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Gender Performance and the Reclamation of Masculinity in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*

by

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Gardner-Webb University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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The 1980s were a time of tremendous social and political evolution in the United States. The decade saw the decline of Communism, the end of the Cold War, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The 1980s saw the Iran-Iraq war, the Iran Contra scandal, and the continued threat of global nuclear war. Often referred to as the Reagan Eighties, the conservative political climate in Washington has been hailed as one of the most productive administrations, politically speaking, by its supporters, and as one of the more problematic by its detractors.

Culturally, the eighties saw sweeping changes, particularly in the US. With the birth of MTV, an entire generation was, for the first time, exposed to superstar artists such as Madonna, Michael Jackson, Motley Crew, and Metallica all from the comfort of their living rooms. In fact, the rise of many of the eighties' signature trends, Goth culture, hair bands, heavy metal, and punk rock can all draw immediate connections to popular media outlets such as MTV. Kids could watch, and idolize, the drug-fueled, sex-crazed, entertainment, all commercially driven, and emulate whatever behaviors they saw.

Such emulation can be seen in the decade's reputation for prolific drug use and casual sexuality. This reputation was also problematized by trends in cinema and television during the time. Co-Director of the Family Life Development Center and Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, James Garbarino, points out that "Images of [violence were] accessible to almost every child in America simply by turning on the television...A typical American child [could] witness more images of death and destruction from the comfort of his living room than any cop or soldier witness[ed] in the line of duty during a lifetime" (107-108). Moreover, this violence, particularly in cinema, and to a certain extent, the graphic arts, was often directed towards women. Rape

and the victimization of the female were particularly startling media trends during the time period. The often controversial psychologist and author, James Dobson, in response to such trends, writes, “The family [was] being buffeted and undermined by the forces operating around it. Alcoholism, pornography, gambling, infidelity, and other virulent infections [had] seeped into its bloodstream” (53). A resulting decline in traditional values, particularly concerning masculinity and fatherhood, can also be seen as a staple of eighties media. Miller recognizes this and responds with a hero answering a call to return, not to the failing values of traditional masculinity, but to masculinity itself. And, while this return bears many of the hallmarks of nineteenth century masculine values, Miller is careful to create a masculinity that differs from its predecessor in that it can co-exist with an equally empowered feminism. This call to return facilitates the text’s portrayal of the struggle between gender identities constructed by social forces and those constructed by self.

To this end, the social forces at work during the 1980s must be taken into account. Particularly, the voice of the screen and its role in shaping the minds of those exposed to it was so powerful in fact that the generation would ultimately be called the MTV Generation, or Generation X. D.T Kofoed, author of “Breaking the Frame; Political Acts of the Body in the Televised Dark Knight,” argues that “The television...transmits the approved ideology...reproducing in its audience subjects of and for its ideological order.” The potential reproduction of the such hyper-saturated violence and sexual exploitation presents a grim picture of the society as a whole, and this picture laid upon the backdrop of the war-infused political climate ultimately sets the stage for one of the most

revelatory social commentaries to be written about the decade, *Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.

Told through the mixed media of image and text, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is often credited with nearly singlehandedly revitalizing the ailing comics industry of the 1980s, an ailment caused in no small part by the proliferation of other forms of visual media. Moreover, following Stephen Greenblatt's theory that "Literature is conceived to mirror the period's beliefs, but to mirror them, as it were, from a safe distance," Miller's text can be viewed as a particularly significant cultural artifact for examination of the period. Readers need only follow the line of reasoning that states, "The culture will find reiterated in that fiction most of the values it passed on to the creator in the first place" (Rollin 433). Blackmore, writing for the *Journal of American Culture*, suggests that Miller himself supported such a viewpoint, arguing:

For Miller, the 'narcissism' of the eighties...made it 'easier to write Batman...the world is [a] horrible, disgusting place...it's terrifying. Just the world political situation, just the amount of crime. All of that created [sic] a general paranoia in life, justifying a character like Batman that couldn't be justified in a good world.' (48)

The novel must be taken as a product of the 1980s, contextualized within the genre from which it is born. Lamentably, the enlightened views toward masculine and feminine gender identity popularized over decades of scholarship preceding the 1980s had hardly found their way into a genre saturated with hyper-sexualized and objectified women and unimaginably powerful men. And while Miller's Batman is larger than life, his goal is not

to diminish the value of the female, but to focus on a self-empowered masculinity. Moreover, Miller's use of the graphic novel format gives the reader a far more engaging experience than text alone would afford, particularly in regards to perspective and subtextual themes involving visual cues, all likewise drawn from the 1980s. Miller's work is loudly praised for its writing and its poignant criticism of cultural trends and media derived gender stereotypes. Moreover, because the work itself was written and published during the 1980s, it serves as an excellent text with which to apply a Cultural Poetics/New Historicism reading strategy.

It is therefore my intention to analyze Miller's work as both a product of and a social commentary upon the sociopolitical climate of the 1980s. Owing to my own disposition, having spent my formative years in the 1980s, and having a certain affinity for the period, I intend to be objective in my analysis, but realize my own predilection for particular interpretive strategies. In limiting my own examination, I will focus primarily upon gender performance, using the text's most significant male and female characters as structural guides for my analysis. Most significant among these characters are Ellen Yindel, Jim Gordon, Carrie Kelly/ Robin, and of course Batman/Bruce Wayne. On occasion, in contextualizing my analysis, I will reference trends reflected in the media-focused elements of the text against the corresponding real-world events or trends of the 1980s, if applicable. Finally, in order to maintain an organic sense of chronology, I will follow the development of the characters, when possible through the chronology of the original publication, the four texts which collectively make up *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.

Any reasonable analysis of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* must begin with a clear definition of the context in which Miller places his characters. In fact, the context, Gotham City in a presumably dystopic near-future, is so important that it might be considered a character in and of itself. Moreover, the city, and its condition, serves as a reminder of the social conditions of the 1980s that Miller is drawing inspiration from.

One scholar writes that while:

Batman has contributed more than its fair share to the ‘darkness that hangs over contemporary culture.’ ‘[Such] ‘Dark[ness]’ designates both a highly marketable aesthetic style an ethical, or rather anti-ethical stance...a designer nihilism...Gotham, particularly as re-invented by Frank Miller in the eighties, is...one of the chief geomythic sources of this. (Fisher)

The text paints a picture of a city in the midst of a heat wave, overrun with gang violence, ten years after the last sighting of the Batman. In litter filled streets, moaning men carry signs reading “we are damned,” while armed thugs, dressed in punk rock outfits and calling themselves “The Mutants” commit unspeakable crimes (Miller 12). “Rape and mutilation” are the typical content of the evening news (Miller 24). The dismal imagery reflects the idea that “Americans (as evident in some elements of popular culture) began to wonder if such things as heroes could even exist in the eighties” (Dubose 916). Such sentiment is clearly reflected in the text as televised new reports “show [surveys] that most [young people]...consider [Batman] a myth” (Miller 11).

Artistically, from clothing styles reminiscent of those seen in contemporary MTV videos to a United States President clearly meant to call the reader's mind to Ronald Reagan, the watercolor images of the text draw the reader into Miller's world, an exaggerated and violent version of 1980s urban America. Finigan suggests that readers should "taking our cue from [the text's] depiction of Reagan...read the Dark Knight as a forcefully, if not especially subtle, critique of its own cultural movement: the conservative 1980s."



(Fig. 1)

With this in mind, the first element that the reader will likely notice is the text's distinctive sixteen panel visual style, four columns by four rows (e.g. see fig. 1). This quickly becomes the text's primary tool for not only transmitting information to the readers, but in making them complicit with the events taking place. Kofoed suggests that this visual style, particularly as it incorporates the television screen as the primary element of much of the text, exposes the audience to the events of the story in the same fashion as the people of Gotham, thereby drawing the audience into the text in a way that is both familiar and engaging. Blackmore argues that "Miller's unprecedented 16-panel grid works cinematically to produce a dark claustrophobic world" (43). And, it is clear that the text presents information in a way that is familiar and inviting to a media-saturated reader. Kofoed writes, "the creation of panels as television screens broaches an interpolative gaze towards the position of the reader, an inescapable assertion of ideology which by its prevalence affirms the monolithic power of a contemporary, politicized media over the entire narrative." In fact, the media, and the various representations of it



present within the text occupy as much or more “screen time” as the character of Batman. A cursory count of such images reveals that in one hundred and ninety nine pages, there are no less than three hundred and forty one such “screens” present. The text is clearly contextualizing itself as part of its media saturated audience, a culture so inundated with the screen that no event may be fully interpreted without its aid. The resulting experience of the reader is that because, “the television screen...directly address[es] itself to the reader in a manner...indistinguishable to that...given to the fictive characters...[the reader is] implicat[ed] as subject to the politics of the text” (Kofoed). Blackmore suggests that:

Miller’s television has four functions apart from framing the actual artwork: first, it allows him to ‘change channels,’ to move easily within the narrative. Second, it allows him to use the ‘objective’ camera eye... Third, Miller puts on a ‘media-event’ that will be read by a television generation as a television program. Finally, the television presents at once a fragmented, and unified society: all are watching a television instead of talking with each other, but again, all are watching the same channel. (43)

It is therefore interesting to note that the character of Batman never appears “onscreen.” From the opening panels of the “The Dark Knight Returns” to the final pages of “The Dark Knight Falls,” the character is either framed within his own “block” style narrative structure, or on frame breaking splash pages, but never on the “television” of the text. This suggests that the text is rendering the Batman unobservable by the average citizen of

Gotham, giving the reader unique insight into the story. It also suggests that the integration into media-culture is either inconsequential to the Batman or abhorrent altogether. His “violations of the paneling authority are constitutive of his...threat to the prevailing...order whose base expression is the television” (Kofoed). Public appearance is of little use to a man who wishes to remain shadowed, nor is it of value to a rising myth who seeks to inspire fear. This attitude is in stark contrast to the performance-based society that dominates the text, a society Alan Moore, famed author of the celebrated graphic novel *Watchmen*, claims has had its “perception of [self]...modified [by] the increase in media coverage and information technology” (qtd. in Dubose).

If the character does not wish to reflect society, the question of what he does seek or desire arises. Bruce Wayne first appears, driving a high performance race car, pushing himself to his limits, the vehicle beyond, saying “I’ve got the home stretch all to myself...I’m in charge now and I like it...This would be a good death...but not good enough” (Miller 10). He crashes in a flaming wreck. As he emerges unharmed, Wayne’s “search” for a good death is paralleled by a news report, highlighting “the brutal slaying of three nuns last week by the gang known as the mutants, Police Commissioner James Gordon...facing retirement on his seventieth birthday...[and] the tenth anniversary of the last recorded sighting of the Batman [who] most high schoolers consider...a myth” (Miller 10,11). This introduction situates Wayne, and Batman, along with Gordon in the midst of a society on fire, a crumbling reflection of greatness mirroring the real world. Wayne is seemingly self-interested, or at least uninvolved with the media centric ramblings of the omnipresent screen, and more importantly, unengaged in the decline of that society, or in its recovery.

Gordon's character is combative, having received a death threat in previous panels, and seems to use the media to convey a "tough cop" image. He says, "I've got four weeks to nail those bastards. If this means they're willing to take me on, I'm delighted" (Miller 11). His bravado parallels Wayne's, and subsequent pages find the two sharing a drink discussing retirement, with Gordon serving as a sounding board for Wayne's insecurities. Gordon, still fighting crime, offers a toast "To Batman," to which Wayne replies, "It's *good* that he retired—isn't it?" (Miller 12). Gordon responds "I'm grateful he *survived* retiring," and Wayne's answer is revealing; "He didn't, but *Bruce Wayne* is... alive and well" (Miller 12). The idea of performative masculinity underlies the text here, and is key to understanding the motivations of Wayne. It is necessary to understanding that Wayne's idea of masculinity is tied to his ability to act in defense of his ideals and his personal sense of justice. To be clear, the text provides no concrete definition for masculinity. Miller would rather have his readers infer the true nature of a person on their performance. And because of the competing natures of society and self presented in the text, Wayne's inability to "perform Batman" is, most accurately read, tantamount to death. He has sacrificed who he believes himself to be in order to play a part assigned him by society. Gordon fears the same for himself, and Wayne later reflects on "[ying] between silk sheets in a million dollar mansion," calling himself "a zombie. A flying dutchman. A dead man. Ten years dead" (Miller 12-13). Some suggest that "Bruce Wayne's feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing arise from survivor's guilt—he stood by [doing nothing] while his parents were murdered" (qtd. in Murphy). However, a more accurate assumption is that his feelings are a result of his current state of inaction. His lifestyle, a mask, is one of softness, an internalized femininity brought on by a lack of

positive action. Feeling emasculated by his lack of performance as the Batman, Wayne's internal struggle will serve to underpin much of the remaining text. Moreover, gender identity, and the performance thereof is one of the primary themes to be found within the text.

In fact, performance of identity, specifically as it relates to gender, and the nature of the self each rise to the forefront of the first of the four texts which make up the whole. "The Dark Knight Returns," spends a great deal of time establishing the history of those events which transformed Bruce Wayne into the Batman. And, while the Batman persona is often mistakenly considered a performance, he, by essence of his "birth," is performing his self-defined gender role in a way that is essential to his own nature. He must be as he is, for to be anything else is to be "a zombie. A flying dutchman. A dead man" (Miller 12-13). However, when the conception of his character is taken into account, he must also be viewed as a social construction, a product of Gotham, a city who is at once his mother and his child, a city representative of a "world that is already broken...[in need of a] hero [who] does what he can to create justice within it" (Cates 834).

Contextualizing these events within "The Dark Knight Returns" even further and paralleled to the reader's private insight into the origin of Wayne/Batman is the media saturated "rebirth" of Harvey Dent/Two Face, who is seemingly rehabilitated by "surgical procedures...and psychiatric [treatment]" (Miller 15). In Wayne's single on-camera appearance, he speaks on Dent's behalf, saying, "We must believe that our private demons can be defeated" (Miller 17). The text clearly intends to contrast these characters who each struggle with "performing" the socially acceptable role assigned to them, Dent, the cured and reformed persona, and Wayne, the reclusive billionaire, his own living

death. However, the real performance takes place in the shadows of Gotham when the characters “remove their masks,” or put them on, and perform those identities which comprise their “inner demons.”

Clarified, Wayne is the mask of Batman, Dent that of Two Face. Each is a socially constructed performance. And, this initial conflict serves to underpin the themes of the text which are to follow. Two Face must certainly be viewed as the damaged psyche of a traumatized man, the “inner demon” of Dent that cannot be constrained to internalization by any treatment. He is portrayed in a wholly negative light by the text, an abomination resulting from trauma. The Batman, clearly resulting from similar trauma in the life of Wayne, is portrayed in the text as powerful and positive entity, a new creation to be “compared to the gods and heroes of ancient myth” that supplants Wayne (Cates 832). He is more than just an inner demon; he is an avenging angel, a separate entity. This parallel of dualities contextualizes the performance of the character throughout the text. As such, readers come to the same conclusion about the mental state of the characters reached by Dace, who argues that “according to Nietzsche, healthy is not simply the absence of sickness [but] a measure of the strength one has to overcome and contain [that] sickness” (103).

With such thought well in hand, it might be understood that Bruce Wayne died in the moments of his parents’ death. Certainly, the text suggests that it was in that moment “forty years [ago] he [Batman] was born” (Miller 13). This sentiment is echoed upon the character’s first appearance in the text, “The rain on my chest is a baptism—I’m born again” (Miller 24). This idea of birth seems to suggest that Batman is not a performance alone, but an entity in and of himself, transcending performance, essentially who he is by

birth, though the text is clear that Batman's birth as a "person" is not a physical one, and the text's focus on him suggests that Wayne is more accurately defined as a social performance. It is important to understand this. Batman is not a mere social construct, a reaction to or product of his environment. He is the product of a single event, the murder of Wayne's parents. And, while endless discussion could be made upon the social factors contributing to Batman's existence, I submit that following this event, that Batman must exist, and does so entirely upon the basis of this "birth." His rebirth, and continued existence, as he acts upon his own nature, his desire to bring justice to Gotham, are clearly dependent upon social factors. In consideration of this, the reader must accept the Dark Knights entity status, his existential reality, as Miller's text surely does. This is made all the more clear as the reader begins to understand that "When Bruce Wayne refers to the Batman, he is not referring to himself; rather he is referring to the other—what Michel Foucault might call—[a]' complex strategical situation' of desiring-machines in a particular constellation of desiring-production" (Orr 174-175).

Furthermore, the Batman's absence from the "media" within the text suggests that the character's behavior is, in part, a rejection of the media-influenced focus on adherence to a social model, an adherence which, coupled with the text's portrayal of "popular psycholog[y]" reveals the Batman as antithetical to the "media influenced self" and, as such, a reclamation of personal identity (Miller 65). This furthers Miller's rejection of 1980s most prevalent stereotypes.

This duality and reversal of essential nature and performance is clear in the text as the Batman confronts and defeats Two Face, the first major villain. Two Face, ranting and screaming, sees his once scarred face as one in which "at least both sides match," but

Batman knows “The scars go deep, too deep...I close my eyes and listen. Not fooled by sight, I see him...as he is. I see him. I see...I see a reflection” (Miller 54). For Two Face, both sides of his scarred personality are that of a monster, hence his role as a villain.

Batman sees a reflection because it is what he could become if mirrored. It is in fact what he has been for the past ten years as Wayne, weak, by his own estimations, and guilty of allowing the city of Gotham to succumb to crime. He has performed that identity which has been assigned to him by public perception and by caving to the sentiment that heroes “must not remind [the common people] that giants walk the earth” (Miller 130). He has been a criminal by inaction, and only through reclaiming himself can he atone for his own crimes. This drive to perform is the basis upon which the narrative is built.

Therefore, Batman does what he does simply because he is Batman. He exists, and therefore he must act. He performs the Bruce Wayne identity in order to enable his true self to operate with relative security. The freedom of action the Batman persona grants Wayne also enables the text to use the Batman himself “to represent specific ideas, personality traits, or ideologies...in order to act out psychological, moral [and] political claims” (Cates 833). The constant media presence serves as a reflection of how 1980s society might react to such a character. For instance, the text features a panel referring to Batman as “symbolic resurgence of the common man’s will to resist,” and another calling him “a rebirth of the American fighting spirit,” a very Reagan era term reflecting much of what Miller is doing with the text, and still another “an aberrant psychotic force” (Miller 41). The text makes no single distinction to decide the correct response for the reader, leaving that decision in the hands of the audience. It is, like the cable network saturation of the 1980s, merely a conveyor of information, at least ostensibly. But, because of the

hero/villain dichotomy, and the first appearance of a smiling Joker in the panel containing the “psychotic force” descriptor, the reader is led to believe that the existence of the Batman is the only healthy response to an identity crisis that would otherwise form a creature “morally bankrupt, politically hazardous, reactionary, paranoid—a danger to every citizen of Gotham” (Miller 41). This strength of individual identity is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the fact that “Batman never fully submits to his desire for vengeance...He manages to transform his...desire to kill into his desire to improve his environment” (Dace 103). This presents itself in the text as a privileging of agency over conformity to social norms. In many ways, the text allows Batman to counter the power of social construction by giving a degree of hyper-agency to the self, particularly as the dangers of a popular media influence play into construction of identity.

It is such danger that the character stands against, and this is particularly interesting if the character is viewed in the light of a masculinities and gender



(Fig. 2)

performance focused criticism. Early on, the text focuses on one of the staples of eighties media, the violence against women. Such imagery is commonplace in the Gotham underbelly and reflective of much the popular media of the 1980s. One need look no further than such 1980s films as *The Prowler*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The House on Sorority Row*, and *Don't Answer the Phone* (e.g. see fig. 2), all of which feature nude or semi-nude women in various states of terror and victimization, to see the underlying trends the text reflects. Miller does not follow these trends, but rather he uses them to define the underlying problems of gender identity as portrayed in 1980s American media.



The “murder of three nuns,” a spread of twenty six wordless panels depicting the murder of Wayne’s parents, focusing primarily on his mother’s death, a news report on a “senseless attack...rape and mutilation,” an implied rape and murder with a woman’s attacker calling out, “I need you mommie. Make me feel safe. Talk soft,” a pimp attacking prostitute with a knife, and Carrie Kelley and a friend being assaulted by “mutants” calling out “chick, chick, chick,” all serve to highlight the violence against women, and the hyper-masculinization of their attackers (Miller 11, 24, 31).

Batman responds to the latter three of these events, the only ones taking place after his rebirth, and stops them before the perpetrators can accomplish their intentions against their female victims. In fact, these are the first three actions he undertakes upon his rebirth, even before his confrontation with Two Face. At first this does seem to reinforce the damsel in distress stereotype, a problematic portrayal on its own, but more than that, it establishes the Batman as a protector of women rather than an abuser of them. In a violent and defensive display of power, his actions, which save Carrie Kelly from possible rape and definite mutilation, leave no doubt in her mind that “He’s a man—about—twelve feet tall” (Miller 34). This emphasis on Batman’s identity as a man, a hyper-masculinized one at that, marks the texts undeniable claim to Batman’s performative masculinity. Here, it is important to differentiate Batman’s masculinity from that of the male villains within the text, the rapist for example. Batman’s actions are never in self-interest or with the intent to victimize another. He displays power only insofar that the display of it contributes to a final outcome of justice. And, while his actions define his masculinity, his enacting of justice upon the male perpetrators also mark his as a superior masculinity, one that is not a result of media saturation and over-

exposure to eroticized violence against women, but one that by virtue of his birth stands against all injustice. Therefore Batman's "hypermascularity" can be seen as a positive rather than a pejorative term as it regards his superiority to other representations of the male within the text. With this in mind, much of the remainder of the work serves to establish Batman as both a man and a means of "social reformation," a new myth of masculinity in a world void of a functional or healthy mythology, a void created by his own absence (Murphy). It is into this contextualization and with this lens that we gain our most profound insight into Miller's work.

If the Batman character is a form of performative masculinity, then this emphasis on performative masculinity is paralleled in the Jim Gordon character throughout the text, with Gordon serving as an inverse reflection of Bruce Wayne/Batman. This is particularly poignant if he is examined in light of his relationship to the character of Ellen Yindel, a competent but inexperienced police commissioner assigned to take Gordon's place as he is forced into retirement. Gordon serves as a model of traditional, and stereotypical masculinity, haunted by the ghosts of society's shortcomings. Threatened by his own forced retirement, he is emblematic of the change felt in 1980s society by the continuation of social empowerment of women, and the resultant fear of emasculation by many men. He is a man who views the female as weak, easily victimized, and incapable of performing in a fashion equal to a man. The text demonstrates Gordon's thought process early in the second published book, "The Dark Knight Triumphant," as Gordon walks past an alleyway lost in reflection, "Problem with crime is the more you know, the more nervous it makes you. Me, I can't look at that doorway over there without thinking of the seventy-two corpses I've found in spots like that" (Miller 58). In this passing, he

faces an attempt on his life, a promised follow up to death threats levied in “The Dark Knight Returns,” to which he responds, “Suddenly the hair bristles on the back of my neck. I hear a girlish giggle and the cold, oiled sound of a gun being cocked behind me. I see the face of a killer who isn’t yet old enough to shave. I think of Sarah [Gordon’s wife]. The rest is easy” (Miller 58-59). The reader learns quickly that Gordon kills his would be assailant, “a seventeen-year-old member of the mutant gang” (Miller 60). He is the model of the sentiment which associates violence with masculinity, a sentiment which says “Heroes cannot...remain lambs: crises call for lions...Crises usually call for violent solutions. Violence seems to be the reality of their worlds and it is in violent situations that the heroes are defined” (Rollin 439).

Most interesting about this event is not the use of deadly force, an action that, as part of the traditional mythos of the character, Batman eschews entirely, but the apparent disdain for, and emasculation of, the young criminal by the elder Gordon. By referring to the “girlish giggle,” the text is demonstrating, in Gordon, a certain sense of power, a sense of superiority in Gordon’s view of himself as compared to his assailant. Certainly, with the law on his side, there is merit to his actions, but by addressing the character with feminine descriptors, Gordon is disempowering his attacker, whose gender is not clear, though visual cues suggests that he was male, by feminizing him. Gordon masculinizes the law, and himself as a representation of it. Laurne Goodland, writing for *Cultural Critique* suggest that this is an inherent quality of “gothic narratives [which] obsessively rehearse a male desire” and therefore a male worldview (104). Reinforcing this view of Gordon, at least in the characters of the text, is the response of Carrie Kelly’s parents, never seen in frame, who see Gordon’s actions as “Machismo with a badge” (Miller 60).

Furthermore, Gordon's performance is paralleled/contrasted in a scene in which Batman is forced to use a firearm to save a child's life by firing it and clearly hitting the assailant. Subsequent charges brought against the character by Ellen Yindel include "assault, breaking and entering, [and] creating a public hazard," but not homicide, indicating that Batman's use of force was not deadly (Miller 72). This begs the question, "Why is it 'easy' for Gordon to kill his attacker?" His "think[ing] of Sarah" seems to point to the answer. Gordon's hyper-masculinization of the Law, and subsequently himself, lead him to view the criminal as inferior, and based on his own language, feminine. This association creates a devaluing of both that, when coupled with Gordon's own bravado, has dangerous results. It might therefore be suggested that Gordon's performance, echoes 1980s masculine stereotypes found in films such as *First Blood*, *Commando*, *Die Hard*, *Predator*, or *Lethal Weapon*, making it, as compared to his androgynous assailant, "an ideal subject for a postmodern theory of gender performativity" (Goodland 107). Viewing Miller's writing as a product of the same time period, it is not difficult to see that "The culture will find reiterated in [its] fiction most of the values it passed on to the creator [of that fiction] in the first place" (Rollin 433). However, Miller's response is not one of acceptance, but one of redefinition, insofar as it concerns a realistic and healthy masculinity.

Interestingly enough, this scene leads into the moment where Gordon learns of Yindel's, his replacement's, appointment, "The youngest ever to hold the office [of police commissioner] and, of course, the first woman" (Miller 72). His response, "A woman, Christ almighty" speaks volumes (Miller 72). Gordon is clearly intended to portray an aging masculinity out of touch with modern gender equality.

Yindel, on the other hand, is also problematized by the text, for though she represents an empowering of the female, she does so through an apparent veil of performed masculinity. From her first appearance in frame, a television image no less, she is hardly distinguishable from Gordon by anything other than age. Finigan suggests that “Yindel...[is] decidedly masculine...suggest[ing] that female-ness...is an untenable category in the aggressive, manly milieu of Gotham City.” Wearing a nearly identical short cropped hairstyle and a wardrobe that hides all traces of femininity, the text paints Yindel as a woman performing a man’s role, specifically a woman performing Jim Gordon’s role, a performance which creates a great deal of gender-based tension, left largely unresolved throughout most of the text.

This tension is apparent in their first face-to-face meeting, with Yindel hiding herself, her female form, within the angular lines of a massive trenchcoat, commenting on how “[she’s] admired [Gordon] since [she] was a child,” and Gordon drawing a chair for her saying “have a seat” before suggesting certain improprieties in either her professional or sexual behavior, “hard to believe that, Yindel, considering how you got your job” (Miller 94). This is a disempowering through speech similar to that levied upon his earlier would-be assassin.

Moreover, Yindel’s apparent emulation of Gordon serves to reinforce traditional performative masculinity, and the devaluing of the female in the culture of the time. She is a model of a woman feeling forced to act as a man in order to obtain equality with one. Telling Gordon that “[He stands] for everything I believe in...I’ve always wanted to be the kind of cop you are,” Yindel devalues herself, despite having earned Gordon’s title on her own merits, and as a woman (Miller 96). This is no less a lowering of the gender than

is the oversexualized news commentator wearing a top with the words “all this and brains too” stretched across her breasts as she comments on Yindel’s appointment (Miller 89). Finigan points out that “the media” who happily announced Yindel’s appointment “might seem to offer at least the potential for female agency, [but] its discourse also serves to construct women as the passive object of an eroticized male gaze.” Hence, Yindel must, in her perspective, cease to be female in order to fully function in a masculine order. Gordon, by withdrawing from that order, fears feminization. I submit that the text demonstrates this dynamic in order to play up the tensions between these two characters for two reasons, to create a binary opposition between the retiring and emasculated Gordon and the returning re-emasculated Batman, and to demonstrate the ability of the feminine to be empowered within a traditionally masculine role.

Gordon’s feelings of lost manhood are clear as he leaves his office, his silhouette behind the label “ELLEN YINDEL Commissioner of Police.” (Miller 103). Reflecting, he says, “I won’t feel like a dad to an entire city of souls. I won’t bleed with every single one of my children...I think of Sarah. The rest is easy” (Miller 103). Conversely, Greenblatt even suggests that “Yindel [fails] to grasp the true importance of protecting the Child [Gotham].” Here, Gordon’s loss is relieved only by the stereotypical portrayal of his wife, even to the point of having her play the role of “damsel in distress” in the final pages of the text. His one-note masculinity is apparent as he gripes late in the text, “I could be sitting at home catching up on my reading...if not for Sarah and the one more thing she always needs from the grocery store” (Miller 164) His resentment towards his wife is reflective of his resentment towards his own lack of performance, echoing the earlier insecurities of Bruce Wayne. He is fearful of becoming what Carl Jung described

as “a man whose libido [has been] focused almost entirely upon his business... so that as a husband he is glad to have no responsibilities...[giving] complete direction [or authority] over to his wife” (141). His only relief is found through violent action during the riotous aftermath of a nuclear blackout that happens before he gets home. He empowers himself, drawing his pistol, a phallic representation of his own masculinity, saying “Nobody. Listens—Gone crazy—fighting for food like it’s the end of the world. Maybe it is—But we’re better than this—Of course I still carry it [drawing the gun] They start listening” (Miller 175). Gordon makes little change throughout the text, defining himself solely on maintaining a social performance in a society that no longer desires him to do so.

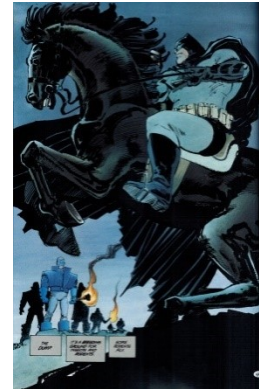
Ellen Yindel, however moves and changes as a character, from the simple performance of Gordon’s role to, in essence, becoming Gordon. However, because her characterization is a textbook example of masculinity attributed to the feminine, her growth as a female is highly problematized. More directly, the text seems to be saying that in order for Yindel to acquire any measure of success in the world it portrays, an exaggerated 1980s, then she must, as a woman, perform her duties as a man, essentially eliminating any traces of her own femininity. As a social commentary, Yindel reflects a stage in gender equality, similar to that in 1980s America, in which women were afforded far more rights than in previous decades, but were still not fully empowered as equal with their male counterparts. For this reason, masculine action seems to be the only means by which her character is expressed. It is not her actions that weaken her growth, but rather her submission to a social performance that guides the manner in which she performs those actions.

This is clear as the text introduces her. We first see her speaking against the exploits of Batman, “His actions are categorically **criminal**...My first act as **police commissioner** will be to issue an **arrest warrant**” [emphasis original] (Miller 72). Yindel defines herself by her “first action.” It is interesting that this action is one of an apparent usurper, a usurper of Gordon’s position, as a television announces she is “**half** the age of the man she’s **replacing**” [emphasis original] (Miller 72). Yindel, for all appearances, seems unaware of the internal nature of her own gender crisis, functioning as person of action in her performance of the role assigned her, with no indication beyond a few scattered comments from third parties that either the text, the culture, or Yindel herself wishes to recognize her as feminine. Her femininity is only of value, culturally, as a symbolic empowering of women. In other words, the text seems to suggest that her female identity made her an ideal choice for her job, a political or social figure, but that same femininity was to be shunned in the performance of that job.

The text demonstrates this in several ways, not the least of which is her adoption of Gordon’s title. Eschewing “Ellen,” she is referred to throughout the text as “Commissioner” or Yindel, unnamng herself, separating her sex from her masculinely gendered performance. Her admiration, and subsequent emulation of Gordon, suggests a desire to perform as he does, or at least in the manner “expected” of her. And, her “record” shows a level of determination and success that echoes that of the man she is replacing (Miller 94). Moreover, her initial conversation with Gordon suggests that the text misspeaks. The phrase, “I’ve always wanted to be the kind of cop you are,” might easily be read as indicative of her desire to be a masculine figure such as Gordon, a reading which is supported by her masculine performance throughout.



It is during this particular conversation that Gordon introduces Yindel to his perspective on Batman, giving a parable as explanation, “a lot of evidence [that] said Roosevelt knew Pearl Harbor was going to be attacked—and he let it happen...I realized I couldn’t judge it. It was too big. He was too big” (Miller 96). This comparison is echoed late in the text as Yindel, after having tried and failed to apprehend Batman, begins to see him as a force for good. In her final scenes, as Batman literally rides through the streets of Gotham on a night-black horse (e.g. see fig. 3), she holds back the police, taking Gordon’s role as supporter of the masked hero, saying, “He’s too big” (Miller 176). Greenblatt argues that her “acceptance of Batman...pave[s] the way to her accepting her position within [the] system,” a position empowered but hardly feminine.



(Fig. 3)

Her evolution as a character is subtle, and clearly problematized. She is only empowered as a female as she performs as a male; and yet, though required to maintain such a performance, she is only valued by the public because she represents an Other in comparison to Gordon’s antiquated masculinity. Declaring her independence from Gordon, she is framed by the camera in such a way as to give her a boyish appearance. And, though a crowd offers “strained applause for James Gordon—and yes—A standing ovation for Police Commissioner Yindel,” it is not for love for the latter, but distaste for the unpopular former (Miller 116). Yindel is popular only because she is not Gordon, and this perception is from the faceless public only. If Gordon represents a hyper-masculinity, then Yindel’s empowerment as a female is only found in pursuit of a gender not her own. Within the confines of the system she is a part of, she must perform as Gordon, a task that

she longs for and yet struggles against, hoping to define herself while escaping his shadow.

As an attempt at such self-defining resistance throughout the text, she attempts to repel the power of the Batman's mythos and its effects on her culture. As young frightened officers call out "he can fly," Yindel responds, barking orders "Nobody can fly. Guns ready. Hit the floods [lights]" (Miller 123). She empowers her men by emasculating them, taking on the alpha male role, screaming "He's twice your age boy. Find the nerve" (Miller 124). This assertive and commanding attitude begins to set her apart as her own character, drawing her out of Gordon's shadow, even as she becomes Gordon. In point of fact, after her initial introduction, a major percentage of her dialogue is in the imperative and directed towards men who are her inferiors, or whom she views as such, particularly in the case of the Batman. This echoes Gordon's earlier superiority complex as directed towards the criminals of the city, and to a certain extent Yindel. Yindel is better, she believes, because she is the law. In this, she no longer wants to be "like Gordon" but becomes her own person, pursuing the Batman with a fervor the elder commissioner never did. This alone should serve to empower her as an individual and set her apart as a strong female character, but because of the nature of Batman's own narrative, Yindel's potential for evolution is largely unresolved. Rollins suggests as much writing, "'Gotham' not only has a mayor, but a police commissioner, a police chief, and squads of officers, but it is Batman who defeats the city's dragons" (437).

Yindel's relationship to the Dark Knight can be seen in her final direct confrontation with Batman. Ordering him "You son of a bitch...FREEZE" [emphasis original], she demonstrates a boldness unseen in any other character faced with the

frightening persona (Miller 156). Her insult, arguable more insulting to the feminine than the masculine, is one she repeats throughout the text as a means to establish dominance over the men by whom she is surrounded. Thoroughly outclassed by Batman, Yindel is unable to capture him and moves into the final act of the story with a newfound respect, if not subtle admiration for the vigilante hero, a respect bolstered by the third act nuclear blackout and Batman's response to it.

The Dark Knight rides into Gotham amidst rioting and violence too great for the police or the overwhelmed police commissioner to handle and announces, albeit threateningly and backed by an army of vigilantes known as "The Sons of Batman", "I'm here to appeal to your community spirit. I'm sure you're all eager to help" (Miller 176). An unnamed officer begins to respond, "Commissioner, we—," and Yindel replies "No. No. He's...too big..." thereby completing her transformation (Miller 176). She is, at this point within the text, a fully realized feminization of Gordon, or conversely a fully realized masculinization of Yindel. The two characters have essentially become one, and though Yindel stands as a wholly empowered female, she does so only through her performance of a role assigned to her.

If Yindel were the only female character spotlighted within Miller's text, then readers would be correct in assuming a grim outlook on the text's portrayal of the female. However, I suggest that Yindel is representative of the reality grounded contextualization, a reflection of the "real" so to speak, a female of the 1980s as the text interprets and exaggerates the period. A true empowering of the feminine can be found in careful analysis of a character who occupies far more of the text's interest, Carrie Kelly, Miller's interpretation of Batman's sidekick, Robin.

The name of Batman's sidekick is ubiquitously associated with the Dark Knight himself. In fact, it might be said that for decades, especially during the 1980s, that "Batman and Robin" was the phrase uttered when the average audience considered the Dark Knight. With each character a part of the comics, cartoon television, and the long in syndication television show featuring Adam West and Burt Ward, audiences were nearly ubiquitously exposed to a Batman accompanied by a Robin. Appearing alongside the Dark Knight as early as 1940, the Boy Wonder has been an important part of the Batman mythos nearly since the beginning. He is an essential compliment to the primary character, serving as both an assistant to the Batman, and often, as a target for his enemies. Rollin remarks that all "heroes...being...incomplete...frequently need assistance...so Batman has his Robin" (443) Moreover, the character has, throughout the storied history of the Batman comics served as means by which to attract younger audience members, particularly those interested in the father/son dynamic at work between the sidekick and his hero-father, which I shall discuss at length later in this text.

This storied past serves the text well as Miller completely turns the Robin character on his, or as we shall soon see, her head. With the Batman in retirement, banished to the mental shadows of Bruce Wayne's fragmented mind, reader's familiar with the existence of the Robin character are not left wondering for long where the absent sidekick is. Early in the text, it is revealed that it was "for Jason" that the Batman goes into self-imposed exile (Miller 19). Within the confines of his "Batcave" sanctum rests the costume of Jason Todd, an earlier bearer of the Robin moniker. Reflecting on this memento, Wayne is interrupted by Alfred who comments "It's the *spirits*, I suspect. Tends to make one overly *sentimental*. Come, sir. Hardly the time for antiques is it?"

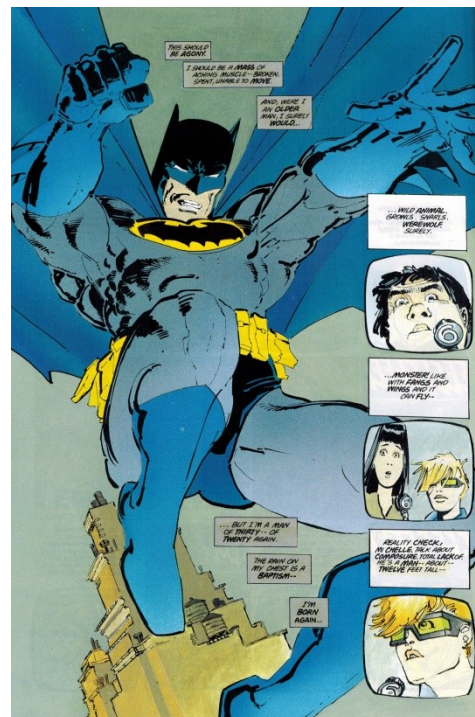
[emphasis original] (Miller 20). This play on words reveals much about the Batman's relationship to the character, who apparently dead, as a spirit, holds a weight upon Batman's soul that causes him to turn to alcohol, spirits. In essence, Wayne/Batman is mourning Jason/Robin as a parent would a lost child. Later, Alfred will ask, questioning Wayne's judgment concerning the new Robin "Have you forgotten what happened to Jason?" giving clear indication that Robin had indeed fallen to some dreadful end (Miller 93).

Enter Carrie Kelly, the text's antithesis to Ellen Yindel, and, without question, the most authoritative and powerful female character within the entire body of work who, of her own volition, takes up the fallen mantle of the absent Jason Todd. If Ellen Yindel is empowered by her performance of a masculine role, then Carrie Kelly is empowered by her claiming of a similar role, but claiming it as a female. She, through this assumption, moves beyond victimization to self-empowerment. She is, in many ways an equal partner to the Batman, and both challenges and overcomes definitions laid upon her as a result of gender bias and/or confusion. She is the text's response to the victimization of women so prevalent in 1980s media, a self-empowered female hero who not only holds her own alongside the Dark Knight, but does so without compromising her feminine identity.

Her development as a character is extremely fast paced. Kelly is introduced to the Batman early on in the text as she walks home along a dangerous route with a friend. She is clearly concerned with her academic success, "I figured I did do double study hall for fun," but demonstrates a naiveté about the dangers her route home holds saying, "even mutants'd know to go home in the rain" (Miller 30). Unsurprisingly, the two girls are attacked. Three gang members emerge from the shadows calling the gendered slur

“Chick chick chick,” and suggesting an assault sexual in nature, “Come here come here come here, chicken legs” (Miller 30). Kelly screams “No!” as one of her assailants grabs her arm and says “Start wif th little one...Slice and dice man slice and dice” (Miller 31). The scene is rendered primarily in silhouette, highlighting the black and white nature of the clearly evil act, likely to be similar to the “rape and mutilation” mentioned earlier in the text. In scenes following, Batman having stopped the violent act mere moments before its realization, Kelly appears onscreen, her friend alongside her, being interviewed as eyewitnesses to the Batman’s return. Her friend identifies her rescuer as “[a] monster! Like with fangs and wings and it can fly” while Kelly responds “Reality **check**, Michelle. Talk about **composure**. Total **lack** of. He’s a **man**—about—**twelve** feet tall” [emphasis original] (Miller 34). While Kelly’s estimation of the Batman’s physical size is overreaching, it is of the utmost importance to recognize her ability to see him as a man, albeit an overemphasized man. This emphasis on size places her, at the beginning of her development, where Yindel was near the end, recognizing Batman as “big.”

It is in fact this recognition, and her subsequent actions that marks the conception of her alter identity, a sentiment echoed by a full-page splash image of Batman, which serves as the background to her statement (e.g. see fig. 4), on



(Fig. 4)

which he says “I’m born again” (Miller 34). The text suggests here that the rebirth of Batman necessitates the rebirth of Robin, that the characters are inextricably entwined.

This rebirth comes to full realization as Kelly contemplates her experience. In the background, her faceless parents refer to Batman as one who is “obviously a fascist. Never heard of civil rights” while doing drugs and forsaking their potentially traumatized child, one asking for the other to “give me another hit of that” (Miller 45). Kelly looks to the sky and sees the enormous emblem known as the Bat-signal and her rebirth is complete. Her next appearance in the text is a short montage of her “suing up” as Robin, redefining herself, without the Batman’s calling, as a new hero, a new Robin. This self-actualization of Robin works in stark contrast to the appointment of Ellen Yindel. Yindel is given her job by male superiors, and she drops her feminine identity in favor of a more masculinized title. Kelly, on the other hand, is a self-proclaimed Robin, the androgynous moniker serving to allow her to fully retain her femininity while performing a traditionally masculine role. By choosing a female Robin, or more importantly, by having a female choose the identity of Robin, the text presents an empowered femininity that challenges the victim role so heavily portrayed in 1980s media.

Kelly, who begins the process of development as a hero entirely on her own, works alongside the Batman, without his knowledge, as the two converge towards an inevitable meeting. This is realized as Batman faces off against the leader of the Mutant Gang, suffering a brutal beating. Nearly defeated, he calls out “where...are you...Dick...you were always...my little monkey wrench” (Miller 82). Many critics have been quick to point out the use of an earlier Robin’s name “Dick Grayson” as an indicator of the character’s completion of Batman’s masculine identity, some even going

so far as to suggest that Batman's calling out for "Dick" as an indicator of his own sexual frustrations with himself and his gender performance. If this is the case, then it is of even greater significance that it is not Dick who arrives to help the nearly incapacitated Batman, but Carrie. And, even though the villain, a massive and disfigured monster of a man, proves to be too much for either individually, together, Batman and Robin manage to defeat him and escape. Together "Robin's [youthful] exuberance complements Batman's mature energy," and while each is incomplete on his/her own, "together, as a 'dynamic duo,' they approach the perfection of the Type I hero" (Rollin 442-443). This hero is, as Fry defines it, is "superior...to other men and to the environment,...a divine being" (qtd. in Rollin 434).

Clearly, Kelly redefines herself, not by fulfilling the role of "the Boy hostage" or that of an obedient "good girl" but by refusing Batman's orders to "run along home" and beginning to administer medical treatment in spite of warnings and cautions from a radio bearing Alfred's voice (Miller 84). Batman is impressed with her ability, her courage, and her performance, and asks her name. Kelly responds, nervously at first, "Carrie. Carrie Kelly. Robin," to which Batman replies "mine's Bruce" (Miller 85). This trading of secrets, this sharing of hidden identities serves as an impromptu adoption. Carrie Kelly has, with a father's blessing, taken on an entirely new role, although it is important to note that she had taken this role before the blessing was given. Batman takes her hand, ordering Alfred to take them to "the cave...and Robin...comes with us" (Miller 85). He does not define her, as the media has defined Yindel, but rather accepts Kelly/Robin as she has defined herself.

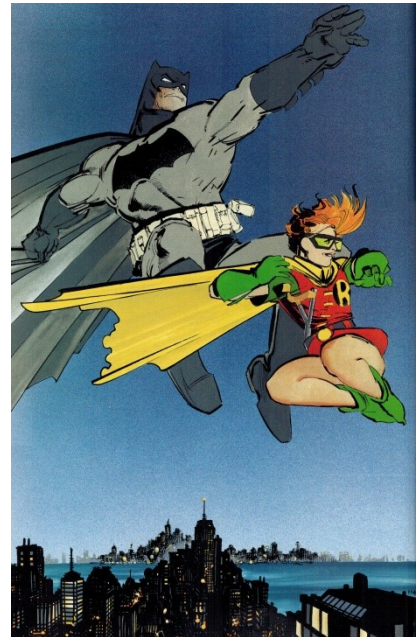


This acceptance speaks volumes for the self-empowerment of the female within the text. While Alfred questions Kelly's competence and ability, "It's the *girl*, sir...She's a sweet young *child*," it is apparent that Wayne, and therefore Batman, sees her as more (Miller 93). Alfred's reservations are clearly gender-biased while Wayne's attitude, "Carrie. She's perfect. She's young. She's Smart. She's brave. With her, I might be able to end this mutant nonsense once and for all," recognizes her as not only a competent and capable partner, but a necessary and complementary one (Miller 93). This is most significant in the way the two characters refer to her. Alfred marks her by her gender, and Wayne refers to her by her name.

Moreover, the text suggests that while Wayne/Batman views Kelly as a surrogate child, he also views her as an empowered equal, a more than adequate replacement to the fallen holder of the Robin mantle. Responding to Alfred's questioning, Batman's response speaks volumes, "I will never forget Jason. He was a good soldier. He *honored* me. But the war goes on" [emphasis original] (Miller 93). In fully accepting Kelly as Robin, Batman accepts her as a soldier, a partner in his war on crime. And, far from preventing her participation in this war, as Alfred seems to fear, her sex empowers her to play a role that Batman never could. Going undercover as a member of the mutant gang, Kelly lures them to a final confrontation between their leader and the Batman. Believing her to be the "leader[s] squeeze," the entire gang ultimately follows her lead. Kelly manipulates gender perception to wage war on those who have been guilty of the most grievous violence against the women of Gotham, those who had threatened "your [Gotham's] *new cop*—your *woman cop*," and who had promised to "come for our leader...*raze* Gotham... *rape* Gotham...[and] taste Gotham's *blood*" [emphasis original]

(Miller 85, 88). In doing so, she empowers Batman, enabling him to create a final confrontation which not only results in the defeat of the mutant leader but in the dissolution of the Mutant gang and the birth of a new group, “The Sons of the Batman”, a group which Kelly/Robin will ultimately help to lead as a character second only to Batman in authority, a position determined not by her gender, but by her age (Miller 102).

Her actions as an empowered feminine character continue throughout the text as can be seen as she aids the Batman against a hyper masculinized female character named “Bruno,” whose exposed breasts and buttocks are adorned only with swastikas, the imagery clearly that of a textual “feminazi,” a minor criminal who serves to highlight Robin’s ability to retain her femininity in spite of wearing a traditionally masculine hero’s mantle. Moreover, Bruno, clearly a negative lesbian stereotype, serves to further demonstrate the



(Fig. 5)

tensions surrounding empowered feminism during the 1980s. The dynamic duo’s move from the scene of this battle is highlighted by a splash page, absent of all text, featuring both characters, Batman being larger and more elevated, but with Robin’s brighter colors bringing her to the foreground (e.g. see fig. 5) and drawing greater attention from the reader’s eyes (Miller 114).

The text leads the reader to a quick acceptance of Robin in her role. In fact, because her gender is never an issue to her or to the Batman, the reader is able to see

more clearly the stereotypical weakness assigned to women in 1980s media and the confusion of the uninformed in their perception of the Robin character. The former is evident as Selena Kyle, having been rescued by Batman and Robin, warns the duo against one of the Joker's plots, "Don't...take the *girl*. He'll," [emphasis original] (Miller 136). This warning which goes completely ignored by both Batman and Robin. Similarly, confusion is evident in Yindel's reaction to seeing Robin, whom she nearly kills. She assumes a masculine figure, not surprisingly based on her own performance, saying "Is that a *kid* with him? Boy Wonder—got to be" [emphasis original] (Miller 138). Yindel assumes "Robin" is accompanying Batman, and assumes that such a performance must be masculine. She is incapable of seeing beyond the mask to the female in the role. This



(Fig. 6)

inability to associate the role with anything other than the masculine is echoed in the media who, watching events from a helicopter, announce "he's young—can't be older than thirteen—he's riding...he's wait—he's" (Miller 155). The repetition of the masculine pronoun defines a clear gender bias in the media's interpretation of unfolding events. So ingrained in the media's perception of gender is the victimization of the female that a female hero seems an impossibility.

As a final note on the character's empowerment, the text challenges such flawed perceptions in two key ways. Kelly joins Batman in bringing peace to a Gotham on the

verge of collapse, literally riding alongside him (see fig. 6) as the two lead The Sons of the Batman into the city on horseback, and, perhaps most importantly, she plays a crucial role in Batman's defeat of Superman, who working as a tool of an incompetent and impotent government challenges the Dark Knights methods, and by virtue of that challenge, Kelly's empowered gender identity.

In creating a female Robin, Miller's text challenges the gender stereotypes of the day, reimagines the stereotypical media portrayal of the feminine, and creates a new type of female character for the graphic novel genre, a character who is capable of standing on her own, not in spite of her gender, but without consideration of it. She is empowered by her own performance, even before she joins the Batman, leading the reader to only one conclusion. Miller intends for his text to show a wholly empowered female character who performs an identity of her own choosing rather than one imposed on her by society or even a mentor/father figure.

Here it is necessary to discuss an important element missing from the gender portrayal of Robin. Kelly, unlike many comic females of the day, is not sexualized throughout the text. This has raised some criticism; in fact, some have argued that "Robin" is an androgynous title and that this makes Kelly's performance more akin to Yindel's. However, the text does not support this. Robin's self-definition alone serves to invalidate such a criticism, as does Batman's recognition, without judgment, of her gender through the use of gender specific dialogue and pronouns. But, unlike the portrayal of characters in popular media of the day, Robin's feminine sexuality is not exaggerated. Such exaggeration, the text suggests, is another form of victimization. The character of Selena Kyle demonstrates this well. Known to readers familiar with the

Batman mythos as the alter-identity of Catwoman, a highly sexualized romance of/nemesis to Batman, Kelly is found by Batman and Robin in a state of utter victimization. Beaten, and possibly raped, by the Joker, she is bound hand and foot, hogtied, in a Wonder Woman costume. The imagery serves a dual purpose. It paints the highly sexualized female as another form of victim. Both the Catwoman and Wonder Woman are traditionally hyper-sexualized female characters, often portrayed in popular comics with exaggerated breasts and highly exposed flesh. By brutalizing one in the guise of the other, the text uses both as an example of the sexual exploitation of the female.

The text, by avoiding such exploitation of Kelly, allows her to retain her femininity and her empowered role. Miller refuses to allow his text to follow such a model of exploitation/victimization. She is drawn in proper proportion to her age, with no undue emphasis or exposure to those aspects of her anatomy which are exclusively feminine. And, while this might be interpreted as a downplaying of her gender, a better reading would be that the text is simply disregarding gender altogether in the face of performative identity. Robin is a hero not because she is a female performing a male role. She is a hero because she performs a hero's role. It is not her gender which empowers her. It is her performed identity, her action. She is Robin because she exudes the qualities of Robin, the same qualities which prevent her from being a victim. As Batman had said, "She's young. She's smart. She's Brave...She's perfect" (Miller 93). The most informed reading of the text will ultimately conclude that Kelly is not a female who becomes a hero, but, rather, she is a hero who happens to be female. Her performance is not an effort to create an identity, but based upon it. Her femininity, juxtaposed with Batman's masculinity is a "not only [a recognition of] opposites, but [a] rejoic[ing] that they exist" or rather that

they coexist (Bly 174). In Kelly, the text demonstrates true empowering and equality without consideration of gender, not, as in the case of Yindel, in spite of it.

An understanding of these characters is important because the text's portrayal of the feminine needs to be understood in light of the text's portrayal of the masculine. Miller's work, as can clearly be seen in the characters of Yindel and Kelly, does not seek to dominate or replace the feminine with the masculine, but rather, particularly in the case of Kelly, seeks to have them represented as individual spheres of existence. In other words, it is not necessary for Batman, in acting out a wholly masculine identity, to supplant or oppress Robin's feminism. The two can coexist, and may be considered equal shareholders in the market of gender equality. Such sentiment is echoed in texts from the period such as Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men*, a major contributor to the resurgent masculine movement of the 1980s, a movement paralleled by Batman's reclamation of his own masculinity in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. And while some have suggested that "the myth of apocalyptic redemption is also rooted in the assumption that 'female destruction' is the 'cost of creation,' and thus betrays its allegiance to a reactionary politics of antifeminism," I suggest that *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is more accurately read as an a reclamation/reformation of a masculine identity that intends to coexist with an equally empowered feminism (Finigan). The text clearly features a call to return to a more traditional masculinity, but Miller seeks to create a world in which that masculinity can wholly co-exist with an equally empowered femininity.

It is here that the characters of Bruce Wayne and Batman must be examined. And, as I have already demonstrated, they must be examined as separate individuals if they are

to be fully understood. It is fortunate then that the text's chronology is divided in such a way as to aid a parallel analysis of these characters. Following the natural divisions of the text, we are able to analyze the characters through birth/rebirth and childhood, through relationships with parents and children, through legacy building/personal achievement, and even through death.

As elements of the birth/rebirth aspect of this dual character have already been discussed, a slightly less thorough examination of them is necessary. However, it is important to note that textual evidence for such an examination can be found throughout the work, echoed beyond the original text, *The Dark Knight Returns*. Significantly though, this text introduces the reader to the concept of rebirth. It does so through a subtly lit frame featuring a nude Bruce Wayne rising up a staircase towards a silhouette of his surrogate father Alfred. The narrow opening filled with light and the following close up of Wayne's newly shaven face speak volumes, both in regards to its Yonic imagery (this is clearly a birth metaphor) and to what I am referring to as the essential nature of Batman (Miller 20). Again, to fully understand the text as Miller has penned it, it is necessary to read Batman as character whose personality is in-born. No doubt, social construction contributes to his conception, but, to a high degree, his personality, once created, is self-existent. This of course flies in the face of much scholarly discussion of identity, but again, at the time of the writing, much of this discussion has not made its way into the graphic novel genre. The text is in many ways its own exploration of the "essential or constructed" identity debate deconstructed decades earlier in more traditional genres of literature. Batman separates himself from Wayne almost immediately, subtly at first, controlling Wayne in such a way that he shaves his

mustache, his mask, unconsciously (Miller 20). He is rising from, or out of the darkness of the womb, the shadowy depths of Wayne's mind, the exile to which he has been committed.

This birth imagery is repeated as Wayne struggles with the painful memories of his parents' deaths. Through seventy four separate images featuring various forms of recalled brutality paired with personal anguish and pain, the text seems to conjure the pains of birth, finally moving Wayne's face closer and closer to the forefront until finally masking him with shadow and a final frame of bat bursting through a window (Miller 22-26). This pain of birth is made all the more clear as several of these images show a nude Wayne bathing, engulfed in water, as Batman's voice speaks,

The time has **come**. You know it in your **soul**. For **I** am your soul... You cannot **escape** me... You are puny, you are small—You are **nothing**—A hollow shell, a rusty **trap** that **cannot** hold me—Smoldering, I **burn** you—Burning you, I **flare**, hot and bright and fierce and **beautiful**—You cannot **stop** me—Not with **wine** or **vows** or the weight of **age**—You cannot stop me but still you **try**—still you **run**—You try to drown me out...But your voice is **weak**.  
[emphasis original] (Miller 26-27)

Wayne's struggle to retain himself is lost in the rebirth of the Batman, and for the remainder of the text, he serves as a secondary character, a mask removed, a revelation of Batman's weakness. This is not so much a devaluing of Wayne, but a devaluing of what he represents early in the text, the suppression of the essential self. This establishes a



binary opposition between the two characters that can be seen in Batman's first appearance in the text, a full colored splash page in which he says, "This should be **agony**. I should be a **mass** of aching muscle—broken, spent, unable to **move**. And were I an **older** man, I surely **would**...But I'm a man of **thirty**—of **twenty** again. The rain on my chest is a **baptism**—I'm **born** again" [emphasis original] (Miller 34). Batman positions himself as superior to Wayne, whose next appearance, lying face down on a bed which Alfred humorously refers to as "Wayne infirmary" serves to allow him to accept the weakness which the Batman seems impervious to. Goodland suggests that this type of masculinity is a "hardcore alternative in which pain—grueling, physical pain—offers the only permissible medium of feminized feeling" (109). If we accept this, then Wayne represents Batman's feminine side, allowing the Dark Knight to stand alone as an entirely masculine character. This sentiment of femininity through pain and Wayne's feminization is further demonstrated as Batman introduces himself, broken, nearly dead, having suffered a vicious beating at the hands of the Mutant Gang's leader, to Robin "What's...your name...Mine's Bruce" (Miller 85).

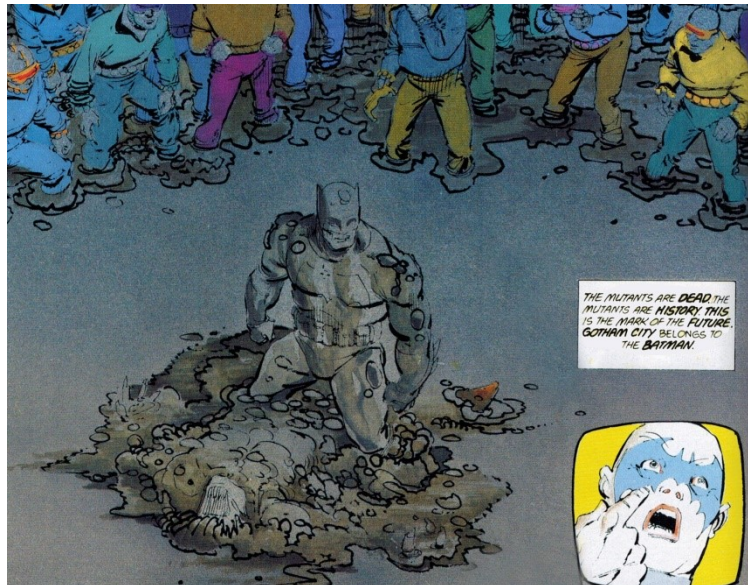
In this moment, the birth metaphor is repeated. Wayne, stripping himself of his Batman costume, finds himself drawn into the alternate identity once more. Beneath the earth, in the womb of the Batcave, a naked Wayne speaks to the darkness,

I leave them behind me...I leave it all behind me...I go...to  
the dark place...where I first met you...before my parents  
died...before I learned what I am. I'm dying...But I can't  
die. I'm not finished yet. And you're not finished with me.  
Then...something shuffles, out of sight...something sucks

the stale air...and hisses. Gliding with ancient grace...eyes gleaming, untouched by love or joy or sorrow...Breath hot with the taste of fallen foes...the stench of dead things, damned things... surely the fiercest survivor...the purest warrior...glaring, hating...claiming me as your own.

[emphasis original] (Miller 87-88)

This rebirth might also be viewed as an adoptive one, a parallel to paternal themes present throughout the text, which I shall elaborate upon in subsequent discussion. Of primary importance here is that this rebirth marks a



(Fig. 7)

merger of sorts between Batman and Bruce Wayne, a consumption of one by the other, a sacrifice of weakness in favor of total submission to the essential self. Shortly following this rebirth of a wholly empowered Batman, we see him emerge, as from a womb, from a drain pipe into a mud pit, locked in combat with the mutant leader, whom he swiftly and brutally defeats. Batman taunts his enemy, “you don’t get it, boy...this isn’t a mudhole...It’s an operating table. And I’m the surgeon” (Miller 101). As Batman kneels above his fallen foe (e.g. see fig. 7), covered in a mud that could easily resemble the stuff of physical birth, the text reveals the birth of “The Sons of the Batman” (Miller 102).

More importantly, the Batman has established himself as more than human, a legend, a myth of hyper-masculinity, superior in every way to his enemies, and by virtue of that, to the system which has failed to contain or stop them. By “infusing...energy into [Gotham’s] vacant mythological landscape, he establishes himself as an example to be followed, an ideal (Murphy). His rebirth is not one of a single character but, in the face of an ineffective social order, of noble masculinity itself and the naturally accompanying mythology thereof.

It is, however, insufficient to only discuss these characters through the various birth metaphors present within the text. However, with the theme of paternity clearly rising to the foreground, through both Batman’s adoption of Wayne and the birth of The Sons of the Batman, the text presents us with a secondary means by which to analyze them. The text itself clearly views paternity as a primary means of performing gender, and an examination of such expression allows us to investigate one of the most important themes of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the reclamation of a paternal masculinity.

There can be no question; Bruce Wayne has “Daddy issues.” With the death of his parents, and the subsequent replacement of his own identity by the birth of the Batman, a psychoanalysis of his character would no doubt reveal a deeply troubled man who both questions the masculinity of his father (why couldn’t he protect his family) and of himself (why didn’t he). Such self-blame is apparent as Bruce reflects on the events of that fateful evening, when his parents were murdered, “Just a **movie**. That’s all...no harm in watching a **movie**... You loved it so **much**...you jumped and danced like a **fool**...you remember” (Miller 22). His self-image is consistent with a critique of America made by Robert Bly in his celebrated work *Iron John: A Book About Men*:

The inner boy in a messed-up family [in Wayne's case, absent] may keep on being shamed, invaded, disappointed, and paralyzed for years and years. "I am a victim," he says, over and over; and he is. But that very identification with victimhood keeps the soul house open and available for still more invasions. Most American men today do not have enough awakened or living warriors inside to defend their soul houses. And most people, men or women, do not know what genuine outward or inward warriors would look like, or feel like. (149)

Batman is the embodiment of such a warrior. Moreover, Wayne's self-observations, while critical of his own performance, serve as a subtle jab at the damage "the movies," a metaphor for media as a whole, does to a society. After all, the media saturation and pop culture references throughout the text indicate that the Gotham Wayne inhabits is one born out of a pop-culture conception. However, this troubled child, this city born of "his [the murderer of Wayne's parents] children" is the very child that the heroes of the text have adopted (Miller 14). It is emblematic of the reality of 1980s America. Mike Dubose, writing for the *Journal of Popular Culture* argues:

Heroes have always been important in American society, they were particularly vital in the eighties. In the previous decade, America had been victimized both abroad (the 444-day kidnapping of American embassy employees in Iran) and at home (with double-digit inflation and an oil

shortage), and the country suffered from low self-esteem.  
(915).

He concludes by borrowing a phrase from Ronald Reagan, summing up the sentiment prevalent in the country at the time, the sentiment reflected in Miller's work, "America was losing faith in itself" (Dubose 915). To clarify, Gotham, representative of America, is a child victim who, like "Americans (as evident in some elements of the popular culture) [had begun] to wonder if such things as heroes could even exist in the eighties" (Dubose 916). Commissioner Gordon expresses as much when he speaks about "feel[ing] like **Dad** to an entire city of souls...[and] **bleed**[ing] with every single one of my **children**" [emphasis original] (Miller 103). Wayne might have, like Gotham, embraced victimhood, or like Gordon, retirement.

However, unlike Gordon, who seeks to abandon his parenthood for a life of quiet recluse with his wife, Batman, supplanting Wayne, seeks to reclaim his role as father. This is apparent in his adoption of Wayne, previously discussed, his acceptance of the father role to "The Sons of the Batman," his adoption of Gotham City, and, perhaps most importantly, in his adoption of Carrie Kelly/Robin. Fatherhood becomes the antithesis of victimization, the expression of a strong masculinity.

To elaborate on the adoption of Wayne, we must return to the moment itself, as Batman strips himself of his costume, wearing only a portion of Robin's cape as a sling for his badly wounded arm. This return to the womb, this return to the essential nature of self, has Wayne adopted, and consumed by the Batman. He speaks of "learn[ing] what I am" as the imagery slowly envelops him in darkness (Miller 88). In this moment, his face is suddenly and visibly changed, shown side by side with a snarling Bat; Wayne is

no longer a man who fears becoming his father, but embraces his own adoptive alter-ego. Batman, a being “self-consciously imagined—and self-created,” becomes the one who



(Fig. 8)

protects Wayne, and by embracing his own state of being “what I am,” Wayne is reclaiming his ability to become a father to Carrie Kelly, to become the conceptual myth that gives rise to The Sons of the Batman, and to become a protective father to Gotham (Fisher 6; Miller 87).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the full page image, free of all text, that features Bruce Wayne, stripped of all but his impromptu sling, receiving the embrace of Carrie Kelly as a father would a child (e.g. see fig. 8).

Some have criticized this visual as a sexualization of the relationship between the characters. An example of such a reading of the text can be found in Nayar’s “Gothic Masculinity, Filiation and Affiliation: Frank Miller’s Batman,” in which the author states:

When Miller does a ‘gender troubling (Tipton 327), by making Robin a girl in TDKR he also problematizes, rather seriously, the nature of the filial role of Batman. In a particularly problematic visualization in TDKR we are shown Robin wrapped up against a semi-clad Wayne standing up, her child-like body, with the sharp curves of her bottom sticking how as she grasps Wayne, with his white hair (a father-figure?), her legs off the ground. (78)

Nayar fails entirely to develop this line of reasoning, primarily because the visual is far more befitting of a reading, as Nayar suggests, that holds Wayne in the role of a father

and Robin in nothing more sinister than a youthfully exuberant embrace born of worry for the health of a parent. Furthermore, the idea that Robin's femininity represents a "gender troubling" is reflective of the same sort of bias held by characters within the text itself who cannot envision such an empowered character as purely feminine. Greenblatt points out that "most notably, the first splash page in which we see Batman and Robin together is one in which Batman's broken arm is literally bound by a piece of Robin's cape. This suggests in no unclear terms that the relationship between the two is complementary rather than sexual in nature. Greenblatt continues, "Robin literally binds and bridges Batman's wounds, and the figure of Bruce Wayne/Batman, although naked and therefore lacking the explicit labeling of his uniform, is forceful, upright, protective, and most definitively, undividedly Batman" all qualities more befitting a father than a sexual partner. This demonstrates without question that a more accurate reading is that the two characters are, in that moment, complementary. Wayne can only be a father if he has a child. Carrie Kelly, having forsaken her parents, who she clearly views as inferior, is clearly overjoyed at the recovery of her adoptive father, who will, for the remainder of the text, serve to guide her growth into a hero like himself. Wayne voices as much shortly thereafter as he praises Kelly's youth, intellect, and bravery, all qualities a proud father would observe in his child.

This traditionally heralded achievement of masculinity, reproduction of self, gives the reader little doubt as to the reasoning behind the titling of the second of Miller's texts, *The Dark Knight Triumphant*. Moreover, Wayne's acceptance, his adoption of Kelly, directly parallels the adoption of Robin by the Batman. Mark Cotta Vaz, in examining these characters, make an incredibly accurate observation of their relationship, writing

“Batman and Robin had a blood brother closeness. Theirs was a spiritual intimacy forged from the stress of countless battles fought side by side. But Batman was also a mentor, protector, and [adoptive] father figure” (qtd. in Tipton).

This adoption is evident as Batman performs the role of father to Robin, protecting her and guiding her, “Your training begins tomorrow. It will be weeks before you’re ready for direct contact with the enemy” (Miller 94). The roles each plays are not indicative of value or worth, but rather of experience and maturity. The two become inseparable, Robin duplicating Batman’s behavior, receiving both guidance and rebuke as from a father. Batman scolds his child, sounding similar to any other parent making idle threats, “You made yourself visible [endangering yourself] I will not tolerate...If you ever disobey ever again” (Miller 115). Moreover, Batman, while wickedly serious with his enemies, trades humorous banter with his child, “Sit up straight, Robin... No, I will not teach to the program. Touch those controls—and you’re fired...[and, smiling after Robin rescues him] you’re not fired” (Miller 122, 129). This reveals an important aspect of Batman’s nature. He adopts Robin, as any parent would, out of affection, out of love. Here, Nayar makes a pointed observation “that Batman constantly seeks to supplement his ‘family’ (81). In reclaiming the role of father, he is able to express this important element of masculinity, paternity, and to a certain extent, patriarchy, a term often associated with the negative connotation given it by the feminist movement but here more reflective of the guiding authority held by a father in a world lacking a powerful mother figure. This reflects Greenblatt’s sentiment “Batman easily steps into the position of the giver of laws. Lawgiving within Miller’s text is necessary in order to produce a



better future through the protection and education of the Child—a child whose very ability to be taught, to be protected, necessarily implies that it is also at risk.”

Batman’s adoption of Robin, however, while serving as a reclamation of patriarchy, or more specifically, paternity, is performed in such a way as to empower Robin as both a female and as a child. Having rescued her from a near death fall as the two escape from danger, she wraps her arms around him, terrified, and he whispers, “Good soldier. Good soldier” (Miller 137). Embracing his paternal nature, he even begins to express a more highly developed moral code, moving from the adrenaline fueled, danger addicted persona seen early in the text to something more akin to a mythological role model, pausing at one moment to tell another child to “watch your language, son” (Miller 146). Robin’s following of his example, and her development as a character, is evident as she begins to occupy more space on the page without the Batman. She functions as a partner, coming to Batman’s aid, who takes pride in her performance, as any parent would, seeing himself reflected in her as he says, “I knew she’d make it...I might’ve at her age” (Miller 159).

So thorough is Batman’s trust of his adopted child, a testament to how effective the text believes his parentage to be, that Robin not only becomes a full partner in Batman’s rescue of Gotham in the darkness of nuclear blackout, but she is also given special insight into his character that is not afforded to others in the text. This insight is evident as she appears at the forefront of a single frame, Batman doubled over on his horse in silhouette behind her, and she reflects, “It’s only once...in the whole **night**...that it **shows**...He’s given **orders** and all the **mutants** and **S.O.B.s** and **everybody** are **gone** for a minute...He just **sags** in his **saddle** like an old **man**...” (Miller 183). Batman is so

confident in the strength of his child that he is willing to show his weakness, something no one else is allowed to see; however, as with any parent trying to set a strong example, he follows up by “straighten[ing] up and grin[ning] at [Robin] like it’s funny” to which she responds, “he can’t die” (Miller 184). Not only does this serve to further establish himself in the eyes of his child, but it reinforces the mythology of masculinity the text ascribes to him, a glorification of willpower-born strength that Miller is seeking to create in his hero. But, it is not this mythology that drives Batman; it is his love for his child, and his children. He sees Robin as a reason to live, a stark contrast to his earlier desire for “a good death.” Looking at his child, he knows “she has decades—decades, left to her...right there—in that saddle—is all the reason I need” (Miller 186). The text is leading the reader to view Batman as a hero not just because he fights crime; that is merely a part of his character. In fact, the text leads the reader to view him as something more. Dubose tells us that “heroes in the eighties must be moral, but the most important quality...is their ability to be truly larger than life” (933). He is a father, and it is fatherhood that defines him as a man. It is the ultimate expression of performed masculinity. Fatherhood is something so tangible and real to the audience that the text is able to use it as a means by which to grasp the other themes present in the text. Batman and Robin’s relationship is the “juxtaposition of fantasy and real experience [that] allows for social themes to emerge” (Dubose 927).

This is particularly interesting, given the extreme focus on sexual prowess in masculine characters found within the texts of the 1980s, such as popular actions tropes Miami Vice or Magnum PI. Batman has no need to dominate women, physically, sexually, or otherwise. And, given that all instances of his parenthood, Robin, Gotham,

The Sons of the Batman, and even Wayne, are relationships born of adoption, his paternity flies in the face of hyper-sexualized masculinity. Paternity within the text is not a matter of procreation, but one of nurture and guidance.

Such guidance is evident in his adoption of the misguided members of the mutant gang, who become “The Sons of the Batman.” These children, dominated by a hypermasculinized and abusive father figure, the Mutant Leader, serve as an extreme example of the worst aspects of a misperformed masculinity. Such performance is seen as the Mutant Leader gives a defiant speech to his fanatical followers, “They call us a gang. They call us a **mob**. They think we just noisy kids. Only when they die **by** our hands and see their women raped will they know...we have the strength—we have the will—and now we have the guns. Gotham city belongs to the mutants...**Kill and Kill**” [emphasis original] (Miller 73). This emphasis on violence, particularly violence of a sexual nature is reflective of the very worst the media influence of the 1980s. Examples include such iconography a robotic rapist featured on the 1987 album *Appetite for Destruction*, which I will not include here, an album which MTV featured heavily and which contained many top ten songs, many of which voiced similar violence.

As Batman fights against this gang, and what they represent, using “rubber bullets” (part of the character’s backstory is refusal to kill), the mutants fight back, following their leader’s hyper-violent commands (Miller 76). “They do each other a lot of damage,” the text tells us, a subtle but clearly worded jab at the state of how such violent and sexually exploitative culture was damaging the youth of America at the time (Miller 75). Examination of the appearance and actions of the Mutants themselves

suggests that they are “obsessively rehear[ing] a male desire for completion” (Goodland 104). They are the iconic,

bricolage of the hyperromantic, gothic youth culture  
 cull[ed] from its glam, punk, and new wave subculture  
 antecedents from Gothic literary culture; from vampire  
 cults and B-movie camp; from religious iconography; from  
 cyborg and technoculture; form oppositional sexual  
 cultures including queer, fetish, BDSM, drag, and  
 bloodsports. (Goodland 104)

The text clearly condemns and blames this type of behavior on the absence of a solid parental figure. As Robin comes to join the fight, her parents, unseen and overshadowed by the smoke from whatever drugs they are smoking, ask, “Hey...didn’t we have a kid” (Miller 76). Without the guidance she finds in Batman, she could have ended up much like the mutants, who exist as “a kind of evil...never dreamed of” (Miller 77). In this regard, we “identify with Batman...because he is clean, upright...undeniably good” (Rollin 433). The text, speaking through Batman, is clearly critical of what society could become in the absence of a powerful and effective father figure, or more precisely, how society falls to ruin in the presence of flawed or inappropriate representations of masculinity. Moreover, this antithetical relationship between these two figures, Batman and the Mutant leader, is highlighted in their views of the feminine.

Speaking on camera concerning his confrontation with Batman, the Mutant Leader says, “Batman is a **coward**. I broke his bones. I **conquered** the fool. I made him beg for mercy. Only by cheating did he escape alive. Let him go to his **women**. Let him

**lick** his wounds...soon, my army ...will hunt your **new** cop [Yindel]—your **woman** cop—and I will...” [emphasis original] (Miller 85). This speech is interrupted by a newscaster who announces that the remainder “is unfit for broadcast” (Miller 86). The Mutant Leader represents a violent masculinity, an oppressive and dangerous response to empowered femininity, perhaps born of fear of the empowered female. And, the mutants, in the absence of a more effective figure, embrace his dangerous words as gospel.

They threaten to “**rape** Gotham,” thereby endangering Batman’s adopted Child, the city itself, and in doing so, force a response [emphasis original] (Miller 88). Batman must redefine the masculine if he is going to defeat such a problem, a response not dissimilar to Robert Bly’s or others who contributed to the masculine movement of the 1980s. He knows that this false masculinity must be shown for what it is. Telling Gordon that “They can’t be arrested. You could never hold them all. They have to be defeated. Humiliated. It’s the only way” he arranges for a showdown with the Mutant Leader, a fight to determine the superiority of one performance over another. Dubose suggests that Batman’s actions, clearly violent, are violence of a necessary nature; he writes, “Foucault would argue that peace always is violent in some regard: ‘peace would then be a form of war, and the state [Batman in this context] a means of waging it’” (926). Taunting the villain, repeatedly calling him “boy” Batman emasculates his opponent by defining him as less than a man. He works with the absolute power of a “surgeon,” removing the Mutant Leader’s influence like a cancerous growth (Miller 101).

Watching as a “true” masculinity emerges victorious, the mutants begin to turn, one by one, against the hypersexualized and violent faux-masculinity, ultimately adopting themselves into the paternity of the Batman. A single screen declares, “The mutants are

**dead.** The mutants are **history**. This [a bat symbol face paint] is the mark of the future. **Gotham City** belongs to the **Batman**” [emphasis original] (Miller 102).

Batman accepts this role, albeit later in the text, snapping a rifle in his bare hands, a symbol of the violence he stands against, calling on The Sons of the Batman to follow his lead. Batman defines his role as a parent, as a teacher, as an authority, and as an example to be followed, as he announces, “This is the weapon of the *enemy*. We do not *need* it. We will not *use* it. Our weapons are *quiet—precise*. In time, I will *teach* them to you. Tonight, you will rely on your *fists*—and your *brains*. Tonight we are the law. Tonight I am the law” [emphasis original] (Miller 173). The text shows him as an individual clearly familiar with violence, but his is violence with purpose, not an end in and of itself. Like a General going to war, Batman leads his children, only in doing what is necessary for the greater good. Fisher argues “Batman may be authoritarian, violent, and [even] sadistic, but in a world of endemic corruption, he is the least worst option.” Ultimately, his actions as father are not to promote violence, but to end it. In the later pages of the text, as he leads his army underground for “years [of silent] train[ing]” he declares his purpose “to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers” (Miller 199).

In this, we see that the text clearly wishes for Batman to express his paternity through reproduction, but reproduction of an educational nature rather than of a sexual one. He redefines masculinity and then duplicates that newly defined masculinity in his followers. This reproduction is focused on protecting his children: Robin, The Sons of the Batman, even Gotham City. And, this protection can only take place through a duplication of Batman’s worldview. He is leaving a legacy, creating a new mythology

that will stand as a beacon of justice, a trait so inextricably tied to Batman that the text clearly views it as part of his masculinity. However, to leave such a legacy, he must overcome all obstacles that would serve to tear it down. And in examining these obstacles and his triumph over them, we begin to see the Batman emerge as more than just a man or even a father. We see him emerge as a as a new form of man, a legend, a myth.

Such an examination must naturally begin with Batman's struggle against the anonymity resulting from his "forced retirement. As the text suggests, "younger viewers will not remember the **Batman**...most high schoolers consider him a **myth**" [emphasis original] (Miller 11). Given the character's reliance on the power of fear to intimidate his opponents, such forgetfulness undermines his ability to perform. And, while existing as a myth might be considered a valuable trait, the Batman must, in order to strike the necessary fear into the hearts of his enemies, be real as well. However, as has been sufficiently discussed throughout this analysis, once the Batman is reborn, the reality of his existence more than serves to overcome the culture's earlier lack of faith in it. What's more, his rebirth from the shadows of memory, coupled with the exaggeration of his physical qualities and actions by the popular media, allows his status as a living legend to emerge quickly from the ashes of anonymity. He is reborn, as if from the dead. The media's pervasive influence in the rebirth of the Batman legend is interesting considering his refusal to participate in it. Kofoed states that it is a "a pervasive cultural power the reborn hero never fully acknowledges." However, it is clear that this same power has no problems acknowledging the Batman.

A second clearly defined struggle, and one related to this idea of rebirth, is Wayne's, and by association, Batman's, struggle with age. Wayne sees himself as "a

dead man...,” and he views Batman as something past, someone who “was a young man” but, of course, is no longer” (Miller 12-13). Moreover, it is apparent that the effects of age are beginning to wear upon Wayne as he considers his lack of progeny. A simple statement from his butler, Alfred, “though given your social schedule of late, the prospectus of their being a next generation...” makes this sentiment evident (Miller 21). This sentiment is remedied as Batman adopts his various children throughout, but the challenges of age itself are more problematic. If we consider Fisher’s suggestion that the text is acting counter to the popular “ideology...that what ‘really matters’ is what [people] are, rather than what [they] do,” then Batman is clearly performing not as what he is, an old man, but as what he does, fight crime as a self-proclaimed “young man” (9). This of course leads the reader to a sentiment reflected in filmmaker Christopher Nolan’s interpretation of the Dark Knight, *Batman Begins*, heavily inspired by Miller’s work, in which the character voices such a sentiment, “It’s now who you are inside that counts, it’s what you do that makes you who you are.” Such performance based identity is indeed indicative of the whole of the text.

However, Batman’s struggles with age are not as evident in his early appearances, when he feels like “a man of thirty—of twenty again” but are more clearly seen as his adventures take their toll on him (Miller 34). One criminal comments “if it is him...[indicating some disbelief] he’s got to be pretty **old**,” and Batman, sneaking up behind them thinks “old enough to need my legs to climb a rope” [emphasis original] (Miller 37). In another scene, he worries about “hav[ing] a heart attack [saying] I’m finished” (Miller 51). And yet, in another scene, he chides himself, barely escaping a foe’s bullets, as a “lucky—**lucky** old man” [emphasis original] (Miller 110). Such emphasis on



age indicates to the reader that Batman's physical performance, a performance tied directly to his age, is, to him, an intrinsic part of his masculine identity. This is clearly evident in the moments before he challenges the Mutant Leader. The text gives the reader clear insight into the mind of an aging hero and what drives him as he thinks:

The mutant leader...a kind of evil we never **dreamed** of...There he is—square in my **sights**. And there's only one thing to do about him that makes any **sense** to me—just press the trigger and blast him from the face of the earth. Though that means crossing a line that I drew for myself thirty years ago...I can't think of a single reason to let him live. Except...except he's got exactly the kind of body I wish he didn't have...**Powerful**, without enough **bulk** to slow him down...every muscle a **steel spring**—ready to **lash out**—and he's **young**...in his physical **prime**...and I honestly don't know if I could **beat** him. [emphasis original] (Miller 77).

Thoroughly trounced by his encounter with such a figure, barely surviving, Batman is forced to accept the hard truths underlying his age, his experience, and to reevaluate his performance in new terms. He embraces the “**ancient grace**” of his namesake, coming face to face with a monstrous bat within his cave, rejecting death by reminding himself of who he is, more than an old man, a “survivor...[a] warrior” (Miller 88). He redefines himself, as is evident in his final confrontation with the Mutant Leader. He snarls “My mistake was to try to match his savagery. To fight like a young man”

(Miller 101). And, by embracing a new methodology, not only does he defeat his opponent, he does so in such a way that not only destroys him physically, “something tells me to stop with the leg. I don’t listen to it,” but also destroys his influence over the people of Gotham (Miller101). Batman takes the mutant gang from their leader, and they rebrand themselves The Sons of the Batman. By taking his children, his progeny, Batman has emasculated his enemy and established himself as more than human. He is what Bly describes as a true warrior, one that “is in service to a purpose greater than himself: that is, to a transcendent cause [the protection of his ‘children’]” (150). He is legend to be followed. He exhibits qualities reminiscent of Frye’s Romantic Hero, being “superior in degree to other man and his environment, whose actions are marvelous” (Rollin 434-435). And, while age is mentioned throughout the text, it is no longer an enemy to be defeated.

That is not to say that enemies do not abound. They are sprinkled throughout the text. Reader’s familiar with the Batman mythology will be quick to notice the return of the Joker, the most famous member of the Dark Knight’s rogue’s gallery, who quickly embraces a violent, and somewhat androgynous, sexuality, first by killing a TV psychologist reminiscent of popular 1980s celebrity Dr. Ruth (e.g. see fig. 9) by kissing



(Fig. 9)

her while wearing poisoned lipstick.

As she defines Batman’s sickness to a studio audience, “zexual repression,”

Joker responds, “You’re right. We

must not restrain ourselves;” she dies screaming “zex und zex...und zex und zex”

[emphasis original] (Miller 126-127). Joker’s lack of restraint is the antithesis of what

makes Batman a hero. He uses sexuality as a tool to manipulate and to kill, as evidenced in silhouette as a prostitute, forced into service by the Joker, poisons a congressman, after apparently engaging in intercourse with him. The poison, of course, drives the naked man, wrapped in an American flag, mad and causes him to fall to his death. Such imagery might easily be read to represent the dangerous sexual pollution of contemporary society and the resultant death of “America” as culture responds with less and less sexual restraint. Furthermore, it echoes Goodland’s reflections on Foucault: “‘To be modern,’ writes Foucault in an affirmative echo of Baudelaire, ‘is not to accept oneself as one is’ but to practice a positive ‘dandysme,’ ‘to take oneself as an object of complex and difficult elaboration’ by turning one’s body, feelings, and very existence into a ‘work of art’” (108). Such a practice might be acceptable for the individual, but Joker is clearly unsatisfied with only performing individually, he seeks to forcibly reshape his victims into physical and psychological representations of himself. To put it more succinctly, while Batman adopts and nurtures, Joker’s actions are more akin to rape.

Moreover the Joker’s behavior suggests certain elements commonly attributed to homosexuality. Beyond his physical appearance, a slim, somewhat feminine shape of character, lipstick and makeup, the Joker embraces Batman as his “darling” (Miller 141). It is clear that the victim he most desperately wants to violate is Batman. The Joker is aroused, attracted to the Batman. Everything he does is designed to draw attention of his would be love. Nowhere is this more clear than in his rebirth from a catatonic state, a rebirth inspired by the mere mention of Batman’s return in a televised news broadcast. He longs for a physical encounter with his nemesis, and makes no restraint in making such an encounter a reality. The sexual nature of this encounter is apparent in the

language of the text. Hands locked on each other's bodies, Batman says of the Joker's knife "I barely felt it enter my stomach...he's moving more quickly than I am...stabbing" (Miller 150). The image is clearly one of rape, of domination, and of control.

However, Batman's own ideology, his motivation in the conflict does not allow such a methodology. He reflects "we kill...too often...because we've made it too easy" (Miller 149). Rather than violate his own code, killing the Joker, which would essentially amount to allowing the Joker to rape his soul, Batman paralyzes his enemy. Joker's response "I'm really...very disappointed with you, my sweet...the moment was...perfect...and you...didn't have the nerve" before killing himself, serves only to point out the madness that such lack of restraint would inevitably lead to. Batman's disdain is apparent; spitting in the Joker's dead face, he "waste[s] one second...with a good-bye" (Miller 154).

The Joker's actions leading to his death serve to bring to light an important concept. He is the embodiment of pop psychology of the 1980s. Having been declared to be "a sensitive human being" by his therapist, who like other representatives of pop psychology is "drawn as [a] pale, sickly stooped, individual [with] closed eyes...emphasiz[ing] their metaphorical blindness," Joker's madness is overlooked (Miller 126; Dace 103). He is used as a tool for media attention, and such narcissistic self-interest and media lust allows the character to not only go free, but to murder hundreds of people before being confronted and ultimately stopped by Batman. Joker's manipulation of his doctors and the media serve as a mastery over others reflective of the manipulative power of the media itself, while Batman's defeat of the Joker, and his attempt to spare his life, represent more of a mastery of self.

This mastery of self is perhaps what makes the character of Batman so appealing. He has no superpowers. He is nothing more than a man who, through strict self-discipline has made himself to be something more, when clearly, he could have, like the Joker, become something worse. To the people of Gotham City, he is a legend, a legend born of this mastery of self. He is defined only by his essential nature, by his birth, and no outside force is capable of changing that. He stands as a man to be admired, a man to be feared, a man to be respected, and a man who defines himself regardless of the social or political influences that pressure him to be something else. In this way, he is beyond social construction. Of course, many would be quick to point out that his rejection of social construction is in and of itself a form of social construction. However it is clear that the character himself, following his birth, is presented by the text as his own creation, standing with or against social convention as he sees fit. As such a man, he is inherently dangerous to the status-quo.

The culture's awareness of such danger is made clear in the text in a comment made by Superman, one of Batman/Bruce Wayne's friends and, to a certain extent, rivals, "They'll **kill** us if they **can**, Bruce. Every year they [mankind] grow **smaller**. Every year they hate us **more**. We must not **remind** them that **giants** walk the earth" [emphasis original] (Miller 129-130). But, that reminder is precisely Batman's purpose, and Superman, as a tool of the establishment is perhaps his greatest challenge. Seeing Batman as a figure of performative masculinity, the reader must respond to Superman's statement by examining why such a reminder is, at least according to Superman, so threatening. The answer is clear. It is countercultural, and Superman, as the text presents him, is the embodiment of the American way, a way, as already demonstrated throughout this

analysis, which Batman believes to be flawed. If he is to be truly a self-defined man, he must not be defined by any ideology other than his own. In his journey to establish a new mythology of masculinity for future generations, he must confront the very culture which he seeks to protect, by challenging its greatest avatar.

Batman's conflict with the culture of 1980s American masculinity is apparent throughout the text; however, there are a few key moments where this conflict is particularly highlighted. Subtextually, his absence from the screen, featured so heavily throughout the text, is emblematic of his resistance to participate in a culture inundated by media influence. Practically screaming this idea to the reader, one character, Lana Lane, featured on a *Hard Copy/Inside Edition* style news program, argues that "It's a mistake to think of [Batman] in purely **political** terms...Rather, I regard [Batman] as a symbolic resurgence of the common man's will to resist...a **rebirth** of the American **fighting spirit**" [emphasis original] (Miller 41). Batman's resistance to conform to popular culture is a resistance to the socially constructive influence of the culture itself. He refuses to be defined by a self-destructive and flawed system. Such refusal creates natural tensions throughout the text.

Such tensions are most clearly seen through the eyes of the screen, which by its nature, draws the reader in. Experiencing the events of the text in much the same way as a normal television audience would, readers find themselves challenged on social issues and called to make decisions on who and what they agree with. Is Batman "a ruthless, monstrous vigilante, striking at the foundations of our democracy—maliciously opposed to the principles that make...[the]nation," or is he merely one of "a thousand people...fed up with terror—with stupid laws and social cowardice...only taking back what's ours"

(Miller 65)? Blackmore argues that Miller himself, and we might infer, Batman, “is both [a] symptom [of] and [an]...autocritic” of democracy, and that understanding each, “is very important to understanding popular fiction in the late ‘80s” (37). As we draw comparisons between Miller’s reality and that of his fiction, the text leaves little doubt that he believes that Batman’s ideology is superior to the flawed system which releases his enemies to the streets, and which, while focused on self-interest and



(Fig. 10)

greed, forgets the victims that populate it. The social commentary is clear. Nowhere is this more evident than in a shadowy image (e.g. see fig. 10) of Batman holding the body of a U.S. Army general, wrapped in an American flag, a smoking gun in his dead hand signifying his suicide, a result of his own criminal activities (Miller 70). The visual is poignant. America is broken. Cradling the General’s body like that of friend, we see that the death of American culture is not Batman’s agenda. Rather, he is mournful, “almost ask[ing]...why;” he only wants to protect his “children” from a similar fate such leaders seem determined to lead them towards (Miller 70). He fears that America is corrupt beyond recovery. Again, we turn to Blackmore, writing “The Dark Knight of Democracy,” and suggesting that *The Dark Knight Returns* echoes the ideas of Alexis

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, in which the latter articulates that "democracy will transmute itself into [dangerous] authoritarianism" (37).

Embodying just such leadership is the U.S. President, a clear caricature of Ronald Reagan. He is presented as incompetent, warmongering, and unconcerned with justice, so long as the status quo of power is maintained. Serving as a model for the entire American political system of the time, he speaks to Superman, whose signature "S" fades into view first as an American flag, showing him to be a tool of the establishment, complicit in the president's plan to "straighten out...Gotham City" (Miller 84). The president makes his concerns clear as he explains:

I like to think I learned everything I know about running this country on my ranch...It's all well and good...on a ranch...for the horses to be all different colors and sizes...long as they stay inside the fence...It's even ok to have a crazy bronco...but if that bronco up and kicks the fence out and gets the other horses crazy...well, it's bad for business. (Miller 84)

Business then, the text demonstrates, is the driving factor behind the political system. Similar arguments can be made for the media industry. Simply put, popular media is just that, what is popular, and therefore economically beneficial to companies and shareholders. Such an argument could be constructed on its own, but for the sake of clarity, and time, it is sufficient to say that Batman's interests are not economic in nature, once again putting him in conflict with the culture in which he operates. Fame, recognition, power, and money are not the driving forces of the hero. Revenge, justice,



and self-actualization would be far more accurate descriptors of his motivations. As such, his is brought into conflict with the system itself. His is “a spirit of local resistance against a government [and to certain degrees a culture] that is both evil and imbecilic” (Cates 835).

And, while Batman believes he is operating in such a way as to improve his world, the selfish nature of the political and social system sees such a performance as dangerously independent. Superman tells him, “these aren’t the old days, Bruce...World’s got no room for...[us]” (Miller 119). The reader learns that all superheroes in Miller’s world are retired or conspicuously absent, save Superman, who functions as weapon of the administration, and figuratively of the concept of “America.” If so, then I argue that while Superman is “America,” then the text paints Batman as distinctly “American,” a resurgence of fiercely independent ideas and behaviors that had shaped a nation that Miller seems to believe is lost in its own power and glory. This echoes Miller’s call to a more traditional masculinity.

We see this as the president addresses the nation about an armed confrontation with “Soviet forces,” similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which he says, “We sure as shootin’ aren’t running **away**...We’ve got to secure our—ahem—stand up for the cause of **freedom**...And those cute little Corto Maltese people, they **want** us there...Meanwhile, don’t you fret...We’ve got **God** on our side...or the next best thing” [emphasis original] (Miller 119). Such callous disregard to the sovereign will of an independent nation, profiteering, and warmongering show the corrupt nature of the political system, and, consequently of America. Superman’s obedience to it is precisely the close minded thinking that Batman regards as weakness.

It is precisely such “differences in [ideology] that [will bring] Superman and Batman to blows...[ideologies] a their foundation [that are] political” (Cates 833-834). This is highlighted in an imagined conversation between the two, who clearly view each other with contempt. Superman reflects:

“You were the one they used against us, Bruce. The one who played it rough. You were the one who laughed...that scary laugh of yours... We almost threw a party when you retired... Do you remember why you retired, Bruce? No—just look at you... Nothing matters to you—except your holy war... I gave them my obedience and my invisibility. They gave me a license...” (Miller 135, 139)

Superman feels justified in his actions, doing “good” when he can, but Batman views him as a sellout, an instrument of the corrupt system, a clear representation of a flawed ideology. While he was once the “embodi[ment of] the American ideal... an alien/immigrant who rises to power on American soil and wraps himself in the red white and blue patriotism of the American flag. He [has become] a shadow of his former self,” wholly ineffectual (Murphy). And, as the President’s greedy engagement leads to a Soviet Nuclear attack, Batman blames Superman’s inaction, “Clark, you **idiot**. You let them **do** it. I always knew you would” [emphasis original] (Miller 167).

In the aftermath, Batman’s superior methodology so shames the rest of America, “New York, Chicago, Metropolis—every city in America is caught in the grip of a national panic—with one exception...that’s right... Thanks to the Batman and his vigilante gang, Gotham’s streets are safe—unless you try to commit a crime” that the administration sends “the big blue schoolboy” to bring him down (Miller 186).

Spanning nine pages and dozens of images, the resulting conflict reveals the texts greatest conflict of ideals, the binary oppositions of Batman's resistance and Superman's obedience. Batman, clad in a custom built armor, pummels Superman, condemning his "always say[ing] yes—to anyone with a badge—or a flag" (Miller 190). Batman holds higher ideals. While "Superman retained his being as [a] subject of the prevailing ideology and political order, [he lost] his meaning as a hero. Batman chose the irrational impossible, rejecting the governmental/social imposition of a subject position to retain the meaning of his war against crime" (Kofoed). However, authority and culture are not what power him. Rather he is fueled by his own essential nature, his masculinity. Continuing his assault, beating Superman bloody, he demands, "It's way past time you learned—what it means—to be a man" (Miller 190). He clarifies this statement as he tells Superman:

"You sold us out, Clark. You gave them [the cultural authority] the power—that should have been ours. Just like your parents taught you to. My parents...taught me a different lesson...lying on the street—shaking in deep shock—dying for no reason at all—they showed me the world only makes sense when you force it to." (Miller 192).

Batman and Wayne are essentially one in this moment, and this statement clearly defines the text's stance on the nature of self. Batman could have been shaped by his "birth" at the death of Wayne's parents, but contrary to popular psychological theory, he believes that he is who he is not because of the factors which shaped him, but because of the power of his will and his will alone. He learns from his experience, but he defines himself. Murphy tells us that "Batman is the antithesis of Superman...He has moved

beyond ‘Gotham’s crime-ridden streets. He is now talking about shaping the world and making it make sense.’” As he pummels Superman into submission (e.g. see fig. 11), he makes one of the texts more powerful statements regarding the nature of his self-willed masculinity in comparison to Superman’s culturally obedient version of the same:

You’re beginning to get the idea Clark...This...is the end...for both of us...We could have changed the world...Now...look at us...I’ve become a political liability...and you...you’re a joke...I want you to remember Clark...in all the years to come...in your most private moments...I want you to remember...my hand...at your throat...I want you to remember...the one man who beat you (Miller 194-195)

Little more needs to be said of the text’s conclusion, of Wayne’s faked death, of his adoption of The Sons of the Batman, or his rebirth into a “Good Life” training “an [underground] army” of future Batmen (Miller 199). His defeat of the “Super—man” has established his performative identity as the Miller’s, or at least Miller’s text’s, ideal for modern masculinity. He has surpassed what the system believed was the “next best thing” to God, firmly establishing himself as a new form of myth, a legend of a superior masculinity to that which the culture has adopted, a resurgent masculinity, echoing sentiments the aged crime fighter believes lost to his culture, born of his actions as an



(Fig. 11)

avenging hero and protector of the weak (Miller 119). Kofoed makes clear what readers must take away from the text, “Batman...and [because of Batman] ancillary characters[,] have been exposed to the reality of the 1980s political discourse and emerged refined rather than redefined, by the journey of iconic deconstruction, creating a new model for the genre of the American superhero comic.”

Alan Moore, famed writer of *The Watchmen*, and an accepted authority on the cultural power of the graphic medium, writing “The Mark of the Batman,” an introduction for the 1986 publication of *The Dark Knight Returns*, reasons:

With the increase in media coverage and information technology, we see more of the world, comprehend its workings a little more clearly, and as a result, our perception of ourselves and the society surrounding us has been modified. Consequently, we begin to make different demands upon the art and culture that is meant to reflect the constantly shifting landscapes we find ourselves in. We demand new, themes, new insights, new dramatic situations. We demand new heroes.

*The Dark Knight Returns* presents us with such a hero, a myth of masculinity that while shaped by the culture of the day, is more than merely a product of it. In a society where “sexual difference...has become integral to a lucrative economic strategy in which gendered products are marketed to gendered audiences, via gendered media,” he presents a new form of self-defined gender identity that both accepts the modern empowerment of the female, as evidenced in his partner, Robin, and differentiates itself from the pop

psychology of cultural androgyny (Goodland 105). Batman's powerful masculinity and his acceptance of the empowered female becomes a new form of androgynous thinking, not a blending of genders, but rather an "ethical undividedness...the competence to overcome centuries-old binarisms and their alienating effects (Goodland 117). His performance of his own self-proclaimed masculinity is, as the text portrays it, the only sane method to confront the cultural and political problems of 1980s America, and by the virtue of emulation, Gotham City. His performative identity, and his refusal to be defined by any outside influence speaks to the text's favoring of the essential nature of self over any socially constructed selfhood. Some go so far to say that his own symbolic nature is so important to the reader that "what the hero is and does in terms of objective reality are less important than what he represents to our inner reality" (Rollin 435). Most pointedly, he is, in a world "conspicuos[ly] display[ing a] self professed male 'androgyny'" through its lack of a strong masculine mythology, something more than just a man (Goodland 107). Goodland suggests that "Gothic narratives...obsessively rehearse a male desire for completion" (104). Batman is just such a completion. The text shows that Bruce Wayne, in overcoming his past, in adopting a city, an army, an old man, and a girl, and in overcoming every contradictory nightmare of cultural or political making, has shown himself to be the very embodiment of an essential masculinity through the performance of the identity which has chosen him and which he has chosen, *The Dark Knight*.

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