

DICK GRAYSON: RELATABILITY, CATHARSIS, AND THE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT  
OF A SUPERHERO

Joshua Ryan Smith

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Committee:

Jeffrey Brown, Advisor

Esther Clinton

Jeremy Wallach

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## ABSTRACT

Jeffrey Brown, Advisor

Dick Grayson, also known as Nightwing and Batman's first Robin, is an important but largely unexplored character within the Batman mythos in DC Comics. There has been much scholarship done on Batman, however, this scholarship fails to address the importance of Dick Grayson. This applies not only to his additions to the Batman mythos, but also to the role he has played in comic book history; he was the first sidekick in superhero comic books, and was one of the first superheroes in all of comics, being introduced shortly after industry titans Superman and Batman. Through Grayson, this thesis will illustrate how comic book superheroes work to inspire us, teach us valuable life lessons, provide social and moral scripts, and promote the development of positive morals, healthy masculinity, and coping mechanisms amongst their audience. Dick Grayson will be used as a specific example of this, as the scope of research must be narrowed to a specific hero, as trying to analyze multiple characters would be unwieldy. This thesis provides an analysis of how Grayson is constructed as a character through the application of Joseph Campbell's model of the hero's journey, and psychological theory including: Sandra L. Bloom's research in childhood and psychic trauma, Cathy Caruth's work regarding post-traumatic stress disorder, and the theory of heroic leadership dynamic from Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals. By using these theories and methodologies, this thesis will show how and why Dick Grayson is an exceptional example of the promotion of positive development in superhero comic books.

For my late Father, Joseph Smith, who introduced me to Batman, and my Mother, Debra Smith,  
who has endlessly supported me and my education.

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## THESIS INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

In 2016, I was a fresh college graduate who was stuck in a rut, working late-night shifts in my local Sears Hardware store with no clear direction or purpose. In between my daily shifts of monotonous shelf-stocking, I often found myself lost in another universe, contained within the pages of comic books, particularly in the *Nightwing* series. Nightwing was Dick Grayson, Batman's first Robin, but all-grown up. With Grayson working as his own independent hero, the series instantly caught my fascination.

I was familiar with Grayson, as I had first been introduced to him by my Dad and Grandfather, through *Batman: The Animated Series* and *The New Batman Adventures*. Watching these shows with the two of them are some of the earliest and, now, most cherished memories I have. Every school day I sprinted down the street from the school bus to watch these shows, as I couldn't dare miss a second of my Batman fix on Kids' WB. I always found Grayson to be "cool" – he had a spiffy haircut, was smart and athletic, had a motorcycle, and had the best-looking costume on the show as both Robin and Nightwing. Despite how cool he was, he had always been portrayed as Batman's sidekick in these shows, never proving himself to truly be an independent hero in his own right, even after appearing as Nightwing. This, however, was different from the *Nightwing* comic books I was now reading, as Grayson had moved out of Batman's domain of Gotham City and distanced himself from Batman, as he wanted to be more independent and to find his purpose in the DC Comics Universe. This resonated with me as a



reader. Grayson was no longer just the “cool” guy with an even cooler costume; I was older now, and I read deeper into the character.

I had similar goals of my own. I too wanted to find my purpose and place in the world and become more independent through this new graduate school adventure. This left me feeling empathetic towards Grayson, as his goals and struggles very closely mirrored my own. After catching up on the ongoing *Nightwing* title, I found myself going backwards through comics, collecting and reading as many of Grayson’s past stories (as both Robin and Nightwing) as I could find. I was desperate to piece together his journey and character transformation.

In modern comic books, sidekicks are commonplace. However, when Dick Grayson was first introduced as Batman’s (Bruce Wayne’s) sidekick, Robin, in April of 1940, they were a new concept. Grayson’s immediate success paved the way for more sidekicks to emerge, such as Bucky Barnes (Captain America), and Wonder Girl (Wonder Woman). Grayson’s Robin changed superhero comic books forever, but unfortunately, Grayson would not move past the role of sidekick until the late 1970s and early 1980s when the creative team of Marv Wolfman and George Perez took over his direction. During these years, Grayson would drop out of college, pass his Robin mantle on to a successor, and lead the Teen Titans, becoming his own independent hero, Nightwing. Grayson’s journey is ultimately a coming-of-age story and the audience gets to see him deal with several “real world” problems and struggles such as romance, identity development, and finding a purpose in the world. With comics being marketed to young adults, these empathetic qualities endeared Grayson to readers and fans and resulted in him emerging as one of the more complex and intricate characters, not just within the Batman mythos, but within all of DC Comics.

Grayson's character development and traditional coming-of-age story is not just one example of how comic books and their heroic characters and narratives can generate empathy with their readers and fans. Working to help them see and understand their own development and the world outside of comic books, Grayson is the *quintessential* example. His journey is rife with examples of heroism, identity formation, and personal growth that demonstrate how comic books (and Dick Grayson in particular) can teach us about positive human development.

Within the field of comic book studies, much work has already been done on the character of Batman, ranging from psychological and sociological studies to identity-based studies (specific works will be covered later on). However, very little scholarship has focused on the rest of the cast of characters behind the Bat who make up a large part of the Batman mythos within DC Comics. Characters such as the Robins, Nightwing, or Batgirl, are often overlooked, so their impact and importance within the Batman mythos and in comic books as a medium goes largely unnoticed. The Robins, Nightwing, Batgirl, faithful butler Alfred Pennyworth, and many others compose the now relatively large Batman family of crime fighters, with each character having an important and distinct impact on the Batman mythos and serving a role in helping Batman develop as a character.

On his own, Batman is a static character. He does not grow or develop by himself. Rather, he operates within a set of stoic and self-destructive behaviors, as he is still trapped within the trauma of his childhood, when his parents were murdered by a gangster right in front of him. Batman's character only moves forward and develops through the direct involvement of his family and partners, as they allow him to begin to heal emotional damage, develop bonds of friendship and trust, and to come to terms with his trauma, as he watches them do the same and then follows suit. For these reasons, it is important to study these other characters within the

Batman family, as they provide exceptional examples of human development and transformative character growth, both in regards to themselves and to Batman.

Among the Batman family, it is the first Robin, Dick Grayson, who has spent the longest amount of time in Batman's inner circle. Grayson was introduced to readers only eleven months after Batman, so this is true in real time as well as canonically, as he grew up with Batman as his parental figure in life, after his parents were murdered by a gangster when he was a child (similar to what happened to Bruce Wayne). Grayson's consistent presence in Batman comic books from 1940 onward, his storied relationship with Batman, and his uncanny abilities to display high levels of positive human qualities, morals, and development make him not only one of the most valuable characters in the Batman mythos, but one worthy of academic study.

From 1940 onward, Grayson has played a key role in allowing Batman access to character development, changing Batman from his early roots as a grim and brooding detective to a more light-hearted father figure, with Grayson's colorful Robin uniform, witty humor, and heightened sense of humanity. From his earliest days, Grayson worked to make Batman a more relatable and sympathetic character, as he lightened up Batman's dark and tragedy-driven roots. However, Grayson himself would undergo very little to no character development for roughly thirty years, as he is Batman's access to humanity.

In the 1970s, comic books began to take a darker and more mature turn, as publishers were looking to market more towards the young-adult age group of readers, which lead to substantial changes to Batman and Robin. Creators were looking to return Batman to his darker roots, and to do that, the humanity that Grayson's Robin had brought to him had to be removed. Grayson was a tool that had been used to help Batman develop into something more human, by working as an exemplar of human characteristics and qualities. It is those human characteristics

and qualities – courage, loyalty, optimism, selflessness, and strength of heart – that allowed Grayson to transcend this role and appeal to the audience of comic book readers. These qualities are both empathetic and sympathetic, allowing them to be felt by the audience of readers, and that would be further enhanced by the coming-of-age journey that the creative team of writer Marv Wolfman and artist George Perez would send Grayson on beginning in 1980, with *The New Teen Titans* comic series. These positive qualities alongside his coming-of-age journey suggest that the true value of Grayson's character is within his humanity, as it displays what makes him empathetic to readers, how positive human development is present in comic books and heroic narratives, and how this can help the audience see and learn about their own path of development.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Dick Grayson, his human characteristics and qualities, and Joseph Campbell's three-act approach to the hero's journey have yet to receive significant academic study or exploration in regards to each other, as most scholarship within the Batman mythos centers on Batman himself. The objective of this study is to closely analyze Grayson's character in order to highlight him as an exemplar of positive human development within comic books and heroic narratives. This project will examine Campbell's model of the hero's journey, and give credence to how Grayson's multiple run-throughs of this model corresponds with positive human development and the fulfillment of psychological needs of readers and fans. It is important to note that for the sake of this study, human development will be examined through the work of Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, Cathy Caruth, Sandra L. Bloom, and Lenore Terr.

Doing this will work to introduce the application of the hero's journey to characters in superhero comic books, with Grayson serving as a quintessential example. This is done to shed

light on the multi-part correlation between Grayson, the hero's journey, and positive human development. Establishing this correlation will draw attention to the significance that the latter two play in how comic books and heroic narratives connect with their audience. All of this will aid the development of a working relationship between these concepts and establishing the hero's journey as an effective framework through which to analyze, view, and evaluate comic book stories and narratives. Overall, and perhaps most importantly, this project aims to establish a new level of importance to the study of Dick Grayson, and to the role of comic books and their characters in the field of popular culture studies.

A vast majority of this study will focus on examining Dick Grayson within the narratives of DC Comics and the complexities of his character development, along with the examination and application of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey. In order to do this, this project will retain its theoretical focus within Allison and Goethals' heroic leadership dynamic, Douglas V. Propora's hero identification, with Campbell's hero's journey providing additional theoretical framework. There has been significant work done regarding Batman, psychology, and philosophy, including the concept of identity theory from scholars such as Dr. Jeffrey A. Brown, *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity: The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero as Cultural Nexus*, Dr. Travis Langley, *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*, and *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul* edited by Mark D. White. However, aside from *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing, and Batman*, edited by Kristen L. Geaman (to which this study is indebted) there has been no significant work done on examining these concepts and theories in relation to Dick Grayson. Choosing to focus on Grayson, positive human development, trauma theory, and the hero's

journey, rather than on Batman is particularly important and useful for a number of different reasons.

First, it allows for the shift of focus away from the study of Batman to a different character, Dick Grayson, which makes it possible to highlight his importance as a character and to encourage future scholarship on Grayson. This is important because he serves as the quintessential example of the hero's journey and provides examples of human qualities such as loyalty, charisma, optimism, trust, sympathy, as well as a general knack for heroics and a strong sense of justice in ways that Batman does not. These qualities allow Grayson to break ground in morality, human relations, and empathy in terms of comic books studies. Going through multiple coming-of-age style stories, Grayson's growth is something that was decades in the making. This growth and development are things that Batman does not experience, specifically in the manner that Grayson did, as he is presented as having already completed his journey, and is fully developed. The presence of this coming-of-age narrative allows for the incorporation of Allison and Goethals' heroic leadership dynamic and Propora's theories regarding hero identification, and provides a new, different method of examining one of the most important characters in the Batman mythos.

Second, the presence of human development and trauma theory within the medium of comic books works to bolster the understanding of the cultural and psychological importance of superheroes, comic books, and comic book studies. Thanks in large part to the wildly successful performances of Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), superheroes are at the forefront of popularity in popular culture, producing media and merchandise that gross billions of dollars every year. Despite this surge in popularity from the MCU, it is important to remember that the source material for these films is comic books. Superheroes, at their core, function the same way

in both comics and film. They embody specific characteristics and values that their audience can resonate and empathize with, ranging from cultural ideals and values to positive morals and desirable qualities.

Applying the theoretical elements of human development as defined in the article, “Hero Worship: The Elevation of the Human Spirit”, by Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, can highlight these ideals, values, and morals. These can then be drawn out of the text, and be examined in regards to how audiences may identify with them, internalize them, and what functions they fulfill for this audience. In addition to this, the application of trauma theory from the work of Cathy Caruth, Sandra L. Bloom, and Lenore Terr will allow for a detailed psychological examination of the traumatic events that characters like Grayson and Batman are written to experience and withstand. Through the use of these theories this project will examine the cognitive and emotional aspects in which superheroes and heroic narratives can fulfill emotional needs and functions, and promote and inspire healthy mental behavior and development in their audience.

Last, but not least, the hero’s journey is a theoretical focus of this thesis because it provides a structure and lens which can be used to organize, examine, and assess Grayson’s journey and character development over his eighty years of publication. This project aims to show the usefulness of applying Campbell’s model as a framework to analyze and assess comic book stories, heroic narratives, and the characters within them. With its formulaic approach, the hero’s journey can be considered to be the epitome of the heroic narrative archetype of storytelling, as it can be seen in some of the most well-received popular culture media of all time. Campbell’s model of the hero’s journey is notably present in George Lucas’ *Star Wars* film trilogy and its

main protagonist, Luke Skywalker, as well as the *Harry Potter* novel and film series by J. K. Rowling.

### **Chapter Breakdowns**

Chapter 1 of this project will be devoted to the examination of Dick Grayson's characterization, specifically: his heroic qualities, his role as a positive moral compass, and how he represents a healthier brand of masculinity. Grayson's behaviors and actions will be analyzed, and at times, compared with those of his mentor, Batman, in order to draw attention to the differences in the two as representations of healthy masculinity. Additionally, this chapter will see the application of the hero's journey to Grayson using Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and the close textual analysis of important comic book storylines. This is essential to this project, as Grayson's character and journey exemplify Campbell's model. By definition, Campbell's hero's journey consists of seventeen different steps that the character progresses through to complete the hero's journey and return with their ultimate boon. However, not all examples of the this journey need to contain these seventeen steps, and will instead be divided into three different acts. Grayson's journeys do not always contain all seventeen stages, but they do align with the three-act approach, which will be examined in detail in this chapter. To display this, this chapter will see Grayson's journeys each divided up by a departure, an initiation, and a return.

By providing a close reading and analysis of Campbell's work, and textual analysis of a number of important comic book issues and storylines that are heavily focused on Dick Grayson as Robin, Nightwing, and Batman, chapter one will acquaint readers with Campbell's model and explain how Grayson fits into the structure of the hero's journey. This process is important because it is vital that readers understand the main theoretical framework that is applied in this



project, and how its application works to clarify Grayson's status as a hero and allows for a more approachable organization of his journeys.

With chapter one working to introduce the concept and framework of the hero's journey and its application to Grayson, chapter two will shift the focus to the presence of trauma theory within Grayson's journey and characterization. Chapter two looks to do this by incorporating the concepts of psychic and childhood trauma as defined in the work of Lenore Terr, *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood* and in Sandra L. Bloom's article, "Trauma Theory Abbreviated". Using the work of Terr and Bloom, this chapter will analyze the traumatic events that both Dick Grayson and Bruce Wayne have been written to experience, and examine the ways in which they cope with them. These examples of Grayson's coping will reveal how Grayson is constructed by writers to undergo healthy mental development and how it is possible to cope with, and recover from highly traumatizing events. The analysis and assessment of Grayson's positive mental development and the comparison of it with Wayne's more negative development is key here, as it exemplifies how Grayson functions as a symbol of positivity and was able to develop into a healthy adult and hero.

This chapter works to use the differences in the mental and emotional development of Grayson and Wayne and to show that it is possible to frame their relationship within trauma theory. More importantly, with the use of textual analysis, citing key dialogue, and examining important scenes and comic book panels, this chapter will analyze Grayson's trauma and positive development, and recovery in order to display that even though he is a fictional character, it is possible for him to inspire his audience to do the same.

It is here that I would also like to note the scope of the source material that will be examined within the first two chapters. These chapters in particular will cover main continuity

comic books from DC Comics that were published between 1940 and 2020, specifically within the *Batman*, *Detective Comics*, *Nightwing*, *Robin*, *Batman and Robin*, and *The New Teen Titans* comic series. Being specific to the main continuity comic book characterization of Grayson is important, as there are numerous iterations of Grayson that exist in various other DC Comics books, such as alternate timeline or alternate Earth versions, that stray from his representation in the main continuity. The same can be said about Grayson's representation in other media, including *Batman: The Animated Series*, the films *Batman Forever* and *Batman & Robin*, and the live-action *Titans* series currently airing on the DC Universe App (although these iterations will be examined in chapter three). Incorporating these different iterations of Grayson that exist outside of the main continuity of DC Comics would only work to complicate and jeopardize the cohesive characterization and analysis that these stories work to establish, therefore they will largely be omitted from consideration.

Chapter three will work to establish an understanding of the importance of Dick Grayson as a character. This includes how important Grayson is to the development of the Batman mythos, and also the importance of the historical legacy that his character has established. By examining Grayson's various interpretations, both inside and outside of comic books, this chapter will address how Grayson has been overlooked and denigrated as a character, and how this can be detrimental to the importance of his legacy. In order to accomplish this, this chapter will analyze how being overlooked has affected his representations in both film and comic books, and will frame the legacy he established as Robin in a historical context, in order to draw attention to its importance.

In addition to this, chapter three will once again examine trauma theory, however, it will do this using Cathy Caruth's work regarding the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD). This will also see the scope of application be expanded, as it will not be focused only on the relationship between Grayson and Wayne. Here, Caruth's trauma theory and definition of PTSD will be applied to other members of the Batman family, particularly Bruce Wayne, Jason Todd, and Damian Wayne, in order to emphasize Grayson's status as the healthiest member of the metaphorical family. In closing, this chapter will examine Grayson's relationships with the members of the Batman family, specifically Tim Drake and Damian Wayne, and how he moves his fellow family members forward, into positive character progression. In order to accomplish this, this chapter will turn to the work of David Kingsley in chapter four of *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing, and Batman*.

Following these three chapters, the conclusion looks to bring all of this together, in order to display how comic book superheroes, specifically Dick Grayson, work to show the importance of the presence of Campbell's model of the hero's journey and human development in their heroic narratives. In addition to this, this project aims to establish an understanding of how Grayson, and other characters similar to him play a crucial role in how we construct ourselves and our own identities. When viewed through particular theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear that heroic characters like Grayson can fulfill emotional and psychological needs for their audiences.

## CHAPTER I. DICK GRAYSON AND THE HERO'S JOURNEY

### **Introduction**

Heroes work to educate, motivate, and inspire us, existing in many forms and iterations, both fictional and non-fictional. World leaders (Barack Obama), humanitarians (Bill Gates), and professional athletes (LeBron James) are just some examples of real-world heroes whose courage, extraordinary feats, and great successes can inspire us to action. We can also find this inspiration and motivation from fictional heroes. In the case of this thesis, I will argue that comic book superheroes, who are often written to personify particular heroic traits and characteristics that appeal to us can function in the exact same way. Despite existing in fictional worlds and realms outside of our own, these superheroes have become cultural touchstones that have enraptured readers over multiple generations. In addition to cosmic and world-ending threats, they also cope with real-world issues and challenges that are comparable to our own. They go about facing these obstacles with heroism, courage, and unyielding resolve, allowing them to emotionally resonate with us and our desires to succeed, as well as play a crucial and critical role in how we construct ourselves and our own individual identities.

Along with these desires to succeed, definitions of heroic behavior are the focus of Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals work in *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them*. In addition to Allison and Goethals' analysis of heroism, this chapter will also incorporate their framework of heroic leadership dynamic (HLD), Douglas V. Porpora's concept of hero identification, Jeffrey A. Brown's exceptional analysis of the character of Batman in his work *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity: The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero as Cultural Nexus*, and Kristen L. Geaman's groundbreaking edited volume, *Dick Grayson, Boy Wonder: Scholars and Creators on 75 Years of Robin, Nightwing, and Batman*. Furthermore, it is

important to include the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in the scope of not only this chapter, but of this entire project as a whole. Campbell established the hero's journey as a universal structure that sits at the core of many of culture's greatest mythic and heroic tales. This is the tried-and-true framework of heroic narrative. As with all formulaic structure, the hero's journey tends to be repetitive, and a predictable pattern does exist within Campbell's mythological framework. However, its presence and use throughout the history of not only popular culture, but culturally influential stories throughout the world, is undeniable and must be explored. Using each of these works, as well as an extensive analysis of Dick Grayson's characterization and construction, this chapter will demonstrate how these make-believe, fictitious characters are written and crafted to be "*hero-prototypes* – individuals possessing powerful heroic qualities that we easily recognize and admire" (Allison and Goethals, 32).

### **Who is Dick Grayson?**

Dick Grayson is crafted as a hero-prototype within the world of DC Comics. First appearing in *Detective Comics* #38 (April, 1940) as Robin, the Boy Wonder, Grayson has been an essential part of the Batman-family of comic book characters, as well as numerous other Batman-centric media. These include live-actions films, a live-action television series, animated television shows, direct-to-video animated films, and video games, though in this work, I will focus on Grayson's representation in comic books. Originally introduced as the sidekick to Batman (Bruce Wayne), over the last eighty years Grayson has evolved beyond the sidekick role, going from Robin, to Nightwing, to Agent 37, and even becoming Batman himself. Grayson has gone on to headline his own comic book series as Nightwing, has starred as the lead character in numerous Teen Titans and Titans themed comic book titles, and is currently the leading

character in DC's live-action *Titans* (2018) show, the third season of which is in development, where he is portrayed by actor Brenton Thwaites.

Being a fictional character, Grayson is carefully designed and constructed to embody heroic schema, or our mental images, characteristics, and traits that define our notions of heroes. Comic book writers Marv Wolfman, Chuck Dixon, Devin Grayson, Kyle Higgins, Tim Seeley, and Dan Jurgens are all responsible for a vast majority of Grayson's greatest strides and character-defining moments. Grayson is constructed to be an exemplary, relatable, and empathetic hero who is given particular qualities and traits in order to function differently than his mentor, the darker and grittier Batman.

It would be a disservice to an analysis of Dick Grayson to ignore the character of Batman. Grayson and Batman have been linked since Grayson's introduction into the Batman mythos in April of 1940, and due to this, it is hard to separate them, as Grayson was introduced only eleven months after the Dark Knight himself first appeared in *Detective Comics* #27 (May, 1939). As such, Batman will share focus with Grayson throughout the course of this project.

Since his introduction, Batman has become "one of the most famous, beloved, and profitable fictional characters in the world" (Brown, 1). Batman is also one of the stalwart characters of DC Comics, along with Superman and Wonder Woman. In his book *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity: The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero as Cultural Nexus*, Jeffrey A. Brown analyzes the intricacies of Batman's character. Brown provides an excellent source of information to compare and contrast Batman's heroic and masculine traits with those of Grayson's, in order to highlight the differences between the two, and ultimately prove how Grayson is constructed to be a more relatable and empathetic character than his mentor.

Before moving further with an analysis of Grayson's characterizations, I must first introduce the various continuities and narrative reboots that DC Comics has undergone during the course of Grayson's eighty years of publication. This will provide context for the different characterizations of Grayson and the varying interpretations of his journey that this thesis will discuss. DC Comics has made multiple alterations or "reboots" to their comic book continuity from 1938 up until the present. Currently, DC's continuity can be divided into four different time periods: "pre-Crisis" (1938-1985), "post-Crisis" (1986-2011), *The New 52* (2011-2016), and *Rebirth* (2016-present). The most significant of these was *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985) by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, which reset the DC Universe in order to streamline DC's complex and cluttered continuity. This led to the emergence of the "post-Crisis" continuity and to most characters receiving updated origin stories through revisionist works. Grayson was no exception to this, as his origins were expanded upon in *Batman: Year Three* (1989), *Robin: Year One* (2000), and *Nightwing: Year One* (2005).

Although Grayson's origin story was expanded, it remained for the most part, intact. Grayson begins as a young circus acrobat, part of the Flying Graysons with his parents, Mary and John Grayson. His parents are murdered by crime boss Tony Zucco, and Grayson is taken in by Bruce Wayne, where he becomes the first Robin to Wayne's Batman. Eventually, Grayson desires his own heroic identity and becomes Nightwing, which is where DC's reboots have had the most effect on him. In "pre-Crisis" continuity this transformation from Robin to Nightwing was rooted in natural growth and character development (he simply outgrew Robin), and Batman supported and respected this transition. However, in the "post-Crisis" revision this takes a darker tone. Batman fires Grayson from the role of Robin, leaving Grayson to become Nightwing on his own, and making the relationship between Wayne and Grayson one of bitterness and underlying

hurt. Other reboots, such as *The New 52* and *Rebirth*, align closely with these “post-Crisis” changes. Additionally, these continuities have seen Grayson adopt different identities apart from Nightwing, such as Agent 37 in *The New 52*, and that of “Ric” Grayson in *Rebirth*, after he suffered severe amnesia from a bullet wound to the head.

### **Representations of Masculinity**

As comic book superheroes, Batman and Nightwing stand as symbols of idealized masculinity. They both embody traits that modern Western society values in men, as they are tough, muscular, chiseled physical specimens, handsome, suave, rich, and white. When discussing how these two characters are constructed, it is important to consider how they represent masculinity, and thus how they fall in with the concept of hegemonic masculinity bares mentioning. Hegemonic masculinity was defined by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, who refer to it as “the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 832). Brown also references the work of Connell and Messerschmidt and points out that hegemonic masculinity is not entirely focused on harmful masculine behavior. According to Brown, Batman can be seen as a representation of a healthier, more ideal masculinity: “closer inspection can reveal that his multiplicities facilitate a number of challenges to these assumed toxic traits” (Brown, 10).

While I do agree with Brown that at times, Batman’s more modern interpretations can be considered to represent a healthier brand of masculinity, I will argue that this changes when he is compared with Grayson. In this case, Batman’s masculinity appears more in-line with machismo, or more exaggerated, negative, and unhealthier masculine traits and behavior. These include: a need for physical and emotional control over others, a superiority complex, aggression, and



assertiveness. By comparing their behaviors, I will argue that Grayson does more than Batman can to expand the scope of ideal masculinity by presenting examples of healthier, more appropriate masculine behavior.

Both Batman and Grayson respect and support their fellow female heroes and heroes of color, stand against issues such as police corruption and domestic violence, and are loving, caring mentors. However, Grayson proves to be a character that is more rooted in humility. This can be seen through how Batman and Grayson operate as leaders and mentors, which provides a particularly effective lens for viewing how their masculinity differs.

Grayson takes a far less aggressive approach to crime fighting and is a less assertive leader. While spearheading the (Teen) Titans, Grayson was constructed as a capable and considerate leader, who became respected by his peers for his tactical abilities and his attentive nature. Often, Grayson would surrender his role as leader when another was best suited for it, and was willing to take suggestions from his teammates in the heat of the moment, trusting their capabilities and putting his faith in their talents. This is in stark contrast to how Batman functions as a leader, as he is more focused on control, power, and unquestionable authority – Batman wants to be the alpha male.

For example, *Justice League* #5 (May, 1987), sees Green Lantern Guy Gardner challenge Batman's authority over the Justice League. Batman proceeds to knock him out with one punch, emasculating Gardner and ending his questioning of Batman's leadership. Although this is an older example, similar incidents can be seen in more modern comics. In *Detective Comics* #981 (May, 2018), Batman chose to disband his Gotham Knights team when he had lost control over Batwoman (Kate Kane). More recently, in *Teen Titans Annual* #2 (August, 2020) Batman comes to shut down the Teen Titans after he found out that their leader, Robin (Damian Wayne) was

unlawfully holding villains in a makeshift prison. Rather than try to work these situations out or reconcile with the members of these teams, Batman simply dissolves them, having lost control and had his authority questioned and or damaged.

Grayson's leadership is less rooted in power and control. When Grayson leaves the Teen Titans in *The New Teen Titans* #39 (February, 1984), he does not chose to disband the team. Instead, he votes that Wonder Girl (Donna Troy) replace him, showing that he trusts her as a suitable replacement. Although this occurred in DC's pre-Crisis continuity, Grayson is still characterized in a similar manner. In *Titans* #19 (January 2018), the Justice League (primarily Batman) shut the Titans down due to uncertainty regarding the stability of the powers of Wally West (The Flash) and Donna Troy. Grayson resists this, insisting that his teammates can handle their powers, showing that he has faith in his team's abilities and competence. Batman goes as far as to question Grayson's ability to lead, opening up old wounds between them, and adding to the number of times that Batman's desire for control, power, and unquestioned authority has damaged his relationship with Grayson.

This is an aspect of Grayson's relationship with Batman that remains relevant throughout all of DC's various continuities and different characterizations (although differing in severity at times) of Batman and Grayson. Batman's desire to control even Grayson's actions has had a lasting negative affect on their relationship. The tension this creates serves as one of the primary reasons for Grayson's transformation from Robin into Nightwing, something that remains consistent throughout all of Grayson's characterizations and all of the retellings of said transformation. In *Batman and The Outsiders* #5 (October, 1983) Batman and Grayson lead their respective teams, The Outsiders and the Teen Titans into a battle, and Batman's controlling tendencies show, as he takes over the operation. Batman orders both teams around, and usurps

Grayson's role as the leader of his own team. Here, Batman's demeaning behavior acts as a catalyst for Grayson's "pre-Crisis" evolution into Nightwing, as he realizes that as long as he bares an identity so closely attached to Batman's, he will never be free from the shadows of his controlling ways. Batman's behavior is worse in the "post-Crisis" continuity, as Grayson's metamorphosis is facilitated by Batman firing him from his duties as Robin. However, even once Grayson is established as Nightwing, Batman's demands and uncompromising nature continue to be sources of conflict between the two.

While the relationship between Dick Grayson and Bruce Wayne will be covered in far greater detail in chapter two of this project, it is important to show how Batman's more negative representation of masculinity, manifest in an aggressive control complex, has damaged his relationship with Grayson. The rift that this creates between Batman and Grayson is presented exceptionally well in *Robin: Year One* (December, 2000), written by Chuck Dixon. In this "post-Crisis" story covering Grayson's first year as Robin, Batman and Grayson have a healthy, almost jovial relationship. This lasts until Grayson disobeys a direct order from Batman to remove himself from a case involving Two-Face (Harvey Dent), and makes an error in judgment that results in the death of an innocent hostage and Grayson sustaining a near-fatal beating from Two-Face.

Due to this, Batman "retires" Robin, demoralizing Grayson, who then runs away from Wayne Manor. Batman showed little concern for this, refusing to even read letters Grayson had left for him. Eventually the two make their way back to each other, with Batman only allowing Grayson to be Robin again under the condition that he be a "good soldier" and never disobey an order from him again (*Robin: Year One* #4, 48). While it could be argued that this is Batman's method of parenting and discipline, it also demonstrates Batman's obsession to control others,

his detachment from emotions, and his unwillingness to relinquish his authority. Additionally, it reinforces the disdain that Grayson has for Batman's absolutist methods, which writer Chuck Dixon would explore at greater lengths in *Nightwing: Year One* (January, 2005). In *Nightwing* #101 (January, 2005), after Robin is late to help Batman on a mission, Batman fires Robin for having other responsibilities with the Teen Titans and not being able to devote all of his time to helping Batman in Gotham. This forces Grayson out of the Robin identity and drives a wedge between him and Wayne that would continue to affect their relationship for years to come.

Despite the many wounds in their relationship, Grayson remains loyal to Batman, and in 2009, a new dynamic duo emerges. Mirroring the team that debuted decades prior, with Bruce Wayne as Batman and Dick Grayson as Robin, Grant Morrison's *Batman and Robin* (2009) series features Grayson as Batman and Wayne's biological son Damian Wayne as the new Robin. Due to Bruce Wayne being presumably killed in the events of DC's *Final Crisis* (2008), Grayson leaves his Nightwing identity behind to become the new Batman. While these events and this comic series will be analyzed again towards the conclusion of this chapter, it is important to mention it here, as it shows the differences in how Grayson and Wayne function as mentors.

As Batman, Grayson must deal with an unruly, spoiled, and egotistical Damian as his Robin, who prefers to do things his own way and favors a more brutal brand of justice. Damian's ego runs amok, as he challenges Grayson's leadership, tears the "R" patch from his uniform, and openly mocks Grayson: "Look at you! This pathetic impersonation of my father makes a mockery of his memory!" (*Batman and Robin* #2, 17). In a similar manner to Grayson in *Robin: Year One*, Damian disobeys direct orders and gets himself into a deadly situation as a result. Grayson lectures him about the importance of teamwork and obeying orders, prompting a

comparison of his actions to Wayne's. Grayson laments about this, fearing that he sounded like he was merely trying to impersonate his former mentor by shouting out orders. Pushing through his frustration, Grayson attempts to make things right and to earn Damian's respect.

Grayson's response to Damian's spoiled, arrogant attitude and propensity to disobey his order differs from the way that Wayne treated Grayson. Instead of pushing Damian away, and dispassionately forcing him to "retire," Grayson stands by Damian, complimenting him where and when he can, while also providing him with positive examples of the value of teamwork and having a partner to rely on. Damian is surprised when Grayson risks his own life to save him, to which Grayson responds with: "Partners, remember? Batman and Robin" (*Batman and Robin* #3, 15), while handing Damian the "R" patch that he had previously torn from his uniform. Due to Grayson's support and willingness to stand by him, Damian eventually gains a trust and respect for Grayson, and the two develop a strong, brotherly relationship. Instead of firing him for his disobedience, Grayson helps Damian, in contrast to when Wayne retired Grayson for his disobedience and then proceeded to fire him for not being able to devote one-hundred percent of his life to being Robin.

### **Relatability and Empathy Through Realism**

Establishing both Batman and Grayson as heroes that seem to be realistic is important, as it allows them to appear as more relatable and empathetic characters. Their realism makes it easier for readers to see themselves in Batman or Grayson's world and surroundings. Brown states that Batman is a realistic hero: "Batman's 'superness' seems more realistic and maybe even achievable (given unlimited financial resources and a lifetime dedicated to achieving physical and mental perfection)" (Brown, 9). This is true, as theoretically with enough time, money, and training one could become the Bat, because at his core, Batman is a human being.

Although hyperbolic, both Batman and Dick Grayson possess abilities that could be acquired, unlike Superman who is powered by the yellow sun, or Green Lantern who uses a super-charged power ring.

However, Grayson proves to be even more rooted in realism than Batman is, as his incredible athletic abilities and prowess come from his being raised as an acrobat at the circus. This makes him a natural when it comes to leaping across rooftops and performing acrobatic combat moves. Similarities to Grayson's brand of acrobatics can be seen in Tasmanian circus performer Jiembra Sands, whose online videos have garnered him an audience of millions of viewers, according to ABC.com. I would like to note that Sands has no official ties to Grayson, but their resemblance and similarities in upbringing and abilities provide a real-world example of how Grayson's athletics are possible and is worth recognition. Sands is a lifelong acrobat and circus performer, much like Grayson, whose tricks and stunts include backflips, jumping over moving cars, doing handstands in traffic, and rolling over moving tires. With Sands' circus background and ability to perform acrobatic stunts being so similar to what Grayson does as Robin and Nightwing, it becomes clear that Grayson is a more realistic and achievable outcome than his mentor.

Realism permeates Grayson's character, as he is constructed to reject the copious wealth that Bruce Wayne uses to fuel his crusade as Batman, refusing to tap into Wayne's funds. Rather, Grayson's still-sizeable (although not endless) fortune comes from a smaller inheritance that his parents had left him. The money had been invested by Wayne's corporate ally Lucius Fox for years, providing a more realistic explanation for Grayson's considerable resources. Unlike Wayne, Grayson does not operate out of his own secluded, armored fortress like the Batcave. Instead, Grayson often operates out of his own apartment or training gym in Blüdhaven, both of

which can double as his living quarters. Grayson is less reliant on the extremely expensive technology that Batman uses, foregoing the supercomputers in the Batcave for a personal computer, which he uses to communicate with other members of the Batman family and for small-time surveillance. This extends to his vehicle of choice as well, as Grayson does not have his own version of the heavily armed and nearly indestructible Batmobile. Rather, he drives a modified street car that he built himself, allowing him to better blend in with public traffic. These more reasonable and easier to obtain alternatives to Batman's fortune-driven armory compound Grayson's realism and establish him as a more realistic hero than Batman.

The theoretical realism of heroes like Batman and Nightwing allows them to function as relatable and idealized characters. Although I have argued that the relatability and more realistic elements of these heroes make them empathetic characters and allow for a greater degree of audience identification with Batman and Nightwing than would be possible with a character like Superman, it must still be made clear that these are all fictional characters. Brown states that "Though identification with a fictional character is difficult to substantiate or quantify in any exact way, the internalization of Batman and his associated ideals is implied at a broad cultural level" (Brown, 3). Despite the difficulty in quantifying this level of identification, it is possible to empathize with these characters, specifically Grayson, and thus to a degree, identify with them.

### **Hero Identification**

Throughout the course of this chapter, I have referred to Grayson as an empathetic hero, and as mentioned above, his construction does allow for a degree of identification. Although, it should be noted that that without field work, it is not possible to ascertain that degree. However, that is not where the goal of this chapter, or even this project, lies. The goal of this portion of this chapter is simply to argue that it is possible for the audience to identify with Grayson's

characterization. This is where the concept of hero identification and the frame work of the “Heroic Leadership Dynamic (HLD)” (Allison and Goethals, 189) become relevant in the analysis of Grayson’s character and his construction as an empathetic hero.

The concept of hero identification, according to Douglas V. Propora in his 1996 article “Personal Heroes, Religion, and Transcendental Metanarratives,” revolves around whom individuals may identify with, based on how said figure correlates with their own set of values and ideals. While the figures discussed in this article focus on real-world individuals such as politicians or public figures, Propora’s concept of hero identification can also be applied to fictional characters such as Dick Grayson, as these characters are often constructed and imbued with particular values and ideals. The application of the concept of hero identification to Grayson is important for two reasons: 1.) it gives us insight to the qualities, values, and ideals that Grayson is purposely built to embody, and 2.) it makes clear how these particular qualities allow Grayson to function as an educational and positive moral beacon for his audience.

Since these concepts revolve so heavily around qualities such as values and ideals, the sorts of values and ideals that are associated with heroes and the heroic must be made clear. These qualities are often what the hero in question symbolizes, and are not to be confused with other idealized qualities about said hero, such as social status and physical attractiveness/conditioning. Propora is more concerned with “such values as humility, integrity, dedication, vision, and courage” (Propora, 211). Along with these qualities, it is important to consider other defining traits of heroes, which Allison and Goethals refer to as “common notions of heroism” (Allison and Goethals, 7). Some of these notions include: attractiveness, toughness, being clever, possessing competence, and high levels of skill. Taking Grayson’s constructed values, ideals, and display of these common notions of heroism into consideration, it becomes



clear that Grayson functions not only as a positive moral beacon for his audience, but also as a hero who can inspire and impart certain valuable lessons for getting through the trials and tribulations of everyday life.

Throughout DC's various continuities, Grayson's characterization aligns with the qualities that Propora and Allison and Goethals have described. He is dedicated to his cause and pursuit of justice, he is courageous, self-confident, physically and mentally strong, virtuous, and charismatic.

Being a part of the DC Universe means that Grayson shares the battlefield with superpowered, near omnipotent allies and enemies alike. Doing so while being a "normal" human with no physical enhancements or extraordinary abilities points to Grayson's display of both courage and self-confidence. Grayson must rely on his finely-honed skills and intellect to see him through whatever situation he is in, yet he continuously puts himself in danger on the frontlines. This shows how courageous Grayson is, his confidence in his own abilities, and his willingness to sacrifice himself for the greater good. Having been considered Batman's sidekick for roughly half of his tenure as a character, Grayson has been written as someone who possesses a tenacious drive to prove his worth. He is self-assured; however, he wants to make sure that others see his talents and do not immediately attribute them to him being Batman's protégé. Although his physical and mental fortitude were greatly enhanced by Batman's training, Grayson has always been a physically gifted individual due to his upbringing as a circus acrobat, which is something that he takes pride in, and incorporates into his fighting style.

While it is important to point out that most comic book superheroes adhere to some sort of a moral code (Batman and Superman do not kill), Grayson is a character who is more steeped in exemplifying positive moral values and behaviors. Grayson strictly follows Batman's code,

which is intolerant of killing; however, Grayson's behaviors and methods of handling both criminals and victims go above and beyond a simple adherence to non-lethal force. Batman will stop a mugger or a thug, usually inflicting some form of physical harm on them in the process, but his methods do little to help the victim after the threat is neutralized. Batman typically just moves on to the next crime. Obviously there are exceptions to this, such as when Batman takes Grayson in after his parents are murdered, or when he takes in Jason Todd after finding him trying to steal the tires off of the Batmobile. In general, Batman tends to ignore the victims of conventional crimes, due to him being constructed to focus on the "bigger picture" when it comes to his mission.

In contrast to Batman's more grandiose style and goals, Grayson focuses on more socially admirable goals within his local community in the city of Blüdhaven, which is comparatively smaller than Gotham City. Instead of simply stopping and beating up a mugger and leaving the victim in order to get to the next crime, Grayson will often make sure that the victim is okay, and will check back on them to confirm that they got to safety without further incident. During writer Chuck Dixon's run on *Nightwing* from 1996-2002, Grayson's day job as a Blüdhaven police officer made this easier for him to do. This allowed Grayson to check up on incidents as Nightwing that he was forced to resolve within the confines of the law while wearing the badge.

For example, in *Nightwing* #54 (February, 2001), Grayson and his partner break up a domestic dispute during their patrol, where a man named Bill is chasing his fleeing, battered girlfriend, Marie. After expressing his disgust that the two are unable to legally do anything once Marie refuses to fill charges against Bill, Grayson goes back to their apartment as Nightwing, and finds that Bill is once again assaulting Marie and their child. When Bill leaves after

threatening Marie once more, Nightwing corners him and threatens him “You don’t need to know who I am. You only need to know one thing. Don’t go home again. Ever... I hear you came within a hundred miles of them and we’ll have a ‘talk’...” (*Nightwing* #54, 17). This provides an excellent example of how Grayson used his job as an officer of the law and his role as Nightwing in order to obtain swifter justice, that would not have been possible through regular police procedure. Grayson’s virtuous nature would not allow him to turn his back on the woman and her child who were in trouble, but he also manages to resolve the situation without violence, making his achievement socially admirable.

In *Nightwing: The Target* (July, 2001), Grayson displays even more examples of courage, virtue, and positive moral values, as he takes a stand against police brutality and corruption in Blüdhaven. Despite being nearly twenty years old, this comic provides commentary on an issue that remains relevant in contemporary social and political environments. As a rookie officer in the Blüdhaven Police Department (BPD), Grayson is framed for the murder of two African-American teenagers by a group of senior officers in his department. Initially pleading his innocence, Grayson is pressured by internal affairs to take the fall for his “brothers”, which makes visible the large-scale corruption within the BPD. Grayson sets out to clear his name, but is confronted and chastised by Batman. His former mentor questions Grayson’s decision to join the BPD, despite knowing about the corruption and crooked practices they use, and forbids Grayson from using his Nightwing gear, as the BPD has him under close surveillance. In response to Batman’s questioning, Grayson reveals that he wanted to join the BPD to bring the corruption down, and with his options dwindling, Grayson displays his unyielding courage and fortitude as he takes on the new vigilante identity of The Target.

Grayson succeeds in clearing his name and brings the group of senior officers down, however he turns other corrupt officers against him in the process. Even when denied access to his Nightwing equipment and identity, Grayson shows bravery and strength when he refuses to take the fall and surrender to internal affairs. By opposing corruption, Grayson displays courage, knowing that he will be making enemies in the BPD in the process, and he displays a positive moral compass by opposing police brutality.

Coming out of DC's *The New 52* continuity, in *Nightwing* #8-9 (April-May, 2012), Grayson must confront the Talon (William Cobb), a highly trained assassin sent to murder the mayor of Gotham City. Here, Grayson puts himself at considerable risk to save the mayor, as he knows that Cobb possesses talents superior to his own. Despite his best efforts, Cobb beats Grayson severely, and offers him a chance to join him, as Grayson is Cobb's great-grandson<sup>1</sup>. This calls Grayson's moral compass and values, as well as his commitment to Batman's code of justice into question, as Grayson is forced to choose between his life as Nightwing and a possible life as an assassin. Grayson declines, choosing to adhere to his positive moral values, and uses liquid nitrogen in nearby subway cables to freeze and subdue Cobb. With Cobb neutralized, Grayson reveals that he had led Cobb to a subway entrance, having prior knowledge of both Cobb's susceptibility to intense cold and the contents of the subway cables. In this scenario, Grayson overcomes an opponent who had him outclassed by maintaining self-control and having intimate knowledge of not only his surroundings (the subway tunnels), but also of his enemies' strengths and weaknesses. With this, Grayson teaches us that brute force does not always win every fight.

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<sup>1</sup> Cobb is a member of The Court of Owls, who chose Grayson to be a future Talon during his younger days at Haly's Circus, so Cobb believed becoming a Talon was Grayson's destiny.

The stories analyzed above are but a few of the plethora of examples of the ways in which Grayson displays courage, bravery, strength, positive moral values, and his virtuous sense of justice. Through these displays, Grayson teaches us valuable and positive morals, life lessons, and truths. These include the importance of self-confidence (setting out to clear his name), the consequences for deplorable behaviors such as domestic violence, that brute force is not always the answer (his fight with Cobb), and having the courage to oppose more systemic issues like police brutality. Grayson's displays of these behaviors, values, and ideals allow us to internalize them, and thus incorporate them into our own identities. According to Porpora, it is this internalization of qualities, and the hero's power to inspire that allows us to decide and declare what we, ourselves, stand for: "and heroes thus are one mechanism we use to tell ourselves what it is we stand for. For those who have them, then, heroes are an important inner marker of identity. They are a part of the landscape of the soul" (Porpora, 211). However, our abilities to resonate and identify with heroes do not stop with the concept of hero identification, as it is possible to take the ways that heroes teach and inspire us to further heights, with the application of Allison and Goethals' framework of heroic leadership dynamic (HLD), which will also lead directly into Campbell's hero's journey.

### **HLD and The Hero's Journey**

Before I move forward with the application of both the HLD and the hero's journey to Grayson's characterization, I would like to note that these concepts are significantly more rooted in the discipline of psychology than any other means of analysis or topic this project has addressed so far<sup>2</sup>. Chapter two of this project will heavily focus on the psychological aspects of

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<sup>2</sup> Campbell himself is not a psychologist.

how Dick Grayson and Bruce Wayne are constructed by writers to handle their trauma, but psychology proves to be useful in areas of this project outside of chapter two, hence its use here.

Propora's concept of hero identification makes it clear that our own personal choices in heroes allow us to make decisions about what it is we stand for. However, adding a psychological analysis of heroes and heroic narratives to this discussion permits a deeper look into how these two things can help to fulfill vital cognitive and emotional needs and desires. Heroes, like Dick Grayson, do not simply entertain us or help us develop our own identities, they also act as models, to enlighten us, to energize us, and to show us how we can live better, more positive lives. Hero stories, like those that play out in Grayson's comic books "provide epistemic benefits by providing scripts of prosocial action, by revealing fundamental truths about human existence, by unpacking life paradoxes, and by cultivating emotional intelligence" (Allison and Goethals, 187). As humans, we have various psychological needs, to keep us mentally healthy, to spur our own desires for personal and emotional growth, and to help us attain and cultivate hope, wisdom, and overall positive growth, in order to ensure human survivability. We have particular needs that must be met in order for us to survive, grow, and thrive.

Some of those particular needs are met and fulfilled by heroes and heroic narratives, with Dick Grayson serving as an exemplar of this. Allison and Goethals describe the core feature of the HLD, which has two different functions, those that are epistemic and those that are energizing. They go on to define these functions: "The epistemic function refers to the knowledge and wisdom that hero stories impart on us. The energizing function refers to the ways that hero stories inspire us and promote personal growth" (Allison and Goethals, 190). Grayson's epistemic functions, or the wisdom and lessons that he imparts to us, were discussed in the previous section, in conjunction with Propora's concept of hero identification. These are the

morals and life lessons that Grayson provides us, allowing them to act as internalized prosocial scripts.

With Grayson's epistemic functions already covered, it is time to examine his energizing functions, or the ways in which he inspires and promotes personal growth. According to "pre-Crisis" narrative, Grayson is introduced as an orphaned child and sidekick to Batman, who grows and matures over time, eventually becoming his own person. Grayson expresses frustration at being the latter half of the dynamic duo of Batman & Robin, and develops a deeply rooted desire to prove that he is more than just a sidekick, and, more importantly, to prove himself to Wayne. Rather than live in the shadow of the Bat forever, Grayson leaves his place at Wayne's side to join the Teen Titans and aims to find his place in the world and to establish a heroic identity that is all his own. This is similar to how teenagers or young adults leave their home and parents behind to go to school, pursue careers, and ultimately to find their own place in the world and live independently.

Alongside the Teen Titans, Grayson finds what he is looking for. Discovering romance with Starfire, a sense of purpose, and confidence in his abilities, leadership skills, and in himself as a hero. During this time, Grayson develops a romantic relationship with Starfire, with the two developing a mature, adult relationship, that even sees them move in with one another. With this development and maturity, Grayson has outgrown the Robin identity and willingly passes the Robin mantle, and symbolically his costume to Batman's newer protégé, Jason Todd in *Batman* #368 (February, 1984). Batman watches this with pride, and respects Grayson's decision, acknowledging that his former sidekick had grown into a man. Grayson undergoes his transformation from Robin to Nightwing, completing his coming of age story.

The “post-Crisis” and later continuities have seen these circumstances revised, and have made Grayson’s transition from Robin to Nightwing into a darker and more Batman-centric event. Rather than leaving by his own accord, Grayson is forced into retirement by Wayne after being shot by The Joker, and is eventually fired from his role as Robin. The pride and respect that Grayson and Wayne had for one another was removed from this iteration. Granted, this has robbed Grayson of some of his agency because he is not allowed to outgrow and pass the identity of Robin to Jason Todd, as this is instead decided for him by Batman. However, this is not to say that Grayson’s agency is completely lost. He still experiences exceptional amounts of growth and maturity, although the sources of these are fundamentally different from the “pre-Crisis” narrative.

Stripped of being Robin, Grayson must embark on a journey of self-discovery (much more in-line with Campbell’s formula), and ultimately develops the Nightwing identity after some encouragement from Superman. Eventually, Grayson moves from Batman’s domain of Gotham City to the smaller, neighboring city of Blüdhaven, where he becomes its sole protector. This move to Blüdhaven restores Grayson’s agency, and gives him room to grow once more, as he gets a day-job as a police officer and makes his own allies and enemies, giving him new obstacles to overcome. Once the “prince” of Gotham, Grayson becomes the “king” of Blüdhaven.

The type of personal growth just described is what the energizing function of the HLD framework is based on. Grayson provides us with the energizing functions that Allison and Goethals describe. What is given above is a shorter summary of Grayson’s growth throughout the years. However, when charting his path through Campbell’s model of the hero’s journey, it becomes clear that regardless of the continuity being examined, Grayson’s character is rooted in



growth and development. The energizing function as described by Allison and Goethals is fulfilled through the hero's journey, as self-discovery and transformative growth are at the very core of Campbell's model.

Humans have long been drawn to heroic narratives, hence the emergence of Campbell's hero's journey, with stories dating back to ancient times that follow a structured, predictable pattern. The heroic tales of legendary figures such as Odysseus, Hercules, and Achilles are time-tested examples, while Nightwing's adventures in comic books provide a more contemporary example. Heroic tales that follow Campbell's formulaic hero's journey promote the process of self-discovery, deep personal change, and development.

Campbell's formula sees the hero discover a personal flaw or inadequacy that needs to be corrected, or a physical or mental obstacle that the hero must acquire the skills to overcome. In Grayson's case, his journey of self-discovery and attainment of personal growth occur over a multitude of various comic story arcs and continuities, with many different writers and artists providing their interpretations of these events throughout the years. This makes Grayson stand out from other examples of more self-contained heroic narratives, particularly due to the monthly serial nature of comic book publishing.

Allison and Goethals state that hero stories reveal life paradoxes, or contradictions that may expose possible truths, (Allison and Goethals, 191). Within Campbell's model, there are several examples of life paradoxes, particularly the heroes having to stumble before they can climb the hypothetical mountain. According to the hero's journey, the way down is the way up; to get up, we must first stumble and fall (Allison and Goethals, 193). This plays heavily into both the construction of Grayson's character and how this serial publication proves to benefit Grayson's characterization, as his saga does not have a finite conclusion. With ongoing

publications, Grayson persists through obstacles, and continues to change and grow. Due to this, Grayson does not go through the hero's journey once, instead, he goes through it multiple times. It is this repetition that is the greatest strength of Grayson as a character – he never stops growing and changing, he is constantly in-flux.

The hero's journey, as Campbell constructs it, consists of seventeen different steps, although not all heroic narratives need to follow these in order, or even contain all of the steps. Campbell breaks the hero's journey into three separate stages: the departure, the initiation, and the return (Allison and Goethals, 41-44). Within these three stages, Campbell organizes the seventeen steps, with the departure containing five steps, the initiation containing six steps, and the return containing six steps. However, for this thesis, I will not apply all seventeen steps to Grayson, as he does not pass through all of them. Rather, I will be referring to the three stages: the departure, the initiation, and the return. When a particular step is applicable to Grayson, I will reference it, but attempting to fit Grayson's character arc (even over eighty years and multiple continuities) into seventeen ordered steps would prove to be quite unwieldy.

The first of these stages, known as the departure, is when the hero leaves the home or the world they once knew, as they answer the "call to adventure" (Campbell, 42). Here, the hero must face and enter a treacherous new world, unknown to them and far removed from the complacency he once felt at home. The hero must set out to confront his fears and attain his "boon" (Campbell, 150), or his ultimate treasure, encountering a mentor figure who acts as a guide to this new world along the way. The departure is necessary, as leaving what was once home and the comforts of ordinary, mundane life behind is a requirement on the path to self-discovery and transformation. After the departure, the hero enters the initiation step, where he must go through intense trials and tribulations. This is done while the hero is being aided by the

mentor, who helps him obtain the skills needed to succeed in conquering his fears or defeating his foe. At the end of the initiation phase, the hero collects the aforementioned boon, which allows him to make his return, using this boon to help make the world he came from a better place. With his various departures, and initiations, Grayson acquires a different boon each time, continuing to grow, and facing painful challenges and obstacles that he must overcome.

Grayson embarks on numerous departures, as he leaves multiple homes, multiple times. He is a character who continues to grow, each time he must leave home and comfort to pursue something new. With this, Grayson also acts as a surrogate character for the reader, which will be discussed further in chapter three. It is important to examine each run Grayson makes through the hero's journey, however, some are more important than others, so in order to be practical I will only discuss two in detail.

Having already included Grayson's "pre-Crisis" journey and growth when looking at his energizing functions, it will not be restated in detail here. However, it is still important to describe how his "pre-Crisis" journeys fits Campbell's model. In "pre-Crisis" continuity, Grayson runs through the hero's journey twice. On his first run-through, Grayson's departure occurs when his parents are murdered by Tony Zucco. With his world shattered, Grayson must venture into the dangerous and unknown world of Batman, who takes him in and trains him, completing his initiation. By completing his training with Wayne, Grayson acquires his "boon" and successfully joins Batman's side as Robin, completing his return. *Batman* #217 (December, 1969), sees Grayson depart once again, when he leaves his life at Wayne Manor to go to college. This sets Grayson up with the Teen Titans, where he finds his purpose as their leader, thus re-entering the initiation stage. It is here that Grayson acquires the boon of Nightwing, and becomes his own solo hero, making his return and using his new identity to help his team in *Tales of the*

*Teen Titans* #44 (July, 1984). Grayson's journey to becoming Nightwing would later be revised in the "post-Crisis" continuity.

Grayson's "post-Crisis" journeys are the most important in terms of the development of his character. Within the "post-Crisis" continuity, Grayson becomes the guardian of his own city (Blüdhaven), and he reaches the highest point of his character arc when he becomes Batman in *Batman: Battle for the Cowl* (2009).

*Nightwing: Year One* (2005) sees Grayson's transformation from Robin to Nightwing revised from its "pre-Crisis" counterpart. Here, Batman fires Grayson and strips him of the Robin identity. This is his departure, as he has been pushed out of his world as Robin, and cannot go back. Alone and lost, Grayson enters into an unknown world, with his path and future in doubt, and it is here where he encounters his mentor, or guide, in the form of Clark Kent (Superman). Now in the initiation stage, Kent's advice gives Grayson his "Nightwing" name and leads him back to the circus, where he receives his father's old circus uniform, and commits to his new identity. Grayson heads back to Gotham, where he ends up helping his replacement and new Robin, Jason Todd, complete "the gauntlet" training test that Batman had set up for him.

Here, Grayson must undergo an actual test in order to prove his capabilities and fully acquire the boon of the identity of Nightwing; he goes through literal trials and tribulations that were also meant for Jason Todd. Soon after, Alfred sends Grayson a new costume, based on his father's circus uniform, but built for the ruggedness of crime fighting. Through this, Grayson symbolically acquires his new identity of Nightwing, makes peace with his relationship with Wayne, and completes his return by going back to lead the Titans. *Nightwing: Year One* presents Grayson's transformation in a form that is much more in line with Campbell's model, as opposed to the "pre-Crisis" telling. This story is structured with a departure, initiation, and return over the

course of *Nightwing* #101-106, while the “pre-Crisis” version took from 1969-1984 to come full circle.

In his second “post-Crisis” run-through of the hero’s journey, Grayson contemplates retiring as a hero and leaves Gotham City behind when he goes to Blüdhaven to investigate a case, marking another departure. After a rough bout with self-doubt serves as his initiation, Grayson acquires his boon. During his return, Grayson makes peace with his relationship with Wayne, admitting that although Wayne wasn’t a perfect parent, no one is, and thanks him for his efforts. Here, Grayson emerges with two boons, one being a somewhat patched relationship with Wayne, and the other being the confidence to continue his heroic ways in Blüdhaven.

When Bruce Wayne is presumed to be dead after *Final Crisis* (2008), the most important of Grayson’s cycles through the hero-path begins, as it is the highest point his character arc has ever achieved. His departure occurs when Grayson must leave his home and comfort in Blüdhaven behind to go back to Gotham, where it all began for him. This time, he is not leaving just a home behind, he is also sacrificing his reputation in Blüdhaven and as Nightwing, which he has spent years building up, in order to take up the cape and cowl. In *Batman: Battle for the Cowl* (2009), Grayson enters the initiation phase, as he must face the trials of competing with others who also want to assume the cape and cowl of Batman, including Tim Drake, Jason Todd, and Harvey Dent. Initially resisting the call to adventure, Grayson makes it clear that he did not want to succeed Wayne and become Batman (Wayne had asked him not to). However, after a conversation with Alfred and Tim Drake and the murderous actions of Jason Todd, he decides to heed the call and succeed Wayne.

His battle with Jason Todd acts as Grayson’s initiation stage here, he must fight and best Jason Todd (who had been trained by Batman) for the cowl. Emerging victorious, Grayson once

again claims a new boon, symbolically with the cape and cowl of Batman. Grayson becomes Batman, succeeding his mentor, and returning to Gotham City in order to bring justice back to the streets after Wayne's apparent death. As Batman, Grayson makes his return to where his run as Robin had started, and must work on training his own Robin, with Damian Wayne, and he must use his previous experience as Bruce Wayne's mentee to properly mentor Damian. Taking up the mantle of Batman marks the highest point of Grayson's characterization, as he now had his own Robin and was also the star of the *Batman*, *Detective Comics*, and *Batman and Robin* series from 2009-2011.

*The New 52* sees Grayson return to the identity of Nightwing. After *Nightwing* #30 (July, 2014), Grayson leaves the identity of Nightwing behind for that of Agent 37, working for the SPYRAL agency, yet another departure. DC's *Rebirth* initiative from 2016 sees Grayson end his time with SPYRAL and return to his life as Nightwing, signifying his return, as he brings his boon from his time as Agent 37 back into his identity as Nightwing. More recently, Grayson ran through the hero cycle once again, as when he is shot in the head in *Batman* #55 (September, 2018), he makes another departure. Grayson suffers amnesia, rejects his old identity as Nightwing, and enters his initiation stage by learning how to be a hero all over again, this time, as "Ric" Grayson. In *Nightwing* #74 (September, 2020), "Ric" gets his memories back, and in *Batman* #99 (September, 2020) Batman gives him his old Nightwing costume back, symbolizing Grayson's acquisition of the boon, which is the Nightwing identity that he has now returned to.

With the number of times he has traversed the hero's journey, it is clear that Grayson is a character who is constantly in-flux. His journey, struggles, and thus, his growth never truly end. Each time Grayson embarks on one of these journeys away from home, he continues further down this path to self-discovery and transformation; each time a newer, more complete Grayson

emerges. From circus acrobat to Robin, Robin to Nightwing, Nightwing to Batman, etc. he is constantly transforming, constantly growing, and constantly learning. Grayson's journey never ends, there is no final obstacle. Challenges serve as his initiation phase, acquiring the boon is his return, often this is with assuming a new identity or bringing back an older one (becoming Nightwing or Batman), but his story does not end there. He must then use the boon to aid him in helping others, fighting crime, and making a positive difference in the world.

Grayson exists in a constant cycle of growth, self-discovery, and reinvention. The hero's journey falls under what Allison and Goethals describe as the energizing function of heroes, however, I believe that it supersedes this and functions as the quintessential tool in constructing a hero that is relatable and empathetic. It mirrors stages of human development, and in Grayson's case, it runs parallel to the idealized life cycle. Allison and Goethals mention this: "Eric Erikson's (1975) stages of development suggest a hero trajectory during the human lifespan, with young adults driven to establish competencies and carve out an *identity* for themselves" (Allison and Goethals, 196). This quest for competency and desire to develop one's own identity have been the basis for Grayson's characterization from 1969 to the present.

This is how our own lives work. We desire our own identities, and must face painful challenges in life, departing from places of comfort, whether willing or not, in order to proceed to the next portion of life. Grayson's cycling through the hero's journey - this hero's cycle - mirrors the idealized cycle of life and human development. According to this idealized structure, as we get older and grow up, we must leave the comfort of home, confront our fears and best them in order to achieve our redemption and acquire our boon – Grayson is the personification of this idealized life structure. By seeing our own journeys of ups and downs through Grayson's, his potential as a relatable and empathetic hero is realized.

## CHAPTER II. DICK GRAYSON, BRUCE WAYNE, AND SHARED TRAUMA

### **Introduction**

I would like to take the time to note that I do not claim expertise in psychology or trauma studies, as I do not possess an academic background or degree in either discipline. It also needs to be made clear that Dick Grayson, Bruce Wayne, and the DC Comics Universe which they are a part of are entirely fictional. However, despite these characters being fictional, trauma theory provides an excellent framework for analyzing how comic book writers have constructed the relationship between Wayne and Grayson over the years. Applying trauma theory here allows us to examine how each character has been written to cope with the enormous losses that they have been built to endure, and shows us the differences between the healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms and psychological development displayed by these characters. Grayson's character develops into an exemplar of proper coping mechanisms and healthy psychological growth, while Wayne is constructed to show us the damaging effects of failing to cope with childhood trauma. Dick Grayson shows us that it is indeed possible to recover from a traumatic experience, and he provides us with examples that, despite being demonstrated by a fictional character, work to inspire and help teach others to do the same.

For this chapter's analysis, the scope of the source material will be significantly narrowed to the "post-Crisis" DC Comics Universe (1986-2011) characterizations of Dick Grayson and Bruce Wayne, and will pay specific attention to the *Batman: Year Three* (1989) and *Batman: Hush* (2002) storylines. During these particular storylines the traumatic experiences of both Grayson and Wayne resurface, making them prime examples for analysis. This is not to say that other versions or iterations of the characters will be ignored, however the focus must be narrowed for the sake of consistency.



## **Childhood and Psychic Trauma**

Before I discuss the implications of psychic trauma, I would like to note that I will be using the term as it was defined by Lenore Terr in *Too Scared To Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*, “psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside” (Terr, 8). In their childhoods, Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson sustain trauma, as both watched their parents be murdered. Wayne watches as a thug shoots his parents to death in Crime Alley; Grayson watches his parents fall to their deaths after Tony Zucco uses acid to wear out their trapeze ropes. Traumatic experiences effect the entire person, both the mind and the body, “the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people, and the way we make sense of the world are all profoundly altered by traumatic experience” (Bloom, 1). Overwhelming emotions brought on by trauma can damage our bodies physically, as well as mentally in terms of our psyches. While both Wayne and Grayson have been written to experience emotionally charged, highly traumatic events, this is exceptionally true in the construction of Bruce Wayne’s character.

Sandra L. Bloom states that, “Children who suffer disrupted attachments may suffer from damage to all of their development systems” (Bloom, 2). Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson both suffered disrupted attachments when their parents were murdered. Through their disrupted attachments, both of them developed a desire for revenge against the criminal element responsible for the deaths of their parents, or, in other words, a sense of reciprocity. The role that this desire for reciprocity, which Bloom defines as “this same sense of ‘fair play’ that leads not only to the evolution of justice systems, but also to the need for revenge” (Bloom, 2) differs in Wayne and Grayson. For Wayne, it is ingrained deeply within his psyche. Wayne is the only

survivor of the shooting that takes his parents, and according to Cathy Caruth, “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis” (Caruth, 9). This is true for Wayne, as Batman is constructed to be a dark, brooding avenger. Wayne makes a promise to wage war against crime while staring at the dead bodies of his parents and once he develops the identity of Batman, his life functions as a never ending crisis, as Batman’s adventures cannot stop as long as the comic books are selling well. Thus, Batman is constructed to wage an endless, one-man war against crime.

When his parents were murdered, Wayne’s childhood was stripped away from him as he pursued training and sought to become a master of criminology, the martial arts, and detective work, rather than focus on coming to terms with his loss. Instead of allowing Wayne to put his trauma into words and letting others such as Alfred or Dr. Leslie Thompkins guide him into the healing process, Wayne is written as a recluse who devotes himself to pursuing revenge and ignoring the opportunities to trust others or allow them to comfort him. Wayne’s construction shows us that “The result is that you cannot hurt anyone, most importantly children, without setting the stage for revenge that will be exacted either upon themselves, upon others, or both” (Bloom, 2). Trapped by the trauma of his parents’ murder, Wayne sees himself as having been incapable of saving their lives, manifesting the identity of Batman as a way to make up for this as well as to extract violent revenge on the criminals of Gotham City that he deems to be responsible for his loss.

For coping with traumatic events, both safety and adequate protection are required. Writers provide these for Wayne, however, they choose to have him sacrifice them in pursuit of honing his skills in order to develop the identity of Batman. Passing up these opportunities at

healing and safety, Wayne instead continues to be a victim and displays traumatized behavior as Batman. This correlates with Bloom's theory regarding victims, "Many victims have long-term problems with various aspects of thinking. An intolerance of mistakes, denial of personal difficulties, anger as problem-solving, hypervigilance, and absolutistic thinking are other problematic thought patterns that have been identified" (Bloom, 5). All of these apply to Wayne. Constructed as the infallible Batman, he cannot allow himself to be wrong, even when Alfred is attempting to console him "and when I suggested that anyone could be fallible – you insisted that Batman cannot" (*Batman: Dark Victory* #7, 15). Batman responds to this in anger, as he punches out a computer screen and demands to know what Alfred wants him to say. Here, Alfred is trying to get Batman to see that he cannot solve the case he is working on alone, that he has ignored the possibility of having Alfred, Commissioner Gordon, or Catwoman help him, and this has caused him to lose his place in the evidence. He has hit a dead-end in an investigation because he has not considered the perspectives of others.

Along with his inability to see or admit his mistakes, Wayne often turns to anger and violence in order to solve his problems. The number of beatings that Batman has delivered to his archenemies is almost innumerable, and he frequently interrogates criminals using violent methods or by threatening them with additional harm. These behaviors and tactics hold true to Bloom's theories regarding victimization, "If you have been victimized, one of the possible outcomes is to assume the power of the one who has hurt you by becoming someone who terrorizes and abuses others" (Bloom, 14). Wayne assumes power over the criminal element of Gotham City with fear and terrorizes them with physical violence.

### **Diverging Paths and Grayson's Catharsis**

It is clear that Wayne displays many of the negative behaviors that Bloom ties to victims of trauma. The vow he took on the night his parents were murdered and his angry, violent tendencies as Batman show a correlation with Bloom's statement that children who have been traumatized take revenge on themselves and others. However, this is rarely, if ever the case with Grayson. As mentioned before, Wayne forsakes his opportunities at safety and love and chooses to pursue vengeance as Batman. Grayson on the other hand does not do this. Dick Grayson's traumatic experience is almost identical to Wayne's, as his parents were also murdered, however, there are minor differences that occur afterwards. With his parent's murder, Grayson's life as a circus acrobat ends, and the young man expresses a desire for revenge much like Wayne's, "Kill him for me. You've got to kill him.... If Batman doesn't find Zucco – I will... I want him... I want him..." (*Batman* #436, 18). Initially, Grayson wants the man responsible for sabotaging his parent's trapeze lines to pay with his life.

Wayne, who was in the crowd at the circus show on the night Grayson's parents were murdered, sees himself in the boy. He sees the same anger and hurt, the same desire for vengeance and reciprocity that are within him and decides to take young Grayson in as his ward. This is where Grayson's path begins to deviate from Wayne's. From here on, Grayson is crafted to be the example of healthy trauma coping mechanisms. While Wayne does make progress, he inevitably gets stuck in stasis and sometimes regresses, in order for writers to maintain his status as a dark and brooding avenger of the night. In this case, Wayne chooses to adopt Grayson in order to help him through his trauma, despite Wayne not allowing anyone to fill this role in his own life. Wayne is constructed as a character who will not let anyone else (even his faithful butler Alfred) fill a paternal role in his life.

At first, Grayson is taken into the care of Sister Mary Elizabeth who offers Grayson love and support, and talks to him about his desires for revenge, asking him if getting revenge on Zucco will do anything to bring his parents back. At first, Grayson resists being taken out of her care when being taken to Wayne Manor, shouting that he wants to stay at St. Jude's Orphanage. Here, we see that Grayson has already been shown love and care and that he had grown attached to those at the orphanage who had shown him compassion and had allowed him to consider an alternate path to life that did not involve vengeance on Zucco. When he arrives at Wayne Manor, it is clear that Grayson has been offered safety and adequate protection in the form of Alfred and Wayne, and the immense mansion that they live in, as well as access to Wayne's vast monetary wealth. Grayson and Alfred discuss the circumstances of Wayne's parents' deaths, and Alfred comments that he believes that Bruce saw himself in Grayson, which is where the possibility for healing for both Wayne and Grayson begins to emerge. Wayne is taking in a ward who is now in the same situation he was once in, giving him someone that can understand his own loss and can allow him to start putting his own traumatic experience into words.

With Grayson now allowing Wayne to put his own trauma into words, the healing process can begin for the two of them (although Wayne starts the healing progress, he rarely, if ever makes much progress). Bloom states that:

We do know that children who are traumatized also experience flashbacks that have no words. For healing to occur, we know that people often need to put the experience into a narrative, give it words, and share it with themselves and others. Words allow us to put things into a time sequence – past, present, future. Without words, the traumatic past is experienced as being in the ever present 'now'. Words allow us to put the past more safely in the past where it belongs (Bloom, 7).

Through words, Grayson is constructed as Wayne's opportunity to begin healing, as he gives Wayne the chance to talk about and share his trauma. They both understand what the other has experienced and Grayson is someone that Wayne can emotionally relate to. When Bloom states that it is beneficial to put a traumatic experience into a narrative, this is true. However, it goes beyond this, as it offers the victim an explanation. Not only is Wayne now written to have a temporal placement for his trauma, but he is also given a way to express and explain it, which allows him to think about the world in a more logical way, differing from Batman's chaotic, damaged, and paranoid worldview.

When written without a logical explanation behind his parents' murder, Wayne is presented as a character who lets tragedy and senseless violence define his outlook on life, which can be clearly seen through Ben Affleck's depiction of the Dark Knight in *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Although this is a version of Batman that exists outside of the DC Comics Universe, it merits mention here, as it presents a bitter, embattled Batman who is so consumed by vengeance that he even goes as far as killing for the sake of his mission (killing the threat that he sees as Superman). Affleck's gritty Batman has a completely distorted worldview that comes directly from his failure to cope with the loss of his parents, "I bet your parents taught you that you mean something, that you're here for a reason. My parents taught me a different lesson, dying in a gutter for no reason at all. They taught me the world only makes sense if you force it to" (2:09:53-2:10:27). Having a narrative, and thus an explanation for his parents' murder allows Wayne to go back to the belief that his world can make sense and does not have to be defined only by his quest for vengeance.

By bringing Grayson into his story, writers give Wayne the chance to talk about his parents' murder with another person who also watched the death of their own parents, which is

something he didn't have before. Alfred, Dr. Leslie Thompkins, or anyone else that had attempted to comfort Wayne could not relate to him on the same emotional level that Grayson can. Being able to put his trauma into words gives Wayne the ability to develop a narrative that makes it possible for him to put his own parent's murder safely in the past, giving him the ability to look beyond it, to the future.

Two months into his stay at Wayne Manor, Grayson again talks to Wayne about his loss, and still expresses a desire to make Zucco pay for what he had done, indicating that Grayson's desire for revenge has not been completely quelled by the safety that Alfred and Wayne provide for him "I mean, it's only been two months for me, but I keep thinking about them so much... and I want to do something to make Zucco pay" (*Batman* #437, 10). Seeing that Grayson wants to hit back at Zucco, Wayne makes the decision to reveal his secret identity as Batman to Grayson, and offers him the opportunity to seek justice in the same manner that he did – by becoming a costumed vigilante. Alfred voices his concerns with this, as he has seen first-hand what the identity of Batman has done to Bruce, "Wearing that costume... Risking your life every night – that is irrational. And now this. It is wrong sir" (*Batman* #437, 10) and does not wish for another traumatized child to head down the path of anger and violence like Wayne had.

However, Grayson's path from this moment forward would differ greatly from that of Wayne's. After training Grayson in the ways of martial arts and detective work, Wayne presents him with his costume, which he had patterned after the circus uniform that Grayson once wore – Dick Grayson was now Robin. As Robin, Grayson appeared as a stark contrast to Batman. His brightly colored red, green, and yellow costume stood out against Batman's darker gray and black colors, and the boy fought crime with a sense of joy and humor that Batman lacked. Robin was having fun, mocking Zucco's thugs as he kicked and jumped his way around them, smiling

as he did so, while Batman presented his usually stoic personality. The two work together to systematically dismantle Zucco's criminal operations throughout the city and they eventually get him sent to prison for his crimes, due to Grayson's testimony. Through the actions of Batman and Robin, the man who had murdered Dick Grayson's parents was now behind bars – Wayne has given Grayson closure in his parent's murder and, in that, has helped Grayson achieve catharsis.

It is through Grayson's catharsis that Wayne achieves his own, "Bruce, however, undergoes a character shift and achieves catharsis by helping Dick achieve catharsis" (Kingsley, 70). Robin's brightness and joyous attitude towards fighting crime softens Batman, as he appears next to Robin smiling, his grim and dark demeanor lightened. Grayson explains this to Alfred:

No it's not like that, Alfred. I mean, I know the danger, and I really try to be careful. But I also know I'm doing good, that I'm helping people. I think in a way I'm helping Bruce too. I used to think he was more real as Batman than as Bruce Wayne... but because he just can't be some cold super-hero around me, I think Bruce is becoming more real too. Look, I know what we're doing is important, but it's not everything. Mom and Dad always taught me to enjoy myself. I think maybe I'm helping Bruce to sometimes enjoy himself, too (*Batman* #438, 18).

With this, Grayson not only shows us that he can see he's helping Wayne, but he also sees the value of being Robin in his own life. Grayson sees the good that he is doing as Robin, and that motivates him to continue his crusade, despite the obvious dangers and risks. This differs from Wayne's motives as Batman, as his are rooted in his desire for vengeance, anger, violence, and are propelled by his inability to save his parents' lives.



### **Grayson's Mental Strength and Resilience**

Despite having a traumatic experience, the “post-Crisis” iteration of Grayson stands in opposition to how Bloom has shown many people are unable to deal with trauma. Throughout his time as Robin and Nightwing he functions as a symbol of hope and optimism, overcoming the trauma that Wayne fails to conquer. When he’s out as Robin and Nightwing, Grayson is not dominated by sorrow or on a quest for vengeance, rather he is out to make a difference in people’s lives, “When Batman sent me down here, I thought I’d solve one case and book. But then I realized... If I could make a difference here – well, that’d be something. This filthy old town needs me” (*Nightwing: Secret Files and Origins* #1, 21).

Grayson is happy and dynamic in his work, fighting crime with a smile on his face, and often makes witty banter or ponders what’s happening in his personal life as he tackles criminals with his quick and acrobatic offensive moves. The highly acrobatic and kick-fueled fighting style that Grayson utilizes is notably different from Batman’s more brutal approach which consists mainly of straight punches and kicks, while his expressions remain stoic or only show his gnashing teeth. This shows how Grayson is constructed to let the influence that the circus had on his childhood shine, and that, despite him being removed from that environment at a young age due to such a traumatic event, the acrobatic and playful nature that the circus and his parents instilled in him stuck, even through his trauma and rigorous training from Wayne. Grayson does not do what he does out of a need in his life or a desire to avenge the deaths of his parents, instead he fights to make a difference in the lives of the citizens of Blüdhaven and Gotham City – he simply wants to do good.

Further distancing himself from Wayne’s behavior, Grayson is not intolerant of his own mistakes - quite the contrary, he’s willing to learn from them. This is evident in writer Chuck

Dixon's acclaimed run on *Nightwing* from 1996-2002, which featured many stories that began with Nightwing making a mistake, but would end in his redemption and victory. When Nightwing confronts the boss of crime in Blüdhaven, Blockbuster (Roland Desmond) for the first time, he underestimates Blockbuster's size and enhanced strength, and barely escapes with his life, after Blockbuster decides that killing Nightwing would draw Batman to Blüdhaven for vengeance. This is a common tactic used by multiple writers, including Chuck Dixon, Devin Grayson, and Tim Seeley, who frequently depict Grayson as a hero who has to take a second approach to his more formidable foes. Grayson tends to either scope his enemies out in their first encounter, or he underestimates them and has to come back, better prepared for their rematch.

Grayson wears the cape and cowl of Batman for Wayne while he recovers from injury in *Batman: Prodigal* (1994), a storyline written by Doug Moench, Chuck Dixon, and Alan Grant that showcases the immense personal and character development that Grayson has undergone since relinquishing the Robin identity in 1984. As Batman, Grayson encounters Two-Face (Harvey Dent) and defeats him, saving the life of Robin (Tim Drake) in the process. This is written to be an important and cathartic experience for Grayson, as it allows him to surmount his fear of Two-Face and redeem a previous failure that serves as a source of his self-doubt. More importantly, *Prodigal* also shows how Grayson has learned from his mistakes in the past when he takes a more cautious and careful approach to combating Two-Face, due to a particularly tragic encounter he had with the villain in his days as Robin. Two-Face is Grayson's most feared enemy, as he serves as a reminder of the "double-jeopardy" incident whenever he faces him. While trying to save Batman and a civilian from hanging in a double-edged deathtrap engineered by Two-Face, Grayson makes a fatal error that results in the death of an innocent man and a vicious, near-fatal beating for Grayson at the hands of Two-Face. This shows us that, despite

overcoming the trauma of his parent's murder, Grayson has had additional traumatic experiences during his time as Robin and Nightwing and these have been burned into his mind, invoking feelings of fear and dread when reminded.

Operating as the Robin to Grayson's Batman, Tim Drake is used by writers to function in the same manner that Grayson did with Wayne, as they use him to note the resurgence of Grayson's traumatic and emotional memories regarding Two-Face, "It's tearing him apart inside. I can hear it in his voice. Dick's running it through his mind over and over. His first time alone against Two-Face. An error in judgment that almost got Bruce killed. It almost got Dick killed. And now all of Gotham is in his care" (*Robin* #11, 17). However, Grayson does not succumb to his fear and apprehension, and defies the role of the victim. In this way, his character is written to surmount the harmful consequences detailed in Bloom's research. Grayson does not lash out in anger and viciously beat Two-Face to within an inch of his life, rather he gains back his composure and confronts the villain, foils his trap, and sends him back to Arkham Asylum. Here, Grayson is given a second chance to confront a demon from his past and to rectify his first and greatest failure – he fights through the flashbacks and the fear that Two-Face instilled in him, overcomes them, and gets the closure that he needs.

Grayson's experience with Two-Face, as well as the murders of Wayne's and Grayson's parents, ties into what Bloom describes as "emotional memory" (Bloom, 6). Bloom argues that emotional memory occurs when "powerful images, feelings, and sensations do not just 'go away'. They are deeply imprinted, more strongly in fact, than normal everyday memories" (Bloom, 6). When Grayson failed to save the civilian from Two-Face's trap and received such a horrific beating from the villain, this experience was deeply imprinted in his memory. Any time

that Grayson encounters Two-Face after this, these memories resurface and he must retread the fear and humiliation from this previous experience.

After realizing that he would have to confront Two-Face again, however this time as Batman, with his own Robin (Tim Drake), Grayson has flashbacks of the double-jeopardy incident and begins to let it alter his approach to combating Two-Face in the present. He is cautious, and warns Robin not to underestimate what Two-Face is capable of, based on his own personal memories. Despite Grayson's best efforts and warnings, Robin goes after Two-Face alone, and winds up being taken hostage, forcing Grayson to confront the villain alone, much like he had to when he was younger, only this time he was now Batman and had a Robin of his own to save. The flashbacks that Grayson experiences here are something that trauma victims try to avoid, "Over time, as people try to limit situations that promote hyperarousal and flashbacks, limit relationships which trigger emotions, and employ behaviors designed to control emotional responses, they may become progressively numb to all emotions, and feel depressed, alienated, empty, even dead" (Bloom, 7). While these flashbacks do trigger emotions for Grayson, he rejects the notion that this can lead to progressive numbness and alienation. He confronts Two-Face and beats him, gaining catharsis for his earlier failure and has his confidence in his role as Batman boosted – along with deepening his bonds and understanding with Tim Drake through the experience, defeating the notions of alienation.

### **Wayne's Failure, Grayson's Success**

Even though Grayson is written to reject these progressions, they directly describe the way in which Wayne is constructed. The murder of his parents is designed to be an emotional memory for Wayne, one that defines who he is and that he often relives through flashbacks. However, this is not the only source of trauma that Wayne has, as he has other emotional

memories that elicit the same emotional responses that Bloom describes. Wayne is written to experience additional traumatic events through other members of the Batman family, such as when Jason Todd (the second Robin) is murdered by The Joker in *Batman* #427 (September, 1988), and when Barbara Gordon (Batgirl) is shot and paralyzed by The Joker in *Batman: The Killing Joke* (July, 1988). In *Batman* #614 (June, 2003), part of the *Hush* storyline, writer Jeph Loeb has Batman suffer through numerous flashbacks to these events when The Joker supposedly kills Wayne's newly resurfaced childhood friend Tommy Elliot.

As Batman is pursuing The Joker, the shock of Elliot's death causes him to relive his parent's murder and the vow he took over their bodies, and his grief and anger over the fate of Jason and Barbara resurfaces. Blinded by rage, Batman brutally beats The Joker, knocking out some of his teeth and completely ignoring the clown's pleas to stop. During this assault, his judgment is impaired by traumatic memories and Batman decides that killing The Joker would be his catharsis for all of the harm he has allowed The Joker to commit by keeping him alive, and commits himself to ending the villain's life with his bare hands. Ultimately, Jim Gordon stops Batman from doing this, by threatening to bring the law against him if he goes through with this, and reminds him of the line of the law that they walk, bringing Wayne back to his vow "I made a promise on the grave of my parents that I would rid this city of the evil that took their lives. Tonight... I nearly became a part of that evil" (*Batman* #614, 21). When these emotional memories surfaced for Wayne, he became numb to all emotion except anger, and he was on the verge of turning his back on the vow he took over his parent's death. Once again, we see writers steering Batman down the path of attempting to solve his problems with anger, choosing to beat The Joker mercilessly, ignoring The Joker's pleas of innocence and silencing Catwoman's

(Selina Kyle's) attempt to prevent him from killing The Joker, only listening to Gordon when he reminds him of his commitment to justice.

Grayson's conflict with Two-Face and Wayne's history with The Joker, as well as the murder of their parents are written as emotional memories – as they evoke strong emotions and feelings within these characters, however, there are obvious differences that emerge between the way that writers have the two handle these memories. As Nightwing and eventually as Batman, Grayson handles his encounters with Two-Face in a healthier way than Wayne confronts his issues with The Joker. Grayson suffers through the initial feelings of fear, terror, and apprehension as he remembers the beating and humiliation that Two-Face gave him, however he attains catharsis by stopping Two-Face's plan and saves Robin and the civilian that he had captured. His catharsis is obtained through upstaging Two-Face's plan and rectifying his mistake from the past. Grayson does not resort to anger and brutal violence to solve his problems and to deal with these feelings unlike Wayne, whose solution is to fly into a rage and beat The Joker to a bloody pulp. Instead, Grayson focuses less on vengeance and keeps himself composed, using his experiences with Two-Face's previous crimes to gain the advantage and apprehend him.

These differences also stem from the role that Grayson's parents play in his memory and his life as well. For Wayne, his parents are a constant source of suffering, and the sole source of the development of the Batman identity. His quest is about obtaining the vengeance he needs to fill the hole that his parent's death left in him. Grayson is written as a hero who is inspired by his dead parents, instead of being consumed by a quest to avenge them. He is constructed to embody the enthusiastic spirit with which they approached their circus routine as this carries over into Grayson's identity as Robin and Nightwing. His parents function as a source of pride and inspiration for him, grounding him and aiding his way through various psychological ailments,

such as The Scarecrow's fear inducing toxins. Wayne's parents still serve as a source of suffering and sorrow, as he morbidly views their portrait and tells his father that he will "become a bat" to instill and inspire fear in criminals. Wayne is constructed as a character who never lets himself move on from his loss, and through this he becomes emotionally numb and alienated.

In Wayne's situation, he experiences what Bloom describes as dissociation, which is, "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment" (Bloom, 8). This allows us to perform and complete tasks that we are already capable of, while our focus is retained somewhere else. Batman functions like this, dissociating from his psychological issues while he tirelessly works through a case or hunts down a villain like The Joker. Dissociation does not lead to healing, but it can allow traumatized individuals to escape from confronting their feelings, "they may be dissociated from their feelings and their capacity for normal emotional interaction may be consequently diminished" (Bloom, 8). The cape and cowl of Batman is constructed as a tool that allows Wayne to dissociate his focus away from his trauma, reinforcing the roots of his character being in his unhealthy solutions to his traumatic experiences. It is difficult to pinpoint a post-Crisis, main continuity iteration of Wayne that is not constructed to do this. Even in DC's *Rebirth* continuity (2016-present) this behavior and dissociation continues to persist. In a recent example, in *Detective Comics* #988 (September, 2018), writer James Robinson crafts Batman as a way for Wayne to dissociate himself from being left at the altar by Catwoman, "No. I won't let what's happened break me or affect me – not in any way. Selina. She – focus" (*Detective Comics* #988, 8). The identity of Batman is written as a way for Wayne to move his focus away from not only his trauma, but his feelings as well, and as a result he is constructed as a character whose ability to emotionally bond with and sustain healthy interactions with others suffers.

Dissociation does not play as key a role in Grayson's story, as Grayson is written as an emotionally healthy character. His identity as Robin, Nightwing, and even Batman do not define his personality; instead, his personality defines those personas. He is not dissociated from his feelings and his emotional interactions do not suffer as a result. Instead of dissociating from his feelings, Grayson is crafted as a character who acknowledges his personal feelings and problems, and is emotionally connected to others. As he grows up, Grayson establishes successful interpersonal relationships with other DC characters such as Robin (Tim Drake) and Kid Flash (Wally West) who become two of his best friends. He even was engaged to Starfire (Koriand'r) while serving as the leader of the (Teen) Titans. During his time with the (Teen) Titans, Grayson also establishes friendships with teammates Beast Boy (Garfield Logan), Raven (Rachel Roth), Cyborg (Victor Stone), Wonder Girl (Donna Troy), and Arsenal (Roy Harper), just to name a few.

Grayson's relationships are not flawless, they have problems, but because he takes the time to attempt to work them out and is aware of the emotional consequences not only of his own decisions, but of the decisions made by others as well, Grayson is successfully crafted to embody traits of positive emotional health. In contrast to Wayne's emotional numbness, Grayson is written as a character with an open heart who has the desire to pursue romance and companionship, even as his life as a vigilante and protecting his identity cause complications and hardships. Grayson is constructed as an emotionally tenacious character, who is willing to fight through them in order to maintain as healthy of a support network and social life as he can, as he has learned to create relationships that are not based on power or fear, or on how much one can contribute to a crusade for justice, unlike Wayne's situation.



Although his openness involving his feelings and emotions often gets him hurt, Grayson learns more about himself during the process – he knows that The Huntress (Helena Bertinelli) is bad for him because he’s willing to open himself up to her and tries to have a relationship, and through this he discovers that her desire for vengeance is equal to, or even greater than Wayne’s. At first, Grayson pursues a relationship with Bertinelli, because he desires companionship and writer Chuck Dixon presents Bertinelli as an opportunity for a romance with someone who understands the vigilante side of Grayson’s life, as she is a vigilante herself. Despite this understanding, as Grayson gets to know her he sees that she is filled with too much anger and rage, and he cannot approve of her brutal methods, as they go beyond even Batman’s harsh ways “All of us. Batman. Robin. Me. We’re driven by one tragic turning point in our lives. So are you. But yours is darker, uglier. I can’t fix it. I wish I could, but I can’t even reach it. And I won’t be part of it” (*Nightwing* #29, 22). Grayson’s rejection of Bertinelli’s feelings leads to emotionally charged conflict between the two, as neither is willing to reform their sense of justice in order to accommodate the other.

Contrary to Grayson, Wayne does not actively pursue relationships, rather, he is closed-off to them. In *Batman* #610 (February, 2003), writer Jeph Loeb visits the possibility of a romance between Batman and Catwoman. When Catwoman kisses Batman after he saves her life during an encounter with Killer Croc, Wayne spends the next few issues trying to figure out what the sensation of romance is, as he is confused by the feelings he develops for her after this, and by Selina’s expression of her feelings towards him. The concept of a romantic relationship is so foreign to Wayne that he initially has no idea where to go with it. After Grayson talks to Wayne about what is going on between Wayne and Selina, he encourages him to pursue a romance with her, as he can see that it would not only give Wayne a chance to have a

relationship with someone who understands his life as a vigilante, but also a chance at a healthy relationship with a person who could comfort him. Grayson tells Wayne that he should reveal his identity to Selina, “My point is – tell her” (*Batman* #615, 12) and it is through Grayson’s advice that Wayne decides to act and does reveal his identity to Selina, allowing them to move forward with their romance – through Grayson’s encouragement, Wayne is able to progress as a character.

Wayne’s failure to emotionally resonate and communicate with others has had negative effects on his relationships and has been used by writers to create particularly stressful situations between Wayne and Grayson. When it comes to the construction of the relationship between Wayne and Grayson, Wayne often fails to properly communicate with him, and this holds true throughout multiple different iterations of their relationship, including the post-Crisis, *The New 52*, and *Rebirth* continuities. This causes misunderstandings and hard feelings between the two, and often results in Grayson reacting to Wayne’s actions in anger. This was especially evident in the post-Crisis continuity when Wayne chose Jean-Paul Valley to succeed him as Batman after Bane broke his back, rather than Grayson. Grayson’s feelings were hurt that he was overlooked for the interloper that Jean Paul was, and did not get so much as a phone call from Wayne to ask him if he would consider taking over as Batman. Despite it not being easy for him to admit, Grayson states that it had always been his dream to one day inherit the Batman role from Wayne, in a passing of the torch manner, from father to son. However Wayne later reveals that he chose not to call Grayson because he assumed that he would not be interested in the job, as Grayson had already made a life for himself as Nightwing, and had gained the distance from Batman that he desired.

Had Wayne expressed this feeling to Grayson at the start, he could have prevented further emotional conflict between the two from developing. Here, Wayne failed to consider the emotional consequences of his decisions, and this shows us that becoming numb to emotions can have harmful effects on relationships. Bloom states that “We need all of our emotions available to us if we are to create and sustain healthy relationships with other people. If we cannot feel anger, we cannot adequately protect others and ourselves. If we cannot feel sadness, we cannot complete the work of mourning that helps us recover from losses so that we can form new attachments” (Bloom, 9). Wayne is in a constant state of mourning, having never developed coping skills, as Bloom states that “Children who are traumatized do not have developed coping skills, a developed sense of self, or self in relation to others. Their schemas for meaning, hope, faith, and purpose are not yet fully formed. They are in the process of developing a sense of right and wrong, or mercy balanced against justice” (Bloom, 10). Due to his lack of coping skills and his numbness to emotions, Wayne does not have the ability to create or sustain healthy relationships with others, even those who are part of the Batman family of crime fighters. Despite all of this, Wayne does care for and love his Batman family; however, his relationships with even the veteran and seasoned members such as Grayson are often at the very least strained, and they suffer from Wayne’s constant adherence to secrecy and inability to completely open up to anyone.

Due to both his inability to and lack of interest in developing healthy, functional relationships with those around him, Wayne becomes more and more alienated. Although it does not concern him, Wayne is alienated from not only romantic relationships and general friendships, but also from establishing relationships or friendships with those he “works” with. Contrary to how Grayson meets some of his best friends through the (Teen) Titans, Wayne has

contingency plans in place in order to defeat the other members of the Justice League, should the need arise, which was used against him by the villainous Ra's Al Ghul in Mark Waid's storyline, "Tower of Babel" in *JLA* #43 (July, 2000). Bloom states, "As these alternating symptoms come to dominate traumatized people's lives, they feel more and more alienated from everything that give our lives meaning – themselves, other people, a sense of direction and purpose, a sense of spirituality, a sense of community" (Bloom, 10). While he does not lack a sense of purpose, the construction of Wayne's character adheres to the behaviors that Bloom describes here. Forever stuck in the moment his parents were murdered, Wayne has lost sight of any other possible meaning to his life, outside of his pursuit of vengeance and his one man war on crime.

Bloom's research brings to light one more negative aspect of Wayne's behavior – his propensity to control everything he is involved with, "These children, who grow to be adults, unable to trust or be comforted by other people – in fact other people have been the fundamental source of the stress. Instead, they must fall back on whatever resources they can muster within themselves, resources that they control, to achieve any kind of equilibrium" (Bloom, 11). Wayne is unable to completely trust anyone, even Superman, who is often described as the "big blue boy scout". Grayson, on the other hand does not share Wayne's inability to trust others, "Bruce always tried to warn me about Superman. 'Superman's not from our world. His loyalty will forever be in question. He's not human.' I'm not so sure of that. He may be the most human guy I ever met" (*Nightwing* #30, 22). Unable to trust others, Wayne is a control freak - if he can't control it, he doesn't like it. Wayne's predisposition to control was one of the factors that weighed heavily on Grayson and contributed to his desire to break away from Batman and become something other than Robin. Grayson was hurt and angered by Batman's behavior in a joint mission between Grayson's (Teen) Titans and Wayne's team, *The Outsiders*, in which

Batman assumed leadership of both teams, despite Grayson being the appointed leader of the (Teen) Titans. Here, Wayne cannot look past the mission at hand, and fails to comprehend that his behavior could be damaging to Grayson's independence and confidence in himself as a leader.

Grayson succeeds where Wayne fails in these areas, he is able to create healthy relationships, while Wayne cannot, as before he met Grayson, he had not developed proper coping mechanisms, and was completely closed off to emotions. Despite establishing an emotional connection with Grayson, Wayne is no more open with any other character, and he eventually reverts to his old ways and pushes even Grayson away, straining their relationship, as he needs to be constructed as DC's dark, lonely, brooding avenger. Forming relationships plays a key part in Grayson overcoming his trauma and setting up his network of emotional support throughout the DC Universe, while Wayne continues to be socially immobilized. Bloom emphasizes the importance of developing healthy relationships:

This means that people who have been traumatized need to learn to create relationships that are not based on terror and the abuse of power, even though abusive power feels normal or right. In such cases, people often need direct relationship coaching and the direct experience of engaging in relationships that are not abusive and do not permit abusive and punitive behavior (Bloom, 12).

People who have been traumatized cannot heal themselves on their own – the healing process cannot be completed alone. Wayne did not know how to engage in a healthy, non-abusive relationship until Grayson came along, who is then able to provide this relationship coaching for Wayne, thus Wayne needs Grayson's catharsis to help him achieve his own and alleviate him from the mental wounds from his parent's murder. Although Wayne does receive alleviation, it is

not permanent, as Wayne regresses (he must in order to remain as DC's highly marketable "dark" knight) and writers do not allow for Wayne to ever achieve complete closure, thus his wounds are never truly dealt with.

It takes Grayson's catharsis and display of healthy coping mechanisms to move Wayne on the path towards his own, as Kingsley argues that "Dick Grayson's ability to grow and mature mark Dick as the adult figure who teaches Bruce how to grow and mature" (Kingsley, 75). It is through Grayson's own path into a healthy adult life that Wayne follows and deviates from his emotional numbness, alienation, and repetitive cycle of other self-destructive behaviors. Although Grayson facilitates the beginning of Wayne's path towards healthy adulthood, this is also where Grayson differs from Wayne. Unable to access this relief or freedom before he met Grayson, Wayne's wounds run deep, and despite him receiving relationship coaching and emotional understanding from Grayson, he is still trapped by the trauma of his parent's murder. Wayne's character does improve to some extent, such as his allowing the Batman family of crime fighters to expand and his occasional romantic pursuit of Selina Kyle; however, he can never make these stick – Wayne always reverts back to his nearly numb emotional state, and still continues to misunderstand relationships, which has caused tension between him and Grayson many times throughout their adult lives.

Unlike Wayne, Grayson teaches us how to move forward in development, as he moves out of Wayne Manor to attend college in *Batman* #217 (December, 1969). It is important to note that although this issue takes place in pre-Crisis continuity, its events are still acknowledged in post-Crisis continuity. From there, Grayson shows us the importance of establishing successful interpersonal relationships as he does with other DC characters while serving as leader of the Teen Titans. Grayson eventually develops his own heroic identity of Nightwing, allowing him to

gain distance from Batman, and to establish himself as the hero of Gotham's neighboring city, Blüdhaven. Not only do these character-defining events make Grayson's aging, maturity, and development visible, they are also enduring elements of his character – Grayson never reverts back to a completely traumatized state as Wayne does. Despite events forcing him to move back to and operate from Gotham at times, Grayson retains a degree of independence, and even after he takes the mantle of Batman from Wayne, he never loses sight of what makes him a healthy and functioning adult. Grayson is crafted as a character who always maintains healthy relationships with those he cares about, and never lets his parent's murder serve as the cause of his mission – rather they inspire him, just as he inspires hope in contrast to fear, by overcoming his trauma as opposed to let it overcome him.

### CHAPTER III. DICK GRAYSON, CATALYST OF PROGRESSION

#### Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis focused on Grayson's construction by writers as a hero and his path through Campbell's hero's journey. Chapter two examined his experience with trauma and the example that he sets for mental health and psychic healing by comparing his health and coping abilities with that of Batman's. This third chapter will focus on what Dick Grayson does as a character. More specifically, why Grayson is important to the eighty-year Batman mythos in both comic books and other Batman media, and how he acts as a catalyst of progression for the characters around him.

Although stated in the introduction to this project, it is important to restate that Dick Grayson is an often overlooked character. In both the world of comic book studies and Batman themed media, his presence and importance to the Batman narrative is glossed over. David Kingsley mentions how filmmakers and actors can diminish Grayson as a character:

Creators and audiences still regard Robin as an avatar of previous era's adolescence who unnecessarily mitigates Batman's maturity, rather than regard Dick Grayson as the impact character who concludes Batman's character arc. "If Robin crops up in one of the new Batman films," Christian Bale, star of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, declared, "I'll be chaining myself up somewhere and refusing to go to work". Bale's denigration of Dick Grayson displays the tendency for filmmakers to deemphasize Robin in all media adaptations of Batman, post 1989, though the character had appeared in all media incarnations of Batman since 1943. Tim Burton was admittedly "happy" that Robin was cut from his 1989 *Batman* film. (Kingsley, 77)



While Burton's *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992) films and Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy were all successful at the box office, with the absence of a Robin (specifically Grayson), they are missing his importance to the narrative and thus a key element in the development of the Batman/Bruce Wayne character and the entirety of the Batman mythos.

It must be made clear that it is not just filmmakers who are responsible for this. Despite having positive and popular works by writers such as Chuck Dixon and Marv Wolfman, Grayson has had his fair share of setbacks handed to him by comic book creators: "Writers fundamentally altered and assassinated Dick Grayson's character in comic books, as well" (Kingsley, 77). Frank Miller and Tom King have both significantly altered Grayson's character. Miller destroyed the relationship between Grayson and Wayne in *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2001), and ultimately had Wayne kill Grayson during this series. King was responsible for Grayson taking a bullet to the head in *Batman* #55 (September, 2018), the amnesia that completely wiped his career as Robin and Nightwing from his memory, and laid the groundwork for the "Ric" Grayson persona that emerged from this. Taking these character assassinations into consideration, it becomes clear that it is important look at both Grayson's and Robin's various representations in a historical context, to examine the extent of his impact on not only comic books, but multiple iterations of the Batman mythos.

### **Grayson's (Robin's) Legacy**

Because Grayson is so often overlooked and underappreciated, his legacy and impact on the Batman mythos and the DC Universe as a whole can be underestimated. *Detective Comics* #38 is often described as the first appearance of "Robin", as opposed to the first appearance of Dick Grayson as Robin. With DC Comics recently celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Detective Comics* #38 in *Robin 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 100 Page Super Spectacular* (April, 2020), it was not

advertised as a celebration of Dick Grayson's first appearance, but rather as that of Robin's. Additionally, the book included multiple stories by various authors that revolved around each character who has worn the Robin mantle. This presents an obscured look at Grayson, as it does succeed in showing the importance and longevity of the Robin legacy that he established. However, because it includes so many works involving the other Robins, and with the second Robin, Jason Todd appearing four decades after Grayson himself, the emphasis on the importance of Grayson is lost.

This is why it is important to examine Grayson's legacy, and what Grayson did for the Robin mantle. Being the first Robin, Grayson set an impressive standard for all of the characters that would carry the Robin mantle after him, both in terms of the narrative and in the way that writers construct the character. As Robin, Grayson was the first comic book superhero side-kick; created as a way for Bob Kane and Bill Finger to brighten Batman up and give kids and younger readers a character they could relate to: "A different character could have become Batman's sounding board, but the industry was learning that the most avid readers of superhero comics were boys. Dick Grayson was a natural stand-in for these young male readers" (Bell, 10-11). Due to this, Grayson's character was in stasis for years, where he functioned as a method of character development for Batman, rather than receiving any sort of development himself.

Grayson aided Batman's characterization and stories in three major ways. First, Grayson gave Batman someone to talk to, as it was difficult to have him constantly thinking or talking to himself all of the time. Second, Grayson filled the role of a child to make Batman into a lighthearted father figure. Lastly, Grayson's presence allowed for more varied plots, as the two often had to rescue one another or made mistakes that got both of them into trouble. The variability that Grayson offered gave Batman more room to grow and develop as a character.

With Grayson's wise-cracking quips, colorful red and green tunic, and bright yellow cape, he turned Batman from a brooding, dark detective into a smiling and cheery father. Grayson also supplied a brand of humor that Batman himself couldn't supply, which helped lighten up Batman's comics.

Being younger and less experienced than Batman, Grayson acts as a surrogate character for the reader, specifically with a younger male audience. With Grayson being the surrogate character, the audience to identify with him, as it is possible to see our own lives played out in his journey, which was discussed at length in chapter one. Grayson's journey is a coming-of-age story, as Grayson embarks on a quest of self-discovery to find his purpose in the world and become happy with who he is. With this, Grayson functions as a surrogate character, as his journey is comparable with our own – we can see our own journeys of self-discovery played out through Grayson's. Bell points out that this phenomenon is not strictly limited to Grayson's development or his path through the hero's journey, but more simply, works due to Grayson's younger age. His youth and smaller stature made him visibly more relatable and appealing to younger readers: "...Robin's status as the littlest guy in the fight increases the character's appeal for some children, especially the 'youngest and the weakest'" (Bell, 11).

Grayson is introduced as a child, and undergoes next to no character growth or development for the first twenty-nine years of his publication – he remains a child and does not advance into adulthood. Once this stasis is broken, he begins his journey to find himself, and he begins to develop as a character. Although he is a titular character, Batman does not function as a surrogate for the audience, because his coming-of-age story is complete. Batman has discovered his purpose in the world and does not change, so, despite his realism and struggles, it is more difficult to relate to Batman/Bruce Wayne than it is to Grayson. Unlike novels or films, comic

books are published as serials, and superheroes like Grayson do not have definitive ends. Over time, the younger characters within serial narratives like comic books must grow up – they must change, develop, and ultimately, transform, of which the Robins are an example. After the surrogate character has grown up or moved on to a different role, they must be replaced by a new, younger character, who will embark on a similar journey, as we saw in the succession of Robins discussed in chapter one.

Grayson's aforementioned stasis ended in *Batman* #217 (December, 1969), when he left Wayne Manor behind to attend college at the fictional Hudson University and his growth arc began. Though Grayson's coming-of-age arc would take years to play out (1969-1984), this style of character development and growth would become the standard for all of the Robins who would succeed him as Batman's surrogate character. Since Grayson's arc of growth would become a pattern for all of the Robins who followed him, Grayson's journey from Robin to Nightwing establishes the Robin mantle as that of a stepping stone, leading those who hold it to bigger and better things. As one Robin metaphorically graduates, they require a replacement, because the audience needs to have another surrogate. This further emphasizes the importance of Campbell's hero's journey, as it revolves around a younger character who has yet to find himself or his true purpose. Thus, no matter who has the mantle, Robin is always a character in flux; and following the example that Grayson set, each Robin has gone through a transformative journey.

Through his growth, Grayson made Robin into a character that is symbolic of change, development, and transformation. Each character to inherit it from him has undergone significant transformation over time. After being murdered by The Joker in *Batman: A Death in the Family* (1988), Jason Todd is resurrected and returns to Gotham as the Red Hood, establishing himself as an anti-hero in *Batman: Under the Red Hood* (2005). After Grayson replaces Bruce Wayne as

Batman, he fires then-Robin Tim Drake and turns the Robin mantle over to Damian Wayne. In response, Drake develops his own heroic identity and becomes Red Robin, which resembles Grayson's own "post-Crisis" transformation into Nightwing. Drake also appears as the Batman of an alternate future in the *Teen Titans: The Future is Now* (2004).

Initially being raised to kill and replace his father, Damian Wayne makes his intent to inherit the cowl of the Bat clear by threatening Grayson numerous times for what he sees as Grayson's desire to succeed Wayne. Damian is also presented as the Batman of an alternate future in *Batman* #666 (July, 2007), succeeding both Wayne and Grayson after their apparent deaths. In *Teen Titans Annual* #2 (August, 2020) Damian quits being Robin due to his disagreement with Batman's code of justice. Damian believes that his father has failed to obtain revenge for Bane's murder of Alfred, and sets out to create his own identity that is more in-line with his definition of justice. Even Carrie Kelly, the Robin from Frank Miller's Elseworld story (set outside of main continuity) *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) adheres to this, as she goes on to become Batwoman in *The Dark Knight III: The Master Race* #9 (July, 2017). All of the Robins that have followed Grayson have their own version of his graduation to a new identity that is all their own.

The role that Grayson played as a sidekick, and then changing his identity, effected the design of all future Robins. This is visible with Jason Todd and Tim Drake, specifically. Jason Todd was first introduced in *Batman* #357 (March, 1983) as a copy of Grayson, as he had the same origins as a circus acrobat, and had a similar personality. In the "pre-Crisis" continuity, when Grayson hands the Robin costume over to Todd, Batman tells Todd that he has massive boots to fill, and must work hard to uphold the legacy that Grayson had established as Robin, as his actions no longer defined just his own legacy, but also continued Robin's (because the public

did not know Grayson was Robin). Todd himself was elated, and regarded Grayson with reverence, showing the standing Grayson had built up and the respect that Todd had for him. All of this was drastically altered in the “post-Crisis” continuity, where Todd was turned into a mouthy, street-smart kid, who tries to steal the tires off of the Batmobile. The “post-Crisis” version of Todd approached his acquisition of the Robin mantle with an ego, viewing himself as the newer and more improved version of Grayson. Instead of holding Grayson’s legacy in reverence, this version of Todd saw Grayson’s tenure as Robin as a record book, and made it clear that he intended to break all of Grayson’s records. Todd’s similarities with Grayson ended with the emergence of the “post-Crisis” continuity, and he developed into his own more egocentric and impulsive character.

While the mantle of Robin does act as a stepping stone, it also provides those who have it with a purpose. Having a purpose plays a key role in recovering from trauma, which was discussed at length in chapter two, and will be covered again in a later section of this chapter. Assuming the mantle of Robin gives the character a purpose, however, after spending an extended amount of time as Robin, the individual develops a desire to move on to another role – they need a greater purpose. Grayson struggles to find a greater purpose after he outgrows being Batman’s sidekick, therefore he must embark on a path of transformation, and ultimately becomes Nightwing. Living in Batman’s shadow was not enough for Grayson once he got older, and being the leader of the (Teen) Titans and becoming his own hero as Nightwing allowed him to find his place in the world.

As Robin, Jason Todd becomes more erratic and impulsive, and he views being Robin as a game, rather than something that was his calling. This impulsiveness eventually gets him killed by The Joker. Tim Drake is introduced as a character with a purpose, which is to get Batman and

Robin back together, as Batman had become reckless and violent following Todd's murder, and Drake believed that having a Robin would bring Batman back to his senses. Initially, Drake asks Grayson to reassume the role of Robin, but after he refuses, Drake decides that he will become the new Robin. Drake is the first character who makes it his goal to be Robin; he has found his purpose and place in the world as Robin.

However, when Bruce Wayne is presumed dead after the events of *Final Crisis* (2008), Drake refuses to believe this and travels the world in hopes of finding Wayne alive. Here, Drake has discovered a new purpose, and he takes on a new identity with this, becoming Red Robin, as Damian takes over as the new Robin. Having this sense of purpose helps keep Grayson and Drake grounded in humility, while Jason Todd and Damian Wayne are more conflicted characters who lack commitments to the mantle of Robin and to Batman's code of justice. Todd still functions as an impulsive and reckless character following his resurrection and becoming Red Hood. Damian's desire for purpose lies within his goal to inherit the cowl of Batman, but due to his young age and the presence of older, more developed candidates like Grayson, this is an unattainable goal for him. Damian is a character that struggles to find his place in the world, and lacks a commitment to both the mantle of Robin (which he sees as a stepping stone to the Bat) and to his father's sense of justice.

Up until now, this thesis' focus has been narrowed to Grayson's representation in comic books, however, it can be useful to consider his, and other Robins' presence in other mediums, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. This can be difficult, as each medium has a different approach to narratives, and tonal differences between Grayson's various characterizations do exist. Robin, specifically Grayson's version has been adapted to film and television numerous times, including in: the *Batman* serial series (1943, 1949), the *Batman*

television series (1966-1968), *Titans* (2018), *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995) and its sequel *The New Batman Adventures* (1997), *The Batman* (2004-2008), *Teen Titans* (2003-2006), and the live action films *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997).

Throughout his numerous portrayals, Grayson has kept elements of his comic book characterization. This is particularly true when it comes to the *Batman* television series which aired from 1966-1968, where he is portrayed by actor Burt Ward. His characterization here is much in line with his comic book persona at the time, as he was young, jovial, and comedic, often providing comic relief with catchphrases and mishaps. However, in later adaptations of Grayson, his character is often altered. Differences emerge in his personality, his goals, and particularly with departure from Batman (although this also happens in comic books with various reboots). Alternate adaptations have seen Grayson made into a darker character who more resembles Batman, as seen in the *Titans* show, or introduced at an older age, with the *Batman Forever* and *Batman & Robin* films.

In *Batman Forever* and *Batman & Robin*, Grayson is portrayed by actor Chris O'Donnell, and is drastically different from his comic book counterpart. Grayson is introduced in his mid-to-late twenties, and O'Donnell's appearance made this noticeable, as he was twenty-five years old when he filmed *Batman Forever* (Kingsley, 77). In this adaptation, Grayson has a brother, and his parents are not killed by Tony Zucco, but are instead murdered by Two-Face (Harvey Dent). Kingsley mentions that his age affects the relationship that he has with Bruce Wayne in these movies: "O'Donnell's age, 25 and 27 at the dates of release, substantially alters Bruce's and Dick's shared trauma of losing their parents at an early age. The idea of Bruce Wayne adopting an adult ward is absurd" (Kingsley, 77). Due to Grayson and Wayne losing their parents at different ages, they are not able to bond in the same way that they did in the comic



books, as Grayson had already grown up with his family, something Wayne never got the chance to do. This also removes the elements of childhood trauma, and reduces Grayson's agency as it nullifies the significance of him overcoming said trauma by becoming Robin and eventually ascending to Nightwing.

*Titans* (2018), sees a much darker live-action adaptation of Grayson, as he has completely cut ties with Wayne, revealing that he has been with Wayne since he was child, however, the bond they shared over the mutual trauma was shattered. Grayson has become ultra-violent, going as far as dragging a criminal's open mouth along broken glass and stabbing an assassin in the genitals with a pair of scissors. This version of Grayson has not dealt with his trauma in healthy manner, and is driven by a desire for vengeance, much like Batman, although he goes to even further extremes. In a flashback during season one, episode six, titled "Jason Todd," Grayson attacks a prison convoy that is transporting Zucco, and brutally beats him for killing his parents. When another group of criminals shows up to kill Zucco, he pleads with Grayson to save him, but Grayson denies him and leaves him to be shot to death. In this adaption, Grayson has not achieved catharsis regarding the trauma of his parents' murder, and gives a glimpse at what Grayson would turn out to be if he walked a path of obsession with vengeance similar to Batman's.

Grayson's departure from the Robin identity also sees alterations in alternate adaptations. One of the most notable changes occurs in *The New Batman Adventures*, in the episode, "Old Wounds." Here, an irate Grayson quits being Robin, and leaves Gotham, tired of what he sees as Batman's manipulative ways and increasing obsession with stopping crimes. The level of agency that Grayson retains in this interpretation rivals that of his "pre-Crisis" comic book departure, as it is done completely by his own volition, and he even punches Batman when he tries to talk

Grayson out of leaving. *Titans* (2018) sees modifications made to this as well, as Grayson views the Robin identity as a reminder of his time spent with Wayne and the darker aspects of Wayne's personality that he had acquired. Symbolically, he burns the costume to rid himself of these qualities. His ascension to Nightwing occurs after he hears a local legend from a group of prisoners, however, his Nightwing costume is designed at Wayne's behest, which removes some of Grayson's agency, as the costume's design no longer originates with him or his father's circus uniform (Superman's influence is also noticeably absent).

It is more difficult to find alternative adaptations of Jason Todd, which may be due to the violent nature of his death and subsequent resurrection. Although this appears to be changing, as Todd is now being brought into different mediums, with the *Batman: Under the Red Hood* animated movie (2010) and partially through comics (comics based in the *Batman: The Animated Series* continuity). The death of Todd's Robin is heavily hinted at in *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), and he is portrayed by actor Curran Walters in *Titans*, marking Todd's first live-action representation. Tim Drake is widely used in multiple animated works, including *The New Batman Adventures* and *Young Justice* (2010), and the same goes for Damian Wayne, who has played a large role in the development of the DC Animated Movie Universe.

Their younger ages, smaller statures, and tendencies to develop and grow allow the Robins to fulfill the role of the reader's surrogate, which is in line with the very reason Grayson was first introduced by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1940; to give the younger (male) readers a character that they could visibly and personally relate to. When one Robin grows up or undergoes significant change (Grayson becoming Nightwing or Drake becoming Red Robin), a new surrogate must take their place. Robin is exemplary of generational progress that is made

through the hero's journey; as one character makes their return, new surrogates must be brought in to replace them.

With the introduction of additional surrogates, Batman himself is finally able to be moved out of stasis, because as the surrogates grow and change, Batman is forced to do so as well. When Grayson goes to college, Wayne decides that he must move out of Wayne Manor. The death of Jason Todd makes Wayne ultra-violent and reckless, while the introduction of Tim Drake brings him out of this, as he has to mentor a new Robin, while avoiding the mistakes he made with Todd. Damian's interaction with Wayne is different because he is Wayne's biological son, rather than his ward or adopted son. The two form a father-son team as Batman and Robin, and Bruce is forced to help Damian deal with his trauma and violent upbringing, even though his own adult life is still defined by a traumatic experience.

### **Narrativized Trauma**

Trauma was one of the focal points of chapter two; this chapter will not have such a narrowed focus, as instead, the scope will be expanded. Additionally, the focus of chapter two was particularly on Cathy Caruth and Lenore Terr's work on childhood trauma, and this section will look more at the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cathy Caruth describes PTSD:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (Caruth, 4).

It is important to look at the role that trauma and PTSD play in the Batman Family, as it is completely defined by numerous traumatic events that have pulled all of its members together. The Batman Family begins with the introduction of Grayson in 1940, and Grayson emerges as the first example of positive health in the Batman Family. At the time of his introduction, this wasn't necessarily an importance facet of the character, but after the family was expanded over decades of comics, it becomes increasingly clear that his healthy depiction plays a vital role at the core of the Batman Family. Along with Tim Drake, Grayson breaks the cycle of pain, trauma and damage that plagues other members of the Batman Family (Drake's trauma comes after he has assumed the identity of Robin). This cycle appears to skip a member with every couple of additions that writers make to it: it begins with Bruce, but misses Grayson, includes Barbara Gordon (Batgirl) and Jason Todd, avoids Tim Drake, but also includes Cassandra Cain (Batgirl), and Damian Wayne, the newest addition to this cycle of pain. Jason Todd and Barbara Gordon are two specific examples of highly traumatized and damaged characters.

*Batman: Three Jokers* (which is still ongoing at the time of this writing), is a series that focuses on Bruce Wayne, Barbara Gordon, and Jason Todd, and the existence of three separate and distinct version of The Joker. In addition to this, the role that PTSD plays in the construction of the Batman Family is addressed in this story. Aside from the story being themed around the three characters mentioned above, it is telling that both Grayson and Tim Drake are not included in the characters covered within *Three Jokers*. With its focus on PTSD, the series examines Wayne, Todd, and Gordon, and the traumatic events that have mentally (and physically) wounded them. Wayne, Todd and Gordon are all heavily defined by their trauma, they are almost entrenched in it, and all three clearly present symptoms of PTSD, Wayne after the murder of his parents, and Todd and Gordon specifically after their encounters with The Joker. In *Batman* #427

(December, 1988), The Joker brutally beats Todd with a crowbar and kills him with a bomb.

Later that year in *Batman: The Killing Joke* (July, 1988), The Joker shoots Gordon and paralyzes her from the waist down, which is an injury her character would deal with for over two decades after she assumes the identity of Oracle, and is something that her character refers back to years later<sup>3</sup>.

Throughout issues #1 and #2, Wayne has numerous flashbacks to the night his parents were murdered, and Todd and Gordon must confront The Joker, who is the source of their trauma. Todd is even captured by The Jokers<sup>4</sup> and is beaten with a crowbar once again, putting him in a more volatile state, and bringing him to lash out at Wayne in anger. These events show that Wayne, Todd, and Gordon (Damian as well, although he is not involved in the story), all have unresolved trauma and symptoms of PTSD. Grayson and Tim Drake differ from them, as they are not constructed by writers to be defined by their trauma, and Grayson is the first in the Batman Family to display this. Drake's traumatic experiences occur while he is Robin, when his father is murdered in *Identity Crisis* (2004), his best friend, Superboy (Conner Kent) is killed in *Infinite Crisis* (2005), and his girlfriend, Stephanie Brown is presumed dead in *Detective Comics* #809 (August, 2005). After suffering these losses, Drake becomes darker; however, it does not come to define his character, and with help from Grayson, he walks away from a budding obsession with vengeance.

Despite his publication history being minuscule compared to Grayson's, Damian has had his fair share of traumatic events. This begins before Damian's birth, as he was genetically engineered and bred to replace his father as the heir to Wayne Enterprises, and to succeed Ra's

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<sup>3</sup> *Batman: The Killing Joke* implies that The Joker sexually assaulted Barbara Gordon after shooting her. This is not confirmed, and as of writing this it has not been implied or addressed in *Batman: Three Jokers*.

<sup>4</sup> As of writing this, the reason as to why there are three distinct Jokers has not been explained.

Al Ghul as the leader of the League of Assassins. His mother, Talia Al Ghul, trained him to kill from birth, which often leads to conflict between Damian and his father, as Batman does not kill. In *Batman and Robin* #8 (April, 2012), Damian kills the villain Nobody in front of Batman, who is very clearly upset by his actions. However, Damian has his most traumatic moment in *Batman* #77 (August, 2019), when he is forced to watch the supervillain Bane snap Alfred's neck. This experience haunts Damian and brings him to blows with his father in *Teen Titans Annual* #2 (August, 2020), as he has numerous flashbacks to it. Damian blames Batman for Alfred's death, as Batman did not do anything to help him or Alfred survive the situation, nor did he kill Bane in retaliation. This leads to Damian abandoning his role as Robin, as Batman's methods do not do enough as far as he is concerned. Thus, Damian is the next Robin to outgrow the role.

Despite the amount of time that Damian had spent with Grayson, and the two of them bonding as Batman and Robin while also dealing with their father's death, Damian's character arc mirrors Jason Todd's development more than it does Grayson's. Damian's trauma instills a violent desire for revenge within him. Damian even goes after KGBeast for shooting Grayson in the head in *Batman* #55 (September, 2018) and is angry that Batman did not kill KGBeast in retaliation for what he had done to Grayson (just as Jason Todd was angry that Batman didn't kill The Joker in response to Joker killing him).

In discussing the impact of trauma on Wayne and Grayson, chapter two of this thesis also pointed out the importance of attaining catharsis and closure. Grayson gets closure to his trauma relatively quickly, allowing Grayson to grow up knowing his parents' killer was imprisoned for his crime. When discussing PTSD and *Batman: Three Jokers* earlier in this section, it was noted that Tim Drake behaves similarly to Grayson when it comes to traumatic experiences.

Throughout all of his characterizations Drake was never traumatized at the level that Bruce or

other members of the Batman Family, aside from the murder of his father, Jack Drake. Wayne, Jason Todd, Barbara Gordon, and Damian have not achieved any kind of permanent catharsis or closure. Although their physical wounds have healed, their mental wounds have not - the physical wounds leave scars, which can be symbolic of the mental wounds that remain. This cycle of pain was directly referred to by both Jason Todd and The Joker: "I'm the loop-de-loop. The hamster wheel of doom. The cycle of pain each one of you is trapped in" (*Batman: Three Jokers* #1, 43). Todd also possesses scars on his head from where Joker cracked his head open with his crowbar, which is symbolic of the wounds that the clown has left on him.

When analyzing the Batman Family, it is clear that trauma and PTSD play a vital role in the creation and development of the characters within it. Correlating with this, trauma also plays an important role in the hero's journey – or – the hero cycle. As the hero's journey begins with a younger person who must obtain some sort of boon to conquer various obstacles, this character often undergoes some sort of particularly traumatizing experience, usually occurring during the departure stage or the initiation stage. Whether it be the death of one's family (with Wayne or Grayson), or the loss of an important mentor, tragedy and traumatic events play an essential role in the hero's journey to self-discovery and transformation, sometimes even serving as an obstacle in and of itself.

### **Big Brother Dick and Positive Progression**

This thesis has discussed Grayson's role as a founding member of the Batman Family, and the example that he set for future characters as the first Robin. However, there is more to Grayson's character and his relationship to the Batman Family than this. Grayson is more than just the first Robin, or the first member to achieve catharsis, as he is also the peacekeeper of the family, and acts as a big brother to many of the younger characters who join the family ranks.

When Tim Drake is first introduced, Grayson is the first character he goes to, in order to help Batman shortly after the death of Jason Todd. Drake is urged by Grayson to become the new Robin, rather than Grayson simply reassuming the role he had once held in his childhood. During the “pre-Crisis” continuity, Drake would often seek Grayson out in times of trouble or self-doubt, looking for his advice or tutelage. *Nightwing* #25 (August, 1998) sees Grayson and Drake re-create a training exercise that Grayson had practiced with Batman during his days as Robin. During their training, Grayson and Drake talk about the different things going on in their lives, from the struggles of dealing with an overbearing and controlling Batman, to the problems they are both having with romance. This was a common occurrence when writer Chuck Dixon was writing both *Nightwing* and *Robin* (Drake’s solo comic series), from 1996 to 2002.

Grayson’s relationship with Damian Wayne proves be the one of the more positive and productive of the entire Batman Family. Writer Grant Morrison introduces Damian as a child terror who even gives Batman a difficult time, but it is not until Grayson takes him under his wing that Damian begins to move away from his more radical nature. This is covered at length in chapter one, however, it is exemplary of Grayson’s role as peacekeeper in the Batman family. As the Batman to Damian’s Robin, Grayson prevents Damian from going rogue or murdering criminals, and he keeps a close eye on him. The sociopaths and sadistic criminals that Grayson and Damian deal with force the two to work together and sort out their differences, which helps Damian realize the value of teamwork and comradery as Grayson risks his own safety to help and save him.

Following their pairing as Batman and Robin in 2009, Damian Wayne also seeks Grayson’s advice in times of uncertainty or distress. This can be seen in *Nightwing* #43 (April, 2018) when Damian calls Grayson to help him deal with a group of ninja assassins, and in



*Batman* #34 (November, 2017), when Grayson comforts Damian as his mother and father are locked in a sword duel. While both Drake and Damian seek counsel from Grayson, Jason Todd proves to be the loner of the Robins, as he goes to no one for advice, and usually only ends up working with the family in times of crisis. Todd's relationship with the family is strained at best (due to events from *Batman: Under the Red Hood* and *Batman: Battle for the Cowl*). Though this relationship is strained, Grayson tries to pull Todd back into the family to help him as much as he can, even offering him a chance at redemption after Todd tried to kill him and Drake to obtain the cowl of Batman.

These characters all make their progressions through Grayson, he is the catalyst for progression and growth – he pushes Wayne and allows him access to emotions. In the “pre-Crisis” continuity, when Grayson leaves Wayne and Alfred behind to attend college, Wayne decides it is time to move out of Wayne Manor, as he does not want to become obsolete, and must match the growth and maturity that Grayson displayed. The *Batman: Prodigal* (1994) storyline sees Wayne and Grayson settle their differences when Wayne embraces him and acknowledges that there must be conflict between fathers and sons. In the 1995 *Nightwing* mini-series by the late Dennis O' Neil, Wayne asks Grayson to talk with him, which is a rare occurrence, and Grayson thanks him for being the best father he could be. Building on this, writer Chuck Dixon has Wayne acknowledge that he believes Blüdhaven is in good hands now that Grayson is the city's guardian. Grayson also encourages Bruce to trust and pursue a romantic relationship with Selina Kyle (Catwoman) in *Batman: Hush* (2002).

This is not limited to the relationship between Grayson and Wayne. In the “pre-Crisis” *Batman* #368 (February, 1984), Grayson gives Jason Todd his Robin costume, and his blessing to assume the identity of Robin, and in the “post-Crisis” continuity, he helps Jason pass

Batman's final initiation test, the gauntlet. Grayson also tries to help Wayne deal with Todd's death at the behest of Tim Drake, while simultaneously pushing Drake towards the path of becoming Robin; Grayson refuses to reassume the Robin identity like Drake wants him to, and instead pushes Tim towards the path of growth and to becoming Robin himself. In *Nightwing* #139 (December, 2007), Grayson and Drake have a fight, as Drake wants to use the Lazarus Pit in order to bring his parents, Superboy, and Stephanie Brown back to life. Grayson knows the risks of using the pit's magic<sup>5</sup>, but Drake is blind to his warnings and is only seeing the pit as a way to bring his loved ones back to life. Ultimately, Grayson leaves Drake make the choice, and when Drake apologizes after deciding not to follow through with using the pit, Grayson comforts him: "You have nothing to apologize for. Nothing. I let you make the choice for yourself... Because I knew you'd make the right one" (*Nightwing* #139, 19). Although, it is important to point out that this role as a catalyst of progression is not strictly limited to Grayson, but at times, has been filled by the other Robins, including Jason Todd, Tim Drake, and Damian Wayne. This can be seen mostly through the ways in which Wayne's character progresses. On his own, Batman is a static character that does not move, he needs others to spur him forward and allow him to develop as a character.

Despite all of the negative representations of their relationships that this project has covered, it is important to acknowledge that Bruce Wayne still loves and supports all of his sons and family members. Brown points this out: "Batman is a passionate and loving father figure to his entire metaphorical Bat-family, and a literal father to the Robins – his adopted sons Dick Grayson, Jason Todd, and Tim Drake, and his biological son Damian Wayne" (Brown, 10).

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<sup>5</sup> The Lazarus Pit is capable of resurrecting the dead, however, it often comes at the price of that individual's soul, with many that emerge going completely mad as a result of the pit's restorative qualities.

Wayne is the best father that he can be to all of them, and he receives thanks for this on numerous occasions by all of them. On occasion, Wayne does voice how proud he is of Grayson: “He was a performer. Gifted in that way. And while, at the time, the transition from Robin to Nightwing was... difficult for us both – it was a day I had long prepared myself for because... Dick was born to be in the center ring” (*Batman* #615, 15). He also makes similar comments about Tim Drake: “But... Tim... I have to hand it to the boy... He wants to be the world’s greatest detective. And from what I’ve seen so far... he will be someday” (*Batman* #617, 9).

*Batman* #99 (September, 2020), serves as an excellent example of the way in which Wayne values his family, and specifically, how Grayson and Wayne value each other. The cover of this issue is emblazoned with “Nightwing – the first Robin, the final ally”, which is exemplary of how important of an ally Nightwing is to Batman. It is in this issue that Grayson reassumes the Nightwing identity, and Batman is the first to welcome him back, giving him one of his spare Nightwing costumes. After Gotham is ravaged by The Joker, it is Grayson’s return to Nightwing and the Batman Family that allows Batman to start taking the offensive against The Joker. Batman knows he can be free to go after The Joker, while leaving the rest of the city in his family’s capable hands, with Grayson leading them.

Batman is also shown to be very protective of his sons, and even sometimes, overly protective of them. This overly protective behavior may be seen as constrictive or suffocating, and can have harmful effects on his relationships with them, despite his goal being to protect them from further injury or dangers that they may be unaware of. Wayne’s dismay over Jason’s death was clear, and plays a role in Tim Drake’s introduction. When Damian kills Nobody in front of Wayne, Wayne refuses to tell the rest of the family about it, fearful of the repercussions and Alfred comments about how overly protective he has become of Damian. He also goes to

great lengths to avenge the death of Damian and to make sure that the body of his son is respected. In the 1993 storyline *Batman: Knightfall*, when Wayne picks Jean Paul-Valley over Grayson to succeed him as Batman after Bane broke Wayne's back, Grayson is left feeling hurt and overlooked. However, Wayne reveals that he did not choose him because he felt that Grayson had established himself as Nightwing and would not want to give that up to become Batman, and did not want to offend Grayson with the offer. In acknowledging Grayson's independent success, Wayne inadvertently creates an emotional wound between himself and Grayson.

Even with the acknowledgement that Batman does love and support his metaphorical family, it is still important to point out that they, specifically Grayson, are the driving force behind the positive progression that he makes as a character. Without his family, particularly his sons – the Robins – Batman is a static character that does not progress and does not grow. The earliest incarnations of Batman from 1939-1940 presented him as dark and vengeful crime fighter, who was not afraid to kill criminals with his bare hands, and at times, even wielded a gun. However, once Robin – Dick Grayson – appeared in April of 1940, Batman became a smiling father figure and his code of justice, which outlawed killing, began to take shape.

Although darker elements have since crept back into Batman's character, it was the introduction of Grayson that provided the initial change that put Batman on the course to becoming the popular culture juggernaut that he is today. Kingsley writes: "The redemption that Bruce receives from Dick provides Bruce Wayne with the only logical endpoint of his story. By adopting Dick Grayson, Bruce Wayne overcomes the trauma of his parents' murder that he was unable to surmount on his own" (Kingsley, 78). While their relationship has changed over the decades since Grayson's first appearance, and with the serial publication of comic books

preventing Batman's story from having an actual endpoint, it is clear the presence of a Robin – Dick Grayson in particular – is essential to the development of the Batman character and mythos: “The complications of stories that seek to resolve Batman's narrative with Robin show that Bruce Wayne has to have Dick Grayson. Batman needs Dick Grayson” (Kingsley, 78). Upon his introduction, Tim Drake, the third Robin himself, said that Batman needs a Robin, but it is more than that. Batman does not just need a Robin, he needs Dick Grayson, both as his first and most reliable ally, and as a pathway towards positive character development.

## THESIS CONCLUSION

This project shows how Dick Grayson serves as a specific example of how comic book superheroes function as relatable and empathetic heroes. Heroes like Grayson provide us with social and moral scripts and promote positive development among their audience. The idea behind this thesis was to develop an understanding that there is a deeper meaning to comic books and their characters. The stories that they tell are heroic narratives and these do important things for us, such as: fulfilling psychological needs, inspiring us to action, and providing examples of positive morals and values. Although it is unavoidable while studying one specific character, this thesis heavily relies on the textual analysis of Grayson's comics, which can be a possible pitfall, as there are far too many stories in publication to get a complete grasp of Grayson's collective history.

In addition, this thesis spent a great deal of time comparing Dick Grayson to Bruce Wayne, however, the goal was not to just compare them. Rather, this was done to highlight the differences between the two. Highlighting these differences displays how Grayson functions as a more optimistic and overall healthier character than his mentor, Batman. Writer Tim Seeley titled his first story arc of *Nightwing* (Vol. 4) "Better than Batman," and this thesis lends credence to Seeley's title. Grayson, as a character that is in-flux, appeals more to the structure of our own lives than a character like Batman, who is static and does not develop or grow on his own.

This thesis works to open other avenues and opportunities for study and academic exploration, as it leaves many potential paths unexplored. This is particularly true when it comes to other members of the Batman family, and the role that trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder play in the construction of each character. The recent comic series *Batman: Three*

*Jokers* (2020) merits academic study, as it heavily focuses on the effects that post-traumatic stress disorder has on Bruce Wayne, Jason Todd, and Barbara Gordon, and how The Joker sits at the center of an endless cycle of pain that the three of them are trapped in. The series even goes as far as to reference psychology-based studies of superheroes and vigilantes that were underway by authors in the comic universe itself. This thesis focuses on an often overlooked and underappreciated character in Dick Grayson, with the hopes of encouraging even further academic discourse regarding not only Grayson, but also many of other characters within the Batman family, particularly the other Robins: Jason Todd, Tim Drake, and Damian Wayne.

Chapter one of this thesis analyzed Grayson's construction by writers as a hero, specifically his heroic qualities and how he represents a healthier form of masculinity (by contrasting his masculinity with a more unhealthy example in Batman's). Along with this, Grayson's relatability through his realism and how he has been constructed to be a more realistic and relatable hero than Batman through his use of more conventional technology and less-exaggerated financial resources is examined by comparing Grayson's character to Jeffrey A. Brown's analysis of Batman. When considering Grayson's heroic qualities, Propora's theory of hero identification proved to be useful, and highlights how Grayson exemplifies heroic qualities and values. Grayson, and the heroes that we identify with, serve as a way for us to figure out what exactly it is that we stand for, and what qualities and values we hold in higher regards. Additionally, chapter one introduced Joseph Campbell's model of the hero's journey, and described how Grayson has cycled through this numerous times. Grayson's multiple cycles through the hero's journey lead to the vast amount of growth, development, and transformation that his character undergoes, and displays how he is a reflection of our own lives and our own journeys.

The second chapter of this thesis analyzed the psychic and childhood trauma that both Dick Grayson and Bruce Wayne have been written to endure, and how each of them have reacted to their shared trauma. Both Grayson and Wayne had their parents murdered by criminals at a young age, however, the ways in which they both process their trauma and develop as character are remarkably different. Grayson teaches us to move forward; he teaches us how important it is to attain catharsis and to build and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. This is in opposition to Wayne, who has difficulty trusting others and struggles to maintain stable and healthy relationships, even with members of his Batman family. In their relationship, Grayson pushes Wayne along, and moves him towards positive progression and catharsis, however, in order to stay as DC's brooding Dark Knight, Wayne cannot be healed.

Chapter three addressed the legacy of both Grayson and Robin (what he has left behind for the mantle of Robin), as well as Grayson's role as a catalyst for the positive progression of other characters. As a younger character, Grayson is a surrogate character for the reader, as he is still learning and growing; his is a coming-of-age story, with a journey that is comparable to our own. This chapter also expanded the scope of how this thesis examined trauma theory, as it introduced the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and how other members of the Batman family are effected by their PTSD, while Grayson functions as the healthy example who exists outside of their cycle of pain. In closing, this chapter discussed the ways in which Grayson acts as a mentor to other members of the Batman family, specifically how he acts a big brother figure to other Robins, Tim Drake and Damian Wayne. Grayson's presence within the Batman family allows for him to act as a catalyst of positive progression for Drake, Damian, and even Bruce Wayne, as he allows Wayne access to emotions and pushes Wayne to overcome the trauma of his parents' murder through their shared experiences.



In the introduction to this thesis, I wrote that watching *Batman: The Animated Series* and *The New Batman Adventures* with my father and grandfather are now some of the most cherished memories I have. These memories are now cherished because both of them have since passed away; my father in 2006 and my grandfather in 2014. DC Comics and its many characters allow my father and grandfather to live on in my life; they serve as a direct link to the two of them, as they introduced me to Batman and Superman at a young age and made them such a large part of my childhood. From childhood, I was familiar with the Batman mythos (although I did not start reading comic books until much later in my life), and the characters within it grew to incite strong emotional responses from me over the years, as I coped with the loss of these two important people in my life. Listening to the *Batman* (1989) and *Batman: The Animated Series* music scores by Danny Elfman and Shirley Walker, and the *Superman* (1978) score by John Williams often lead to highly emotional reactions for me, as I find myself standing up a little straighter, goosebumps running down my arms, and at times, they can even bring me to tears. The memories of countless nights I spent with my father watching *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Justice League*, and *Teen Titans* on Cartoon Network have now translated into nights of poring over many missed years of Batman's comic book adventures.

While watching *Batman: The Animated Series*, I always found it easy to relate to Dick Grayson as Robin. His relaxed attitude and more jovial tone seemed more appealing than Batman's more stoic and serious characterization. Whenever Batman and Robin attempted to solve a problem together, or tension built between the two, I often found myself rooting for Grayson, because his struggles and approaches to problems seemed more natural, or more human, to me than Batman's did. When Grayson first showed up as Nightwing in *The New Batman Adventures*, I was fascinated by how radically different his character had become; he

had traded in his red, green, and yellow colors for black and blue, now lived on his own, and no longer relied only on Batman to find his way. At the time, I had no idea that this was an adaptation of Grayson's transformation into Nightwing from his comic book stories, and years later, when I finally started to read them, this resonated powerfully with me. Finding out that Grayson, who I had been such a fan of in my youth, had so much more to him, and even had his own ongoing comic series was almost overwhelming for me, as it brought back the memories I had of watching him with my father and grandfather many years before.

If a character like Grayson can function this way for me, then he can do so for others as well. This notion makes credible the importance of comic book superheroes, and that they transcend being *just* "comic book characters". Characters and heroes, like Grayson, allow for an expression of one's self and give many outlets to do so, including: action figures and statues, t-shirts emblazoned with their logos, hats, cups and tumblers, and of course, physical comic books. These physical items give us the opportunity to hold superheroes close to our literal person, as well as incorporate them in our daily lives, such as putting a statue in a place where you know you will see it every day.

However, these characters also evoke powerful memories and emotions. In my case, my personal comic book and statue collection allow for Nightwing, Robin, and Batman to exist in a physical form, and thus, give me a physical tie to the memories of my father and grandfather. With this, DC Comics, and Dick Grayson in particular, gave me an outlet to deal with my own trauma, grief, and sometimes overwhelming emotions. Grayson's tenacity and resilience inspire me. Grayson, who not only psychologically survived the murder of his parents, but then proceeded to flourish as the childhood sidekick to Batman and his own independent hero as

Nightwing, and even succeeded his adoptive father Bruce Wayne as Batman, has had a lasting impact on how I construct my identity and maintain my emotional health.

Studying Grayson, and specifically my research for chapter two of this thesis, taught much me about my own coping mechanisms and dissociation that I was not conscious of at a younger age. I lost my father when I was in the eighth grade, and at the time, could not fully process the situation or properly grieve, and roughly all of my time went into my schoolwork and playing video games, which I now know served as my dissociation from the trauma I had experienced. As I got older and started to read comic books, these were replaced with DC Comics and characters like Dick Grayson. At times, I have experienced life struggles very similar to those of Grayson's, such as trying to find my place in the world, wanting to prove myself to others, and losing a parent. These are not just phenomena that Grayson is written to experience, or that I have felt, but are rather parts of the cycle of life – leaving home to go school or pursue a career, returning as a smarter and stronger version of yourself, and dealing with obstacles such as the loss of a loved one.

There have been many times in my life where I have felt discouraged or overwhelmed by emotions such as grief and sorrow, but heroes like Grayson give me the motivation and inspiration that I need to continue onward. The way that Grayson deals with the death of his parents in his adult life is very empowering, and is something that I often try to emulate. Grayson is emotionally healthy, he does not constantly grieve for his parents; rather, he uses them as a source of motivation. Batman often looks at his parents' portrait with sorrow, and apologizes to either their portrait or their grave, because he does not feel like he is doing enough in their memory. Compared to how Grayson functions, Batman's state is still that of a traumatized victim, he has not moved past his parents' murder.

Here, I am referring back to chapter two, as Batman is a highly popular character and has been built to be DC's dark, brooding avenger of the night, however the behaviors he exemplifies are not always healthy. This is where I find the greatest strength of Grayson's character to be. Grayson overcomes his grief and trauma, and progresses onward, and he often has positive interactions with his parents' memorials: "Mom, Dad – we haven't talked for a long time. I don't know if you can hear me or not, but so much has happened. And I just felt I had to tell you all about it" (*Batman* #439, 24). In *Nightwing* #149 (October, 2008), a hallucination of Grayson's parents helps to pull him out of the shock of the Scarecrow's fear gas, and in *Nightwing* #151 (December, 2008) he has a particularly inspirational monologue: "Okay, Mom and Dad, your 'Flying Grayson' is about to take the great leap... I'd say I wish you could see me now, but I know you're watching me – I can feel angels on my shoulders. And probably a bat too" (*Nightwing* #151, 17). These moments stand out, as they show how Grayson has come to cope with his parents' death, and even the assumed death of his adoptive father, Bruce Wayne, in a healthy way. Grayson does not allow his loss to consume him, and he does not commit himself to an endless crusade in their name. He has achieved catharsis and has accepted the loss of his loved ones, and with this, he inspires me to do the same. I often find myself behaving in similar ways to Grayson, talking to my grandparents at their grave, and acknowledging that I can feel their presence; in these ways, Grayson has helped me achieve catharsis.

After my undergraduate education, I knew graduate school was my path, but I was unsure of what to do with myself, how I was going to get there, and where exactly "there" was. Reading Grayson's adventures and discovering his growth gave me the inspiration I needed to move forward. Grayson's conflicts and detachment from Bruce Wayne specifically spoke to me, as he wanted to prove that he was no longer a child, that he was capable of being his own hero,

independent of Batman. His becoming Nightwing and moving from Gotham City to Blüdhaven inspired me, and gave me the courage apply to graduate school and make the move across states to start the next “adventure” in my own life.

In closing, if Grayson was capable of doing all of this for me, then he is capable of doing it for others as well. I was able to relate my journey away from the only home I have ever known in Pennsylvania to Ohio, as this was, in my eyes, similar to Grayson leaving Gotham City for Blüdhaven. Like Grayson, I wanted to set out on my own, prove I could live independently, and break out from the shadows of my hometown high school and undergraduate institution. I saw myself in Grayson, and his goals mirrored my own. Grayson’s determination, tenacity, optimism, and mental resilience have inspired me to action and have had a lasting impact on my morals, values, emotional health, and how I conduct myself on a day-to-day basis. I would like to close this thesis with a quote from Grayson, during his time as Batman: “The thing is, being here now, on the other side of all of the terrible things that happened this year, I know that this is where I need to be. Where I want to be. Because I know – like you do – that if you make it through Gotham’s trials, if you can stand up to the monsters it throws at you, you come out redeemed. A stronger version of yourself” (*Detective Comics* #881, 30). This quote from Grayson encapsulates this thesis, and shows the strength of his character quite well; if you can stand up to the trials and tribulations that life (Gotham) throws at you, you can attain your own boon and emerge as a stronger, more experienced version of yourself.

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