“HEY BATMAN, WHAT ARE YOUR PARENTS GETTING YOU FOR CHRISTMAS?”: THE ORPHAN NARRATIVE AND NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILIES IN AMERICAN SUPERHERO PUBLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

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Many superheroes are orphaned characters. “Orphan of adventure” fiction influenced the superhero. Each stories required an origin that separated the hero from his or her family. The simple solution was to make the character an orphan. Orphan superhero stories remain popular throughout the century and were told and retold in various forms and media. As historical conditions changed, the stories were adapted to express changing ideology.

This thesis examines the orphaned superheroes, different adaptations of each character’s origin story and the integration of the hero into traditional or non-traditional family units. This thesis focuses primarily on the American superheroes Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man. These three superheroes have lasting popularity, which is evident in the continued telling of their stories, and popularity of their merchandise. This inquiry examines various stories within their context with changing definitions, demographics, experiences, and representations of the family in twentieth-century America.

The early comic book creators in the 1930s were Jewish and orphaning was a tragedy with which they were all too familiar. A tragic orphaning also had a side effect of making the character, which often was more god-like than human, seem more “down to earth.” The reality of the 1930s was that there were many war orphans which society could clearly see. In post-World War II America, readers wanted child-friendly stories, and the lonely child was downplayed in favor of creating families to which the superhero
could belong. The orphan adventure story was reinvented with the emergence of Spider-Man when he was responsible for fighting crime and responsible for his Aunt May. By the 1980s, Superman’s orphan origins had been wiped almost completely in favor of making it clear that he had a human, American, family, to which he could turn. Simultaneously greater stress was asserted on Batman’s orphan status with the complete destruction of the Batman Family. In contemporary times the audience for comic books got older and the orphan has come to stand for the struggles of that older audience, such as alienation from society. Films and comic books continue to recycle and adapt these orphan narratives seventy years later to audiences.
DEDICATION

To: My Dad, Charles Frank McWilliams

“Happy Father’s Day”
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: THE TROPE OF THE ORPHAN IN LITERATURE

When someone speaks of superhero origins rarely is there a mention of a superhero’s family that does not somehow relate to him or her having a broken home or some kind of orphan status. This thesis examines two interwoven components of the superhero orphan narrative. The origin narratives of the heroes intrinsically link them to their orphan status. First, I will examine some history to ascertain the meaning of the orphaning and then apply those meanings to each hero. Second, since most heroes take surrogate “parents,” I wish to look at what those surrogates, in turn, mean to the hero. Lastly, I will examine how this form of the non-traditional family supports the hero. The greater aim of this inquiry is to offer a textual analysis to conclude what these orphans mean to the society that consumes them. I wish to prove that each generation, each age, bend the meaning of the same origin to tell the same story for different ends. The malleable nature of superhero origins provides a venue for mythic origins.

The beginning stories in the 1930s told origin stories that were realistic because orphans on the street corner were a reality of that day. Casting the orphan in a heroic light follows a literary tradition started in the Victorian Era with novels such as those of Dickens and Twain. The 1950s wished to portray family values in a positive light. Psychoanalysts of the day blamed comic books for all manner of childhood “deviance,” parents bought in and they created external pressures, which caused the comic book industry to redefine the superhero orphans into superhero families. After the 1970s, the comic book audience got older and demanded more realistic stories; as this occurred the orphan narrative of each of the characters became further

1 A notable exception is Marvel Comic's Fantastic Four, in which a selling point of the book is that they are an adventuring family.
fleshed out and focused on the nuances and trauma of the orphaning event through deconstruction and postmodern reconstruction.

I chose Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man because of their ubiquity in popular culture and also because they have all been published, more or less constantly since their initial runs in 1938, 1939, and 1962, respectively. This inquiry primarily focuses on comic books; however, in addition to their comic book publications, these characters at one time or another has had several incarnations as television shows, cartoons, and motion pictures. They are all merchandizing powerhouses and remain so for the sale of toys, t-shirts, video games, stickers, notebooks, folders, underwear, and cups, just to name a few. Obviously, for these characters to sell as much merchandise as they do, something remains very relatable in all three characters.

The core of these characters is their origins. Something relatable within these characters remains in the origin stories. Besides the obvious fact that they are all super-heroes, one of the things all the origin stories have in common is that, in all three instances, the character is an orphan. Everyone understands one aspect of the orphaning, as discussed later in the thesis.

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2 There lingers some complication when you consider that each of these characters has appeared in a multitude of titles in addition to their self-titled comic books. For example, Superman has been the lead feature in “Action Comics” for almost all the approximately 850 issues, or 80 years, of publication. That book has run concurrently with almost 700 issues of “Superman” (sometimes titled “Adventures of Superman”), which does not include Superman’s other (sometimes) core titles “Superman: Man of Steel,” “Superman (vol.2).” This also does not include any of the monthly books in which he appeared side-by-side with other characters such as “World’s Finest” and “Superman/Batman” which feature Superman and Batman team-ups. Lastly, there are ensemble titles such as the “Justice League,” which have also had their own multitude of spin-offs, one of which always features a Superman character. It creates the effect of having at least one Superman book every week. That is just Superman; publishers have also done this, more or less, with Batman and Spider-Man.

3 Although the form, comic book, and the genre, superhero, are relatively interchangeable in today’s vernacular, it remains a fair point to note that superheroes were not the only popular genre in the comic book medium. For example, horror comic books were popular in the 1950s, and throughout the history of comics publishing. Comic books based on other media tie-ins, such as cartoon characters, also continually sell very well.
For each superhero the specific event of orphaning means something different. Superman’s orphaning took place with him as a baby when his parents sacrificed themselves to save him by launching him in a rocket off a dying planet. Batman’s orphaning takes place when the child Bruce Wayne watched robbers murder his parents and leave them to die in an alleyway. Spider-Man, Peter Parker, was orphaned as a baby, but the defining orphaning, the loss of his Uncle, took place for him as an adolescent. Interestingly, however, even though these characters underwent different circumstances, they led to the same ends, putting on a costume and exacting justice regardless of lawfulness.

To begin this examination a larger look at the concept of the orphan is needed. Orphaning has been a part of stories that exist prior to the major American superhero narratives, which are the focus of this inquiry. Stories of ancient times and the Victorian Age are clearly influential on the various superhero stories. The orphan status bursts with meaning.

For a trope that is so prevalent within superhero texts there is surprisingly little written, academically or otherwise, explicitly about orphaned superheroes. With the exception of one article on superhero orphans, “Storm of the Orphans” by Danny Fingeroth, in his book Superman on the Couch, otherwise there are only side mentions of the orphan status, usually taken as a given, to foreword other topics. In truth, fewer authors than one would expect have written on the orphan as literary device. The greatest exceptions are Orphan Texts by Laura Peters, Hana Wirth-Nester’s article “The Literary Orphan as National Hero: Huck and Pip,” and Orphan Narratives by Valerie Loichot. Peters’ and Wirth-Nester’s texts examine the literary Victorian orphans, and this thesis owes a sizeable debt to both these scholars. Loichot’s piece examines orphans in the postplantation Reconstruction Era. However, since all of these texts deals with
orphans from eras that pre-date comic book publishing, and the theoretical groundwork helped me historicize the orphan superheroes.

The definitions of orphan and family are problematic and have changed throughout the history of the words. Below is the etymology of orphan:


From the 1300s the word was intended to mean either “without a father or without both parents.” This definition prevails throughout texts that examine orphans. The definition above also suggests some overtones of servitude or slavery. This trope becomes significant for studies of the superhero when one considers a stereotypical superhero as one who serves a society without any overt reward for himself or herself. Also interestingly within the etymology, there was not a word for the places where orphans are institutionalized until 1865. There is a very good reason why that is the case.

Historically speaking, until relatively recently, society lumped orphans in with criminals and the insane as the dregs of society; although any text pertaining to prisons, hospitals or poorhouses rarely mentions orphans explicitly, in any text pertaining to prisons, hospitals or poorhouses the problem of orphans remains implicit. One such text is Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon Papers, written in 1787. He referred to several uses of his panopticon, which included schools, as well as “work-houses” and many other uses for his circular “inspection house” or prison (Bentham). Foucault examined several of these types of institutions in both
Discipline and Punish and Madness and Civilization. Both Foucault and Bentham agree the panopticon’s intended purpose was to modify behavior. Foucault states that there was a decree within the Hôpital that anyone under twenty-five was to work “for as long as their strengths and situations will permit” (Foucault [Madness] 60). Workhouses for children and the poor were set up to fight idleness and create ethical consciousness. The idea is that work would be its own reward for these people (Foucault [Madness] pp. 52-57). It is not surprising that people treated children, and particularly orphans, this way because “childhood” as a category was not established until the mid-18th and 19th century. Mintz notes, “Childhood, previously conceived of as a period of submission to authority, was increasingly viewed as a period of growth, development and preparation for adulthood” (Mintz 47). Until that time children were treated like “little adults” and it was a parent’s responsibility to develop a child morally, which included a work ethic. Orphans were abhorrent in this respect, and ethics that parents would have instilled were assumed to be absent.

The orphans of Victorian stories become heroes by inverting the idea of the orphan as a drag on society, as a typical Victorian would expect. Peters says of family values in the Victorian era, “[family values were] in crisis: it was at least an unsustainable ideal. In order to reaffirm itself the family needed a scapegoat. It found one in the orphan figure” (Peters 1). It seemed that blaming the orphan for any number of issues in society created that easy scapegoat; they are helpless children, after all. It probably also seemed like a valid threat to children for parents, point at an orphan and say, “behave little one, or you’ll end up like that child.” The threat of ending up poor and living on the street could scare the child into line.

A painting from by Sir Thomas Kennington shows the orphan’s emotions quite well. He painted the picture titled “Orphans” which depicted a couple of children in 1885; their dress, the
house and meager meal suggest that there is nothing to envy about their situation (See Figure A). However, the story does not end with unhappiness; the older looking child does have a coy smile on his face, while the smaller one was depicted as not as happy and staring away. Perhaps he dreamed of a better life.

Since society frowned upon the orphan, authors could use the orphan as the protagonist in their stories. Within this pattern of stories, the orphans became somewhat redeemed. Additionally, the protagonist, as an orphan, is an outsider to society and remains allowed to act in particular ways that might not be in accord with that society’s ideal. This tension renders the orphan as a figure of transgression. Consider Huck’s relationship with Jim and the controversy it caused for so many years. The orphan of literature resists hegemony.

Peters states that the family is the locus of social structure and “site of morality” (Peters 3). Orphans that remain absent from that site of morality are free to create their own morality. Hana Wirth-Nester, in her article “The Literary Orphan as National Hero: Huck and Pip,” says, “Pip and Huck are born into a tradition of literary orphans who, by virtue of not being limited by the rules and constraints of parents and kin, are free to seek spiritual surrogate parents and moral codes” (Wirth-Nester 260). Compare this idea of the orphan to the inner-workings of the predecessor to the superhero. Peter Coogan states of the superhero genre’s precursors, “the meaning of [a] superman in the pulps is clear: a physically and mentally superior individual who acts according to his own will without regard for the legal structures that represent the morality of society” (Coogan 162-163). When writing a serialized story that needs to make sense over several issues and in which the main character questions the moral fiber of society, logically the writers would need to create an outsider status for such a character. In the case of Superman, for example, he is both an alien and an orphan.
Coogan says, “The superhero is a logical outgrowth of the science-fiction superman because the narrative conventions of serialized literature demand a hero-type that can be endlessly employed against symbolic representations of social ‘others’” (Coogan 145-146). It seems that with superhero stories it is very easy for the reader to allow an “outsider” to fight “the other” and not get his or her own hands dirty. For instance, in the early comic books many superheroes fought the Nazis.

The orphan is an interesting literary character because inherent to the character is a contradiction. That identity results in two forms: an enabling identity and a disabling identity. Some of these identity traits are internal to the character and some are external, from society. Some of the enabling that occurs includes freedom, independence; also without a family, a character gains a greater appreciation of friendships. However, orphans are much more disabled. They are left lacking; they suffer a lack of resources, history, family, and community. They can also have feelings of abandonment and constantly feel the need to prove worthiness.

The orphan does not have a natural family and there are certain privileges that come with having a family. As Laura Peters states, “it came to represent – legitimacy, race and national belonging” (Peters 1). Because of the importance of family ties, orphan is unable to attach to his or her past and, as a result, often his or her future. An orphan with a “happy ending” can embrace the lack of past and use it to his or her advantage. “The loner, cut loose from family responsibilities, is an inherent part of the romance of America, the myth of eternal fresh starts” (Wirth-Nester 260).

In conceiving of the American dream, the idea that a person can become a success simply of his or her own volition, there remains a powerful draw in the “clean slate,” the idea that past mistakes can simply be erased in favor of starting over. Consequently, in relation to the
American ideal, the orphan becomes self-made; all community connections and resources are a result of the actions of the orphan themselves. The orphan can partake in society and play by its rules but can never truly be a part of that society. The orphan character is one that comes inside but remains eternally outside. Wirth-Nester writes, “Orphanhood in American literature is a clean slate, self reliance, and often veers dangerously close to real loneliness” (Wirth-Nester 261). An orphan is truly alone in the world. It is necessary he or she make his or her own way. This is just as true for real-life orphans as it is for fictional orphans Huck Finn or David Copperfield, and as it is for comic book character-orphans Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man.

In many ways, an orphan identity is like other orientations in that unless otherwise stated society assumes the hegemonic norm. In the case of sexual orientation, it is heteronormativity society assumes; in racial orientation, society assumes whiteness. Much the same is true for family life; the nuclear family remains the hegemonic norm and society assumes it unless otherwise stated. As a result, the orphan creates an identity for a character. In storytelling assumed familial connotations create a dynamic that forces the writer to make a character’s family connections explicit. For orphans that lack of family creates an orphan trope, or formula.

After its establishment storytellers use the orphan trope more often; by the time comic books use them they draw and develop on a formula that already existed. Cawelti states that “the world of formula can be described as an archetypal story pattern in the images, symbols, themes, and myths of a popular culture” (Cawelti 16). Formula becomes a short hand for audience expectations of text. The hero’s journey is an excellent example of formula in which the audience has an expectation of, for example, reluctance on the hero’s part, and some advisor that is full of wisdom. “Audiences find satisfaction and a basic emotional security in a familiar form; in addition, the audience’s past experience with a formula gives it a sense of what to expect in
new individual examples” (Cawelti 9). In other words, authors craft every story with this pattern in mind to meet expectations and reference all the stories before it in an attempt to find resonance with the audience. If an author constructs a story which strays too far, it risks the chance of those who consume the text not understanding it.

Cawelti states that an important way to look at the process is “though a dialectic of cultural and artistic interests” (Cawelti 30). In other words, there must to be some tension between the formula and novelty on the part of the artist. The story has to be enough like something else that it relates but does not bore the reader so much that the audience loses interest. In the case of comic superheroes, adventure stories influenced the formula. Comic books took the formula from the pulps, and serial adventure stories before that, but the novelty of comics comes in the addition of pictures becoming the fuel of these stories.

The story of the orphan during the Golden Age follows up on the adventure story formula established by the Victorians. Literarily, there are three different ways that authors handle parents of orphans. Either the text does not address or does not care about parents, such as in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*; characters within the text know the parents, such as in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*; or the characters do not know the parents, such as in Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. If that is the case, the orphan is a near-stranger. It would be impractical to compare some of these character’s stories to those of comic book characters; however, the way the characters are orphaned is similar. Comic books offer an example of each of these. A text where the orphan generally does not know his parents would be Superman, the comic where the orphan knew his parents is Batman, and the comic that does not acknowledge the parents is Spider-Man, whose parents aren’t even mentioned for many issues into the series.
Comics do not simply follow up on Victorian literary tropes; they create new ones. I have chosen to divide this thesis by various periods as a matter to tell what each division tells us textually. Briefly, the Golden Age is commonly defined by those who collect comic books as running from *Action Comics* #1 (1938), the first appearance of Superman, until the mid-1950s.  

The definition of the “ages” is a problematic and fuzzy one among collectors and scholars. According to Coogan’s genre theory, the Golden Age corresponds to the primitive period that firmly establishes the rules of a genre, in this case comic books (Coogan 194). The Silver Age, which is a revisionist age, ran from the reintroduction of the Flash in *Showcase* #4 (Oct 1956) through the mid-1970s. Then another revision occurs, called the “Bronze Age,” with the introduction of antiheroes and superheroes dealing with real life problems. One example of the real world problems occurs in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #85 (October 1971) in which Green Arrow finds his ward, Speedy, addicted to drugs (Coogan 193-210). After this, the ages are very loosely defined; some people refer to the 1980s and 1990s as the “Age of Chromium,” because of the foil used in gimmicky covers. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this as the “contemporary era.” Scholars and collectors attempt to draw another line at about the year 2000 and argue that we have since entered another age separate from the 1980s. I remain skeptical since the gimmicks of the 1990s remain as well as many of the same audience members from that time, myself included.

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4 Where the different ages of comics begin is usually less contested than where they end.  

5 Coogan draws his line at the publication of the *Sentry* #1 as entering a “Renaissance Age” (Coogan 194).  

6 If I were to draw a line at a major shift in the industry, it would be with the formal shift rather than a textual one, at the publication of “Dark Knight Returns” (1986) as a collection. I argue this mainly because this returns to the roots of comic books as a medium for reprinting stories. Some
Since the comic book characters are representations, in analyzing primary and secondary texts the focus on what they represent becomes clearer. The Golden Age orphan comic book characters acted as representatives of their Jewish creators. Communities orphaned the Jews when the individuals emigrated to a new land. Due to comic books taking a large hit in their reputation for being too violent and sexual, during the Silver Age / Post-War Era the orphan narrative took a backseat to clearly hegemonic and patriarchal values. Superman and Batman became “fathers” of a grand Superman Family and Batman Family, respectively. Marvel Comics then published Spider-Man, which in many ways returned to the classic orphan formula mixed with the necessity of a secret identity to keep from his Aunt May. Lastly, the Contemporary Age of comics revised comics’ characters in the handling of the origin stories. The creators of this time lived their lives with these stories as solidified American mythology and that greatly affected the way they told the stories. They used the orphan narratives as a springboard to tell stories of alienation in society.

The fact that these orphan characters, as the dregs of society, became protagonists was a part of the charm for the Victorian. However, in the romance of that, do not forget that the literary social concerns for these authors related to a real social problem. When I began this inquiry, I theorized that creators used orphans in the stories of Batman and Superman because orphans were a greater reality of the period. War orphans were children who had to be self-sufficient due to high adult mortality rates and losing their parents during the First and Second World Wars. I hypothesized that the orphan origins reflected what was present in the society.

may argue that “Dark Knight Returns” also creates a textual shift from the hero as protagonist to an antihero protagonist. This is a problem because some could also draw that line with the first appearance of The Punisher in Amazing Spider-Man #129 (1974). The collected edition has truly changed the way retailers market comic books, such as coining them with a new term “graphic novels.”
This theory has a problem: neither of the two orphan comic characters that survive continually from this period, Superman and Batman, is strictly a “war orphan.” However, orphans were a reality in the post-war late depression era because of high adult mortality rates, so an orphan character might not have been as striking a stretch of reality. The origins of the characters are simply too complicated to explain away.

These character’s origin stories begin simply and typically gain complexity over time. In the case of comics, the canon of each character’s origin “snowballs.” In particular the three dealt with in this thesis, Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man, have been fleshed out with much detail because they have been published consistently since their inceptions. As Umberto Eco states, the reason is that this allows an agreement between the reader and the writer of the text,

Superman’s scriptwriters have devised a solution which is much shrewder… the stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all – where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what has been said. (Eco 153)

As Eco points out, with each retelling of the origin several core things remain intact while details change, creating a mythic origin. I will refer to this phenomenon as a “snowball origin.” I refer to it as snowballing because it works like a snowball rolling down a hill. Rarely creators make the choice to change resonant details, typically not removed but often added. For instance, the original Superman origin from 1938 was five panels long; but by the book Superman: Birthright, the most recent retelling of Superman’s origin story, from 2005, that origin story had ballooned to 314 pages. Also, when speaking of the origin story, Denny O’Neil says, “In the old days, we would have repeated it every three years because the assumption was that the readership had turned over every three years” (Pearson and Uricchio 24). In other words, in the old days, children would outgrow comic books; a new audience would cycle in and need the
origin explained to them. Creative teams on the comic were also on that same sort of cycle. This changeover would allow the creators to retell the origin story, as they remember it, embellishing and coloring in details. The creator would rediscover the character while the readers discover them for the first time, allowing the new origin details to stick and outmoded ones to fall by the wayside.

However, there is a textual element to the origin stories as well. Wirth-Nester says, “In a society of shifting social classes, the roving orphan, or picaro could create a past that suited his aspirations rather than his blood ties” (Wirth-Nester 260). Briefly, to textually deconstruct the constantly changing origins of superheroes, the theory has stated that for the reader the escape is in the form of enjoyment of the eternal restart, to be free of past mistakes and simply rewrite them. This works for the character because perhaps as time goes on the origins are rewritten not for the sake of adding to their commercial profitability, as Eco says. However, the origin stories have more added details as the characters encounter more trauma, integrating more details into their memories. This relates to what Freud called the adjusting of detail in memories, or “screen memories.” “Important facts are not retained; instead, their psychic significance is displaced onto closely associated but less important details. Displacement is indeed the main mechanism here” (Screen Memory). This is not an exact match, because, of course, the subject remembers the important fact, the loneliness of childhood, but over time certain details become particularly important.

In concert with readers allowing themselves to be “hazy,” creators adding details, and characters encountering those details, writers create mythical origins for comic book characters, including Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man. To this end, the origin story is the most important part of the character, perhaps more important than “world-shattering” adventures of the heroes.
When Denny O’Neil was asked why there was an “obsessive return” to Batman’s origin story he replied, “The origin is the engine that drives Batman… It includes everything you need to know about the character. Why he does what he does and why he is who he is…” (Quoted in Pearson and Uricchio 24). Orphan status remains the driving engine of the big three characters, Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man.

Umberto Eco also says that within the popular imagination, “a hero’s virtue is humanized” (Eco 146). Orphaning is one of the keys to humanizing superheroes. Kal-El is the orphan, but Clark Kent is the adoptive name. The reader does not typically think of Superman as humanized unless he takes on the role of Clark Kent. However, Coogan conjectures that Superman’s origin story affected him deeply.

Clark Kent, therefore is an outward expression of Superman’s inner self. Superman sees himself as weak and inadequate because of survivor guilt. He feels anger at having been abandoned by the Kryptonians. At the moment of the planet’s death, he was not super, he was impotent; a spineless Clark Kent fleeing the destruction of his home and people instead of a powerful, potent Superman. (Coogan 101)

By this admission, Superman constantly lives in such a way as to set himself apart from society because he feels inadequate. Even though we see him as more than human, he sees himself as not able to be human because of guilt. Coogan writes: “The Clark persona is the only place that Kal-El can express vulnerability. The Superman persona is the embodiment of ‘strength, control, omnipotence, and perfection while Clark Kent personifies weakness, cowardice, helplessness, and inadequacy’” (Coogan 101). This places Superman in line with the other two heroes, Batman and Spider-Man, as having guilt that they could not help their murdered parents. Batman’s quest is a constant attempt to stop crimes like the one committed against him, and Spider-Man constantly regrets not stopping Uncle Ben’s robber.
Peter Coogan writes that heroes, “particularly in the classical mythology, serve as intermediaries between gods and humans, acting and passing between the two worlds” (Coogan 116). Superheroes occupy a liminal status between man and god, somewhat like angels, or priests. To that end, they remain neither man nor god. This is truly a usurping of the mythological hero to one that is inadequate and vulnerable. The “super” of superhero would suggest that these creations are above mythological heroes in some way.

To put a finer point on this, Lawrence Watt-Evans in his piece “Previous Issues” writes about the humanization of Superman. He deconstructs all the power that Superman has to exert and then talks about the insecurity of the character. “The guy has got to be lonely and under constant stress. So is it so surprising that he carries a security blanket? No, not carries – wears. In fact, he flaunts it, though no one recognizes it for what it is” (Watt-Evans [2006] 4). Of course, he is referring to Superman’s cape, his childhood blanket, one of the only remnants of Krypton. Many children, myself included, have vivid memories from childhood of wrapping a towel or blanket around their necks and jumping from sofas pretending to be Superman. Imitation proves, at the very least, that within these characters some resonance beckons children who wish to be like the hero. The author, Watt-Evans, then reminds us that there are other bits of Superman’s home wandering around, Kryptonite, but they are trying to kill him. The blanket becomes a symbol of the love of his two mothers, the one that bore him and the one that raised him (Watt-Evans [2006] 7).

In the previous statement, the author also reminds us that for whole tracts of the character’s history Superman and Spider-Man were double-orphans. For Superman there was no Ma and Pa Kent in the Golden Age and, tragically, the event that created Spider-Man was the death of his “adoptive father” Uncle Ben. Both of these heroes lost their birth parents prior to the
story, which the writers tell the readers. Then the heroes have a second tragedy, in which the reader experiences with the protagonist. The connection, for the reader, to the protagonist-hero occurs in the origin story, the orphaning process. The empathy for the character prior to the orphaning trauma carries over into the trauma itself when the reader really feels the event and for the character. The reader gains an interest in the well-being of the character and buys into the motives of the character’s actions. In other words, we, as readers of Batman, buy into Bruce Wayne’s mission as the vigilante Batman because of the tragedy of his childhood; readers empathize with the child Bruce Wayne because anyone could lose his or her parents or be the victim of a tragic crime, and the context of Batman’s mission makes the story make sense.

Another example of dialectical tension between novelty and formula can be shown in how different parts of the world use the formula. For example, Wirth-Nester contrasts American and English literary orphans to say “English literature has no shortage of orphans, they are usually on a quest to find a place for themselves in society rather than arranging for a romantic exit” (Wirth-Nester 261). This illustrates a strong connection between stories told in societies and the feelings of that society. The English wish for their orphan characters to assimilate into society, while for the American authors the wish is for them to remain individual, outsiders that romantically exits. This is also a theme that carries over into the comic book superheroes when they are clearly not assimilating into society. In fact, the characters are quite contrary to society, if a society is defined by its laws. Society utterly fails these characters and the characters fail society. None of the superheroes trusts society and all take the law into their own hands, and none are police or become police. Since police, lawyers, and lawfulness are the societal institutions set in place to handle crimes, our heroes are not inside society. Vigilantism in this particular context I will get into in later chapters.
Cawelti writes, “Popular story patterns are embodiments of archetypal story forms in terms of specific cultural materials” (Cawelti 6). Cawelti argues that specific cultures bend the archetype stories to make sense out of their own society.

If we can isolate those patterns of symbol and theme that appear in a number of different formulas popular in a certain period, we will be on firmer ground in making a cultural interpretation, since those patterns characteristic of a number of different formulas presumably reflect the basic concerns and valuations that influence the way people of a particular period prefer to fantasize. (Cawelti 33)

In other words, Cawelti is saying that the cultural artifacts that any particular society creates reflect the desires and anxieties of that society. The Golden Age hero fights for the common man and reflects anxieties of crime ridden streets and corrupt bosses, things that common man feared. The Silver Age heroes use the archetypical, nuclear family as a basis to build their heroic stories. The Modern Age shows Superman as a fighter of “evil” corporations, and Batman back as a fighter in the streets, harkening back to the roots of these characters and a return to anxiety that our society feels.

The superheroes, Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man, all resound with readers as evidenced by their merchandising. As reflections of the societies that created them, superhero stories tell as much about the context of their creation as about the heroes themselves. The creators handled the various orphans in each of these superhero contexts in a particular manner as well to tell their stories. The trope of the superhero orphan follows a logical path from previous storytelling institutions, particularly of the Victorian era, with characters like Huckleberry Finn and Jane Eyre, by way of pulp magazines as “orphans of adventure.” The fictional orphan was an inversion for a society which believed that orphans were irredeemable and become little more than criminals. The meaning of that orphan narrative changed at same time the superheroes continued their publication and each of the characters carried particular
meanings nested in their origin stories. The heroes do what they do because they are orphans and since the heroes are a reflection of us there remains something that the reader understands about the orphan. In the Golden Age the hero texts tells stories of the authors as Jews orphaned from their homeland. In the Silver Age the hero texts tells stories of rebuilding families after orphaning. In the Contemporary Age the hero texts tells stories which require freedom from his family to come back from alienation.
CHAPTER 2 – COMIC BOOK GOLDEN AGE CHARACTERIZATIONS:
WWII ERA (1930S-1950S)

"There were Jews in this medium because it was a crap medium.” ~ Will Eisner (Fingeroth 28)

Comics, as defined by Scott McCloud, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic experience in the reader” (McCloud 9). Many people forget that comic books existed before Superman. However, few superhero comics predated him, and certainly, even to this day, few rival the popularity of Superman. For the most part comic books published before then were “funnies” or comical in nature and reprints of newspaper strips in bound form. This chapter follows the historical developments of comic books in tandem with Jewish history-- because most comic creators were Jewish, the development of the idea of orphans in the text, and ideas of families external to the text.

The literature on comic books of the Golden Age and superheroes for the Golden Age is very much a feast or famine. The feast of secondary literature is for popular characters, particularly those which have reprints of their comics readily available. Of course, many scholars have written about Superman and Batman, about whom I will also write, so the challenge is to sift through it all. I have chosen to focus on Peter Coogan’s Superhero: the Secret Origin of the Genre, Bradford Wright’s Comic Book Nation, and Danny Fingeroth’s Disguised as Clark Kent, among several others. The famine comes with the lesser-known heroes for whom even reprints are notoriously difficult or expensive to obtain. Comics publishers remain gun-shy when reprinting comic books from this era for several reasons, including the fact that it is difficult and expensive to reconstruct deteriorating pages, some lack of interest (i.e. not new and flashy as
comics readers are trained to consume), clearly racist content that can be taken out of context, but lastly copyright concerns. Much of the early days of the comics industry was a fast and loose game of meeting deadlines and moving product.

As a result, this inquiry is primarily limited to the reprints available because the original comic books, from this era are very expensive due to their scarcity. Comic book publishers have been more eager in the last five years or so to publish reprints of some of the older materials; even so, what is available at any particular time is still very hit-and-miss. During the Golden and Silver Ages, publishers printed the comics on newsprint, which was cheap and degrades over time.  

Comic Books as a genre were born of the literature and pulp magazines of the 1920s and early 1930s. Publishers never could have imagined that some seventy years later we would still be reading the ongoing adventures of the hastily created heroes and their offspring. This is probably the reason that the creators of Superman sold their share in the character for $130 (Wright 7-8). They never could have foreseen that the character they created would become a lasting icon born in the assembly line, which many considered junk.

Ultimately, the main reason for early comics being scarce is that they started out a medium that was born as junk. As an example, in the WWII era the government encouraged people to recycle junk and comics were the first to go. Writing in 1965, comics’ creator Jules Feifer describes comic books as “junk.” He says, “To accuse them of being what they are is to make no accusation at all: there is no such thing as uncorrupt junk or moral junk or educational junk – though attempts at the latter have, from time to time, been foisted upon us” (Feifer 72).

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Editorial message: Destruction of primary sources is going on every day as the original sources degrade. Much like what many wish to do with the films of this era, there should be archives made of these materials for posterity.
He says further, “Junk is there to entertain on the basest, most compromised of levels. It finds the lowest fantastmal [sic] common denominator and proceeds from there… readers will say, ‘I know it’s junk but I like it’” (Feifer 72-73). Although this is clearly a reply to Fredric Wertham’s anti-comics crusade of the 1950s, discussed in a later chapter of this thesis, there is a ring of truth to what he says about the origin of the genre.

Feifer says that “the success of the best junk lies in its ability to come close, but not too close; to titillate without touching us. To arouse without giving satisfaction. Junk is a tease” (Feifer 73). Roz Kaveney says, “Like pornography, superhero comics always teased, they always offered more than they could deliver, on splash covers where grinning villains played our heroes and heroines as figures on a giant chessboard, or spun them on a wheel of death” (Kaveney 2). Interestingly, Cawelti writes about pornography as pure formula, since all the structures are built with one purpose and therefore can be an extremely effective form of escape (Cawelti 14).

Comic books are an ultimate escape literature. Kaveney further argues, “And yet to deliver fully on that promise would always have been to make that jeopardy more real than the commercial medium could bear. Comics taught me that disappointed expectation of greatness that is part of the aesthetic experience: things are this but somehow, in one’s mind, they might be better yet” (Kaveney 2). The resolution within the books is never as good as promised by the cover because the characters were rarely in real peril. Feifer says that the covers were drawn by good men and that the insides were drawn by bad men; often the only way you could tell the same character was by the costumes (Feifer 31). The marketing reason for this is that since people would judge the books by the cover, have a great looking picture on the front and then pay anyone that could pick up a pencil to draw the pages inside the book. Cawelti notes that after viewing pornography, the excitement and the satisfaction fades back into the routine and ennui. He states that with
pornography, like detective literature, people are always looking for the next thing, before boredom sets in. I think this is comparable to comics as well.

Besides being junk, comic books are a business, a commercial medium. As such, they are created on, essentially, an assembly line with piecework, and workers are not paid hourly but by the output. Writers do some work, artists do some work, and sometimes there is an inker, sometimes a letterer, sometimes a colorist. Feifer states that during the Golden Age “Artists sat lumped in crowded rooms, knocking it out for the page rate. Penciling, inking, lettering in the balloons for $10 a page, sometimes less…” (Feifer 64). Although rates have gone up, this process created in the Golden Age largely remains today. One publisher is quoted as saying, “don’t give me Rembrandt, give me production” (Wright 22). Under these conditions, artists and writers worked for an editor that would never be around long enough to learn their names, and worked for companies that were bought and sold just as often. In that environment, it is remarkable that any stability in quality remained at all.

This is important to this thesis because the origin stories examined are radically inconsistent, in part because of the nature of the medium. The stories told were never intended to be consistent because publication of any given hero could be quietly ceased the next month and readers would forget about him as quickly as he came. Writers and artists gave the audience what was exciting for them at the time they were working.

The comic book as we know it started out as the child of reprints of newspaper “funnies.” In addition, according to Bradford Wright, the modern comic book owes much of its form to pulp magazines.
Titles like *The Shadow*, *Captain Satan*, *Amazing Stories* and *Startling Tales* sometimes went to considerable lengths in their appeal to the sense of the lurid, sadistic, and grotesque. Existing alongside the well-documented 1930s market for best-selling novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Gone with the Wind* was a less-heralded audience for pulp magazines like “Volunteer Corpse Brigade,” “Cult of the Living Caracas” and “New Girls for Satan’s Blood Ballet.” The proliferation of such bizarre literature during the interwar years indicates that there existed a lucrative, and mostly young, market with tastes well outside the mainstream (Wright 2).

To stress the important influence that the pulps had on comic books, Coogan states, “Doc Savage and the Shadow led respectively to Superman and Batman” (Coogan 127). It was in this fertile landscape that the superheroes were created. In 1935 National Allied Publications began to publish original content in comic form, and later published a series titled *Detective Comics* that in issue #27 featured Batman.

The comparison in the previous quotes is of comic books and pornography as both artifacts of “junk culture.” It is important to note, however, that just because something is “junk culture” does not mean that is not useful for study. To further that point, Simon During says in his introduction to the second edition of *The Cultural Studies Reader*, “[Student’s] everyday-life culture is increasingly that of popular culture or niches within it – this is their starting point for exploring the past” (During 26). For that reason, popular culture is a useful springboard for understanding history. During does not make the distinction between “literature as culture” and mass culture artifacts, or popular culture, because the distinction between high-culture and low-culture is also a false distinction. In his essay “The Joke(r) is On Us” Barry W. Sarchett states, “What Jan Chon has called the ‘weary’ distinctions between highbrow and low, elite and popular, authentic art and mass culture can no longer be self-evidently maintained under the pressure of cultural mutations... and theatrical interventions” (Sarchett 127). Comic books for much of their history have not only been low culture, but lower than low: junk. For that reason,
studying comics is useful because there is no pretence of keeping up appearances; in a way comic books remain more authentic, more true to history and useful for studying culture because they have more space to not attempt to be literature, in facade.

Historically in the Golden Age of comics, America was dealing with several crises and growing pains, including the Great Depression, World War II, the atomic bomb, and the beginning of the baby boom. The main orphan narratives of the Golden Age are Superman, Batman and Robin. Each of these three characters was orphaned at a young age and took it upon himself to wear a costume to avenge injustice. This was what the hero wanted to do, right the ills of society against the villain, the perpetrator of the injustice.

Also historically, orphans were a social reality of this time. Mintz states, “Family disintegration was dramatically evident in the fact that the number of children placed in custodial institutions rose 50% during the first two years of the Great Depression and that more than 200,000 vagrant children wandered the country” (Mintz 136). Clearly there was a social reality that existed in many neighborhoods / street corners and the only thing that divided “good children” from “those children” was a lucky break or two, or perhaps a choice or two.

Hoppenstand says: “The Great Depression, its causes and effects, were not clearly understood by Americans who lived through it. Rather than seeing the Depression as a social problem, it was viewed as a personal problem. The Depression was not perceived as the result of a failed capitalistic system but as individual failure” (Hoppenstand 144). That is to say that choices made by individuals created consequences for the whole of society. Kaveney states that people without power could be regarded as superheroes before Superman. Prior to Siegel and Shuster’s invention of Superman, the masked avenger’s mission defined the hero as much as his
powers. “Many of the opponents of the superhero are as powerful as the hero, or more so, but they lack the moral compass or have specifically chosen evil” (Kaveney 4). It is very telling of the time that the only thing that separated hero from villain was their moral choices. Coogan states that Depression era media was preoccupied with destructive individualism, which brought about the ills of the Great Depression. “Superman Comics deal with this fear by incorporating Superman into the establishment. Once the character was purged of his reformist tendencies and turned toward battling criminals rather that corrupt politicians and capitalists, evil was transformed from a social problem to a personal one” (Coogan 146).

At the beginning of the Golden Age, Superman fights errant bosses and corruption. However, as copies started to turn over more quickly, and money was made, the need to be resistant waned. “Superman and Batman both gain official recognition and work in concert with the authorities, and in both series the class ‘other’ is distanced from the mainstream and its alternative social vision is firmly rejected” (Coogan 188). The superhero certainly marked himself as different by wearing special clothing and not living like the rest of us. In order for Superman to be critical of society, he must be an outsider. He must hover over us with his bright cape and look at humanity form the outside, from on top of his mountain, inside his fortress. Furthermore, the orphan is a perpetual outsider as well. It is unclear if the creators of Superman were using the orphan literary formula consciously or not. According to John Cawelti, “a formulaic pattern will be in existence for a considerable period of time before it is conceived of by its creators and audience as a genre” (Cawelti 8).

As the Golden Age wore on and the heroes became more popular and America came closer the brink of World War II, the comic book superheroes took on a decidedly more patriotic
and hegemonic tone. “Superman’s struggle against evil ‘becomes confined to the defense of private property and the extermination of criminals rather than a struggle against social injustice and an attempt to aid the helpless and oppressed’” (Coogan 146-147). This fight for the helpless and oppressed was the same rhetoric that America heard to join the cause of World War II. “Hourman [another Golden Age hero] frees the people from the boss’s tyranny, much as America itself was about to liberate Europeans from Nazi tyranny” (Wright 25). Imagine the power of superheroes and politicians telling the public that liberation was within their grasp. Coogan states that the power of the superhero is the power of America, to exert power and solve the world’s problems effortlessly, without harm to oneself (Coogan 231).

During the war years, American soldiers comprised a great deal of the readership of comic books. “Newsweek attributed the robust sales to ‘the well-filled pockets of the nation’s school children’ and ‘the war-developed market of American service men.’ … one out of every four magazines shipped overseas was a comic book” (Wright 31). With the war a reality the need for escape became greater. Pragmatically a comic is very tradable and makes less noise than many other entertainments. “Publishers also sought to boost their image by linking their products to patriotism” (Wright 24). Many heroes encouraged children to recycle and buy war bonds. This represented the comic industry’s full support of the power. However, it was also a way that many Jews could support their overseas brothers and sisters. Undoubtedly, as new immigrant comic creators kept in touch with their families back in the former old countries and heard tales of struggles in prewar and war-time Europe. The Jewish condition might not have been easily heard, politically. However, the creators of popular culture could send a message though the cultural texts. Wright, more to the point, states, “Comic books had actually launched their own propaganda effort long before the federal government. Many of the young artists were Jewish
and liberal. Morally repelled by the Nazis, they expressed their politics in their work” (Wright 35). Clearly this media allowed an oppressed voice to speak clearly, particularly during the war effort.

Most theorists would stop short of saying that the creators were being subversive. However, there was certainly pro-Allied involvement within the pages of comic books such as Captain America. Just as Superman could hover over, tell society its problems, and correct action from the outside, Jewish creators stood outside as well. “Jews of that era, as immigrant outsiders or their children, could reflect a culture’s values, concerns, and obsessions back at it in ways the dominant culture would find enjoyable, informative, inspiring, and entertaining” (Fingeroth 19). In reflecting the dominant culture of the 1930s, American comic’s creators saw people that needed help from somewhere, from someone else, a struggle they knew all too well.

Additionally, more specifically than the time-period, the comic book medium itself also came to reflect Jewish conditions in the pre-war era and Jewish heritage in many ways. The truth of the matter is that since comics were a “junk media,” it allowed those of Jewish descent to easily get jobs. Fingeroth quotes from early comics’ creator Will Eisner, “There were Jews in this medium because it was a crap medium. And in a marketplace that still had racial overtimes, it was an easy medium to get into…” (Fingeroth 28). The comics allowed many of its early creators to get jobs when immigrants were often seen as a problem in America, and not granted jobs as easily. Eisner continues, “So… You had a medium that was regarded as trash, that nobody really wanted to go into… and a group of people who… brought with them their 2000 year history of storytelling…” (Fingeroth 28). The assembly line construction and constant deadlines were taxing. However, as a creative resource Jewish comic writers took stories from
their own heritage to create these heroes. Several of these stories culminated in the heroes of the Golden Age. One such hero that benefited from these stories was Superman.

Superman in the Golden Age.

Superman first appeared in June 1938 in *Action Comics* issue #1. The story opens with a simple six-panel origin story.

1. Panel one: (depicts a rocket takes off from a cityscape) Caption: As a distant planet was destroyed by old age, a scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space-ship, launching it toward earth!
2. Panel two: (depicts mostly text small ship at the bottom) Caption: When the vehicle landed on earth a passing motorist, discovering the sleeping babe within, turned the child over to an orphanage.
3. Panel three: (depicts a baby holding up a chair with two shocked onlookers) Caption: Attendants, unaware the child’s physical structure was millions of years advanced of their own, were astounded by his feats of strength.
4. Panel four: (depicts three sub-panel each with a man in a suit: one jumping over buildings, one lifting a girder at a construction site, and one running next to a train) Captions: When maturity was reached he discovered he could easily: leap 1/8 th of a mile; hurl a 20 story building… raise tremendous weights…. Run faster than an express train… and that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!
5. Panel five: (depicts: all text) Caption: Early Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind * and so he created…
6. Panel six: (depicts: Superman standing over text) Caption: SUPERMAN! Champion of the oppressed the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!

(see Figure B)

This origin gave birth to the entire superhero genre. Superman is largely regarded as the first major superhero. The origins of this hero are well known even to those who do not read comic books. It has been repeated over and over again in film and cartoons. The essential elements are: parents who load their child into a spacecraft away from the dying plant Krypton, a nice couple-the Kents- find him, raise him, he moves to Metropolis and fights for “truth, justice and the American way.” This origin is fairly far removed from the origin of Superman that is commonly
known. Eco would suggest that the origin that we are dealing with is the results of a mythic origin.

The origin story echoes the origins of its creators. Superman becomes a very powerful symbol in the historical perspective and means a lot to Jewish nationalism, which can be represented in the orphan status. The symbolism is thick; creators tell of Jewish people who are without a homeland, and the “superman” is a powerful symbol with great Moses-like overtones. Superman’s homeland is destroyed and he is sent down a symbolic river, through space, to a new home.

Moses is one of the earliest tales of orphaning in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). In the Moses tale, his mother sets him adrift on the Nile River in a basket. An Egyptian princess finds the orphan and raises him for her own. As a result, Moses is afforded some aspects of royalty. Remember, the disabling identity of the orphan in literature comes from lack of resources, lack of community connections, and feelings of abandonment. Would Moses have been effective were he not the stepbrother of Pharaoh? Peters notes that “the situation for the poor orphan was different from that of its counterpart in the bourgeoisie” (Peters 7). The poor forlorn orphan has to fight for everything; consequently, he or she learns to constantly break the rules and ultimately becomes a spitfire. The bourgeois orphan never grew up with real parents and never learned that there were rules at all. Superman becomes a middle class orphan, who grew up modestly with Ma and Pa Kent. As Anders says, “Clark Kent was raised in the heart of Middle America, on a farm in Kansas… and given Jeffersonian values” (Anders 71). He posits that Smallville will be the last place on earth that would have drug or gang problems, which he states was probably perfectly representative of a small town in the 40s and 50s. However, now
Smallville represents nostalgia for a simpler time. The Smallville that was contemporary to a certain time had become a distant memory for Superman as well as our nation.

Peters says, “At the heart of the nation lies the home and the family” (Peters 123). This idea of a Jewish nation is paramount to Zionism. Further Peters says, “TS Elliot envisaged the nation working in the same way – firmly rooted in the past and providing an inheritance of cultural values and traditions for its children” (Peters 123). The main idea of Zionism figuratively seems to be “bring the (Jewish) family together.” Since the home and the family is at the heart of a nation, bringing together the family works on both the micro-level and the macro-level. To that end an orphan character is an especially tragic, and relatable figure for which many can relate.

This idea of orphans standing in for Jewishness is not unique to superhero publications. For the character of Daniel Deronda from the George Elliot novel, his “lack of known family origins allows for the adoption of rooted ‘native’ ones only to revel his lack of rootedness in his ‘foreign’ Jewish origins” (Peters 6). Superman is treated the same way. When he is Clark, he is “Smallville” as Lois calls him, but when he is Superman he is this otherworldly god. Jules Feifer asks who Clark Kent existed for; was it for the sake of the story or the sake of the reader? “[Kent] is Superman’s opinion of the rest of us, a pointed caricature of what we, the noncriminal element, were really like. His fake identity is our real one” (Feifer 13). When Superman tells us to “eat our vegetables” he has every right to do so because he can stand outside of us, as if from high in the mountain like God or Moses, and say so. Remember as a hero Superman represents

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8 The term Zionism is not an unproblematic term with many connotations; however, that is a debate for another time.
most clearly that old hero ideal as a liminal figure between god and man. Moses was a divine
law-bringer; Superman is a secular law enforcer that shows the reader the correct path.

Many psychologists over the history of the superhero dismissed them as an adolescent
power fantasy. This argument states that children will fantasize about the world of the superhero
where they can be powerful rather than focus on their own world. This is dangerous because
sometimes the powerless will attempt to solve their problems like their heroes, with their fists.
Anders states that the adolescence of Superman was the opposite of many adolescents; as a teen
Clark had to learn to hide his capabilities, such as his ability to run fast or punch through a wall,
and not harness them (Anders 72). Another argument goes another way; Coogan points out in his
conclusion that several people have argued that comics are a medium that works for
“disempowering the common man” (Coogan 238). His argument, in short, is that man is not
powerful enough to take care of his problems himself and needs a superhero to come in and take
care of it. The common person does not learn to fight danger, like the Golden Age union bosses,
because Superman will come in and help.

These two arguments are not necessarily in conflict. However, both of these arguments
are interesting to consider from the orphan perspective. One of the markers of an orphan is that
as a child they begin their story as helpless. Does the presence of a “god-like” orphan allow such
an orphan a power fantasy? Does it teach him or her to overcome or does this disempower such a
common orphan? These two arguments might simply represent two extremes of which there
might be a mean. It’s not difficult to understand either mindset. Superman comics of the Golden
Age are good examples of both ideas.

In reading several Superman stories of this era, and other eras, one thing becomes clear,
the only time a reader sees Clark Kent or Superman is in concert with another character. Never,
on panel, do you see Clark in his apartment after a day at the Daily Planet. Nor does the reader ever see Superman unless he is avenging something, dispensing justice or pontificating. The consequence of this is that Superman remains the outsider, unfamiliar with normal human behavior such as eating dinner. Superman is always seen through the eyes of the other characters and is either constantly powerful Superman or powerless Clark Kent.

Superman’s character trajectory is interesting because early in his career Superman fights people that abuse power, like prison wardens and corrupt officials. A year into his run he became somewhat the official hero we know today. Around Action Comics #13 Superman fights a super villain, an outsider to society set on world domination, and with that issue Superman took his first step into becoming a hegemonic text rather than a subversive one. By the time of America’s involvement in World War II, Superman clearly was used for propaganda. (See Superman #14 and #24 - Figures C & D) Clearly Superman readers were dealing with a different Superman by Action Comics #58 (March 1943); on the cover, which shows a clearly caricatured canary yellow Japanese face, readers are told “Slap a Jap by buying war bonds.” Also in June 1943, the Superman newspaper strip ran a story titled “Superman is about to visit the relocation centers.”  

A soldier gives Lois Lane and Clark, as journalists, a tour of the facility and he informs the reporters,

“Our main difficulty is that loyal Americans of Jap ancestry are indiscriminately mingled with enemy sympathizers who would be glad to sabotage our national welfare at the first opportunity. It’s a delicate and difficult situation. Our government has done all but lean over backwards in its desire to be humane and fair.” Lane praises the work, adding “the Jap government should have absolutely no excuse for not showing their prisoners of war as much consideration” (Chang 39).

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9 (i.e. Japanese internment camps)
Then Clark Kent heartily endorses the camps as “a reasonable set-up” (Chang 39). Chang argues that, with few exceptions, even the most liberal of people seemed to support the internment centers in WWII, and the liberal-Jewish creators of Superman were a perfect example of his argument to be sure. Even taken out of context there is very little room for discussion about the propaganda nature of this strip.

Since the war was going on, Superman acted as the perpetual outsider-lawgiver telling the Americans the right course of action. Throughout the late 1930s and 1940s National Comics introduced a new genre of comic books. The birth of Superman created a new venue for children and soldiers to read adventure stories. Prior to the war, Jewish artists and writers could easily land jobs in comic publications. Sigel and Shuster started the Superman comic as a secular version of many of the stories from Jewish history and used the character to fight injustice. The orphaned Superman represents the orphaned Jewish immigrants and the orphaned Moses story. By the time the war ramped up, their character was a mouthpiece for selling war bonds. Like many patriotic superheroes, Superman struggled to find his place in the changing comic book economy after the war. It is very difficult to resonate with large audiences when there were few enemies that everyone could agree upon.

**Batman in the Golden Age**

With the success of Superman, National Publications wished to create another superhero in 1939. Batman first appears in *Detective Comics* #27 (05/1939). Like Superman, Batman also begins his comic book adventures in the Golden Age. However, Batman’s early adventures take on a different tone than those of Superman. Where Batman’s adventures were dark and macabre, Superman’s were brightly colored and full of action. This first Batman adventure, in *Detective*
Comics #27, was a simple story where Batman stops chemical company executives from killing each other over contract negotiations; one of them attacks Batman who, in turn, “accidently” pushes him into a chemical tank; after Batman does this, he coldly laments to the reader, “fitting end for his kind.” The next few issues Batman takes on a few criminals but also supernatural characters such as werewolves and vampires.

Batman’s origin story was not actually told until six issues into his story. The only thing we know about him up to this point was that Batman is Bruce Wayne and Bruce is friends with Commissioner Gordon. The twelve-panel origin showed the pieces that became Batman’s mythic origin. Panels 1-3 depicted a robber went up to the Wayne family and demanded jewels; Thomas Wayne jumped at the robber and Mrs. Wayne went to his aid and screamed for the police. Panels 4-6 depict young Bruce witnessing the lifeless corpses: “..Dead, they’re d.. dead,” and swearing to god he would have a war on all criminals. Panels 7 and 8 depict Bruce training his mind and his body. The final panels show him settling on a bat, because it is a terrible creature of the night, and “criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot” (DC Comics, Batman #33 - 11/1939) (see Figure G).

Since the creators chose not to tell the origin story until after many appearances of Batman, this raises the question why they would choose to do their storytelling this way. In the early days of comic books, sometimes origin stories were not told as early as Superman’s, in the first appearance. I speculate that the reason that origin stories did not attach to characters as early is that most of the time these stories were formatted in try-out form. If the public wanted more of a character, they got more. If the character did not catch on, he or she disappeared. Rarely would writers want to use the “opening volley” to tell a complicated origin story. The idea was to hook
the reader, and worry about the “why” later. In adventure comic books, especially, exposition could be a killer.

Additionally, to benefit the reader, the hero without an origin also has the dual-effect of allowing the mystique of the hero to continue; the hero does not have a past and could truly be anyone. Moreover, this relates to the orphans themselves having their history robbed from them. For the first six months of publication, Bruce Wayne was just a “wealthy socialite.” Only later, in panel 5 of the origin, does the reader really start to see the human side of Bruce, the teary-eyed child in the alley. Up until that point, Batman was just a criminal-punching and tackling detective. The idea that he could have been anyone under the costume frees him from any sort of history.

When examining the form that the novels took, Wirth-Nester says, “The episodic picturesque structure of Huck Finn allows for a continuous series of fresh starts, the very essence of the American dream. Each unit is a discrete episode that need not affect the other; there need not be a cumulative reckoning, i.e. what we call history” (Wirth-Nester 266). This was most certainly the form of the comic book in the Golden Age and, to a lesser extent, the Silver Age, when continuity was much less a big deal to comic readers than it is to more recent comic book readers. However, this also points to the idea that several of the origin stories of these characters were linked to ahistorical orphans, who were not only free from responsibilities but also from their own history.

The term “wealthy socialite” has meaning; in modern times someone like Paris Hilton has been described by the media as a “wealthy socialite.” It is difficult to imagine Paris Hilton as a superhero, and perhaps that is why Bruce Wayne is able to keep his identity a secret. No one believed that fumbling screw-up rich kid could be Batman. Remember that Peters said “the
situation for the poor orphan was different from that of its counterpart in the bourgeoisie” (Peters 7). Remember that the enabling identity of the orphan was greater freedom and independence. Consequently, the orphan became self-made, all community connections and resources were a result of the actions of the orphan himself or herself. Bruce was given the Wayne family fortune. Bruce had a butler. Bruce never had to consider getting a job, never had to move to the orphanage, and never really was forced to do anything. Although Bruce was an enabled orphan and self-made; he also had the added benefit of inheritance. In Batman’s first appearance, Bruce shared court with the police commissioner; it was unlikely that even a well-to-do self-made orphan could attain that level of society.

More to the point, Batman and the police had an interesting relationship in the Golden Age. It seems in most panels Commissioner Gordon that he seemed perplexed by the existence of “The Bat-Man.”¹⁰ Coogan notes that the difference between comic books and the pulps before them is that superhero comics clearly divide “straight and criminal society” (Coogan 188). There was not truly a gray area where The Bat-Man might be working counter to the police. He was a vigilante; however, the man that falls into acid in Batman’s first adventure was never given justice or a trial, etc. He was evil, and, as Batman said, he deserved what he got and the audience never thought any different.

Feifer says of a comparison between Superman and Batman, “Batman was not a superhero in the truest sense… if you pricked him, he bled—buckets. Superman’s superiority lay in the offence. Batman’s lay on the rebound… with Superman we won; with Batman we held our own” (Feifer 26). While Superman carried his crime bosses to prosecution, Batman would

¹⁰ Earlier stories referred to Batman as “The Bat-Man.”
sooner let them kill themselves. Superman can pretend to be the everyman; Batman has a higher potential to actually be the everyman. Batman crying in the single panel shows more emotion than Superman expresses for a very long time.

Hana Wirth-Nester wrote about the “lonesomeness” of Huck Finn; she said that Huck preferred the lonesomeness to any compromise with society (Wirth-Nester 264). This also fits the way Batman ran his life, keeping few close, and preferring to be a loner vigilante than conform to any of society’s normal ways of dealing with crime. Batman showed there might be a connection between loneliness and non-compromise with society.

However, the problem is that Batman does not remain a loner for long, and yet that identity defines him. In his eleventh appearance, less than a year later, in Detective Comics #38 (4/1940), Batman gained a child sidekick by the name of Robin.

Robin in the Golden Age

“If someone does not have a good father, he should acquire one.” (Nietzsche)

Of course, because of the baby boom many more children were reading comic books. Toward the tail end of the Golden Age, more and more children read comic books and the stories reflected that. National Comics\textsuperscript{11} introduced a character that edged out the noir dark and broody Batman, and brought him down to earth. Robin became the point-of-view character so that children could understand Batman. “Enkidu serves as Gilgamesh’s sidekick just as Patroclus did for Achilles, Iolaus and Hylas for Hercules, and Robin for Batman” (Coogan 118).

\textsuperscript{11} National Comics was later renamed DC Comics after the flagship book Detective Comics.
Denny O’Neil describes Robin as a “counterbalance” to Batman. “He is a bright and cheerful presence in an otherwise grim world” (quoted in Pearson and Uricchio 20). This is an interesting characterization since young Dick Grayson underwent the same, or parallel, trauma young Bruce Wayne did. With the introduction of Robin in Detective Comics issue #38 (04/1940) the pattern of orphaned child turned superhero repeats. Just like Bruce, Dick’s parents were killed in front of him as a young child, and yet he remains upbeat in the face of the grim Batman. The difference between them is that Bruce was alone after his parents died. However, Dick had Bruce, who shared his pain, and could maintain a semblance of a normal childhood (See Figure H).

Robin was not always popular with readers. Feifer says of Robin, “Robin wasn’t skinny. He had the build of a middleweight, the legs of a wrestler. He was obviously an ‘A’ student, the center of every circle, the one picked for greatness in a crowd – God, how I hated him” (Feifer 51-52). Robin was the good kid for his father (Batman), rarely in trouble, and had brains, as well. This character came in handy in the 1950s when family values were at the forefront of American values. Robin was the good kid that every kid could look up to; he could juggle school, girls, and nightly vigilante activities. The Batman and Robin relationship became a template for a deluge of superhero sidekicks. It seemed for a period in the Golden Age that whenever a hero needed a sales boost the book introduced a child sidekick. None worked as well as Batman and Robin because they had a perfect father and son relationship. However, their relationship came under fire in the 1950s for being a little too close, which I will explain in the next chapter. The Silver Age brought about changes to comic book families and Batman and Robin were no exception.
The Golden Age defined the superhero, first with Superman and then with Batman. Comic books followed up on orphan stories the Victorian era told for adventure and then the action stories told in pulps. The orphan narrative in Superman was told from the point of view of the ultimate outsider, who could powerfully bring laws and avenge the downtrodden of society. He stood in for the struggle of immigrant Jews that could easily get jobs in the publishing houses that hired for the “junk” stories. The Jewish immigrants told their stories and greatly influenced the pages of the new medium. They were orphans from their families and their homeland, which was a struggle that translated well into comic book superheroes. Superman was popular enough that National Comics created another hero, Batman. The orphaned Bruce Wayne gained many benefits which other orphans would not have. Batman’s worldview was quite different from that of Superman; Batman was a lone character in a dark world. Robin was the bright spot in Bruce’s world. Even though their orphan stories are parallel, rather than create another dark avenger like himself, Batman trained Robin to enjoy vigilantism. After the superheroes were established, the family values pervasive within them came under scrutiny by authorities.
“… standards of good taste, which might tend toward corruption of the comic book as an instructive and wholesome form of entertainment, will be eliminated.” (The 1954 Comics Code Preamble)

Comic books underwent a significant change with the adoption of the Comics Code in 1954. Like other media, comic books fell in lockstep and conformed in the age of conformity: there was little room for subversion, or anything that could even be confused with subversion. Psychoanalysts of the day saw phalluses and vaginas in every picture’s shading and homosexuals in every cape. Parents became outraged that simple “kids stuff” might subvert their children into little delinquents. Therefore, the Comics Code was created and comic books were changed forever. Simultaneously, a clear focus on family values occurred in American media of the 1950s and 1960s.

The adoption of the code and society’s change in ideas about family values morphed the representation of those family values in the superhero tradition. Before the Silver Age of comics, in the 1950s and 60s, orphan representations were comprised of searching for self-understanding and orphaning as a means of freedom and for the sake of independence. Without parents, it is much easier to break the rules and not need to be responsible for/to anyone—think of the orphan as represented in The Adventures of Huck Finn. Early superheroes, like Superman and Batman, were like many of these prior literary orphans of adventure.

In the Silver Age, after the institution of the code, all of the rules changed. During the 1950s-1960s era, in some ways, the orphan status served as an excuse for costumed heroes to create non-traditional family units. These allowed the comic companies to create spin-off characters. Characters spun-off from more popular ones, sold well and made more money for the
comic companies. Social pressures from the external communities created internal changes within the comic book industry that caused the publishers to rethink the concepts of their characters. Each generation latches on to the orphan narrative and reshapes the narrative to speak to its own concerns. In the case of Superman and Batman in the Silver Age, they become patriarchs of their Superman-Family and Batman-Family respectively. The same period that created *Leave it to Beaver*’s idea of the family is at work in these texts. These superhero families, which were previously non-families, came to reflect a hegemonic idea of the family and offset homosexual tones. Spider-Man, also an orphan, started publication in the Silver Age and marked a revision of the Golden Age orphan character.

Although many authors have written copious amounts of information about this period, the Silver Age of comic books, very little has been written about the representations of family contained within the texts. The works written about this age have tended to focus on the early days of Marvel and the personalities that inhabited the Marvel bullpen, such as Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, including their own biographies. Several texts have examined the institution of the Comics Code Authority, such as Amy Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval*. Lastly, authors have written a few books about the offbeat stories and oddities that comic books created at this time, including the *Krypton Companion* by Michael Eury.

Evidence for the Silver Age revision begins with the reintroduction of Flash in *Showcase* #4 and Green Lantern in *Showcase* #22 (Oct 1957). The characters of Flash and Green Lantern had existed before in the 1940s. However, in the 1950s, DC Comics reintroduced the characters as new science and outer space based heroes, rather than their previous incarnations, which were magic and mythology based. These changes reflected the age in which the writers created them. In the 1950s America had a renewed interest in science, and Americans were anxious about the
effects of scientific breakthroughs, such as the atomic bomb. Film portrayed these anxieties with movies like *Dr. Strangelove* and monster movies such as *Godzilla*. Comic book superheroes reflected a beacon of hope for their readers as radiation and super-science weapons would render super powers, such as those in the origin stories of characters such as *The Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk*.

Interestingly, DC Comics’ two real icons and moneymakers, Superman and Batman, seemingly did not undergo the same sort of radical transformations as the Flash and Green Lantern. However, Batman and Superman did undergo a softer and different change wherein their previous orphan adventures took a backseat to clear family based adventures. In this way, Superman and Batman texts effectively undid the importance of their orphan status by focusing on the character’s families to reflect the 1950s as a time that stressed family values and revalorized the nuclear family. Later on in the Silver Age, in 1962, Marvel Comics revised the orphan narrative in the pages of *Amazing Spider-Man*.

The main reason for these revisions is because comic books were, in essence, deemed “children’s stuff,” and the content of the books worried many parents. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the comic book industry took a sinister turn, and horror comics had become a valid and very popular genre. Bradford Wright says that parents and church groups began to boycott comic books because of content that “stressed crime and sex” (Wright 86). These parents were worried about a growing fear of juvenile delinquency and subversion. Nyberg points out that the “child consumer” was actually a very small portion of the juvenile fiction audience; in fact, adults made most fiction purchases. However, comic books were easily accessible and inexpensive (Nyberg 19). And the adults and children did buy …
In the 1950s the landscape of comic books changed with the institution of the Comics Code Authority. Senate subcommittees opened trials on April 22, 1954 based on Cold War fears of subversion and perversion (Wright 154). Dr. Fredric Wertham, an expert in psychoanalysis who had written a scathing indictment of the comic industry titled *Seduction of the Innocent*, became an expert witness at the Senate trial a couple of years later. He stated categorically that children were being subverted, at least in part, by the content he found present in comic books. He spoke of children as gaining sadistic joy from seeing other people punished. In particular, he noted a fixation on eye gouging and referred to the joy of punishment as a “Superman-complex.” According to Wertham, the children would then reenact that violence that they saw in the comic books (Nyberg 60). In February 1955 the Senate published their findings which “stopped short of accepting Wertham’s findings” (Wright 174). The Senate did not pass any laws against comic books or the comic book industry; however, they did implicitly suggest that something should be done internally.

In response to these allegations comic book companies scrambled to reassert themselves as safe for their target market, children. Comic book companies created a self-regulating body called the Comics Magazine Association of America, which was the overseeing body for the Comics Code Authority. Some examples of rules from the comics code:

\[\begin{align*}
A1. \text{Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.} \\
A4. \text{If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.} \\
A6. \text{In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.}
\end{align*}\]

\[\text{12 This is nothing less than an oversimplification of these events, for the sake of length. The history of the Comics Code is much more complicated, as explained in Amy Kiste-Nyberg’s “Seal of Approval” (1998).}\]
B3. All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.  
(Nyberg 166-169)

With such constraining rules it became very difficult to write a story that is anything other than absolute formula. The code itself managed to kill off many of the genres within comics. Soon after its institution the only genres that existed were romance, westerns, those which were based on TV shows and cartoons, and most popular and prominently, superhero comics. Interestingly, the conclusion that Vollum & Adkinson draw from the institution of the code as it pertains to superhero comics is as follows:

The messages portrayed in the comic book superhero mythos are clear. We are being told that we must preserve the status quo, or, as Superman might put it, “democracy and the American way”; threats to the status quo must be extinguished. We are presented with a world in which there is clearly right and wrong, good and evil. Good must prevail and social order must be maintained. The dominant hegemony is safe in the hands of the comic book superhero. (Vollum & Adkinson 105)

To a Silver Age audience “the code” is exactly what it purports to be, an institution of the status quo, an institution of formula, an institution of normalcy and predictability in an unpredictable world. If our superheroes represent what our society needs, 1950s America needed normalcy and positive views of the family.

The Silver Age begins, not coincidently, after the creation of this code in 1956. To this end superheroes explicitly become defenders of the status-quo. Gone are the Golden Age days where Superman might fight for the union men against corruption. Instead, after the institution of the code, Superman opts to dress up as a witch doctor and force Jimmy Olsen to marry an ape
In addition, and more over the long-term, comic books became galvanized in the American imagination as “kids stuff.”

Superman in the Silver Age

Superman, as a character, might have the most “in canon” mythology. He has over seventy years of constant monthly publication, at most points with several concurrent titles. Superman has a very simple origin as told in *Action Comics* #1 (Sigel-1938), his first appearance. A baby Kal-El was rocketed away from the destruction of the distant planet Krypton. His rocket landed on Earth, a passing motorist found him and took him to an orphanage, and now he fights for “all those in need.” Missing from this story are many elements we consider iconic about the character, such as Smallville, the Kents, and “truth, justice and the American way.” However the first time many of those elements were added together was not until *Superman* #146 (July 1961 – See Figure K). All of these elements snowballed onto Superman throughout the publications. The Superman of the Golden Age was a double orphan. He lost his biological parents in the explosion of Krypton as a baby, as well as his earth parents prior to *Action Comics* #1.

In the Silver Age, Superman, like other comics, became pursuant to Section C of the Comic Code, which contains a special section on “Marriage and Sex” that says:

3. Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered. A sympathetic understanding of the problems of love is not a license for moral distortion. (Nyberg 169)

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13 Although each of these things might be subversive in its own way, I am not sure where to begin deconstruction; moreover, clearly the authors actually intended no subversion.
DC Comics was a little ahead of the curve, or perhaps they were reading the writing on the wall, but a few years prior to the Silver Age, writers told a very popular story about the young adventures of Superman as a Superboy in Smallville, first appearing in *More Fun Comics* #101 (Jan-Feb #101-1945). Superboy guest-starred and took over the *Adventure Comics* anthology shortly after he gained his own title in 1949. The title was very important to the Superman Family. Besides creating Smallville, a fictional hometown for Superman, the Superboy publications also introduced us to Ma and Pa Kent, Superman’s (earth) adoptive parents. The comic implicitly and sometimes explicitly states that these are the parents that instilled Clark with a strong sense of morality. In other words, the reason that Superman was a force for good and not a criminal was because he had good parents. As the comics code states, young Clark Kent remained respectful to his parents.

To complete his nuclear family, in the pages of *Adventure Comics* #210 (Mar 1955), Superboy gets a dog. Through a twist of fate, a second rocket lands on Earth a few years later, following Superboy’s own. The literature in the rocket explains that the citizens of Krypton could not test the rocket on humans first and so they tested it on animals. In an emergency test, one such animal was Kal-El’s (Superman/Superboy’s given name) beloved puppy. Krypto and Superman become reunited. Krypto, like Superman, could fly, had super-strength and, later, heat vision. At first Krypto was a bit of a hand-full for young Superboy but eventually Superboy turned him into a well-trained dog. Krypto even builds his own “Doghouse of Solitude” (Eury 36). Like television’s *Lassie*, these tales of a boy and his dog in *Superboy* are sometimes heartwarming but they also signaled a floodgate of other Kryptonians to earth. More importantly, with the Kents and a dog, the Superman (Earth) nuclear family is complete.
Superman is a double-orphan who lost not only his earth parents but also an orphan of his home planet Krypton, but creating Superboy they eroded his Earth orphaning. The editors at DC eroded the orphan status from Superman’s Krypton past, as well, with the introduction of the Bottle City of Kandor and Supergirl. In *Action Comics* #242 (July 1958), Superman officially was no longer an orphan of Krypton. This issue introduced the Bottle City of Kandor. In a complicated plot, Superman villain Brainiac discovers how to shrink and collect cities. He started doing this on Earth and collected important cities such as New York, Paris. Superman put a stop to it. In doing so, he discovered a non-Earth city among the miniature cities. Since superheroes are advocates of the status-quo while trying to return Earth to the status-quo, Superman discovers that this is a Kryptonian city which “Brainiac must have imprisoned [this city] inside this bottle years before Krypton met doom!” Unfortunately for Superman and the Kandorians, the ship that shrinks/enlarges cities ran out of fuel before he could return the city to its normal size.

This is not Superman’s only attempt to symbolically undo the destruction of Krypton, at least in small part. Before he found the Bottle City of Kandor, Superman attempted to recreate a shrine to his home planet called the Fortress of Solitude because of a feeling of mourning. The Fortress, which was a collection of artifacts, was a shrine to Krypton. The fortress eventually came to house Kandor. There are several adventures in Kandor for Superman in the Silver Age after he develops a switching beam with which he can switch places with a Kandorian, symbolically taking a vacation. In entering Kandor, Superman proves that “you can go home again.”

14 No pun intended.
Interestingly, Superman rarely shows any mourning for his Earth parents, the Kents, who are also dead in the Silver Age comics. The obvious place would be in panels that depict the Fortress of Solitude. One possible explanation is that the fortress is a monument to a world that Superman never knew, and he knew his parents. Another explanation is that in the Silver Age Superman “knew” the Kents in the concurrently running comic book, Superboy. A hypothetical 1950s parent would have a difficult time explaining to a child how the Kents can be alive in one book and statues in the other without getting into details and the meaning of the deaths of parents, an uncomfortable topic for parents that are requiring stability in comics.

Besides the introduction of Kandor, the presence of Supergirl also eroded the orphan status of Superman. DC Comics tested the waters in a Superman story in which, "In Superman [vol.1] #123, mischievous Jimmy Olsen fools with black magic to conjure up a Girl of Steel to accompany Superman. (True to character, Olsen does not bother to solicit Superman's approval before mucking with the dark arts.)" (Rosen 145- author’s edit marks). Supergirl attempts to help Superman but only gets in the way because she is redundant to Superman. However, Rosen explains that the character became so popular among fans that DC introduced another new Supergirl a few years later.

In Action Comics #252 (May1959), Superman became entirely removed from his exile from his own Kryptonian family with the introduction of “The Supergirl from Krypton.” In the issue, yet another rocket lands on Earth and out of this one popped a female Kryptonian, to Superman’s shock. She had powers that rivaled Superman’s own. Over the course of their adventures, the two characters discover that they are cousins (See figure O). This twist was

15 No wonder comic book America was so paranoid about Russian rockets since they were inundated with so many Kryptonian ones.
written in to preclude the obvious love interest angle that a Supergirl’s presence would have naturally accorded. Not only that, but she also would have thrown a monkey-wrench into the love triangle DC Comics had been building for many years between Lana Lang, Lois Lane and Superman.

Superman dropped Supergirl off at an orphanage at the end of her first appearance (See figure P). Her character is constantly trying to keep her identity a secret from others, while using her superpowers to do things like clean her room, a superpower many youngsters in the 1950s wished they had, to be sure. Even though Kara / Supergirl / Linda Lee took up residence in an orphanage, she was anything but an orphan. Supergirl was a member of the ever growing Superman Family, with Superman acting as her de facto surrogate father, teaching her the same moral compass that the Kents taught him. As her story progressed, she gained Streaky the Supercat, to mirror Superboy’s Krypto the Superdog. Supergirl starred in several Action Comics second-features until her “death” in 1986.  

The appearances of Supergirl and Kandor mark the symbolic end of Superman as a refugee from the dead planet Krypton. Simply put, Superman is no longer the only Kryptonian. In his adventures as Superboy, which take place in Superman’s past in Smallville, Ma and Pa Kent are very much alive. Superman is really an orphan in name only. All of these surrogates are close enough to call family. Superman Comics start to focus on this family, at several points

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16 I say “death” because the story in which Supergirl “died” actually made it that she never really existed in the first place. Moreover, DC has since undone that story so that she re-existed and now exists as if she landed on Earth in 2004 instead of in the 1950s. Also in another recent story, it was revealed that the story that made it that she never existed actually simply made it so she forgot her whole existence and was retroactively shoehomed into another preexisting character’s existence, Power Girl. However, Power Girl and the current Supergirl co-exist because Power Girl is actually a Supergirl from a parallel Earth, which DC promises to explain more in depth to the readers someday.
referring to the characters of Jimmy Olsen, Lois Lane, Supergirl, etc. collectively calling them the “Superman Family” (see figure L).

**Batman in the Silver Age**

Like Superman, Batman has a simple origin, told in *Batman* #1 (1940). As a child out for the evening with his parents at the movie theater, a robber murders his parents right in front of him. The boy grows up and trains himself to be an avenger of crime and “super” detective. The creators of Batman based the character in a horror and detective setting. The origin has Bruce, wishing to strike fear into the “superstitious and cowardly lot of criminals,” choose a bat as his symbol (DC Comics 1939). The fear is supplemented by a detective twist where a crime has already happened and Batman attempts to avenge the wronged by catching (or killing) the perpetrator. The idea that you can make those two things compatible with the idea that children are reading the book is hard to sell. Yet DC Comics did it. In introducing the child “point of view” character of Robin (Dick Grayson) to readers, DC was able to capture the imaginations of children. The origin story of Robin mirrored Batman’s own. A gangster committed a crime and killed Dick Grayson’s parents in front of him. The main difference between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson was that Dick could look up to Bruce. Robin was a very different character than Batman. Denny O’Neil said in an interview that he saw Robin as a counterbalance to Batman’s grimness because of his sunny disposition (Pearson & Uricchio 20). Robin was probably most at home in the sunny disposed Silver Age.

It is good that DC did not reboot the character in its entirety as they did Flash and Green Lantern. Michael Uslan asks us to imagine that if Batman was created in 1959 instead of 1939, instead of picking a bat, Batman would say, “To strike terror into hearts of criminals I need to
become a green, gigantic, alien, robot, etc…” (Uslan 5). So once again, like Superman, soft tonal changes occurred to Batman throughout the Silver Age. In the case of Batman these changes occurred because the character was responding to direct threats. Family values changed in the 1950s. According to Mintz & Kellogg “Failure to marry was associated with ‘homosexuality,’ ‘infantile fixations,’ ‘unwillingness to assume responsibility,’ ‘narcissistic pursuit of career aspirations’ and deviant physical characteristics” (Mintz & Kellogg 181). With that prevailing idea in mind it is not difficult to frame what a terrible idea a single father like Bruce Wayne may have seemed to authorities of the day.

In Seduction of the Innocent, Dr. Wertham “outs” Batman and Robin as homosexuals. Brooker states that Dr. Wetham either intentionally, or otherwise, missed the point that Batman and Robin were in a clear father and son relationship (Brooker 105). Further, he states that the horror for parents that Wertham may refer to in some articles might not be literal comic books but the horror of “sex perversion” of their children or the horror of having a homosexual child (Brooker 118). Mintz & Kellogg say that the popular culture of the middle-class television shows illustrated that the problem in shows like Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best and The Donna Reed Show was not how to make ends meet but how to raise children effectively (Mintz & Kellogg 192). DC responded to these attacks by creating characters that clearly frame the heterosexual identities of Batman and Robin with potential love interests, but never partners, BatWoman and BatGirl.

In the 1950s, the detective aspects of Batman were usurped by his large array of gadgets. Rather than figuring out what to do about a crime, Batman’s struggle was to create the perfect gadget to extricate himself and Robin from many situations. DC Comics treated Batman just like Superman; Batman in the 1950s acts as a patriarch of sorts in his Batman Family. Medhurst
states that DC turned Batman into Fred MacMurray from *My Three Sons*. He’d lost any of his vigilante credibility and became an upholder of the most stifling small town American values (Medhurst 153). Once again, this illustrated the post-code establishment of nuclear family and hetero-normative values.

Uslan says that as the supporting characters were created, Superman would do something first and then Batman would follow suit (Uslan 7). Batman and Superman were sometimes interchangeable in the minds of the readers as a generic superhero. In fact, in several early issues the characters were so interchangeable that it was a common story device that Bruce and Clark would switch places. In addition, Batman and Superman would switch costumes; in doing so they tricked villains and women. Where the Superman Family was a natural outgrowth of the character, external criticism forced DC to make Batman clearly heterosexual by creating a Bat family (See Figure M). The Batman Family included love interests for Batman and Robin, respectively BatWoman and BatGirl. It also included Ace the Bathound from *Batman* #92 (June 1955). With the Bathound, Batman and Robin completed the picture of their nuclear family household. 17

The politics of the Batman Family becomes clear on the cover of *Batman* #122 (Figure N) when Robin is worried that the marriage of Batman to BatWoman will leave him out. Perhaps honed in on the anxiety a child might feel if his or her parents were to divorce and remarry. Regardless of what popular television told the audience, the 1950s were no picnic for gender politics either.

Mintz & Kellogg state that Betty Friedan and “the problem that has no name” pointed to a problem that was also present in the popular culture of the 1950s in shows like *The Trapped*...

17 Who wore a mask to conceal his “doggie identity.”
Housewife. In their establishment as keepers of the status quo, one could see this in Batman comics. In the introduction of BatWoman in Detective Comics #233 (July 1956), Bruce and BatWoman in her civilian identity are musing about BatWoman. She says, “It sounds silly that any woman could ever equal the great Batman.” To which Bruce replies, “You have to admire her courage though” (Uslan 75) (See Figure Q). Uslan echoes that sentiment when he says that in the 1950s, “no ‘girl’ superhero or kid-sidekick would ever steal the ‘climactic thunder’ from ‘the man’” (Uslan 7). This is true of Robin as well; a love interest for him was introduced into the books as well in the form of BatGirl as the sidekick to BatWoman. BatGirl constantly fawned over Robin who states in Batman #144 (December 1961) that his only love is Justice. Batman standing next to his own de facto love interest BatWoman gives his creepy blessing to Robin, “still be a teenager,” and BatGirl took that as permission to kiss him.

It was not until the end of the Silver Age and introduction of Batgirl II (Barbra Grodon) in Detective Comics #359 (January 1967) that a feminine character that women could admire as almost strong was introduced. This Batgirl was still problematic but was not simply always fawning for Robin; in fact, she often rejected his advances.

Besides making the Batman Family larger, another element added to the character was a legacy. In one version of the origin story from 1956, Bruce Wayne is “taking on a mantle that his father had previously worn. Dr. Wayne and his wife attended a costume party with the theme of flying creatures. Wayne took first place for his bat-man costume” (Coogan 103). After this crooks break into the party and Thomas Wayne (as Bat-man) defeats them. One of the characters, Lou Moxon, swears revenge. Years later upon reading his father’s journal, Bruce believes that this character arranged the murder of his parents. He dresses up as the Bat and confronts Lou Moxon. He screams as though he is seeing a ghost, "You’re dead! I had Joe Chill
kill you! Leave me alone!” He starts running into oncoming traffic and is killed instantly (Detective Comics #235, Sept 1956 - See Figure J). In this version of the origin, Bruce finds the costume and becomes Bat-Man as his father did. The implication was that Bruce was a good son and truly assumed his father’s role. This creates a connection to his father that was not previously there; it made Batman a legacy, in a way, rather than an aberration created by a particular set of circumstances which occurred in Bruce’s childhood.

The changes of the 1950s led to the campy image Batman had in the very popular television show. If in the 1950s the name of the game was gadgets and Rube Goldberg-style traps, in the 1960s Batman was all about acrobatics and brute force. The “Bam!,” “Sock!,” and “Pow!” in the television show was also a thread that defined the comics of that era. Complicated detective work gives way to simple plots like those in the television show. However, because of the popularity of the television show, Batman sold an amazing 900,000 copies, unprecedented since the pre-code days (Nyberg 137).

Several stories treated Batman as father to many other children as well. One story, which occurred in the Brave and the Bold #83 (May 1969), titled “Punish Not My Evil Son.” In this story, Bruce Wayne adopts another orphaned child and the kid turns out to be a bad seed. He wreaked all manner of havoc including holding someone for ransom using Batman’s gear. Bruce Wayne/ Batman refused to believe that the new kid could do those things and blamed many of them on Dick Grayson/ Robin. Ultimately, the child dressed up as Robin and sacrificed himself at the end. This telegraphed the way Batman would treat the second Robin’s death in the 80s. Bruce was fiercely loyal to his adopted children even in the face of evidence that the children were not the most honorable or well behaved.
Another story which treated Batman as a father, played out from 1972-1978 in various issues of the Superman/Batman team-up title *World’s Finest*. The story was titled “Saga of the Super Sons” and featured Superman Jr. and Batman Jr. as they attempt to live up to the legacy of their respective fathers. The Super Sons went on a road trip and beat up super villains and biker gangs. As teenagers during the story, they did the best they could but wanted to do things their own way. In issue #228 there was a disagreement between Dick Grayson / Robin and Bruce Wayne Jr. about who was the rightful heir to the legacy of Batman after Bruce died in a prison riot. The matter was never resolved because Bruce came back at the end of the story and revealed the whole thing was a trick. At the end, “The Saga of the Super Sons” story was just a computer simulation by Batman.\(^{18}\)

Also in the early 1980s, in a last gasp of the Silver Age, another alternate universe story plays out where Batman becomes a literal father.

After the introduction of DC Comics' multiverse in the 1960s, it is retroactively established that stories from the Golden Age star the Earth-Two Batman, a character from a parallel world. This version of Batman partners with and marries the reformed Earth-Two Catwoman, Selina Kyle (as shown in *Superman Family* #211) and fathers Helena Wayne, who, as the Huntress, becomes (along with the Earth-Two Robin) Gotham's protector once Wayne retires from the position to become police commissioner, a position he occupies until he is killed during one final adventure as Batman. Batman titles however often ignored that a distinction had been made between the pre-revamp and post-revamp Batmen (Close).

It is interesting that even as he chooses family life he still fights crime as a prosecutor. Also of note is that his daughter would choose to fight crime without the impetus of being an orphan, much like the 1960s Batgirl, daughter of Commissioner Gordon. Upon taking into account, the creation of Batman as legacy from the stories described above and the new Batgirl, it became

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\(^{18}\) (Or was it?)
clear that perhaps orphaning was not a necessary precondition for becoming a costumed crime fighter in the DC universe.

The gender politics of the 1950s and 1960s were evident in the Batman titles, with the creation of BatWoman and BatGirl as replies that Batman and Robin were not homosexuals. Batman in the Silver Age was not only a father to the larger Batman Family of characters but also to several alternate reality children. He also carried on a created Batman as a legacy, from which many characters sprung. The implication was that Bruce Wayne’s childhood orphining was not what created Batman, but a destiny. Batman titles in the Silver Age in truth shoes to deemphasize the fact that Batman and Robin were orphans in favor of them becoming closer to other characters and establishing that Batman was a character which could live on with someone else under the cowl.

Spider-Man in the Silver Age

The third iconic hero I am going to examine is Spider-Man. Spider-Man’s origin story from *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962) takes elements from Superman and Batman. Like Superman, Spider-Man is a “double orphan” of a sort. Peter Parker’s parents are long dead prior to the story of Spider-Man. Peter’s biological parents are not even mentioned until well into the *Amazing Spider-Man* run; they are largely irrelevant to the story of Spider-Man. However, unlike Superman, his second tier orphaning happens on panel. Where Superman’s second orphaning was either the orphanage or the Kents, neither mattered to the story until much later in the Superman story. This is where Spider-Man took elements of the Batman origin. Batman’s orphaning happened right in front of him. Spider-Man made a mistake in letting a robber go, and that robber went on to kill Uncle Ben. Peter feels that if he had not made that choice Uncle Ben
would still be alive. He made the choice, and was a little too late to stop it, and it is as if Ben’s murder happened in front of him (see Figure R).

Many of the Marvel Comics characters are typically marked by a loss or lack of some kind. The Hulk has a lack of control; the X-Men lack certain human frailties, or possesses too much human frailty. In the origin story of Spider-Man as told in his first appearance, Spider-Man was not a hero until the loss of his “father” figure, Uncle Ben. Like Batman for Peter Parker’s becoming an orphan is his impetus to become a superhero. Unlike Batman, Peter was powerful before the event; however, he used it for personal gain as a wrestler. The impetus to become a hero was when he could have acted and the unintended consequences of letting the burglar go cost him the life of his uncle. To honor the memory of his uncle and pursue vengeance, Peter becomes Spider-Man, the vigilante.

So unlike Batman or Superman, Peter Parker has a dual “call to adventure.” In addition to fighting crime as Spider-Man, Peter also is the de facto patriarch for his family-unit, himself and his aunt. Bruce Wayne or Clark Kent are not actually truly responsible to/for anyone else until later in their stories, so they can fight crime with impunity. They do not need to figure out how they are going to help pay the rent because Superman did not need to live anywhere and Batman has money.

The theme that Peter Parker is responsible both to his Aunt as his elder and for his Aunt as “man of the house” runs through many years of the book. Amazing Spider-Man was subject to the same rules as any other publication with the Comics Code seal. Peter had respect for his Aunt or mother figure. On the other hand, since she is his aunt there was a little latitude with his disobedience. Additionally, Stan Lee says, “[Before Spider-Man] teenagers only worked in humor comics or as sidekicks” (DeFalco 12). Being a teenage character allowed Spider-Man to
act up and also remain a dependant. In the Spider-Man Family there was always concern about whether there is going to be enough money to pay the rent or bills. This was the reason that Peter is a scientific genius and yet took a job as a photographer, which was way beneath him. According to Watt-Evans, Peter takes these jobs as his penance. He was on track for a good life as a nerd and super-scientist, although in high school he could not see it. The death of Uncle Ben derailed all that and this was how Peter punished himself (Watt-Evans [2007] 19-20).

Peter Parker as Spider-Man’s secret identity remained a problem throughout the run of Spider-Man comic books. He reasoned that he must protect his identity to protect his family, Aunt May and later Mary Jane, his wife. Speculation constantly buzzed around the book, among fans and editorial staff, that they should just kill Aunt May. Spider-Man artist John Romita said of Aunt May, “If you kill Aunt May, Peter Parker’s secret identity is not a problem anymore because there’s no one for him to protect, and you’d lose the whole teenage nerd factor” (DeFalco 32). This remained the tension of the character through his teenage years, how to hide the costume from Aunt May and how to explain his late nights, until he moved to college in the late 1970s.

In many ways, Spider-Man being a teenager is also important textually. The comic expresses this just like horror movies, when the manifestation of werewolfism or vampirism is an expression of the changes that occurs when one sexually awakens during adolescence. “Many formulaic elements of the monster movies have affinities with two central features of adolescent sexuality, masturbation and menstruation” (Evans 569). On a formulaic level, the comic book genre owes much to horror. Spider-Man symbolized an adolescent struggle, the horror that most boys would do not face, life without a father figure. While not overtly a horror comic book, Darren Hick points out that combining 1950s horror elements of a big Spider with the horrors of
radioactivity and including those horrors of adolescent life was a brilliant stroke of genius for kids that had no access to horror comics (Hick 9). More often than not heroes discover their superpowers as adolescents. For a writer there is some difficulty in explaining the difficulty in taming a baby with laser sight, or explaining to them how to shut it off. If character is a teenager when he or she discovers his or her powers it forces him or her to take responsibility for the powers on his or her own, much like one’s sexuality. I imagine discovering your x-ray vision is less fun with your parents around, or learning to “toss your bat-arang,” or learning how to “shoot web-fluid,” but I digress.

To close, the valorization of family values in superhero publications of the Silver Age is a natural outcome of the institution of the Comics Code Authority. Superman and Batman effectively become fathers in situation comedies for about twenty years of comic book publication. They are effective patriarchs according the rules put forth in the code. However, the comic stories were bogged down in formula and by targeting children as their audience. Both heroes are fathers to their respective families but also father many trademarks and were responsible for moving millions of comic books in the 1950s and 1960s. These two heroes are less orphans and more fathers by the 1950s.

The revision of the orphan narrative to resemble its roots did not occur until Marvel Comic’s Spider-Man. Spider-Man is an “orphan of adventure” just like the older stories, but he also had many domestic responsibilities. Spider-Man symbolized an adolescent horror that most boys would not have to face, life without a father figure. As a result of his own actions as a teen, Spider-Man prowled the streets in an effort to combat crimes like those committed against him in the loss of his Uncle.
These three heroes as beholden to the Comics Code Authority maintain the status-quo and remain non-subversive, in some cases though to this day. The news is not all bad for comics as a transgressive media, since a reinvention in the 1970s allowed comics creators to speak their minds about certain social issues while remaining within the rules. For instance, there was a story in *Green Lantern / Green Arrow* #85 where Green Arrow discovers that his adopted child sidekick and ward is addicted to heroin. In being a patriarch for the world, Green Arrow did not see what was going on under his own roof. Under Denny O’Neil, this series spoke out on other issues such as race, religion and politics; I believe that it begins the deconstruction of the hero that marks the next era of comics to be discussed in Chapter Four.
There’s been a distinct change in attitude among the people who are doing comics. The preservers are less in evidence and the destroyers are more in evidence.” ~ John Byrne (Wright 266)

From the late 1970s through to the late 1990s, comic book creators became preoccupied with polarization and themes of alienation. By polarization, I mean in the sense that creators were divided about whether comics are for adults or for children, if they were made as a way to spread liberal ideas or reassert conservative ones. Contemporary superheroes deal with contemporary American, adult, concerns such as media saturation, events going on around the world, and power in corporate America. The polarization occurs along the lines of what comic creator, John Byrne calls the people that want fun in comics and the “destroyers” (Wright 266). This polarization was formed by having more adult themes in comics and comic books that were, previously and obviously, created for children. It created backlash among creators that saw children as their target audience. Nevertheless, the business end, which was moving to a different system of distribution simultaneously, favored young adults with more disposable income, and the creators followed suit. This marked the comic companies’ obvious acknowledgement that their audience was becoming older. Ironically, when they created a polarization among creators, comic books themselves, within the texts, tended to explore more gray areas of morality, such as antiheroes.

Just like in the Silver Age, there was also quite a lot of comic book scholarship written during the contemporary era. Much in particular was written after the 1990s when casual readers become interested in the industry as much as the comic books themselves. As an era, the last twenty or thirty years has been defined by postmodern deconstruction; so too much of the
scholarship about Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man that comes from this era. In addition, in the contemporary era, many scholars, creators, texts and audience members are questioning, deconstructing and redefining the concepts of heroism and superheroism.

The fans for superhero comics started to get older in the 1980s and 1990s. There were many reasons for this, but chief among them was the rise of the direct market. It was called the direct market because the distribution no longer was moving through intermediaries, such as newsstand vendors. This allowed specialty shops with knowledgeable sales staff to carry the product and had less overhead for everyone in the chain because there were fewer people taking slices of profit. With specialty stores in place, comics receded from the newsstand; there were fewer casual purchasers.

Wright quotes Paul Levitz, president of DC Comics since 2002, saying that, in 1982 “for better or worse, a majority of comics published today are produced for the entertainment of comics fans... and [companies] were consciously aiming their efforts directly at the fan market” (Wright 261). No longer did they have to re-explain the origin of Batman over and over again, to new readers. The new fan-base was familiar with that story, and the older, more sophisticated audience became interested in the nuances of the stories. Even so, a few creators hold on to the old ways of the comics industry.

Wright stated of John Byrne that he wrote comic books well suited to the culture of the Reagan years. “He explained that he had always tried to write with, ‘a Middle America Bible Belt mentality…’ Byrne felt it was important to have his superheroes act on righteous motivations” (Wright 265).

John Byrne, and others like him, had a simple formula for revitalizing superheroes. Recall what made a superhero popular in the first place, then rework the nostalgic qualities into
modern superhero narratives. Wright claims that this back to basics approach was a clear reflection of the back to basics approach that Reagan was using in the politics of the New Right. Reagan claimed that the liberal politics of the 1970s and 1980s undermined patriotism and hurt American morale. Byrne puts himself solidly in the preserver camp; in 1986 he was hired to revitalize Superman and used his preserver approach with a twist of conservative politics.

Superman in the Contemporary Age

In 1986 DC Comics editorial staff decided that their storytelling universe had gotten bogged down with too many years of storytelling and inconsistency. The solution for DC Comics was massively wiping the slate for all their characters and rewriting of each their histories. For Superman this rewrite was called *Superman: Man of Steel*, which was written and drawn by John Byrne.

The late 1970s and 1980s were steeped in Cold War mentality. The comic books of the era reflected that mentality. Sometimes they reflected it in using Russians as villains or perhaps a hero would take away nuclear weapons. The nationalist overtones of Superman were working overtime during the Cold War: *Man of Steel* was clearly one of those texts.

*Superman: Man of Steel*, was the official origin story of Superman from 1986 until 2003. By this time Superman was codified as the mythical hero of America. In *Man of Steel*, he became embroiled in all manner of American cold warrior anxiety. One significant change that critics have pointed to when discussing the *Man of Steel* series was Kal-El was no longer a baby when they shot him away from Krypton. Instead, his parents placed him in a gestation chamber as a fetus, and then he was born on Earth when he arrived. Not only was Superman born on
Earth, but also he was born in America. Superman was no foreigner alien defending us; he was American born and American raised.

Other American anxieties were reflected in the Superman comics of the era. For example, Lex Luthor was now portrayed as a wealthy billionaire and no longer as a mad scientist. Superman is often unable to touch Luthor because he is in a position of power; no longer can Superman just punch the errant boss. Now he was forced to find a more “adult” way to handle his problems.

Significantly, for the Superman Family, Jonathan and Martha Kent remain alive into Superman’s adulthood in this continuity. This allows writers the ability to have Superman fly back to Kansas, or phone home, and ask advice when facing a crisis. Hard-working American families, by proxy, could solve the crises Superman faced.

Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale’s series from 1998, *Superman for All Seasons*, followed up on many of the origin themes from *Man of Steel*. The series showed Clark’s life in Smallville as he grew up. Ultimately, the story turned into a heartwarming tale of a boy and his relationship to his father. The four issues had a lot less stress on anxieties and were much more emotional than its predecessor, *Man of Steel* or most Superman books before it. This was one example of how in the twelve years between these two stories, from 1986 to 1988, the readership appreciated nuanced storytelling over action sequences.

The covers of Superman books also mirrored a pro-America sentiment (See Figures E & F). One of the covers from *Adventures of Superman* #424 (1987) depicts Superman holding his arm out to an eagle; the background shows the World Trade Center. The second cover from *Adventures of Superman* #600 (2002) depicts Superman holding a United States flag. These
covers looked quite like their World War II counterparts. Superman illustrated that he really stood for truth and justice, but especially the “American way.”

The fact the Superman is an orphan is no longer present in the books. He had signed on as a member of earth who was alienated because he is different, an alien. However, Superman seemed less into breathing life into Krypton or complicated Silver-Age time travel or black magic solutions. In 1993 Superman “died”\(^\text{19}\) with much media hoopla. After his return, the writers at DC Comics showed Superman as happy with his adoptive parents and Lois Lane, whom he married in 1996, Superman became mostly free of being an orphan.

**Batman in the Contemporary Age**

On the other side of the spectrum from Byrne we have Frank Miller. Although I do not think Miller would see it that way, one of the people in that earlier quote which Byrne was likely speaking of as a destroyer was Frank Miller. “Miller envisioned the superhero as a right-wing force fighting to preserve social order” (Wright 269). He was one of the creators that took the essential elements of superheroes and added reality, which removed “fun.” Three texts in particular define Batman, the Batman Family, and indeed, comic books, for the contemporary age: *The Dark Knight Returns* (and by extension *Batman: Year One*), *The Killing Joke*, and *Death in the Family*.

*The Dark Knight Returns* (2/86-6/86) happens outside of the main Batman story, but reinvigorated the franchise. The story envisioned a world run by corrupt politicians and media

\(^{19}\) I say “died” because a few months later DC Comics revealed he was not really dead and just turned out to be a near-death experience.
oversaturation. To this end, an aged Batman sees himself as the solution to a world gone mad.

Nash notes of the politics of *The Dark Knight Returns*.

As a spokesman for the wealthy and the political system the old Batman is preachy, self-righteous and largely unconcerned with the life and rights of the criminal class. All of this makes perfect sense within the framework of the Arthurian mythos, which neatly divides the world into binary characteristics such as good and evil, right and wrong, law and crime, wealth and poverty, etc. (Nash 38)

As a result of these feelings, Batman truly feels that only he can save Gotham. As a frame story, the book shows the beginning of Batman as well as the end of “a Batman.” This retelling of the Batman’s origin is particularly violent, but resonated with audiences (See Figure S).

No Batman origin story showed Martha Wayne’s pearls breaking before Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller [DKR]). After that, the pearls became iconic and folded into the myth, so much so, in fact, empirically many fans have sworn that they were a part of the origin story as if since the beginning. While deconstructing the nuances of *The Dark Knight Returns* Scott Tipton of Movie Poop Shoot\(^\text{20}\) says,

…the device Miller uses to convey the murder of Wayne’s parents, transposing the firing of the pistol with the thief’s grabbing and breaking of Martha Wayne’s pearl necklace, has become one of the most lifted, borrowed and “homaged” bits of business in the character’s publishing history. I’ve seen it in movies, TV shows, comics, non-Batman material, everywhere; a testament to just how big an impact this book has had over the years. (Tipton)

The reason many believe it to have been there since the beginning was its codification in the film version *Batman* (1989). This clear illustration of the theft of commodity and breaking of pearls symbolizing Bruce’s psychotic break was reinforced in Tim Burton’s film version of *Batman* (1989).

\(^{20}\) Despite its name this is a movie review website related to the film maker Kevin Smith.
The story *Batman: Year One*, also by Frank Miller, which came out a year later, shows the pearls on Martha Wayne, but does not show the actual robbery, or them breaking, in such detail. In particular, the *Batman: Year One* story stresses Bruce Wayne’s happiness prior to the robbery (See Figure T & U). “For Bruce Wayne, a part of himself died when his father died. Unlike Kal-El, Bruce knew his parents; he was about ten years old when they were killed. Further his childhood is typically depicted as happy and his relationship with his parents as warm and loving” (Coogan 103). Thomas Wayne and Martha Wayne represented security and stability in the world. When they were gone so was his innocence, his childhood. The shattered stability, and the relationship of Bruce Wayne with his father, which Coogan referred to, was shown on the next page just after the murder. The quote on the page says, “Yes Father, I shall become a bat” (See Figure V). This was not a reiteration of blaming the criminals as a “cowardly and superstitious lot,” from the first origin. Nor is Bruce following up on the Golden Age origin where he takes up the legacy of his father by putting on the Batman suit. This was a clear psychosis turned inward where he feels the bat coming through the window was a message from his father.

These two stories, *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*, really demonstrated Batman as a figure of melancholia. Laura Peters points to orphans’ “romantic notion of home” and considers longing for such a home a Freudian melancholy: “a process of objectification which keeps what can never be recovered permanently alive through a process of continual mourning and desire” (Peters 4). The superheroes I am examining are all melancholic to an extent. Imagine there was a melancholy spectrum with desire at one end and mourning at the other end; all the superhero orphans are somewhere in the middle.
Superman falls on the desire end of the melancholia spectrum. His Fortress of Solitude evidences this melancholic desire. The Fortress is a memorial, but also a rebuilding, of Krypton. Every piece of Kryptonian memorabilia Superman can collect he keeps in the Fortress. The word “memorabilia” implies that there is some kind of memory attached, of which Superman has none. The Fortress became a monument to a place he had never really been. At times, these are artifacts without a context, another simulacrum. Another example of Superman’s desire for the return was the Bottle City of Kandor, the shrunken Krypton city, which was explained earlier in this thesis. Spider-Man falls in the middle. He has moved on a bit, but still has regrets and, ultimately, is Spider-Man because he could not stop the robber who killed Ben. DeFalco asked Stan Lee in 2000, “Why does Peter Parker remain Spider-Man – is it mainly because of his sense of responsibility or his guilt over Uncle Ben’s death?” to which Lee replied, “Both…” (DeFalco 24).

However, the worst sufferer of melancholia is Batman. Clearly, he falls on the mourning end of the melancholic spectrum. “In contrast to Kal-El, Bruce Wayne has outgrown the Oedipal stage when his parents were murdered. Their deaths ended Bruce’s childhood. His obsession with revenge took over and he essentially became an adult, in charge of the Wayne family fortune” (Coogan 104). Therefore, where Clark is obsessed with returning home, Batman knows there is no home to go back to.

In his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) Freud described melancholia as a “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.” (Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 11, p. 248). This condition might occur as the result of the death of a loved person, but it might also occur when something has been lost as an object of love, or even when “one cannot see clearly what has been lost” (254). In mourning “it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Clark).
In applying Freud to Batman, goes out every night to re-enact the crime/trauma set upon him as a child, only this time he stops it. “Bruce Wayne’s feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing arise from survivor’s guilt – he stood by while his parents were murdered. He takes out this anger at himself upon criminals, but since he can never capture the one person he holds responsible for their deaths (himself), his battle can never end.” (Coogan 105)

For Batman it was fear that he may have let his parents die. Had he screamed out, they might have lived. Yet Batman became an agent of fear. “Most of Batman’s villains adopt costumed identities to make sense out of the world, just as Bruce Wayne took on the Batman identity to make sense out of the world in which his parents were killed” (Coogan 103). Fear became the only thing that Bruce / Batman understood because of his parents death, fear was where he lived in the contemporary age.

Moreover, as a result of the 1986 reboot of the DC Comics stories, the person literally responsible is also never caught either and presumably still at large. Instead of resolution like in previous ages, the contemporary age must live with the idea that maybe the criminals do get away with murder. A sobering fact of the real world illustrated in comics. Each of these stories also frames Batman is a new light, perhaps as insane as the villains he is trying to catch.

The comics depict Batman as he goes out every night as a vigilante. That word has certain connotations as well:

vigilante :"member of a vigilance committee," 1856, Amer.Eng., from Sp. vigilante, lit. "watchman," from L. vigilantem (see vigilance). Vigilant man in same sense is attested from 1824 in a Missouri context. Vigilance committees kept informal rough order on the frontier or in other places where official authority was imperfect. (Online Etymology Dictionary)
Sure, Batman goes out and fights crime as a vigilante. With vigilance comes the idea that he is watching over someone as well. Some comics suggest that he watches over the citizens of Gotham, but Gotham is hardly a frontier town where authority is imperfect. Nash suggests since “Batman is a child of postmodernity… [Batman is] a thorn in the side of the legal and political structures. Batman’s activities are quite illegal” (Nash 41). However, instead of being vigilant Batman might also be holding a nightly “vigil” for his parents.

Besides criminals getting away with murder in the 1980s, the destruction of the Batman family is evidenced in the stories of the contemporary period. In Alan Moore’s Batman: A Killing Joke, not only is the happy-go-lucky Batgirl from the 60s shot, she is raped and humiliated as her father is shown pictures of the act (For Cover, See Figure Y). This was an act of brutality on the part of the Joker, to prove that Batman is as crazy as him. Batman appears to let him win the argument but catches him as a result. As terrible to the Bat Family as The Killing Joke was, A Death in the Family was unthinkable in the comic book world.

Robin (Jason Todd) in the Contemporary Age
As Dick Grayson got older he eventually, as all good children and robins do, had to leave the nest and make his own way in the world. In the early 1980s Dick Grayson gave up being Robin. Robin’s absence left a vacancy in the Bat Family. For a few years, Batman operated without a Robin character and then in 1983 DC introduced a new and a very unpopular Robin character named Jason Todd.

An interviewer asked Death in the Family writer Denny O’Neil about Jason Todd as Robin: “He was invented by Gerry Conway in an origin that is a virtual duplication of Dick Grayson’s Robin origin… I think they thought ‘We’ve got to have a Robin in the series, so let’s
go with the tried and true. This Robin worked for so many years so let’s do him again’” (Pearson and Uricchio 21). The orphaned Jason Todd was caught stealing the tires off the BatMobile and Bruce took him in (See Figure W). The cloning technique did not take. When asked why everyone hated the new Robin, O’Neil replied: “They did hate him. I don’t know if it was fan craziness – maybe they saw him as usurping Dick Grayson’s position. Some of the mail indicated that this was at least on some people’s minds” (Pearson and Uricchio 21). Batman was bleeding readership and they needed to do something about the Robin problem.

Further, he says, “I think once writers became aware that fans didn’t like Jason they began to make him more bratty. “So we did a story in which it was left vague as to whether or not Jason pushed someone off a balcony. The writer, Jim Starlin thought he did – I thought he didn’t, but we let the reader decide. There was certainly no doubt that throughout much of the story he wanted to push this guy off the balcony” (Quoted in Pearson and Uricchio 21). In the Golden Age Batman clearly sent a guy off a balcony on-panel and no one blinked twice. In the Contemporary Age, Robin might have sent a guy off a balcony off-panel and the readers were in an uproar. Batman, as a good father should, suspends Jason from duty. This age stressed another facet of heroism, the antihero. Characters like The Punisher were introduced, not as a character that you wanted to emulate but one who still was technically on the side of the good guys. The Punisher murders criminals. Murder is wrong, but philosophically does the end justify the means? These kinds of heroes sat in a truly gray area that was vastly explored in the contemporary postmodern era of comic books.

Remember from the Golden Age heritage the ability of the superhero to exert power and solve the world’s problems effortlessly, without harm to oneself. By the time that Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and other writers like them were writing comic books, heroes are getting hurt on a
regular basis; they are being bruised, stabbed and shot. The ante was upped once again by Jim Starlin in Batman #426-429 (12/1988-1/1989 – See Figure X) in a storyline titled “A Death in the Family.”

O’Neil notes, “And then when we were building up to the death of Robin we made him rebellious – he ran away and in a way he got what he was asking for. He disobeyed Batman twice and that’s what led to his demise” (Pearson and Uricchio 21). Consider Robin disobeying his surrogate father’s orders and being killed. The greater hegemonic message is that to disobey one’s father incurs punishment.

The Joker murders him by strapping him to a bomb after beating him within an inch of his life with a crowbar. Fans were allowed to vote on the final fate of Jason. By a narrow margin of a couple hundred votes, Jason was sent to his death (See Figures Z & AA). This was not only a vote against Jason, but also a vote for Batman and respect for the father figure. Jason Todd was tracing his birth mother when the Joker killed him. He had used the resources of the bat-cave and found her; so he died no longer an orphan.

At the end of the story, the Joker, the villain, is dressed in traditional Middle-Eastern attire and gets away with the caper because of his diplomatic immunity as UN ambassador from Iran. Another story from 1987 titled Batman: Son of the Demon from 1987 featured acts of terrorism as an impetus to push the USSR to the brink of war with America (Bingham). One scene in particular has the USSR president Gorbachev, by name, calling the American president and asking him if he realizes that “this means war,” to which the president replies simply, “yes.” These reflect a new American consideration that allows for acceptable losses. Once again a gray area: are the ends of heroism worth the means?
Deaths of major characters was not new in 1988. In Amazing Spider-Man #121 (June 1973) the death of a major character in the Spider-Man family marked a true questioning of the ends and means of heroism. In this issue Gwen Stacy, Peter Parker’s girlfriend, is being held hostage by the Green Goblin. Green Goblin tosses her off the bridge in order to get away, and the panel implies that Spider-Man breaks her neck during the fall when he uses his webbing to catch her when she was already falling too fast. Gerry Conway, a writer of Spider-Man, says, with “Gwen’s death, we presented a hero who is not only flawed, but actually may be responsible for the death of his girlfriend.” Further, “Uncle Ben died because Peter didn’t use his power. Gwen dies as a consequence of Peter using his power” (DeFalco 47).

After the call-in vote from Batman’s A Death in the Family storyline, and by the 1990s, readers, or fans, discovered that their purchasing decisions affected the comics published. If fans bought a book because of a particular artistic style, the next month several books would emulate that art style. Eventually as the period wore on style became privileged over substance, gimmicks became the norm: truly the postmodern style. People were collecting rather than reading comics, and sales plummeted.

One gimmick that exemplified the worst of times was the return of Peter Parker’s parents. There was a catch, as there always was with Spider-Man; the problem was that when it was executed no one knew what the catch was. In an interview David Michelinie, writer for Spider-Man in the early 1990s claims he was forced by editorial to bring back Peter’s parents. As a testament to the gimmicky times the 1990s, were for comics, the editor had no idea where to go or what to do with the story line. Michelinie says, “I didn’t know if they were robots, aliens, or clones! Neither did [the editorial]. He hadn’t figured it out yet” (DeFalco 137). Ultimately, they
are found to be clones\textsuperscript{21} and not his real parents. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to construct a story that readers care about if no one in charge of writing the story cares. Eventually Spider-Man was given a new issue number one and people who cared about the character more than the copyright holdings were on the book in 1998. The move to bring back Peter’s parents proved that Marvel did know how to run Spider-Man at the time. Central to his character is the fact that he’s an orphan.

The contemporary era was littered with bodies; Jason Todd, Gwen Stacy, and the Parker clones. The distinction between the way Superman and Batman were handled in this era really shows the sharp contrast between the polarized personalities and their target audiences. Superman had eliminated his orphanhood, married his sweetheart, and for the most part could be handed to a child. Batman was deconstructed and his family destroyed during this era, effectively making him a lone wolf and reinforcing his orphan status. However, the debate takes a turn when asked which character has grown more. There are arguments for either side. The postmodernist impulses of gimmicks and fake deaths and resurrections told different stories for the older audience that reads comic books.

\textsuperscript{21} (or something).
CHAPTER 5 – SUPER HEROISM & THE ALTERNATIVE FAMILY (POST-9/11)

“This family structure reproduces itself through a process of inheritance which constitutes not only material wealth but name, social place and familial tradition/practices” (Peters 123).

Each of the superhero characters latches on to a surrogate of one form or another. Superman has Ma Kent and Pa Kent. Batman has Alfred the Butler. Spider-Man has Aunt May and Uncle Ben. They all created surrogate families. Peters suggests that the family definition was in crisis in the Victorian Era; just like when the family changed form from the 1980s to today with the breakdown of the nuclear family. Therefore, the superhero’s nontraditional families come to represent one’s own family.

Family (etymology) c.1400, "servants of a household," from L. familia "household," including relatives and servants, from famulus "servant," of unknown origin. The classical L. sense recorded in Eng. from 1545; the main modern sense of "those connected by blood" (whether living together or not) is first attested 1667. Replaced O.E. hiwscipe. Buzzword family values first recorded 1966. Phrase in a family way "pregnant" is from 1796. Family circle is 1809; family man, one devoted to wife and children, is 1856 (earlier it meant "thief," 1788, from family in slang sense of "the fraternity of thieves"). (Online Etymology Dictionary)

As any hero’s story moves forward, he appears to become less of an orphan by taking on various surrogate families. Kaveney points out that all of these relationships are almost always “work-in-progress, as prickly soap operas in which things can go wrong” (Kaveney 9).

What follows is a short run-down of the non-family units and the orphan’s relationship to them. For Superman, as a child his strongest relationship is with the Kents. They remain his moral center and his parents. As an adult Superman in the Silver Age, Perry White acted as a father figure at work, and Clark acted as the big brother for Lois and Jimmy; Clark was a brother, and Superman was a patriarch. In a capacity of heteronormative adult relationships, Superman eventually marries Lois.
Batman often treats his adoptive family like coworkers. His relationship with Alfred over the years has fluctuated from father to co-conspirator to field medic “Unlike Kal-El, Bruce Wayne’s connection with his family and heritage was not broken at the moment of his parents’ death. “His father provided for him wealth and a butler, Alfred” (Coogan 103). If Batman has a true father figure, it might be Commissioner Gordon. Batman sees him as the embodiment of everything he wishes he could be, but limited by things like the law. Even though fathers are hard to pinpoint, various Robins as his children are not. Dick Grayson is the oldest child to whom all the other children have to compare. Jason Todd is the angry middle child. And Tim Drake is the youngest son that Bruce wishes he could take care of more, but who is clearly too independent. Batman has had a more problematic relationship with daughters. Neither Carrie Kelly (the female Robin from The Dark Knight Returns) nor Stephanie Brown (the female Robin that “died” recently) ever made the grade in Batman’s opinion. As I stated earlier, Batman treats most of the Batman Family as coworkers. This was precipitated by his failures and the destruction of the Batman Family in the 80s. The events of killing Robin and maiming Batgirl have caused him to want to distance himself. Batgirl used a network called The Birds of Prey to allow Batman that distance, as well as Batman’s memberships in the Justice League of America and the Outsiders allows him distant friendships. If Batman had a “brother” it would be Superman; in fact in many early appearances in World’s Finest the resemblance was used to fool people.

Spider-Man’s heart is with Aunt May & Uncle Ben. If comic books were not adventure based, Aunt May could have been the star of the comic book. The story could have revolved around the day-to-day dealings of raising a child in a single parent household and dealing with

22 DC faked her death too.
moving on after the death of a loved one. It is tough to know if this would have sold as many copies, or had the staying power, or if Aunt May would have even been considered a hero.\textsuperscript{23} Having Aunt May in his life really grounded Peter. Moreover, Aunt May presence within Peter’s life contains his sexuality as well. As a teen, Peter has a curfew and cannot bring girls home.

“Since sex cannot be integrated with the personality of one engaged in a redemptive mission, it must be segmented, placed in a separate compartment sealed off from the world of work, public affairs, and ones deepest personal commitments” (Coogan 189). However, needing a heteronormative adult relationship, Peter eventually marries Mary Jane.

In an ongoing imagined story set in what is called “MC2 universe,” Mary Jane and Peter have a child that eventually becomes her own character named Spider-Girl. She is not orphaned and yet is still a hero, just like her father. The story is compelling because the draw is how she balances her family life, disapproving father, and superheroism, just like dad. Spider-Girl’s origin causes one to wonder if the “orphan narrative” is necessarily at the core of these characters.

Yet the orphan narrative is what we understand about the characters, as evidenced by postmodernism. Recently a humorous picture circulated around the internet. It shows Robin asking Batman, “Hey Batman, What are your parents getting you for Christ-“ Batman slaps him and screams “MY PARENTS ARE DEEAAAAAAAAD!!!” The panel was from another comic and totally faked. However, the joke remains. The picture shows clear ambivalence to the subject matter as it is a funny juxtaposition and yet someone’s parents tragically being killed should not

\textsuperscript{23} Something like this was tried with a series titled “Trouble” in 2000. This book told the story of Peter’s parents, Aunt and Uncle as teenagers, and someone gets pregnant. It was clearly intended as a stab at reviving romance genre comics. It failed miserably.
be funny. The audience is “in on the joke,” they know the story and the characters. It clearly embodies the postmodern sensibility (See Figures BB & CC).

As the audience for comics grew older they wanted more adult texts. Strictly speaking, this audience is more accepting of adult themes, which include curse words, nudity and violence.24 In 2001 Marvel started the “MAX Universe,” which was originally intended as a separate publication venue for more adult-themed comics, but it proved popular enough to be folded into the mainline comics. A character named Jessica Jones proves that comic books are keenly aware of how they treat characters and time. Jessica’s book Alias25 was about a washed-up hero who could not cut it in the big leagues and settles into a less than extraordinary life. The creators of the book shoehorned Jessica into a 1970s-era Avengers roster, and into comic book history, in which she did not exist previously. It created the effect that because she never existed in history she was a forgotten hero. Her origin story stated that she became a superhero after her parents were killed. Since she was an orphan, no one would miss her and scientists could freely run an experiment on her. She took the same serum that made Captain America. Kaveney says that this is a part of the Marvel stock origin, “the accident, the alienation, the sense that no one understands; and the realization that one is not like the others” (Kaveney 89). Alias followed up on many of the tropes that adult audiences knew to exist in comic books, including orphaning. The creators of Alias gave the audience a shorthand for the superhero narrative with the orphaned Jessica Jones, putting her into a tradition that was seventy years old by this time.

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24 When Marvel launched the MAX line the first word on the first page of the first book, Alias, was “Fuck.” In addition to the coarse language, that issue also featured a drunken super-hero and (what some speculated) a scene with anal sex. Clearly, Marvel is not aiming at a child audience with this book.

25 There was no relationship to the television show, which ran concurrently with the comic book.
Marvel’s MAX imprint also published a title in 2003 called *Supreme Power*. This book is for “mature readers” retelling of the formation of DC Comics’ Justice League\(^\text{26}\). The story opens up with a pod crashing into a Kansas cornfield. A young couple finds the child in the pod. However, the narrative splits from what the reader knew of the Superman origin when the government took custody of the child and raised him in a camp. This camp is a simulacrum of ideal American life, with a fake-perfect home, fake-perfect family, fake-perfect school and a fake name, Mark Milton. The United States government also reverse-engineered the pod and its contents to create other heroes. Milton grows up and discovers the ruse; he is confused about the less-perfect real outside world and lashes out as a result.

While not a Superman text in the strictest sense of the word, I have heard people argue that this is the truest Superman story they have ever read. The reason is that Superman is somewhat removed from being able to tell certain kinds of stories because of his status as an icon; as an icon he has responsibility. Jane Gaines in an article about the Superman trademark asked the reader to consider the mythic Superman. “Capital and literary form appear as competing interests in Superman as with no other popular figure because of his existence as both a consumable and an inconsumable character” (Gaines 181). His trademark as a property is worth too much now that it cannot be sullied, telling the stories of sex and violence that *Supreme Power* does as a parody text. For example, Mark Milton, Hyperion (Superman) had a dog in the story. When the character discovered his heat vision, he accidently incinerated the dog; from behind the glass the soldiers, watching, mused, “Spot was a good name for him after all” (Straczynski 12). There was also a clear illustration of American hegemony on the cover of the

\(^{26}\) *Supreme Power* was also a retelling of an earlier Marvel Comic called “Squadron Supreme,” from early Avengers stories, popularized in the 1980s, and itself was Marvel’s earlier stab at the DC Justice League heroes.
first issue. Several Superman covers feature Superman standing with a puffed chest and American flag in the background, and sometimes an eagle sometimes not (i.e. Figures C-F). On the first issue of *Supreme Power* Milton as a child stands on a slab, very angry-faced, glaring at the reader and draped in the American flag, as if to say, “Look what you’ve created America.” The family in *Supreme Power* is a simulacrum but probably not very different from the couple the Superman texts would have the readers believe raised Clark. *Supreme Power* remains a skeptical text about whether an all-powerful alien, even a well-mannered one, would be friendly.

Besides trying to meet the needs of their current audience, the two largest comic book publishers Marvel and DC, have attempted to reach former and new readers with Spider-Man, Superman and Batman. However, when assessing the problems with attracting these audiences it was discovered that the more than seventy years of history was off-putting. In an effort to follow up on the theme of simplifying continuity within comics readership, Marvel established their Ultimate line and DC established their All-Star line. Marvel updated the timeline for their Spider-Man story, and asked what would happen if Spider-Man happened today instead of the 1960s. The main changes were small; the spider that bites Peter is genetically enhanced instead of irradiated, because cloning reflects the audience anxiety of today more than radioactive particles. Other minor changes are that the *Daily Bugle* is an online newspaper and Aunt May is clearly an empowered woman. These changes were made for newreaderships and intended for a teen audience. For DC comics’ part, they did not really aim at the new reader. “DC Comics publicized *All-Star Batman and Robin* as a return to the characters' roots that was designed for people who may not have read *Batman* comics for years, and hence was divorced from the complicated continuity of recent times” (Sanderson).
The series All Star Batman and Robin (2005 – current) does not occur as a part of the mainline Batman story. In theory, it tells the same story as the original Batman comics. However, the book makes some important origin deviations. All Star Batman and Robin retells the first meeting between Batman and Robin, in which the largest difference is the greater stress on Batman being clearly insane. In the first issue Dick “the first Robin” Grasyon’s parents are murdered, as happened in the regular comics. The difference is that instead of making it look like a trapeze accident, as with the old origin, the creative team opted to murder them outright. After landing from the trapeze, the Graysons are both shot in the head, leaving Dick alone. The next few panels show a crazed Batman kidnapping and taking Dick away, telling him “You’ve been drafted into a war” (Miller [All Star Batman and Robin #1] See Figures FF - HH). As I stated this does not happen in the mainline story, but there can be some concepts applied from the mainline. With the original Robin, Batman did impart his beliefs onto a young child about the cause and solution, instilling a worldview in the minor child, as a parent would do. It is not as extreme as in the All-Star version, but never the less the point is made. Interestingly, the creative team of the All-Star book never told Batman’s own origin. The assumption, which they made, was that readers would know Batman’s own origin as an orphaned child.

Like All Star Batman and Robin, All Star Superman does not occur in the mainline Superman books. The origin story is broken down into four panels and eight words on the first page, "Doomed planet," "Desperate scientists," "Last hope," "Kindly couple" (Morrison 1- See Figure EE). The minimalist approach to telling each of these origin stories allows readers already familiar with the stories to fill in their own gaps with what they believe is important to the origin. If an older reader enjoyed the stories of Superboy as a child, this eight-word origin does not address it, but does nothing to negate it. If someone is a younger reader and thinks that the
Birthright origin is THE Superman origin, once again nothing is negated. In effect, DC Comics wanted the All Star characters to be everyone’s characters.

Throughout this thesis, I have thrown around the term “comics scholarship.” After the year 2000 and particularly after 9/11, and the deconstruction of the superhero has grown further into academic study. I have maintained throughout this essay that, if nothing else, comics of the various eras can be used as historical artifacts that trace the anxieties of the times in which they were created, further they can show the morals which that society valued in the guise of how the hero should rightfully act. In the post-9/11 era, there was some call for a full reconstruction of the superhero genre; one way this reconstruction occurred was in film. The popularity of films based on the properties which are the focus of this thesis, have sky rocketed in the post-9/11 era.

Three movies – Spider-Man, Batman Begins, and Superman Returns – told the classic origin stories. Spider-Man told the orphan origin almost panel by panel from Amazing Fantasy #15. Batman Begins tells the origin with a clear stress on Bruce’s time with the ninjas after the death of his parents, partially to delineate the movie as an action movie and partly to stress the individual aspect of what he does. The Batman from Batman Begins does not take a Robin character; it would not make sense with the way of the lone ninja. In Batman Begins the origin story was told as a robbery but buttressed by showing the philanthropy of Thomas Wayne, and also stressed the fact that Bruce was raised by Alfred. The origin stories as told from the 1930s, almost seventy years earlier, remained largely intact.

Lastly, Superman Returns featured a montage at the beginning that explained Krypton and assumed audience knowledge of the Kents. One possible explanation for assumed knowledge was the fact that the weekly WB/CW television show Smallville, which featured
plain clothes Clark Kent learning about his powers and adventuring as a teenager, ran concurrently with the release of *Superman Returns*. More likely, however, the filmmakers of *Superman Returns* felt they were dealing with a knowledgeable audience and did not need to rehash the origin. Near the end of *Superman Returns*, the audience finds out that Superman has become somewhat of his own worst enemy. In his time off world, prior to the film, Lois Lane was pregnant with his child and met another man. Superman created a fatherless “orphan.” The reflection of this in the 2000-era was not without controversy but was not as shocking as it would have been for earlier audiences, whose members saw Superman as a pillar of conservative hope.

As of the completion of this thesis, some interesting things are happening in the Superman and Batman comic books regarding the families and origins of the characters. For Superman, in *Action Comics* #870 (2008), Pa Kent suffers a fatal heart attack and dies. Superman may be a partial orphan again. This lead into a storyline for Superman to leave Metropolis called, “New Krypton,” in which the Bottle City of Kandor has been enlarged and all the citizens are superpowered (and not interested in assimilating to Earth/America as Clark did). Given that Clark was a model immigrant in the Golden Age, this raises all manner of racial allegories. As a result of all this, Superman feels he needs to take responsibility for the “New Krypton” and its citizens. In his own books, Superman had proxy characters take over his role in both *Action Comics* and *Superman*. This seems to be another undoing of his origin as being the sole orphan of a dead world.

In Batman’s books, *Detective Comics* and *Batman*, Bruce Wayne has recently discovered that he was the absentee father of a child, Damien, whom he conceived in the *Son of the Demon* book with the daughter of a super villain. However, the reunion of father and long-lost son did
not last long; without getting into too much detail about the current state of the books, Bruce Wayne is currently dead. Damien’s half-brother Dick Grayson (the first Robin) is currently raising him as a fatherless orphan and training him. Dick took over Batman’s role, continuing the legacy and Damien took over the mantle of Robin. DC Comics editor Dan DiDio said in an interview dated May 28th 2009,

Dick and Damian are the reverse of Bruce and Dick as Batman and Robin. Bruce was grim and Dick kept him light and centered, now we have something that is a complete reversal. Batman is the lighter one, and the one who’s enjoying what he does, and now he is the one who has to lighten this grim and gritty kid, and make him more understanding of the role of a hero. (Quoted in Brady)

With the role of Batman and Robin both filled by orphans, the cycle begins anew.27

In Spider-Man’s core book, Amazing Spider-Man, the editorial committees have decided to remove Peter Parker’s marriage with Mary Jane from the storyline entirely; not a divorce, but a complete removal, in an ill-conceived deal with the devil, as if it never existed. Marvel editor-in-chief Joe Quesada is quoted as saying,

I think Peter getting divorced to me says that they gave up on their love, that their life in love together was so awful, so stressful, so unfulfilling that they had to raise a red flag and walk away from it. They quit on their marriage and even more tragic, they quit on each other. In other words, Peter would rather be alone and single than to spend another moment with MJ. Plain and simple, that's just a Spider-Man story I don't want to tell and it's not something that I would like to have associated with Peter Parker and MJ. You guys may feel differently, but I just think it's the wrong thing to do with the character and the wrong message to send. (Weiland)

Quesada claims to be returning Spider-Man to his roots, when many readers started reading the book. The tension of the Spider-Man book now is what it always has been: how Peter balances superheroics and family. The responsible thing in Peter’s eyes would have been to choose one or

27 Until the gimmick is over and DC brings back Bruce Wayne.
the other. Once again, the superhero as role model gets in the way of a story that could have told itself.

The currently storylines within the films and the comic books play with the character’s origin stories. The stories in Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man continue having their real families and constructed families played with. They tweak the orphaned status of the characters to bring a greater clarity to the audience, which consumes them today. Postmodern tales like Alias and Supreme Power recycle the same origin stories with a modern twist. The Superman, Batman and Spider-Man books have all had side projects in order to keep them current and to recapture the older audiences. The films and comic books continue to recycle the orphan narratives 70 years later to today’s audiences.
Figure A - Painting titled "Orphans" by Sir Thomas Kenington (1885)
Figure B – First origin of Superman (Action Comics #1 – 1938)
Figure C Superman (vol.1) #14 (1/1942)

Figure D Superman (vol.1) #24 (9/1944)

Figure E (Adventures of) Superman (vol.1) #424 (1/1987)

Figure F (Adventures of) Superman (vol.1) #600 (3/2002)
Figure G (Origin story from Batman #3, re-colored from Detective #33)

Figure H (Origin of Robin) Detective issue #38 (04/1940)
Figure I – Jimmy Olsen #98

Figure J – Detective Comics #235, Sept 1956

Figure K – Superman #146 (1961)
Figure L - “The Superman Family”

Figure M - “The Batman Family”

Figure N - Batman #122
Figure O – Cousins!

Figure P – Supergirl’s conflict

Figure Q – Detective #233 (July 1956), BatWoman’s feminist message

Figure R – Spider-Man’s origin – Amazing Fantasy #15 (1962) p.11
...crashing through the window of your study...

...it comes...

I have seen it before...somewhere...

...it frightened me...as a boy...

...it frightened me...

...it frightened me...

I shall become a bat...

Father...
Figure W - Robin's Origin (Jason Todd)

Figure X - Batman #426 (1988)

Figure Y - Batman: The Killing Joke (1988)
Figure BB - A joke which circulated around the internet

Figure CC - Panel from 1965's World's Finest #153
Thanks: http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/2009/01/01/batman-slaps-robin-the-origin-of-the-panel/

Figure DD - Cover Supreme Power #1 (2003)

Figure EE - All Star Superman #1 (2006) p.1
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