhero. He is the character who, through his immense popularity and close association with the genre, helps define what a superhero is. What a superhero stands for, how one should act, and why they do their heroic actions can all be traced back in some way to Superman. He takes these definitions and ideals laid out in previous narratives and media and adapts them specifically to his own stories, and by doing so, allows every other superhero narrative in existence to comment on what a superhero is in congruence or contrast with the Man of Tomorrow.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Weathersbee "MLK and His Aides," and Winkler, "MLK and His Guns."

There are not many rural superheroes in the genre. Most superheroes were born, raised, and operate within the bounds of a single city. For Green Lantern, it is Coast City, for Batman, Gotham, and for a majority of the Marvel Universe, New York City is home. Superman is, in himself, a twist on this trope. While this norm developed after his publication, Superman defies the norm in favor of a childhood in Smallville, Kansas, only moving to Metropolis in his young



4: *Smallville, Kansas* (Loeb and Sale 1999)

adult years at the earliest. He is explicitly never raised in a large city or by wealthy parents, nor did those parental figures die to initiate his superhero career. Jonathan and Martha Kent are, in most retellings, both alive and well far into Clark's stint as Superman<sup>3</sup>. Martha is usually characterized as an avid church-goer that usually pulls Jonathan along. Jonathan, while not disbelieving anything from the church, has a more pragmatic view of the world and of morality, one he imparts on Clark. He notes of himself, "I didn't put too much stake in being a churchgoing sort.

That was more Martha's way. Myself, I never doubted that Mother Nature could level the

playing field when need be" (Loeb and Sale, *For All Seasons* 29). Jonathan is a farmer by trade.

He does not need to theorize and philosophize about the world using a college degree or any

<sup>3</sup> An exception to both Martha and Jonathan being alive comes from *Man of Steel* (2013), a darker take on the hero where Clark questions if he should become Superman after Jonathan tells Clark not to save him from an oncoming tornado.

special spiritual insights. Any wisdom he has, he gained through his work and his life, not through any intellectual acrobatics. He is simple and skeptical of authority, but intelligent in that simplicity and honest in his skepticism. This translates to Superman's own core values. He does not choose to be a hero – to put on a uniform and stand every day between the city and harm—only because it is the morally right thing to do. It is what he can uniquely contribute to the people around him. It is this midwestern, pragmatic, wholesome upbringing that helps inform Clark's sense of morality. That upbringing is perhaps why Clark is a good person at his core. Not from any sort of genetic-moral superiority, but because he was raised with people in mind and genuinely wants the best for them. When discussing Superman's use of an ultimate weapon capable of turning thoughts and wishes into reality, one of the monitors of the multiverse, Nix Uotan, said of him, "He's Superman. He wished only the best for all of us.... He wished for a happy ending" (Morrison et al., n.p.).

But there is more to Superman's moral code than simply being good for goodness' sake. He has a different perspective than the rest of humanity. As his greatest enemy and polar opposite, Lex Luthor, put it when he was experiencing Superman's powers for himself, "I can actually see the machinery and wire connecting everything since it all began. This is how he [Superman] sees all the time, every day. Like it's all just us, in here, together. And we're all we've got" (Morrison and Quitely 287). Superman is a hero not just because he has some higher, self-aggrandizing morality guiding him. He's a hero because that is what provides the best outcomes for the most people and helps us persevere into tomorrow.

Ultimately, however, this philosophy isn't just for show. Superman puts his beliefs into practice in more personal ways than simply trouncing villains and saving the world. Superman can see the connections we all share, and he can see how important each and every person is to

the grand web of life we have been given. This makes him not into a friend before anything else, not some omnipotent, authoritarian god who enforces peace at any cost. He does not want anyone to be forgotten. As Christopher Reeve, the first actor to play the Man of Steel on the



5: Christopher Reeve as Superman (Superman 1978)

silver screen in 1978, noted in a 1987 interview about his fourth movie as the character, “The basic ingredient of Superman is that he’s a friend, and that’s just simply – that’s the value that’s the most important to me. It’s not Superman as a muscle man... it’s Superman as a

really good neighbor” (Reeve). The comic depictions of Superman also highlight this intimately personal quality of the character. In *All-Star Superman*, Grant Morrison writes a one-page scene where these qualities come to bear in full force.

In this scene, Superman hears a phone conversation in the nearby hospital, realizes the gravity of the situation, and flies to the roof of the skyscraper to intervene. A young girl, on the edge of the roof, having just let her phone drop, stands poised to throw herself off. She feels betrayed by those closest to her and forgotten, even by the doctors assigned to her case. As she closes her eyes, preparing to leap, she feels a hand rest on her shoulder. Superman is there. He addresses her not by some sort of witty moniker or impersonal noun, but by her name. He is



there not because he saw a girl on a roof as he was flying by; he came because he knew she needed someone to be there with her. He then shares words of encouragement as she embraces him, glad to have someone who cares enough about her to show up. “It’s never as bad as it seems,” he says, “You’re much stronger than you think you are. Trust me” (Morrison and Quitely 236). Those two final words that carry an immense amount of meaning. Trust implies a relationship, and even though this girl doesn’t know Superman on a personal level, she knows



6 *All-Star Superman* (Morrison and Quitely 236)

how powerful and important he is. That he would take time out of his day to stand beside her and be there for her is unthinkable, but that is what Superman does. No one is forgotten, or useless, or unimportant when Superman is there. This is how Superman has always been, even from his first appearance. He began his saga not by saving the world, but by appealing to save a woman’s life from death row and defending another from an abusive husband. He beats himself up not

because he can lose fights but because he can't do more to help people. He is simply one man trying his hardest to make the world a better place.

The character of Superman, the original superhero, stands as a tribute to what superheroes can and should be. By this token, Superman has also drawn the most exposition in the forms of “analogue Supermen,” characters who share traits with the Man of Steel, but differ



7: *Superman Catching a Woman Falling From a Bridge* (Ross and Dini n.p.)

in key ways. Many of these characters are Supermen from other Earths<sup>4</sup> where his history played out slightly differently. Three of these are worth examining: Superman the Red Son, Superman the dictator, and Superman the criminal.

---

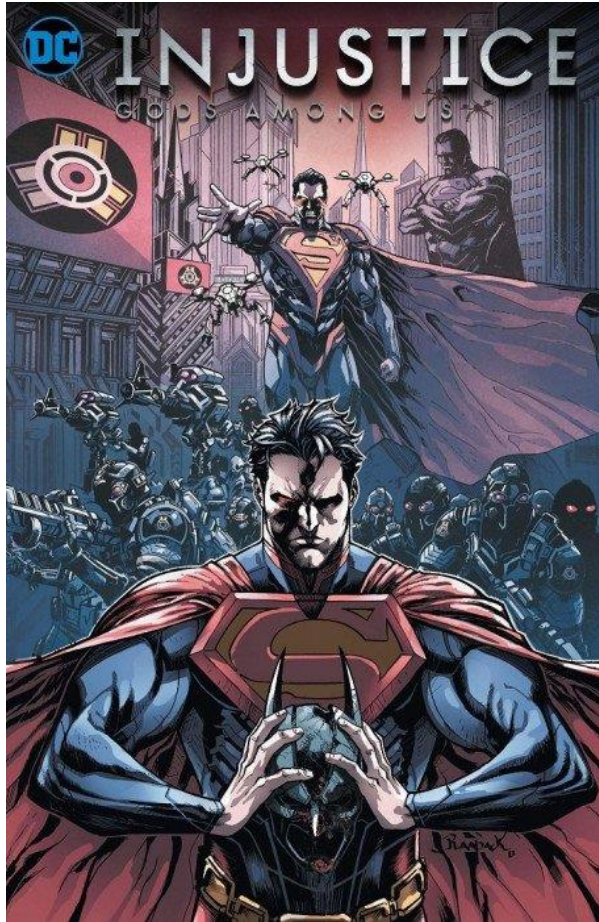
<sup>4</sup> Comic book universes operate within an internal multiverse. One group of stories can be set within one multiverse and take place in its own continuity, unaffected by any other story set in other multiverses. Occasionally the multiverses do cross over with each other, and characters can interact with their alternate realities, but by and large these stories are entirely separate and bound to their own continuity and internal logic.

Red Son Superman [or, Red Son, as I will refer to him throughout] takes place on an Earth twelve hours different from the prime Earth, where the classic Superman resides. In this universe, Red Son did not land in Smallville, Kansas, but in the Siberian Farms of Soviet Russia. Raised by farmers in the Russian wilderness, Red Son comes to Moscow as the Soviet secret weapon, but he still retains the heroic perspective granted by his powers. He does not want to rule the world like a dictator or crush it under his heel. He wants to be a savior, because that is what his powers allow him to strive towards, and he believes communism is the



8: *Red Son* (Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett n.p.)

way to make life for the world better. This graphic novel, written by Mark Millar, Dave Johnson, and Kilian Plunkett, is almost haunting, because you empathize with Red Son and his crusade. His heart is in the right place, and he genuinely wishes the best for the world. But as this warped version of Superman begins to grow older and lose his family, friends, and allies, he loses his grounding. He forgets what matters in his crusade and how his actions affect others. In trying to make the world an entirely safe place for everyone under his rule, he has effectively made it a city in a bottle with no freedom or enjoyment to be had. This is what breaks him, ultimately showing him that the world does not need a Red Son as a savior, but only as someone who would help it grow on its own.



9: Regime Superman (Cover illustrated by Jheremy Raapack)

Superman the dictator<sup>5</sup> hails from a world not dissimilar to the prime Earth. In this world, he has had a long career as a hero, working alongside the Justice League for years, marrying Lois Lane, and expecting a daughter. Once one of Batman's villains, the Joker, decides he wants to push Clark over the edge, Clark loses everything. Lois and the baby die, Metropolis is hit with a nuclear bomb, and Superman kills the Joker in retaliation, something Batman believes is across the line. Superman then goes on to ally himself with some of the Justice League members and sets up a regime across the entire planet, subduing any

resistance and becoming the complete authoritarian Red Son might have feared becoming.

Superman kills his enemies without hesitation and is willing to recruit supervillains to his cause if it bolsters his ranks and gives the world more order. This version of Superman – the seemingly heartless dictator who wishes more for order than peace – is generally what most “evil”

Supermen look like. A good man, a hero, pushed to emotional extremes and doing unspeakable things in the name of justice and safety. While Red Son forgot why he was trying to save the world, Regime Superman has the faces and voices of everyone who died in the Metropolis

---

<sup>5</sup> This Superman actually made his debut in a video game rather than a comic book. *Injustice* (2013) is a fighting game that used the events of the story to pit popular DC characters against each other. Interestingly, the story was far more complex and developed than one might expect from a fighting game, nuancing characters' experiences with trauma, fascism, and family.

bombing burned into his memory, haunting him and never letting him forget whom he was trying to save the world for. Red Son became a hero by regaining a lost trust in humanity and stepping away from the leadership role. Regime believed he could remain a hero through his brutal reign because he could not stand the idea of a world so uncaring and incalculable it would take his pregnant wife and daughter. He could not conceptualize himself as a villain. While readers can root for Red Son throughout his story, acknowledging the horrors of his choices but celebrating when he turns away from his flaws to find a better way, readers of *Injustice* can only feel pity at the Superman whose pain is so immense that it causes him to become the villain.

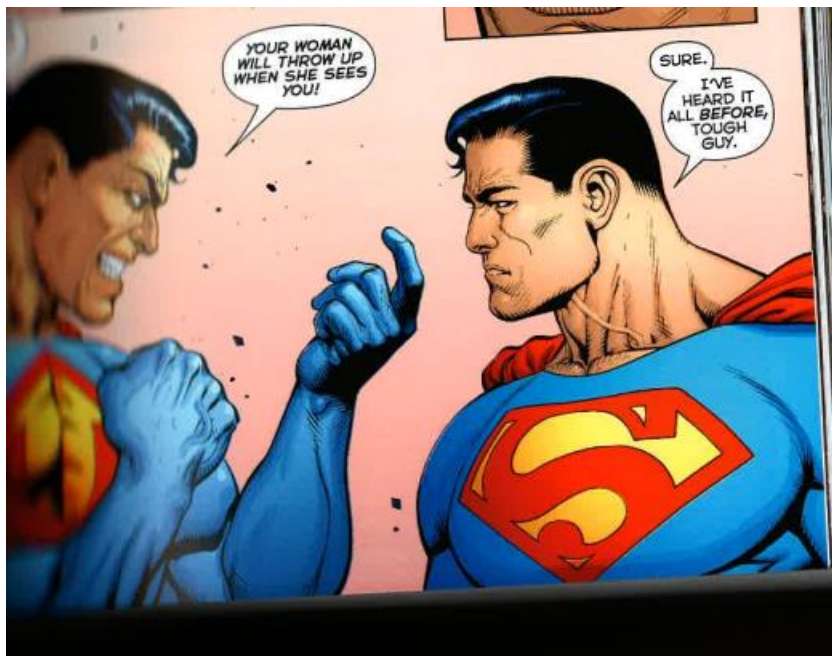
There is one more Superman analogue worth discussing: Superman the Criminal. This version of Superman, dubbing himself Ultraman, hails from an antimatter universe.<sup>6</sup> Originally an astronaut named Clark Kent, who underwent alien medical procedures after an accident in space left him nearly dead, Ultraman leads the Crime Syndicate of America, or CSA, a villainous counterpart to the Justice League of America. The CSA has several evil analogues to heroes on the JLA, making the entire world feel almost like a complete photonegative of Earth Prime.



10: Ultraman (Morrison et al 2008)

<sup>6</sup> Antimatter itself is not necessarily important to who this character becomes, but of note is that he cannot touch Superman Prime, as his matter and Ultraman's antimatter would interact and cancel each other out, destroying both characters.

Ultraman is evil for evil's sake. While one could argue some form of mental illness brought on through the alien treatments made him that way, he is often written as little more than "evil Superman," and it is worth noting that Ultraman does serve a role in comics. During DC's *Final Crisis* (2008), Superman Prime and Ultraman are tasked with saving the multiverse from a beyond-multiversal threat, forcing the two to work together. When the two are compared side by side in this story, Ultraman comes off looking more and more like an overblown bully who thinks far too much of himself. His motivations, goals, and methods are oafish and laughable when next to the "real thing." The photonegative, the evil Superman, is nothing more than a schoolyard bully at heart. He does not subscribe to some grand villainous machination or overarching philosophy. He is just more powerful than anyone on his Earth and he wants everyone to know it. When faced with someone of equal might, he's almost boring. Everyone



11: Ultraman and Superman (Morrison et al 2008)

has seen and read characters like Ultraman before. One-note cannon fodder villains who, when faced up and defeated, slink back into the dark from whence they came and pout until they can return. When compared to the character who is, at his core, good, Ultraman barely casts a shadow.

Red Son, Regime, and Ultraman each help us see what Superman is by clearly showing what he is not. They each have some elements of the Man of Tomorrow. The powers, the origin, and the connections, but each is different in his own way. Superman can still be Superman without his powers – there have been countless times he has lost them for one reason or another – but without that sense of connection and empathy and care that makes him the hero, he quickly becomes at best a tragic villain.

This is what Superman represents in modern media: goodness and compassion regardless of the circumstances. Superman is the quintessential superhero, the one from which every other superhero must draw inspiration or reject it. Heroes do not need superpowers, or flashy costumes, or even elaborate backstories, but modern heroes must care. They must have not only the desire but the determination to help people regardless of who those people are. If they embrace this, they will usually be considered heroes. If they reject it, they may be, at best, anti-heroes and, at worst, outright villains. As Christopher Reeve noted, Superman is, at the heart of his character, a friend when people need a friend.

In any crowd, there is symbolism about Superman. It could be at a football game or in a crosswalk in Manhattan or even a political rally. It does not take long to find it. That “S” crest that represents Superman is on a shirt or backpack or phone case. It may not always be overt or easy to see, but it is there. People know the story of Superman. He was an immigrant, adopted, who has ultimate power but is not ultimately corrupted. He’s a good man, a friend, a neighbor. He is the Man of Tomorrow, the person we strive to be. People may wish to fly or have the strength of Superman, but those things alone do not make him a compelling character. He is worth attention and study because of his strength of character, his moral code, his kindness in a

world that is decidedly unkind. We want to be that. Jor-El puts it best in the pages of *All-Star Superman*,

You [Superman] have shown them the face of the Man of Tomorrow. You have given them an ideal to aspire to, embodied their highest emotions. They will race, and stumble, and fall and crawl... and curse... and finally... they will join you in the sun, Kal-El. (Morrison and Quitely 278)

Superman is the best of us. He is the ideal man. And the ideal man is not simply one with the power to change the world, but one willing to do so for the good. That is something we all strive to be, but Superman himself gives us the reminder that we can be that. As he said in *All-Star Superman*, “You are much stronger than you think you are. Trust me” (Morrison and Quitely 236). We each have the capacity to change the world. Maybe we can’t all stop bullets or fly or lift cars, but we can be a friend to our neighbor. We can put our hand on the shoulder of someone



12: *Superman: American Alien #6* cover. (illustrated by Ryan Sook)

who is hurting. By wearing his crest, his emblem, we strive to embody the ideals he does. We strive to become the best in us. In doing so, in some ways, we are all Superman.



# Batman: Redemption of Tragedy

Batman is one of the most recognizable superheroes in American media. An ordinary child, for the most part, Bruce Wayne was the only son of Thomas and Martha Wayne, one of the richest couples in Gotham City. They were good parents, loving and teaching Bruce about the world, but after watching *The Mask of Zorro* at Bruce's request, they were mugged and murdered in front of the eight-year-old. This left Bruce with deep psychological scars, but perhaps most interestingly, an even deeper drive for justice. Now orphaned, Bruce dedicated the rest of his childhood to becoming the best version of himself he could achieve, studying intensely anything from the arts to mathematics to forensics and detective work, pushing his body to physical limits, and mastering over ten martial arts. Even though his parents' murderer was never found,



13: *The Batman* (Loeb and Sale 1999)

Bruce vowed to wage a war on crime to raise Gotham City from the dark depths to which it had descended since the Wayne murders. But Bruce could not do that as a nameless, faceless vigilante breaking up drug rings and muggings. He needed an identity beyond Bruce Wayne. Something primal and terrifying. He became Batman. Equal parts superhero and urban legend,

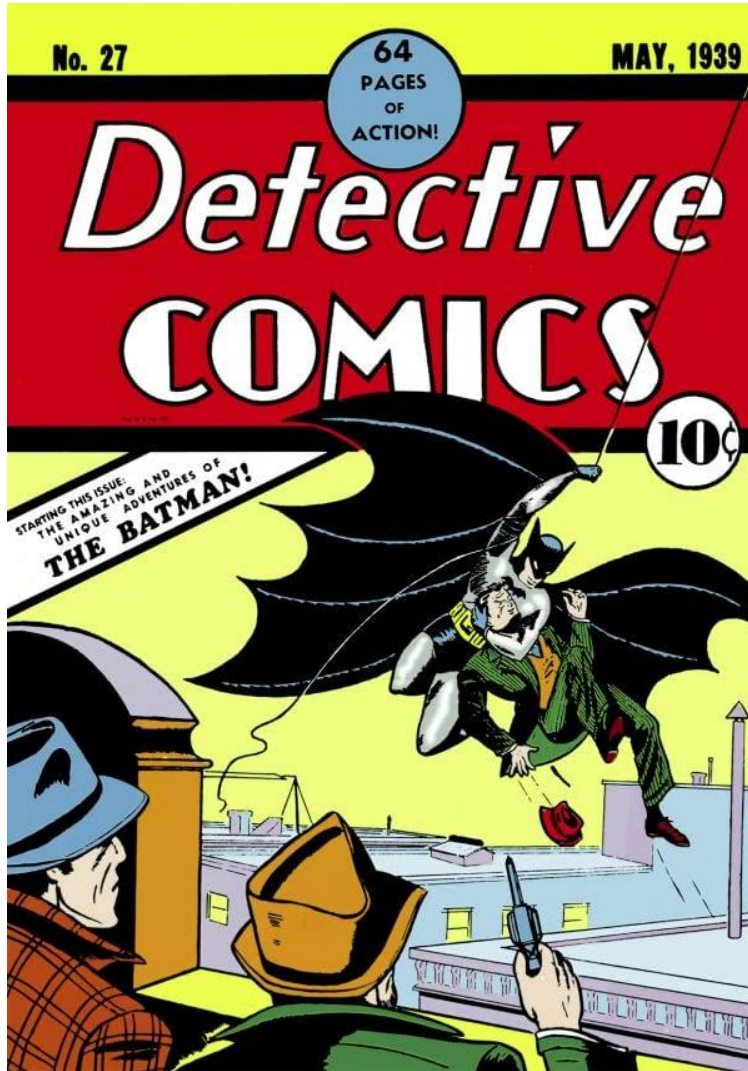
Batman haunted the streets and alleyways of Gotham, intent on rooting out crime and preventing tragedies like that which had befallen him from affecting anyone else.

Batman has one of the most tragic backstories in comic history, yet he still is one of the most powerful forces for good in his world. Why is this? Simply put, Batman is resilient. He shows the limits of the human spirit and how one can go beyond their own limits. Bruce does not do so because he grew up wealthy or because he lost his parents, he became the best version of himself in spite of his circumstances. Losing one's parents as a child is one of the most difficult experiences a child can endure, yet Bruce turns the tragedy into a force for peace and justice. In many Batman stories, the narrative focuses on the psychology and redemption of Bruce's tragedy, oftentimes in comparison to the tragedy of other characters, and in the end, Batman is able to take the darkest moments and turn them into determination for his crusade as a hero.

While Batman's methods and background might be a bit darker than Superman's, he is every bit the hero that the Man of Steel is. Superman represents one end of the heroic spectrum. He is noble, kind, scrupulous, and unfathomably powerful. We have already examined what one type of opposite to the Man of Tomorrow is in the discussion of Red Son and Ultraman, but there is another opposite equal to the respect that Clark Kent has. That opposite is Bruce Wayne, better known as the Batman. Batman is not a villainous opposite; he is more like a conceptual negative. Unlike Superman, the conceptual extra-perfect man, Batman has no powers. He can't fly or throw cars or take bullets. In simplest terms, he is just an ordinary man trying to make the world a better place. Perhaps more importantly, while Clark grew up with a family in wholesome small-town America, Bruce was raised on the outskirts of a city as a grieving orphan who desires to right the wrong done to him. Though the complexities of Batman's heroism run far deeper

than that sentence implies, that simple fundamental concept is what drives his character development and provides the fatal flaws whenever Bruce deviates from it.

Debuting in 1939, Batman was always meant to be the conceptual foil for Superman. Bob Kane and Bill Finger, when asked by Vin Sullivan at *Detective Comics* to “whip up a new hero in the Superman mold, one that could capitalize on this new fad for ‘long underwear characters,’” worked on crafting the hero who could match Superman conceptually without trying to compete with him directly (Morrison *Supergods* 17). They succeeded. Where Superman’s adventures tended to fall somewhere within fantasy and science fiction, Batman landed squarely within the detective and noir genres. Superman’s narrative is a power fantasy, Batman a story of the relentless nature of the human spirit. While Superman operates under the bright Metropolis sun, Batman skulks around rooftops in the dead of night. The list of comparisons can go on and on ad infinitum, but I believe it is more helpful to focus on just a few. By defining how Batman’s narratives consistently contrast with Superman’s, we will see what themes are emphasized in the tales of the Dark Knight. Each of these differences demonstrates the orientation of storytelling that these characters inhabit, and while Superman rests in the future orientation, with a majority of his adventures taking place without any reliance or connection to what came before the Man of Steel, Batman has a past orientation, operating at a slower, more deliberate pace through his stories and using character backgrounds and histories to inform a majority of the narratives he resides in.



14: Cover of *Detective Comics* #27 (Kane 1939)

First, the setting of Batman's tales is strikingly distinct from Superman's. Even since Batman's debut in 1939's *Detective Comics* #27, the pacing and city of the Caped Crusader has a distinct feel from that of Superman's first issue, *Action Comics* #1 (1938). The story inside *Detective Comics* #27, "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," begins by introducing Bruce Wayne, a seemingly boring millionaire and socialite with a fascination in Commissioner Jim Gordon's recent criminal case. The recent murder of a businessman has the city

spellbound as Gordon investigates, but he is not the only one on the trail of the murderer. As Gordon gathers evidence, Batman begins hunting the criminals responsible, obtaining a contract that would have given the holder power over Apex Chemical Corporation. He fights the mastermind inside Apex Chemical in front of Gordon, and as the villain is tipped into the vat of acid and Gordon stares in disbelief, Batman vanishes into the night like a phantom.

This first appearance of Batman sharply contrasts Superman's first issue. *Action Comics* #1 features the Man of Steel in four quick episodes, each one standing more or less alone as its

own narrative. Superman is always moving forward, quickly leaping from page to page and adventure to adventure. By contrast, Batman's first appearance had a much slower pace, focusing on a single narrative and parsing out a mystery. "The Case of the Crime Syndicate" is just as much a detective story as a superhero comic. It may feature a larger-than-life hero on the cover, but the story is one that, at its core, would fit as nicely into the tales of Sherlock Holmes or Dick Tracy as it does to Batman.

Because *Batman* and *Detective Comics* tend towards crime stories rather than science fiction, the stories also dealt with mental illness and darker sides of psychology. While early *Batman* issues tended to keep any assumption of mental illness on the glib side, with villains such as Mr. Freeze and the Joker being played



15: *Arkham Asylum* (Sean Murphy 2019)

as more comedic and lighthearted foes, later stories began to delve deeply into the psychology of Batman and the criminals he regularly faced. This emphasis on abnormal psychology is most apparent in one of the most famous locales in Gotham City: Arkham Asylum. Arkham is a combination mental institution and superhuman prison, housing Gotham's worst of the worst, almost all of which were put behind bars due to Batman's detective and vigilante work.

Batman's rogues gallery is certainly a colorful crew. The standouts include a clown, a flightless bird, and a frozen scientist. But interestingly, many of his villains can line up with personifications of mental disorders. Two of particular note are Two-Face and The Riddler. Disgraced D.A. Harvey Dent, whose face was burned half away from an acid attack from a

criminal he and Batman worked together to put behind bars. As Two-Face, he terrorizes Gotham with his own brand of vigilante “justice,” using the random chance of a flipped coin to determine the fates of those he deems guilty. Edward Nigma has an obsession with riddles. Often, he has thematic crimes, centering on something riddle or question related. He is incapable of committing crimes without leaving esoteric and difficult riddles and clues to his grand schemes. Batman is one of the few able to decode his riddles. Two-Face and the Riddler both symbolize a type of obsessive-compulsive disorder, with Dr. Travis Langley stating in his book *Batman and Psychology*,

When he [Riddler] tries to commit a series of robberies without telegraphing his plans to Batman via his trademark riddles, he subconsciously leaves clues anyway.... Addictive behaviors continue long after they stop being fun because failing to act on them stresses the addict, pushing that person to seek release from the internal pressure. (Langley 121-22)

Riddler cannot help but leave clues that ultimately lead to his capture and return to Arkham. Not only is that part of what makes his character unique both within the context of the Batman stories and as a character in his own right, but this mental disorder is also what makes him fascinating to examine from an analytical perspective. “Why does he do the things he does,” one may rightly ask. It is this question that has given rise to so many of Batman’s greatest adversaries, not just from within the story as a direct threat to Bruce himself, but also from a character complexity standpoint.



16: *The Joker* (Brubaker and Mahnke 2003)

For a more extreme example of psychopathy, one only needs to look a few rungs higher on the “Batman’s greatest villains” ladder to arrive at the Joker.<sup>7</sup> While Two-Face and the Riddler are rather mild cases of psychological disorder, Joker is in an entirely different league. In theory, Harvey Dent and Edward Nigma could reintegrate into society quickly with the help of some medication or therapy, but Joker is not so simple a case. Joker, in many senses, has no history, or at the very least no sense of history. As he says to Batman in Alan Moore’s *The Killing Joke*, “Something like that<sup>8</sup> happened to me, you know. I... I’m not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I’m going to have a past, I prefer it be multiple choice” (Moore and Bolland n.p.). While Joker could be diagnosed with any number of psychological disorders based on this alone, not to mention the myriad of other psychological and behavioral differences he presents with, diagnosis

is not the point of his character. He is meant to represent a person who could not recover from trauma. He is Batman’s antithesis because he represents the randomness of the world and its injustice and cruelty. Anyone can go mad, and all it takes is just a single bad day to tip the scales from sanity to insanity.

<sup>7</sup> No one knows who the Joker is or where he comes from. Some stories say he was a comedian who had a bad day and fell into a vat of acid. Others contend that he has been haunting Gotham City for generations, always in the background, always smiling sadistically. He has no consistent origin but is Batman’s own conceptual opposite – a force of pure chaos and evil with no reason or purpose or background. Where Bruce has dedicated his life to making the city better in the wake of his parent’s murders, Joker is a terrorist for no other reason than it makes him laugh.

<sup>8</sup> Joker is attempting to taunt Batman by listing reasons he might have gone mad.

Because *Batman* is more rooted in past tense storytelling<sup>9</sup> when compared to *Superman*, it has a little bit of an advantage when discussing some topics, particularly trauma. The central theme of much of Bruce Wayne's character is trauma and how one reacts to traumatic experiences. Without the murder of Thomas and Martha Wayne in crime alley in front of eight-year-old Bruce, there is no Batman. Where Superman has no true inciting incident in his path to becoming a superhero, instead learning lessons on the Kent farm about power, responsibility, and humanity, Batman must be born from a heartbreaking tragedy. Bruce demonstrates phenomenal resilience as he grows up an orphan. While many people might have broken down, Bruce instead dedicated his childhood development to self-improvement. He says about tragedy in Alex Ross and Paul Dini's *Batman: War on Crime*, "It is not the moments of tragedy that define our lives so much as the choices we make to deal with them" (n.p.). Bruce does not succumb to grief and depression. Instead, he chooses to use the grief as motivation for a crusade for vengeance against the criminal underworld. Dr. Langley notes that losing a parent is "the single most stressful common life event a child can experience" (37). This stress would have thrown eight-year-old Bruce into a terrifying spiral, as the world that once was luxurious and safe was now desolate, cold, and lonely. It is within this pain and anger that he resolves to avenge the deaths of his parents.

This resolution, however, does not come easily. Bruce spends years of his life training for a seemingly endless task: a war on crime itself. His trauma fuels a deep rage inside of him, but rarely does this rage boil over without a purpose. He does not suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress

---

<sup>9</sup> Past tense storytelling is a term I use to differentiate levels of reliance a character or story has on different points in time. Past tense stories have a deep reliance on events that happened before the main narrative, such as Bruce's parents dying, and constantly reference these points to the reader as significant. Compare to future tense and present tense storytelling. Future tense focuses on events that might happen, good or bad. An example would be how Superman approaches his adversaries: with a hope that they can be redeemed and be better than who they are today. Present tense storytelling is, in my mind, synonymous with serial storytelling, where each individual narrative might have a plot in itself, but few of those narratives weave together to tell an overarching story.

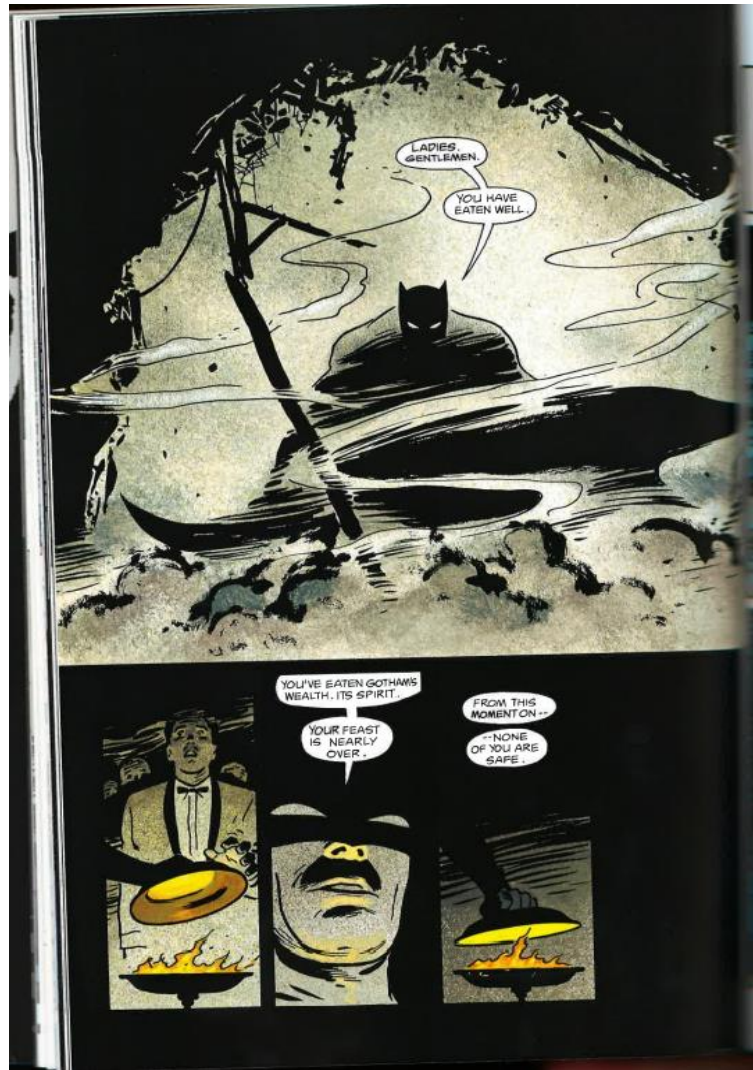


Disorder [PTSD] in the clinical sense. The diagnosis of any disorder demands that there be some form of maladaptive behavior, but Batman, while certainly not conventional, does not suffer from any disability of function due to the trauma induced by the murder of his parents (Langley 40). He is the world's greatest detective and a crime-fighter on par with the rest of the Justice League. Arguably, Batman is the pinnacle of human achievement from both a physiological and psychological standpoint. While he suffered immense trauma at the hands of the faceless Gotham underworld,<sup>10</sup> he did not allow that trauma to overcome him. He turned the trauma into something beneficial to those outside himself. Batman experiences not PTSD but rather Post-Traumatic Growth, or PTG. PTG is about what it sounds like, and is defined by Bret Moore, Richard Tedeschi, and Taryn Greene as a theory "which posits that positive psychological changes can occur in the aftermath of difficult life experiences, specifically in the areas of personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, appreciation of life, and spiritual/existential matters" (44). Bruce takes the trauma of his parents' deaths and works to turn that hurt into a force for good. He becomes the dark avenging hero of Gotham City.

---

<sup>10</sup> In some retellings, the murderer is a man called Joe Chill, but in others, the murderer is never named. The identity of the murderer has no bearing on Batman's story, however. The identity, background, and circumstances of the murder is tangential to Batman's origin. Be it a political assassination disguised as a mugging, a robbery over a string of pearls, or an accident from a shaky trigger finger, Batman always rises from the night in the alley like a shadowy phoenix. Often, these extra details are more to foot a temporary plot with swift resolution instead of a complex character study, leaving almost no definitive mark on the mythos overall.

Batman is Gotham's cryptid,<sup>11</sup> a predatory hunter of the vile and dark, an almost omniscient presence in the minds of those who fear him. He is nigh untouchable, with even supercriminals like Poison Ivy and Scarecrow eventually being beaten and returned to Arkham Asylum. He wants to strike fear into the hearts of criminals he hunts using both common phobias and his immense anger to intimidate them. Batman is not prone to violent, pointless outbursts, however. He is not like most of the criminals he faces: easily provoked and tending



17: Batman using the night to intimidate Gotham's wealthy elite (Miller and Mazzucchelli 1986)

towards violence. Bruce is completely in control of his emotions in both his civilian and vigilante lives. As he put it when he was fighting a mutant for control of Gotham's respect in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), "You don't... get it, boy... This isn't a mudhole... it's an operating table. And I'm the surgeon" (n.p.). Batman does not see himself as a player in the game that is Gotham city. He is not simply a man vying for control of the

<sup>11</sup> In most stories, Batman is seen early on as a dark creature or urban legend. Over time, the citizens of Gotham acknowledge the reality of his existence and usually there is no question that the Batman is real once he appears on national television standing side by side with the rest of the Justice League, but in his early days, he was more of a shadowy force than a man in a suit.

geography or the people. He is the operator who manages the system from a higher level, intent on carving out or burning away the cancer of crime the city is crippled with in the most effective way.

This ability to choose effective techniques becomes most evident when he has to move from a violent situation to one that requires a quieter touch. One key example comes from *Batman: War on Crime*. This more reflective book follows Batman over a few nights attempting

to improve the situation in a more poverty-stricken neighborhood in Gotham City. Throughout his interactions with drug dealers and gang members,



18: *Batman: War on Crime* image. "There's another way" (Ross and Dini n.p.)

he constantly plays up to his intimidation factor, using the darkness, confusion, and superstition of the criminals to single-handedly upend a drug lab. When he encounters a young boy defending the older gang members, however, he changes his approach. He knows that intimidation will work on the child, but being feared is not his goal. He may be Gotham's resident bogey man, but he chooses to be in order to protect those who cannot protect themselves. To this end, Batman does not make himself intimidating but instead talks to the child, comforting him from the loss of his

parents and hugging him to make him feel secure. Bruce knows what it is to lose parents, and while he might have begun his crusade for justice as a way to bring the killer in, his priorities show in his compassion for those like him. He notes at the end of the narrative,

I know I am fighting a war I can never completely win. But there are small victories that encourage me to keep trying. If I can win back one child, there may be hope for many others. If it starts with one person, and then a neighborhood, then perhaps redemption can spread through an entire city, and finally back to me.

(Ross and Dini n.p.)

Batman does not want simply to be the vengeful spirit of the night; he wants to make Gotham safer so that no one else has to live through his trauma. In this way, he is not fighting simply for justice, but also redemption and absolution of his own trauma.



19: Robin (Loeb and Sale 1999)

Importantly, rarely is there a Batman without a Robin. Bruce often has a younger protégé at his side during his nightly escapades in costume, with each person who takes up the mantle showing a different side of Bruce. The first, and perhaps the most influential, is Dick Grayson. Dick was part of a circus, his parents the trapeze artists, when an assassination masked as a rigging accident left him orphaned. Bruce, who was in attendance at the time, finds the killers and brings them to justice as Batman and subsequently adopts Dick as his ward.

Between various retellings, Dick finds out Bruce's secret either before or shortly after being adopted and joins Bruce in his fight against the underbelly of Gotham City. Many of Batman's critics, including fellow superheroes, question his decision to bring a child into a personal war, with Wonder Woman confronting Batman in front of the entire Justice League in *Young Justice*.

*Wonder Woman:* You indoctrinated Robin into crimefighting at the ripe old age of nine.

*Batman:* Robin needed to bring the men who murdered his family to justice.

*Wonder Woman:* So he could turn out like you?

*Batman:* So that he wouldn't. (*Young Justice* S1 E17)

Bruce does not flippantly allow Robin to join him just because the kid makes a second target for the criminals to shoot at. Robin is fighting crime because that is what will make him better than Bruce got the chance to be. Bruce does not want anyone to suffer the way he has suffered and live the life he feels he has had to lead. To that end, he brings Robin into the fray so he can learn how to not be the Batman.

Ultimately, Dick grows up (no one can stay young forever, except maybe Bruce himself) and moves on from Batman's shadow. He forgoes the mantle of Robin for a new title: Nightwing.<sup>12</sup> First taking the title in 1984, he is a founding member of the young superhero team, the Teen Titans. He moves away from Gotham and begins protecting a city all his own in Bludhaven. Even though Nightwing was trained by Batman, he is not like Batman. Dick does not grow up to be socially isolated, brooding, and intimidatory. He is happy and optimistic, with a hopeful outlook towards the future that informs the way he fights crime. While Batman tends to lock up his criminals and then continue with his nightly crusade, Nightwing tries to understand their situation, not necessarily to show them legal mercy and let them go, but more in an attempt to fix the root of their problem and make Bludhaven safer by fixing any structural or systemic problems he sees. His goal is the same as Batman's, but his method is different. In this way, Nightwing is Batman's greatest success. Though Dick might have become like Bruce in the wake of his tragedy, Batman's intervention ensured that Dick got the catharsis and closure he needed.

Dick knew Batman better than anyone else. Because he worked side by side with the hero growing up, Dick understands what many heroes do not about the caped crusader. Batman does

---

<sup>12</sup> Nightwing's name actually has Kryptonian origin. Nightwing was the protector of the bottled Kryptonian city of Kandor whose legend made its way to Dick Grayson as he was preparing to leave Batman and the mantle of Robin.

not fight his battle out of anger. There is no deeply rooted hatred for anyone that drives the nightly escapades. It was thankfulness that kept the Batman going. Dick and Superman summarized it best after Bruce's death in Grant Morrison's *Final Crisis*,

*Superman:* He [Batman] wasn't a creature of vengeance. He wasn't trying to avenge the deaths of his parents by lashing out at every criminal he could find.

*Dick:* No. He was grateful. He had been spared. He was repaying a debt. (n.p.)

Bruce is not a character who operates from the great rage inside of him. Batman, though he began with the desire to avenge his parents, grew through his life to become more than just a vengeful vigilante. He used his trauma to fuel a mission to protect others and show that tragedy does not have to be the end for a life. That is the point to Batman: the redemption of tragedy. But how can Batman's story end? What reward does he get for being Batman?

In the somewhat meta-narrative story *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader*, penned by Neil Gaiman, Batman watches his own funeral as friend and foe alike step forward to recount their memories of the hero and how they remember him dying. In each story, no matter the specific circumstances, Batman goes out sacrificing his life for a greater good, uncompromising in his dedication to a redemption of the past and a future worth living in. While the entire narrative is filled to the brim with moments that highlight specific attributes of Batman's principles and beliefs, there is just one exchange I wish to highlight. Batman walks through the door at the end of life to find his mother waiting on the other side to help him come to terms with what has happened. Batman explains to her his understanding,

I've learned... that it doesn't matter what the story is, some things never change.... The Batman doesn't compromise. I keep this city safe... even if it's just safer by one person... and I do not **ever** give in or give up.... I can't give up.

I'm the Batman. I protect the city. I rescue people. I investigate crimes. I guard the innocent. I correct the guilty.... At the end of the story Batman is, he's dead. Because, in the end, the Batman dies. What else am I going to do? Retire and play golf? It doesn't work that way. It can't. I fight until I drop. And one day, I will drop. But until then, I fight. (Gaiman and Kubert n.p.)

These are not the words of a man who wishes to brutalize criminals in Gotham. Batman is not meant to be a creature of vengeance, ultimately, whether he knows it or not.<sup>13</sup> As Bruce grows, as he gains allies in the Justice League, Superman, and Robin, he realizes the true reason and purpose for his being Batman. His reward, as told to him by his mother as he drifts off into death, "You don't get heaven or hell. Do you know the only reward you get for being Batman? You get to be Batman. And – when you're a child – you get a handful of years of real happiness, with your father, with me" (Gaiman and Kubert n.p.). Bruce's journey, as Gaiman writes it, is more of a cycle. There are moments of happiness between the dark nights, but ultimately, Batman is Batman because that is how he must react to the tragedy. Nothing must be the end. There can always be a brighter tomorrow.

I was at a comics convention back in 2017, and I attended a panel hosted by Kevin Conroy, the voice of Batman in *Batman: The Animated Series* and other animated shows. He answered a few general questions about what it was like on the show and how he stumbled into the role, but after the usual frequently asked questions he opened the floor for audience participation. We were not in a large convention hall, so it was easy for all of us to hear the most intriguing question from the man a few rows in front of me to my left. He was around his early-

---

<sup>13</sup> Many versions of Batman do not take this more nuanced approach, chief among them some *All-Star Batman* by Frank Miller, but many of these versions of the dark knight become grim and gritty without substance, pure power fantasies about a man in a Kevlar suit. Thus, most of these versions are panned as being one-note and shallow.



to mid-thirties and wearing a Batman hat. He said that his father had died when he was around seven, and those had been some of the hardest years of his life. He had fallen into depression and had contemplated suicide several times throughout his life, but he had watched a few episodes of *Batman: The Animated Series* and it had captured his attention. Sure, the animation was slick, and the voice cast was superb, but what had caught his attention was Bruce Wayne. In the show, he saw a man who had gone through a tragedy like his own. Bruce not only felt the loss deeply and grieved the loss on screen but was also able to transform that pain into



20: Kevin Conroy, photo by Tray Armstrong, 2017.

something constructive and helpful for others. Bruce's example, in part, was what helped the man back onto his feet, and he was now happily married with a child. He asked Kevin to say a few lines in Batman's voice, just to say that he had met his childhood hero, and Kevin obliged, wishing him well and a happy life. This is what Batman means to people beyond the comics page. He shows that even the worst of tragedies can be redeemed, and that failures, defeats, and hopeless nights are not the end. There is always a way forward if we are brave enough to take the first step.

# Spider-Man: Power and Responsibility

Superhumans have incredible and unbelievable abilities, but often the line between superhero and supervillain lies in how those powers are used. While it is easy to say that one would use his or her powers for the benefit of others, it is a much more challenging task in practice. What defines a good use of powers? Good for who? What responsibility does a superhuman have regarding the use of his powers and what happens when those responsibilities are shirked?



21: *Spider-Man* (Bendis and Bagley 2000)

Enter Peter Parker, A.K.A. the Spectacular Spider-Man. A New York City superhero with the proportionate abilities of a spider, Peter fights crime while also trying to balance home, social, and school lives. He certainly has the opportunity and the need to use his powers to make his life easier. He might earn money

performing or even saving people and asking for a reward. Spider-Man, however, does nothing of the sort. He is a civil servant more than a superhuman profiteer. How Spider-Man approaches the concept of power and responsibility is the core of his character as well as that of his greatest villains: Doctor Octopus, Green Goblin, and Venom. The narratives in which each of these

characters interact examine what responsibility looks like when one has power, and each of the villains helps show how Peter has grown in his understanding of the responsibility that comes with being Spider-Man.

Conceived by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in 1962 as the younger, more hip, more human-feeling superhero to the adult Superman and billionaire Batman, Spider-Man was meant to connect with the child and teenaged readers of comics in ways that the adult heroes could not. Where Batman's entire focus was his war on crime, dropping every social event he had scheduled as Bruce Wayne in order to chase the Joker through the streets of Gotham, Spider-Man's life was a balancing act. While he was a superhero through and through, he also had the pressure of school, a job, and a social life to add stress to his already hectic life. As Grant Morrison puts it in *Supergods*, "*Spider-Man* transformed ordinary teenage life into a weird symbolic soap opera" (98-9). Peter Parker was, at his core, relatable to the primary comic book audience. Because of that relatability, the message and moral that Lee and Ditko wished to tell in the origin story was poised to have an impact.

Peter Parker is, as a striking percentage of superheroes tend to be, an orphan. In *Amazing Fantasy #15*, penned by Lee and illustrated by Ditko, he is given a complete origin story. He was given to his Aunt May and Uncle Ben before his parents took an overseas assignment as government agents from which they never returned. His was not a sad childhood, however, as his aunt and uncle tried their best to provide for him and educate him, fostering a love for science and creativity. Peter, at a science demonstration, gets bitten by a radioactive<sup>14</sup> spider and

---

<sup>14</sup> In many continuities, it is a genetically modified spider if Spider-Man's origins are scientific in nature. There are other origins which detail a more mystical or mechanical origin, but for purposes of this essay, I will be referring primarily to the mainline "Earth-616" version of Spider-Man, the character that has been the focus of *Spider-Man* books since his introduction in 1962.

develops amazing powers. He can climb sheer walls, lift several tons over his head, and sense impending danger with a sixth “spider” sense.

Unfortunately, Peter is still young, and with youth comes both ingenuity and angst. Realizing the potential of these powers, Peter dons a bright costume and tries his hand at show-business, developing his own web-shooters and webbing solution to give him the ability to swing on the webs he fires from the devices on his wrist.



22: Peter Parker Developing Webbing (Lee and Ditko 1963)

However, Peter is still a teenager, with all the moodiness, angst, frustration, and ego that comes with it. After a show, he sees a robbery take place but does nothing to stop the criminal as he runs by. The nearby security officer confronts him, saying, “What’s with you, mister?? All you hadda do was trip him, or just hold him for a minute!” (Lee and Ditko 8). Peter, in his infinite teenage wisdom, responds, “Sorry, pal! That’s your job! I’m thru being pushed around – by anyone! From now on I just look out for number one – that means – me!” (Lee and Ditko 8). He does not owe the world anything, particularly since it took his parents from him.

When he returns home later, however, he is greeted by police cars lining his street. His Uncle Ben has been murdered in a botched break-in. Overhearing that NYPD have the suspect cornered in an abandoned building, Peter dons his costume and pursues the murderer in a way the police cannot. He says in a rage, “I know the old Acme warehouse! It’s been deserted for years! A killer could hold off an army in that place! But he won’t hold off – Spider-Man!” (Lee and Ditko 9). As he stalks the murderer, taunting him from the shadowy eaves, he begins to realize who exactly he is facing. It is the man he refused to stop after his show. Tearful, he webs the villain up for the police to find and retreats into the shadows to grieve for his uncle and lament his choice. “My fault,” he says, “All my fault! If only I had stopped him when I could have! But I didn’t – and now – Uncle Ben – is dead...” (Lee and Ditko 11). The narrator closes the story in the last panel, “And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come – great responsibility!” (Lee and Ditko 11). Spider-Man is born of tragedy, a radical misunderstanding of this fundamental necessity of responsibility that will forever alter his future.

Spider-Man operates from a different degree of motivation when compared to Superman and Batman. Superman is a hero because it is the right thing to do. He believes that being a hero is the reason he was sent to Earth and is the way he makes his life matter and the world better. As he says in Mark Waid’s *Kingdom Come* (1996), “In this world, there is right and there is wrong... and that distinction is not difficult to make” (Waid and Ross n.p.). Batman, on the other hand, is a hero because he wishes to prevent the repetition of the tragedy he bore as a child. He is both a creature of justice and salvation from the dark. Batman never gives up trying to save as many people as he can from a darker fate. As Robin said in Neil Gaiman’s *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow* (2009), “Holy... I mean... he was holy. He never gave up. No matter

what. And over and over again, he'd pull off miracles" (Gaiman and Kubert n.p.). Spider-Man is a hero because he both realizes the responsibility he has to others and as penance, a way for him to make up for the death of his uncle. He is also a neighborhood-level, more often than a citywide level, hero who focuses his heroics more on where he is in the present moment rather than trying to find danger by scanning the city. Interestingly, Peter did not need his powers to prevent the death of his uncle. He could have easily tripped the murderer, allowing the security officer to catch and detain him. The reason Peter feels so guilty is because he could have prevented Ben's death, but instead was too self-centered to care until it affected him. This leaves him not with direct trauma like Batman's, nor the inner drive of heroism like Superman's, but instead a desire to make right the wrong he could have prevented. Spider-Man is a hero because he feels the responsibility and need for atonement.

Spider-Man's greatest enemy, however, is his exact opposite. Norman Osborn, A.K.A. the Green Goblin, is a multimillionaire businessman working primarily in chemical manufacturing and weapons. He has everything he could ever want – money, fame, power, a family – but it still is not enough for him. Norman sees his son Harry as an abject failure, unworthy to carry on the Osborn legacy. Instead, he sees Spider-Man as his equal, eventually finding out Peter Parker is Spider-Man. He injects himself with a super-serum that was meant to give him even more power, but while it enhanced his strength and intellect, it also made Norman insane, hell-bent on recruiting Spider-Man or destroying him.

While there are several defining stories about the Green Goblin, what is most relevant about him is not necessarily one singular encounter as much as his concept. He is everything Peter might be but chooses not to be: the manager of a multi-million-dollar company,<sup>15</sup> a technological genius, and, at one point, the leader of the Avengers (New York City's resident



23: *The Green Goblin* (Bendis and Bagley 2000)

superhero team). Unfortunately, however, he is also cruel, sadistic, and conniving, Machiavellian. Norman will always want more and more, and he will always look for ways to make Peter's life miserable, no matter the personal cost. The most memorable example comes from *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121 and #122 (1973), written by Gerry Conway. This was one of the first major turning points for Peter Parker, as the Green Goblin targeted not just his superhero identity but also his personal life as well. Norman kidnaps Peter's then-girlfriend Gwen Stacy and throws her off the Brooklyn

<sup>15</sup> While Peter did briefly run Parker Industries, building the company was not actually his doing. The formation of Parker Industries happened while Otto Octavius was in control of Peter's body as the Superior Spider-Man, discussed later.

Bridge, killing her. Peter pursues Norman to a warehouse where some of the Goblin equipment is stored and the two fight. As Spider-Man backs the Goblin into a corner, Norman launches a desperate bid to kill Peter and attempts to impale him on the remote-controlled Goblin Glider. Peter's Spider-Sense warns him of the danger, and he leaps out of the way. Norman cannot stop his glider in time and he impales himself, presumably killing himself.<sup>16</sup> Norman Osborn's insatiable lust for power and hatred of anything that challenges that power runs directly counter to Peter's own philosophy of great power and great responsibility. Norman was one of the most powerful people in New York, yet he squandered his wealth, his time, and his power to try and kill someone who did not even threaten his status directly rather than work to improve life in the city. Peter has less power than Norman and fewer resources, yet Norman will always be the villain in the history of Marvel comics in part because he refuses to learn the lesson that is central to Peter's character.



24: *The Death of Gwen Stacy* (Busiek and Ross 1994)

<sup>16</sup> The Goblin Serum gives Norman a healing factor and he does not die. When he recovers enough, he escapes and goes into hiding, becoming a constant thorn in Spider-Man's side several years later.





25: *The Black Suit* (Zdarsky and Bagley 2019)

While Spider-Man does understand what it means to be a hero, he is not as god-like or infallible as Superman or Batman. Bad days are central to many Spider-Man stories.<sup>17</sup> Occasionally, Peter will be influenced by outside sources and become a rougher, more destructive version of himself. The most notable of these influences was his symbiote suit.

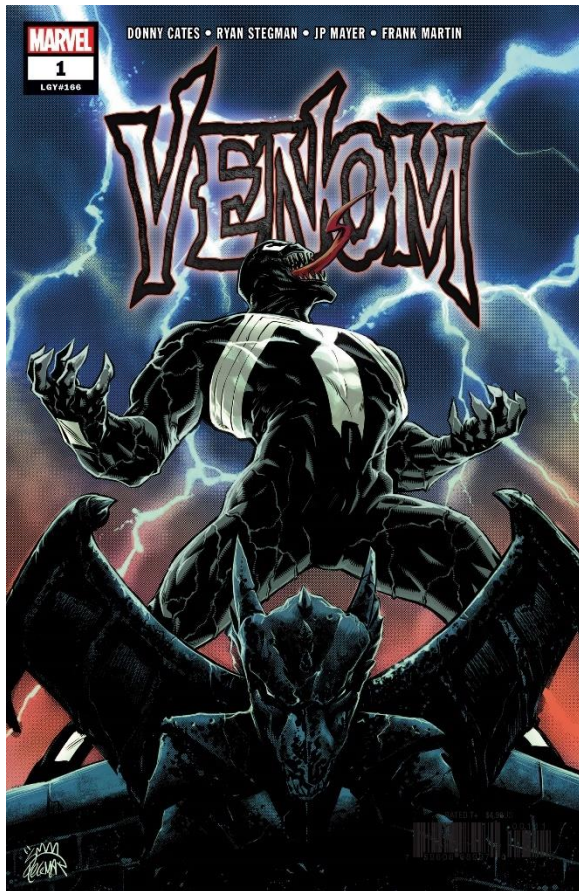
Dubbed the black suit, this strange,

emotion-altering suit is actually an alien species called a Klyntar. When many of the superheroes and villains from the Marvel universe were teleported to an alien planet, Spider-Man discovered this black suit when trying to repair his stitched-together fabric costume. It leapt onto him, granting him enhanced strength, speed, organic webbing,<sup>18</sup> and an ability to telepathically reorganize itself into different forms to look like civilian clothes or his original costume. He used this new alien suit during the war on Battleworld and took it with him when he returned to NYC. Peter was under an intense amount of stress from his job, his home life with Mary Jane Watson, and his life as Spider-Man, becoming restless and irritable. Unfortunately, because the suit was

<sup>17</sup> Some examples include “Spider-Man No More!” from *Amazing Spider-Man #50* (1967), *Spider-Man: Blue* (2002), and *Spider-Man: Kraven’s Last Hunt* (1987).

<sup>18</sup> No more chemically synthesized webbing that could frequently run out while he was fighting or web-swinging through the city.

telepathically linked to Peter, it began to take his body out for crime fighting while he was sleeping and altering his mood to be even more aggressive when he was awake in an attempt to curb the stress on Peter. Once Peter realized this, he fled to a church and started ringing the bells, the intense noise weakening the symbiote and allowing Peter to pull it off.



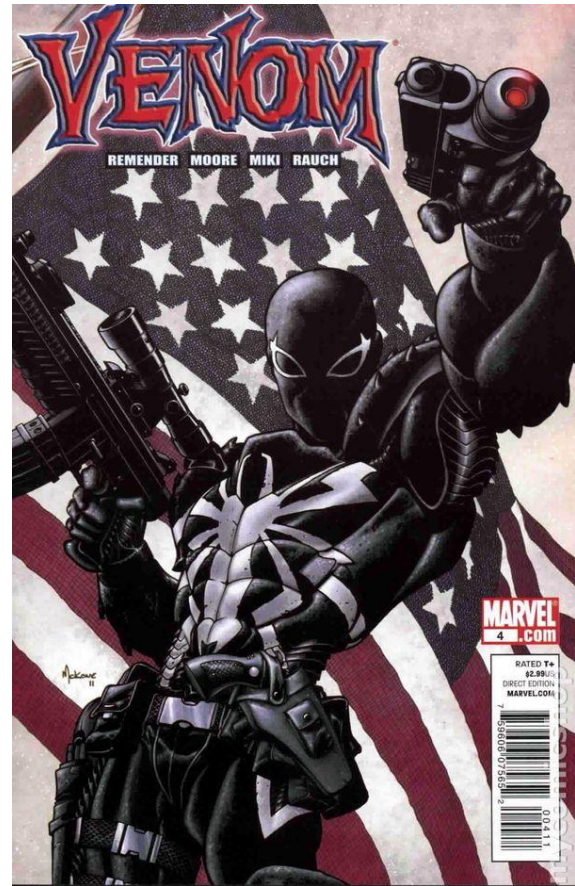
26: *Venom* (Illus. Ryan Stegman 2018)

Rejection was not the end of the story for the Symbiote. Even aliens can learn that power and responsibility are irrevocably linked. After being wrenched from Peter's suit, the symbiote fell onto a man named Eddie Brock and bonded with him, giving him all of Spider-Man's abilities and then some, along with the stress and aggression that Peter had experienced. The now symbiotic relationship between the suit and Eddie Brock spawned one of Spider-Man's most dangerous villains: Venom. While Venom and Spider-Man clashed on multiple occasions, the symbiote itself does not stay in Eddie's

possession. It eventually falls into the hands of the U.S. Government, and realizing the potential of the symbiote as a living weapon and super-soldier, they granted it to honored war veteran Flash Thompson. Flash was Peter's high school bully, but as he grew up, he had enlisted to fight for his country and be a hero like Spider-Man. Recommended for the medal of honor for saving his fellow soldiers at the cost of his legs in Iraq, Flash enrolled into the Project: Rebirth 2.0

program to bond with the symbiote and serve as a government superhero: Agent Venom. While Flash could feel the rage of the symbiote in his mind due to the telepathic link, he was able to retrain the creature to be a force for good, becoming not just host and suit, but friends and partners. This was something that Peter never understood about the suit. It is a living entity with its own emotions and thoughts. Peter believed the suit was purely evil, but Flash was able to bring the Venom symbiote back to being a hero.

Peter's interactions with the Venom symbiote demonstrate another facet of the power/responsibility dynamic, one that Spider-Man has not been historically the best with. Peter tends to have a hard time believing anyone has changed for the better, be that former bullies or former supervillains. This skepticism is both helpful in his superhero job and a character flaw that keeps him bound to his preconception of reformed characters. When he first meets Agent Venom, he tries again to kill the Venom suit, even as the pleas from both suit and user said it had changed. Peter then learns that the Klyntar species feed on anger and rage as though it was a drug, and with Peter's rage fueling its addiction while he was wearing the suit, it became incredibly lost and suffered withdrawals when anyone else used it. Peter was the one who condemned the symbiote to an addiction, failing perhaps a different facet of power and responsibility. Instead of controlling his emotions, Peter allowed his emotions to control him and



27: Agent Venom (illus. Mike McKone 2011)

injure those around him both in the form of the Venom suit itself and those who the suit injured after it left Spider-Man.

Spider-Man does wish to save everyone, even his villains. Sometimes, redemption is possible, yet at other times, it is unattainable, and both are the case with Dr. Octopus. Dr. Otto Octavius, A.K.A. Dr. Octopus, is one of Spider-Man's oldest enemies, first appearing in *The Amazing Spider-Man #3* (1963), written by Stan Lee. There are two versions of Dr. Octopus I wish to discuss in this essay, one from the *Spider-Man* (2018) video game and one from the mainline Earth-616 comics.<sup>19</sup> The world of the video game is slightly different from the one we have been discussing thus far. In this world, instead of being a supervillain initially, Dr. Octavius is an adult Peter Parker's scientific mentor, helping him develop technology he can use as Spider-Man. Peter idolizes Otto. To him, Dr. Octavius is the epitome of using great power, in this case great knowledge, responsibly to help people. Halfway through the game, however, Peter realizes that Dr. Octopus has been orchestrating the machinations going on throughout New York City in the few weeks since the game's narrative begins, releasing a deadly contagion into the heart of NYC. In the final confrontation, after defeating Otto and securing the antidote, Spider-Man and Dr. Octopus have a final conversation.

*Peter:* You were my hero! You meant so much to me.... We were going to change the world!

*Otto:* You look tired, Parker.

*Peter:* Not tired... just hurt.

---

<sup>19</sup> Earth-616 is the Earth in the multiverse on which the main Marvel stories take place. While characters from 616 can interact with other Earths and vice versa, rarely does this occur and even more rarely does this have any significant effect.

*Otto:* Oh, Parker. If you want to change the world, you have to be the kind of man who can make the hardest decisions.

*Peter:* I couldn't agree more.

*Peter allows one of Dr. Octopus' arms to stab into him, bringing Otto close enough for Peter to remove the device allowing Otto to control the arms. They both fall down and into a building.*

*Otto:* Peter. I saw you as a son. I should've known you'd turn on me, just like all the others.

*Peter:* Turn-? Turn-? I worshipped you. Your mind... your conscience... wanting to help others... the way you never gave up!

*Otto:* That's because men like us have a duty. A responsibility. To use our talents in the service of others. Even if they don't appreciate it. We have to do what's best for those beneath us, whether they understand it or not.

*Peter:* No! You're wrong. You were everything I wanted to be! You just... threw it away! (*Spider-Man* 2018)

Dr. Octopus here is the last failure of power and responsibility: the belief that power makes one inherently better than anyone else. Otto Octavius believes that because he has more intelligence than almost anyone else in his life, it gives him the responsibility to make their choices for them, sometimes leading to catastrophic consequences. Peter, on the other hand, believes that great power warrants great individual responsibility. While Peter can, as Spider-Man, swing around the city and prevent crimes, saving people in the process, he knows he is not a god. This is where he and Otto differ. Otto genuinely believes himself to be superior to anyone else in the room, but Peter believes himself to simply be a man trying to do what he can to make the world a better

place. As he says in his final words to Dr. Octopus, “You do what you think is best, Doc... It’s all any of us can do” (*Spider-Man* 2018). Peter knows he doesn’t have all the answers, and even his own mantra of great power and great responsibility gets him into trouble from time to time, but he has always been someone who does what he believes is right, no matter the cost.

Earth-616 Dr. Octopus’s story ends a little more positively from that of the video game. Though his history with Peter is tense, remaining on adversarial terms for most of their time together, when Otto is close to death, Peter tries to make him as comfortable as he can in his cell. Unfortunately, Otto manages to swap minds with Peter, trapping Dr.



28: Comics Dr. Octopus (Zdarsky and Bagley 2019)

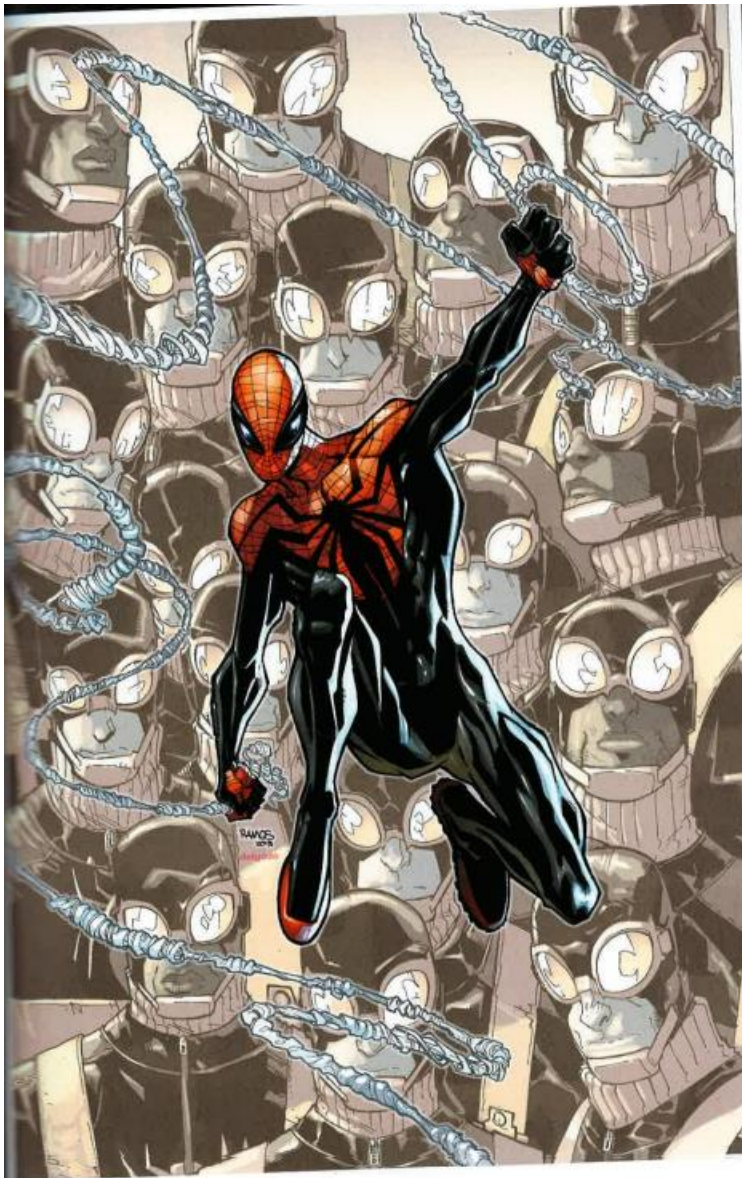
Octopus’s mind in Spider-Man’s body. While Dr. Octopus’s initial plan is to use Spider-Man’s identity to wreak havoc within New York while Peter dies trapped in Otto’s body, Peter finds a different way. Just when it seems like all is lost, Peter realizes that he can stimulate the memories trapped in his body and forces Otto to experience everything he has experienced up until this point. Growing up with Aunt May and Uncle Ben, the deaths of Uncle Ben and Gwen Stacy, the trial of the Venom symbiote, and even saving Otto’s life in an earlier adventure. As Peter floods Otto’s mind, he screams out in pain,

*Otto*: Stop! I don’t want this! I—

*Peter:* You wanted to be Spider-Man. Well guess what? It's more than the powers.

*Otto:* I'll – kill – you!

*Peter:* No. You won't. Because you know how valuable life is. And what a tragedy it is – each and every time it's cut short. (Slott, DeMatteis, and Van Meter n.p.)



29: *The Superior Spider-Man* (Slott et al 2012)

In this moment, Otto transforms from a villain bent on destruction and domination to a fledgling hero. His heart is in the right place, though his methods are more brutal and technical than Peter's more carefree style. Throughout his time as the "Superior Spider-Man," Otto truly does come to learn what it means to bear the burden of responsibility that comes with great power, and when the time comes for him to give up his role as Spider-Man back to Peter Parker, he does so willingly in order to save the city, dying in the process. While the Dr. Octopus of the video game was the failure of power and

responsibility realized, the Superior Spider-Man is the realization and embrace of another man's powers and responsibility.

While there are plenty more Spider-Man villains to discuss and compare with Peter Parker, these three in particular show distinct nuances to the theme of *Spider-Man*. Even though we may not all be able to climb walls or have super-genius intelligence or lift several tons, we all have our own powers. Some might be in communication and persuasion. For others, it might be affluence and resources. Regardless of what kind of power we each have, we all must use it responsibly, and ideally to help others.



## Conclusion: When Heroes Unite

While these characters, Spider-Man, Batman, and Superman, all have had countless stories told in their nearly century-long existence, each emphasize the themes of heroism, redemption, and responsibility throughout all of their stories. What I have detailed here is just a small sampling of the immense amount of superhero literature, spread across all different types of sub-genres and characters. While I have not directly addressed characters outside of these focal three in these essays, through my readings I have seen these themes recur over and over again, from themes of trauma and recovery in Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos' *Jessica Jones* series and Matt Shakman's *WandaVision* TV show to a discussion of what heroism actually is in Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross' *Marvels* and Christopher Priest's *Black Panther* to a recognition of the responsibility that comes inherent with calling oneself a hero, as in Darwyn Cooke's *DC: The New Frontier* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. While not always the focal concept in these stories, these ideals will always be in conversation with the narratives that have come before.

However, there is another way these themes present themselves in dialogue: team-ups. A staple of the modern superhero genre is the partnering of two or more heroes in order to fight off a threat neither could defeat alone. This is when we see heroes come into both conflict and cooperation in much larger teams, such as the Justice League, created in 1960, or the Avengers, created in 1963. The Justice League has, at times, been large enough to sub-divide into multiple long-standing teams of about seven each. Naturally, not every hero within the JL agrees on methodology or ideology. Green Lantern Guy Gardner, a brutish hothead, tends to irritate Batman, who generally approaches situations with a more stoic and reserved attitude. Even Batman himself has been questioned numerous times by the League for his own seemingly

paranoid actions when it comes to security and observation of the League. This is where a majority of the conflict in books and shows like *Justice League Unlimited* (2004) come to a head. Not every superhero in the world wants to do things the way Superman or Batman might want them to do, but ultimately, they put aside their differences for the sake of those who need protecting. As the Martian Manhunter put it in Alex Ross and Paul Dini's *Absolute Justice League*,

There are others on Earth who share my commitment to preserving life and upholding the common good. Being whose extraordinary abilities are secondary to the heroic spirit that motivates them.... Wherever lives are threatened, a champion will fight to save them. On land or in the sea, the rules are simple.

Those who use force will find it returned in kind – and killing is never tolerated.

Time and again I have been proud to stand beside my allies and friends. Together we are the Justice League of America. (Ross and Dini n.p.)

Ultimately, regardless of the differences that these heroes see, whether they be alien, human, or mystic, be they old or young, white or black, or even if they have a checkered past, what brings them together is the shared commitment to the preservation of life. While Batman and Guy Gardner might never see exactly eye to eye on how to approach a situation, they will always both be unified in a mission to protect the innocent, even at personal cost.



30: *The Justice League* (Ross and Dini n.p.)

That is the greatest message the superhero genre can convey. No matter what the differences, at the end of the day, even superheroes need to work together. We all are alive and because of that, we all have value, power, and a responsibility to do the right thing. Even though people's differences may be great, when people decide to work together for a common good, they become part of something bigger than themselves. While our world is far from perfect, it is still ours. Saving it, making it better, is no small task. Each and every one of us has a role to play. We may not be able to fly or lift cars over our heads, but we can still be heroes, no matter who we are or who we have been. Because even though it will be difficult, there is still good in the world, and it is good worth saving. Even though there are no Martians or Kryptonians or radioactive spiders out there, the goal is not impossible. All it takes is for someone to take a first

step. Embrace the heroism, realize that there can always be a tomorrow, and take on the responsibility that comes with the calling. Because, at the end of the day, saving the world is not just a job for fictional characters in comic books, it is a job for us, coming together and making a difference. This looks like a job... for Supermen.

# Bibliography

## COMIC SOURCES

Bendis, Brian Michael and Mark Bagley. *Ultimate Spider-Man Vol. 1: Power and Responsibility*. 2009. Marvel, 2018.

Bendis, Brian Michael and Michael Gaydos. *Jessica Jones: Alias*. Vol. 4. 2015, Marvel, 2017.

Bendis, Michael Brian, Sara Pichelli, Chris Samnee, and David Marquez. *Miles Morales: The Ultimate Spider-Man: Ultimate Collection*. Vol. 1. 2011, Marvel, 2019.

Brubaker, Ed, and Doug Mahnke. *Batman: The Man who Laughs*. DC Comics, 2008.

Brubaker, Ed, Steve Epting, Michael Lark, John Paul Leon, Tom Palmer, and Mike Perkins. *Captain America: Winter Soldier Ultimate Collection*. 2010, Marvel, 2018.

Busiek, Kurt and Alex Ross. *Martians, the Remastered Edition*. 1994, Marvel, 2019.

Busiek, Kurt and John Paul Leon. *Batman: Creature of the Night*. 2017, DC Comics, 2020.

Busiek, Kurt and Stuart Immonen. *Superman: Secret Identity*. 2004, DC Comics, 2015.

Claremont, Chris and John Byrne. *X-Men Milestones: Dark Phoenix Saga*. 1980, Marvel, 2019.

Cooke, Darwyn. *DC: The New Frontier*. 2004, DC Comics, 2019.

DeMatteis, J. M. and Mike Zeck. *The Amazing Spider-Man: Kraven's Last Hunt*. 1987, Marvel, 2019.

Duggan, Gerry, Brian Possehn, Scott Koblish, and Declan Shalvey. *Deadpool: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. 2013, Marvel, 2016.

Gaiman, Neil and Andy Kubert. *Batman: Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* 2009, DC Comics, 2010.

- Johns, Geoff, Gail Simone, Phil Jimenez, and Ivan Reis. *Infinite Crisis Omnibus*. 2005, DC Comics, 2020.
- Johns, Geoff, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, Mark Waid, and Kieth Griffen. *52 Omnibus*. 2006, DC Comics, 2012.
- Lee, Stan and Steve Ditko. *Amazing Fantasy #15*. Marvel, 1962.
- Loeb, Jeph and Tim Sale. *Batman: Dark Victory*. 1999, DC Comics, 2014.
- . *Batman: Long Halloween*. 1996. DC Comics, 2011.
- . *Superman: For All Seasons*. DC Comics, 1999.
- . *Yellow, Blue, Gray, White*. 2001, Marvel, 2018.
- Loeb, Jeph, Ed McGuinness, and Michael Turner. *Superman/Batman*. Vol. 1. 2003, DC Comics, 2014.
- Marini, Enrico. *Batman: The Dark Prince Charming*. DC Comics, 2018.
- McGregor, Don, Rich Buckler, and Billy Graham. *The Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage*. Vol. 1. 1966, Marvel, 2018.
- Meltzer, Brad and Rags Morales. *Identity Crisis*. 2004, DC Comics, 2016.
- Millar, Mark and Steve McNiven. *Civil War: A Marvel Comics Event*. 2006, Marvel, 2019.
- . *Wolverine: Old Man Logan*. 2010, Marvel, 2018.
- Millar, Mark, Dave Johnson, and Kilian Plunkett. *Superman: Red Son*. 2003, DC Comics, 2014.
- Miller, Frank and David Mazzucchelli. *Batman: Year One*. 1986, DC Comics, 2005.
- Miller, Frank. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. 1986, DC Comics, 2016.
- Moench, Doug, Kelly Jones, John Beatty, and Malcom Jones III. *Elseworlds: Batman*, vol. 2. 1991, DC Comics, 2016.
- Moore, Alan and Brian Bolland. *Batman: The Killing Joke*. 1988, DC Comics, 2008.

- Moore, Alan and Curt Swan. *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* 1997, DC Comics, 2009.
- Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. 1986, DC Comics, 2014.
- Morrison, Grant and Frank Quietly. *All Star Superman*. 2005. DC Comics, 2018.
- Morrison, Grant, Geoff Johns, Greg Rucka, Sean McKeever, J. G. Jones, Doug Mahnke, George Perez, and Philip Tan. *Final Crisis Omnibus*. 2008, DC Comics, 2019.
- Murphy, Sean. *Batman: Curse of the White Knight*. 2019, DC Comics, 2020.
- . *Batman: White Knight*, DC Black Label Ed. 2017, DC Comics, 2018.
- O’Neil, Dennis and Neal Adams. *Green Lantern / Green Arrow: Hard-Traveling Heroes*. 1971, DC Comics, 2018.
- Priest, Christopher, Joe Quesada, Mark Texeira, Vince Evans, Joe Jusko, Mike Manley, Mark Bright, and Sal Velluto. *Black Panther: The Complete Collection*. Vol. 1. 1998, Marvel, 2018.
- Ross, Alex and Paul Dini. *Absolute Justice League: The World’s Greatest Superheroes*. DC Comics, 2017.
- Seagle, Steven T., and Teddy Kristiansen. *It’s a Bird....* 2004. DC Comics, 2017.
- Sejic, Stjepan. *Harleen*. 2019, DC Comics, 2020.
- Siegel, Jerome and Joe Shuster. “Superman.” *Action Comics*, issue 1. Action Comics, 1938. Accessed through DC Universe, 1/27/2020.
- Slott, Dan, J. M. DeMatteis, and Jen Van Meter. *The Superior Spider-Man: The Complete Collection*. Vol. 1. 2012, Marvel, 2019.
- Smith, Jeff. *Shazam! The Monster Society of Evil*. 2007, DC Comics, 2019.
- Vaughn, Brian and Marcos Martin. *Doctor Strange: The Oath*. 2007, Marvel, 2016.

Waid, Mark and Alex Ross. *Kingdom Come*. 1996, DC Comics, 2008.

Wolfman, Marv and Claudio Castellini. *Man and Superman*. DC Comics, 2019.

Woodard, Jeb, ed. *Elseworlds: Superman*. Vol. 1. DC Comics, 2018.

Zdarsky, Chip and Mark Bagley. *Spider-Man: Life Story*. Marvel, 2019.

## Electronic Media Sources

*Ant-Man and the Wasp*. Directed by Peyton Reed, performances by Paul Rudd, Evangeline Lilly, Michael Pena, Hannah John-Kamen, Michelle Pfeiffer, Laurence Fishburne, and Michael Douglas. Marvel Studios, 2018.

*Ant-Man*. Directed by Peyton Reed, performances by Paul Rudd, Michael Douglas, Evangeline Lilly, and Corey Stoll. Marvel Studios, 2015.

*Aquaman*. Directed by James Wan, performances by Jason Momoa, Amber Heard, Patrick Wilson, and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II. Warner Bros., 2018.

*Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Directed by Joss Whedon, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Hemsworth, Mark Ruffalo, Chris Evans, Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, James Spader, Samuel L. Jackson, Don Cheadle, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Elizabeth Olsen, Paul Bettany, and Anthony Mackie. Marvel Studios, 2015.

*Avengers: Endgame*. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, Chris Hemsworth, Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, Don Cheadle, Paul Rudd, Benedict Cumberbatch, Chadwick Boseman, Brie Larson, Tom Holland, Karen Gillan, Zoe Saldana, Evangeline Lilly, Tessa Thompson, Rene Russo, Elizabeth Olson, Anthony Mackie, Sebastian Stan, Tom Hiddleston, Dave Bautista, Letitia Wright, John Slattery, Tilda Swinton, Michael Douglas, Vin Diesel,



Bradley Cooper, Gwyneth Paltrow, Josh Brolin, Chris Pratt, and Samuel L. Jackson.  
Marvel Studios, 2019.

*Avengers: Infinity War*. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Hemsworth, Mark Ruffalo, Chris Evans, Scarlett Johansson, Don Cheadle, Benedict Cumberbatch, Tom Holland, Chadwick Boseman, Zoe Saldana, Karen Gillan, Tom Hiddleston, Paul Bettany, Elizabeth Olson, Anthony Mackie, Sebastian Stan, Dave Bautista, Vin Diesel, Bradley Cooper, Pom Klementieff, Josh Brolin, Chris Pratt, and Letitia Wright. Marvel Studios, 2018.

*Batman Begins*. Directed by Christopher Nolan, performances by Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Gary Oldman, Cillian Murphy, and Ken Watanabe. Warner Bros., 2005.

*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Directed by Zach Snyder, performances by Ben Affleck, Henry Cavill, Amy Adams, Jesse Eisenberg, and Gal Gadot. Warner Bros., 2016.

*Birds of Prey*. Directed by Cathy Yan, performances by Margot Robbie, Rosie Perez, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Jurnee Smollett, and Ewan McGregor. DC Films, 2020.

*Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler, performances by Chadwick Boseman, Michael B. Jordan, Lupita Nyong'o, Danai Gurira, Martin Freeman, and Letitia Wright. Marvel Studios, 2018.

*Captain America: Civil War*. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, performances by Chris Evans, Robert Downey Jr., Scarlett Johansson, Sebastian Stan, Anthony Mackie, Don Cheadle, Jeremy Renner, Chadwick Boseman, Paul Bettany, Elizabeth Olson, Paul Rudd, Emily VanCamp, Tom Holland, Daniel Bruhl, and Frank Grillo. Marvel Studios, 2016.

*Captain America: The First Avenger*. Directed by Joe Johnson, performances by Chris Evans, Hugo Weaving, Sebastian Stan, and Samuel L. Jackson. Marvel Studios, 2011.

*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, performances by Chris Evans, Samuel L. Jackson, Scarlett Johansson, Robert Redford, Sebastian Stan, and Anthony Mackie. Marvel Studios, 2014.

*Captain Marvel*. Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, performances by Brie Larson, Samuel L. Jackson, Ben Mendelsohn, Jude Law, and Annette Bening. Marvel Studios, 2019.

*Deadpool 2*. Directed by David Leitch, performances by Ryan Reynolds, Josh Brolin, Morena Baccarin, Julian Dennison, and Zazie Beetz. Twentieth Century Fox, 2018.

*Deadpool*. Directed by Tim Miller, performances by Ryan Reynolds, Karan Soni, De Skrein, Stefan Kapicic, and Brianna Hildebrand. Twentieth Century Fox, 2016.

*Doctor Strange*. Directed by Scott Derrickson, performances by Benedict Cumberbatch, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Rachel McAdams, Benedict Wong, Mads Mikkelsen, and Tilda Swinton. Marvel Studios, 2016.

*Green Lantern*. Directed by Martin Campbell, performances by Ryan Reynolds, Blake Lively, Peter Sarsgaard, and Mark Strong. Warner Bros., 2011.

*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*. Directed by James Gunn, performances by Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldana, Dave Bautista, Vin Diesel, Bradley Cooper, Michael Rooker, Karen Gillan, Pom Klementieff, and Kurt Russell. Marvel Studios, 2017.

*Guardians of the Galaxy*. Directed by James Gunn, performances by Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldana, Dave Bautista, Vin Diesel, Bradley Cooper, Lee Pace, Michael Rooker, and Karen Gillan. Marvel Studios, 2014.

*Injustice: Gods Among Us*. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. 2013.

*Iron Man 2*. Directed by Jon Favreau, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Mickey Rourke, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Don Cheadle. Marvel Studios, 2010.

*Iron Man 3*. Directed by Shane Black, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Guy Pearce, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Don Cheadle. Marvel Studios, 2013.

*Iron Man*. Directed by Jon Favreau, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Gwyneth Paltrow, Terrence Howard, and Jeff Bridges. Marvel Studios, 2008.

*Justice League*. Directed by Zach Snyder and Joss Whedon, performances by Ben Affleck, Henry Cavill, Amy Adams, Gal Gadot, Ezra Miller, Jason Momoa, and Ray Fisher. Warner Bros., 2017.

*Logan*. Directed by James Mangold, performances by Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, and Dafne Keen. Twentieth Century Fox, 2017.

*Man of Steel*. Directed by Zach Snyder, performances by Henry Cavill, Amy Adams, Michael Shannon, and Diane Lane. Warner Bros., 2013.

*Marvel's Spider-Man*. Insomniac Studios. 2018.

*Shazam!* Directed by David F. Sandberg, performances by Zachary Levi, Mark Strong, Asher Angel, and Jack Dylan Grazer. Warner Bros., 2019.

*Spider-Man 2*. Directed by Sam Raimi, performances by Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, and Alfred Molina. Columbia Pictures, 2004.

*Spider-Man 3*. Directed by Sam Rami, performances by Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, Thomas Haden Church, Topher Grace, and Bryce Dallas Howard. Columbia Pictures, 2007.

*Spider-Man: Far From Home*. Directed by Jon Watts, performances by Tom Holland, Zendaya, Samuel L. Jackson, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Jacob Batalon. Marvel Studios, 2019.

*Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Directed by Jon Watts, performances by Tom Holland, Michael Keaton, Robert Downey Jr., Zendaya, and Jacob Batalon. Marvel Studios, 2017.

*Suicide Squad*. Directed by David Ayer, performances by Margot Robbie, Will Smith, and Jared Leto. Atlas Entertainment, 2016.

*Superman*. Directed by Richard Donner, performances by Christopher Reeve, Margot Kidder, Gene Hackman. Dovemeat ltd., 1978.

*Superman*. Produced by Max Fleischer. Paramount Pictures, 1940.

*The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. Directed by Mark Webb, performances by Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone, Jamie Foxx, Dane DeHaan, and Colm Feore. Columbia Pictures, 2014.

*The Amazing Spider-Man*. Directed by Mark Webb, performances by Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone, Rhys Ifans, and Denis Leary. Columbia Pictures, 2012.

*The Avengers*. Directed by Joss Whedon, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, Chris Hemsworth, Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, Tom Hiddleston, and Samuel L. Jackson.

*The Dark Knight Rises*. Directed by Christopher Nolan, performances by Christian Bale, Gary Oldman, Tom Hardy, Anne Hathaway, and Morgan Freeman. Warner Bros., 2012.

*Thor*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, performances by Chris Hemsworth, Anthony Hopkins, Natalie Portman, and Tom Hiddleston. Marvel Studios, 2011.

*Thor: Ragnarok*. Directed by Taika Waititi, performances by Chris Hemsworth, Tom Hiddleston, Cate Blanchett, Jeff Goldblum, Tessa Thompson, Mark Ruffalo, and Anthony Hopkins. Marvel Studios, 2017.

*Thor: The Dark World*. Directed by Alan Taylor, performances by Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Tom Hiddleston, Anthony Hopkins, and Christopher Eccleston.

*Venom*. Directed by Ruben Fleischer, performances by Tom Hardy, Riz Ahmed, and Michelle Williams. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2018.

*Wonder Woman 1984*. Directed by Patty Jenkins, performances by Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Kristen Wiig, and Pedro Pascal. Warner Bros., 2021.

*Wonder Woman*. Directed by Patty Jenkins, performances by Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, David Thewlis, and Elena Anaya. Warner Bros., 2017.

*X-2: X-Men United*. Directed by Bryan Singer, performances by Patrick Stewart, Hugh Jackman, Ian McKellen, Halle Berry, Famke Janssen, and James Marsden. Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

*X-Men*. Directed by Bryan Singer, performances by Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, Famke Janssen, James Marsden, and Halle Berry. Twentieth Century Fox, 2000.

*X-Men: First Class*. Directed by Matthew Vaughn, performances by James McAvoy, Michael Fassbender, Kevin Bacon, and Jennifer Lawrence. Twentieth Century Fox, 2011.

*X-Men: The Last Stand*. Directed by Brett Ratner, performances by Hugh Jackman, Halle Berry, Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Famke Janssen, Anna Paquin, and James Marsden. Twentieth Century Fox, 2006.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

Langley, Travis. *Batman and Psychology*. John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

Moore, Bret A., Richard Tedeschi, and Taryn Greene. "A Preliminary Examination of a Posttraumatic Growth-Based Program for Veteran Mental Health." *Practice Innovations*, vol. 6, no. 1, Mar. 2021, pp. 42–54.

Morrison, Grant. *Supergods*. Spiegel & Grau, New York, 2012.

Reeve, Christopher. "Interview over *Superman IV*." 1987. *Youtube*, uploaded by Brian Wade Garrison, Mar. 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APeVihoDe6Q>

Sanderson, Peter. "Phantom." *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Phantom-comic-book-character>. Accessed 3/12/21.

Weathersbee, Tonyaa. "MLK and His Aides Had Guns For Self-Defense." *The Florida-Times Union*, 20 Jan. 2016.

<https://www.jacksonville.com/article/20160120/OPINION/801241799>. Accessed 3/11/21.

Winkler, Adam. "MLK and His Guns." *Huffpost.com*, 17 Jan. 2011.

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mlk-and-his-guns\\_b\\_810132](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mlk-and-his-guns_b_810132). Accessed 3/11/21.

## Illustrated Cover Sources

Bob Kane, illus. *Detective Comics # 27*. DC Comics, 1939.

GrandPre, Mary, illus. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Scholastic, 2000.

Jheremy Raapack, illus. *Injustice: Gods Among Us Year 2 #1*. DC Comics, 2014.

Mike McKone, illus. *Venom #4*. Marvel, 2011.

Ryan Sook, illus. *Superman: American Alien #6*. DC Comics, 2016.

Ryan Stegman, illus. *Venom #1*. Marvel, 2018.