Superheroes for a Superpower:

Batman, Spider-Man and the Quest for an American Identity

by

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ABSTRACT

Comic books, as items of mass culture, are designed to sell, designed to be profitable. To generate profit, they have to be popular. Comic book titles that Americans could not relate to did not sell and were then cancelled. Some of the most popular and long-standing comic books are ones that star superheroes. Superheroes represent idealized American heroes. Their superpowers give them the ability to protect Americans in a way that older pulp magazine and dime novel heroes could not. By looking at superheroes during different points in time, we can see what Americans during those times valued and what they feared. American hopes, fears, and dreams can all be found in comic books.

The first chapter in this thesis discusses dime novels and pulp magazines as contributing to the development of comic books. As works of popular fiction, aimed at the working class, dime novels and pulp magazines are very much like comic books. The following chapters outline periods in American history and provide insight into how comic books reflect the popular attitudes and beliefs of Americans during these periods using two well-known superheroes, Batman and Spider-Man. The willingness of Americans to accept super-powered heroes reflects their belief in an all-powerful government and a super-powered nation. In a world where America was all-powerful, Americans needed heroes that were just as powerful to show them how to use that power responsibly. This thesis ends with a discussion of how the concept of superheroes helps Americans deal with the disparate division of power in a republican democracy and with the repercussions of being part of a superpower nation.

Table of Contents

The original version of this thesis contained images that helped to illustrate changes in art styles used in comic books and changes in the way certain comic books characters were depicted. I have removed images from the digital version due to the nature of the ETD Center on the OhioLINK website, to eliminate any possible copyright problems or concerns. The removal of images slightly weakens this thesis as certain key points rely on the reader understanding the changing art styles used in comic books; readers will have to visualize these elements on their own.

Introduction

My initial idea for this research was to do something with the history of comic books. I once did an assignment that involved bringing something I collected to a class and discussing why I collected it and whether or not I thought it would be worthy of being in a museum and why. I decided on a collection of mine that most people would consider anything but scholarly. Since early childhood, I have collected comic books. In fact, comic books played a huge part in my learning to read. When I was around three years old, my older brother used to read comic books to me. Between the images on the pages, the identifiable characters, and the way my brother sounded out words, it was not long before I was able to read them on my own. Throughout my childhood and into high school every time a new issue of *The Amazing X-men* or *Detective Comics* came out, I would snatch up a copy as quickly as possible. The questions I had to answer for the assignment got me thinking about comic books and how they relate to American identity. Could comic books be used to help figure out how Americans in the past felt about the world and their lives?

To keep their audience, comic books have to speak to Americans in an emotional way. For something to be popular, it must deal with themes that are meaningful to large numbers of people.[1] Comic books, as items of mass culture, are designed to sell, designed to be profitable. To generate profit, they have to be popular. Comic book titles that Americans could not relate to did not sell and were then cancelled. Some of the most popular and long-standing comic books are ones that star superheroes. Superheroes represent idealized American heroes. Their superpowers give them the ability to protect

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[1] Arthur Asa Berger, *The Comic Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us About Ourselves* (New York: Walker and Company, 1973), 6.

Americans in a way that older pulp magazine and dime novel heroes could not. By looking at superheroes during different points in time, we can see what Americans during that time valued and what they feared. American hopes, fears, and dreams can all be found in comic books.

The following chapters outline periods in American history and provide insight into how comic books reflect the popular attitudes and beliefs of Americans during these periods using two well-known superheroes, Batman and Spider-Man. My discussion of superheroes ends with the 1980s. This is a natural stopping point due to the changes in the character of Batman. Batman started out as a dark vigilante in the 1930s and despite decades of a softened image, Batman returned to his dark roots in the 1980s. Comic book superheroes did not appear until just a few years before the United States entered World War II and asserted itself as a world power. Readers' willingness to accept super-powered heroes reflected their belief in an all-powerful government and super-powered nation. In a world where America was all-powerful, Americans needed heroes that were just as powerful to show them how to use that power responsibly. A common theme in the origin stories of superheroes is the acceptance of the responsibility to society that their powers and abilities place on them. In the same way that American society had to face the tragedies of the Great Depression and the attack on Pearl Harbor, superheroes usually experience a major tragedy early in life that prompts them to action and gives them justification to use their superpowers to fight for justice.

Chapter One: Development of Comic Books

In both Western and Eastern cultures, images were collected in book format before the invention of comic books. However, these collections were generally not used to tell sequential stories. Comic strips from newspapers were often collected into books, but these strips generally did not contain story lines that continued beyond a few strips. These collections did not contain any original material; they were merely reprints of strips that the public had already read.[2] The idea of creating a book with multiple panels and strips that contained a sequential storyline was born in the United States. Early comic books contained multiple stories, each one about a different character. These storylines were continued issue to issue. What happened to a main character in one issue usually affected the story in the next issue.

Comic books (not books of comic strips) first appeared in the United States right before the Great Depression. New mass production techniques allowed for the cheap and fast printing of anything from newspapers to books to, well, comic books. Comic books presented a cheap form of entertainment that proved popular, in part, because of the images. The reliance on visuals to help tell a story created a form of story-telling that could be understood by all, even those who were illiterate. While comic books were marketed to children, adults were drawn to the stories early on. Since comic books were written by adults, it is not usual that they attracted older readers. It is important to note that, in the same way that comic book readers were usually members of the working class, comic book writers and artists also came from working class families. While the

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[2] Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books,* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 95.

books were mass produced and mass marketed, they were ultimately products of working class Americans.

Dime Novels and Pulp Magazines

Comic books evolved as a mix between comic strips, dime novels, and pulp magazines. While the visual narrative form, using panels containing images and text, came from comic strips, the literary forms reflected dime novels and pulp magazines. Both dime novels and pulp magazines are similar in content to comic books. All three types of entertainment make use of formulaic stories with archetypal characters. Nineteenth century American popular fiction arose out of a relatively high level of literacy and primarily presented itself in the form of short dime novels.[3] Dime novels were generally around one hundred pages and small enough to fit into pockets. High literacy rates among the working class created a market for short stories and serial adventures. Dime novels were extremely popular between the 1840s and the 1890s.[4] Dime novels included stories ranging from westerns and stories about boyish fun to urban detective stories and stories about factory workers.[5] Instead of reading dime novels as novels, people read them as allegories.[6] The concept of a fiction novel was still relatively new and generally unknown to the vast majority of American readers.[7] Novels told stories that new readers would have taken literally, as fact; dime novels were allegorical stories that these readers could understand. This explains the function and meaning of

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[3] Michael Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century America," *History Workshop*, no. 22 (Autumn 1986): 1-17, online via JSTOR, www.jstor.org (12 November 2008), 2.
[4] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 2.
[5] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 5.
[6] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 12.
[7] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 12.

disguise in dime novel stories; disguises were common in most dime novels.[8] Detectives

wore disguises the most, allowing them to be anyone, regardless of their class. This

allowed readers to also be anyone, to experience a change in status. Dime novels were

much like fairy tales of peasants, as opposed to genealogical myths and legends of the

historic elite.[9] In the same way that Cinderella allowed young peasant girls to dream of a

better life, dime novel stories allowed readers to dream of a life beyond the working one.

     Dime novels acted as brief distractions from a life of work.[10] Dime novels were

read for the same reasons people watch popular television shows today. Aside from basic

entertainment, dime novels provided readers with something to discuss with friends and

co-workers.[11] Reading popular fiction in working class culture was very much a social

activity.[12] Dime novels encompassed two bodies of fiction: popular sensational stories

that captured the reading public and instructional, moralistic narratives, such as Horatio

Alger's stories.[13] While the sensational stories were not as openly instructional as

etiquette books and moralistic narratives, they still provided readers with heroic

characters that embodied how men and women should act.

     A nineteenth century commentator noted the distinct differences between

depictions of upper and lower classes in the simple stories in dime novels and he noted

that mill workers were the primary audience of such stories.[14] These differences in

depictions between upper and lower class individuals pointed out to readers the behaviors

that separated them from wealthier individuals. In this way, dime novels acted as

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[8] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 13.
[9] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 15.
[10] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 3.
[11] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 9.
[12] Michael Denning, Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America. (New York: Verso Press, 1998), 69.
[13] Denning, Notes on Popular Fiction", 6.
[14] Denning, "Notes on Popular Fiction", 3. The commentator was Rev. Jonathan Baxter Harrison.

instructional literature, showing working class readers what they needed to do to fit in with middle and upper class society.

Pulp magazines replaced dime novels by the start of the 1900s. Pulp magazines presented similar stories to those in dime novels, but in a much shorter format. Instead of having only one story per issue, pulp magazines presented multiple stories that starred different characters. Each story was usually written by a different author. New printing techniques coupled with inexpensive pulp paper drastically reduced the production cost of pulp magazines and their popularity soared. Pulp magazines had illustrated color covers that were usually a bit garish. Printing techniques only allowed for very specific, saturated colors. Sometimes the covers were designed first, with stories written to fit the image on the cover later. Pulp magazines included extra interior illustrations depicting specific elements of stories. Issues only had a couple interior illustrations and they were not the primary method of storytelling, instead they helped to illustrate a specific moment in a story. Due to the poor quality of the paper, fine lines and intricate detail were impossible to reproduce, as the ink would bleed and smudge. Artists used a minimalist style that relied on heavy lines and a lack of detail to create images that could be clearly printed. Figures were generally just outlined, with simple faces that only included a line for the nose, one or two for the mouth, with large eyes. Artists borrowed shading techniques from old woodblock printing, such crosshatching and pointillism. This lack of detail had another bonus: it allowed artists to generate cover art and interior illustrations quickly, adding to the cost-effectiveness of pulp magazine printing. Pulp magazines featured heroic characters and crime stories. Hero pulps were pulp magazines that,

unlike other pulps, had stories which featured a single recurring character; usually a brave hero.

Publishers aimed pulp magazines at members of lower classes, since members of the middle class and upper class were busy reading fictional novels. Readers of pulp magazines from the 1920s to the 1940s were white males, usually members of the working class and immigrants.[15] These readers were concerned with finding and keeping jobs that paid as much as possible, having as much autonomy as possible, asserting their manliness, and keeping women in their traditional roles.[16] Pulp magazines published stories that spoke to the anxieties of these readers. Men at the turn of the twentieth century defined their masculinity primarily through physical strength and autonomy.[17] Pulp detective stories were popular because they featured heroes who won the day due, in part, to superior strength and the ability to work on their own, separate from official law enforcement. Pulp magazines made use of formulaic stories and standard archetypes because readers were not interested in the plot or the process of detection. Readers did not care that they were reading the same basic story again and again. Readers of pulp magazines were interested in the ability of fictional detectives to tell class and social position from details in clothing and home décor.[18] Subtleties of speech and appearance could tell these fictional detectives all they needed to know about a person. Readers cared about how detectives struggled for the autonomy to track down and apprehend criminals, about their manly physical and mental strength.[19] Comic books replaced pulp magazine

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[15] Erin A. Smith, *Hard-boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 16.
[16] Smith, 16.
[17] Smith, 461.
[18] Smith, 17.
[19] Smith, 17.

heroes by introducing superheroes with super strength and heightened physical abilities. To readers at the start of the twentieth century, superheroes would have been the ultimate expression of idealized masculinity.

Like dime novels, pulp magazines also provided subtle instruction on how to act in society. Pulp magazines were able to keep production costs low by including advertisements in issues. Ads in pulp magazines urged readers to remake themselves into real men.[20] Ads pointed out wrinkles in clothing, errors in speech, and poor manners.[21] Pulp heroes emphasized these points by providing instruction in reading how class, gender, and power relationships were reflected in dress and bearing. The ads pointed out the faults of the readers and the fiction provided readers with role models.[22] Pulp stories offered lessons on how to act and showed readers what they were doing wrong, replacing instructional narratives found in dime novels. Comic books also had ads that acted as instruction for readers. Advertisements in comic books, particularly those aimed at children, depicted rippling muscles and promised strong bodies.[23]

Pulp magazines used numerous low-paid artists and writers to keep costs low. Writers could support themselves by writing numerous short stories. Pulp magazines provided writers with quick money and offered a venue for writers who were just starting out. More seasoned career pulp writers had aids who would take dictation, allowing them to crank out prose on a steady basis. Writers were paid upon acceptance of material instead of publication, helping struggling writers make money quickly. This division of

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[20] Smith, 72.
[21] Smith, 72.
[22] Smith, 72.
[23] Robert L. Coard, "The Comic Book in Perspective," *Peabody Journal of Education* 33, no. 1 (July 1955): 18-22, online via JSTOR, www.jstor.org (16 November 2008), 20.

labor and low pay scale was copied by comic book publishers, to generate new content quickly and inexpensively.

Comic books were produced cheaply to be sold in great volume. Writers, artists, inkers, colorists, and letters all contributed to the finished product.[24] Comic books in the 1930s presented stories in large panels on an eleven by eight inch page, usually in black and white, between covers that were in four colors.[25] Comic books offered a different form of entertainment from collections of comic strips. While comic strips relied mostly on humor, comic books branched out and began presenting American audiences with pulp and adventure stories. During the Great Depression and for a short time after, Americans turned away from comic strips based on humor to comic books based on gritty story lines. Americans were drawn to the new heroes and villains portrayed in comic books. Comic book publishers began taking stories from national headlines and printing them in this new visual format. True crime comic books were an instant hit with American audiences. Comic book companies blossomed during this period, resulting in a number of small independent publishers. Eventually these small publishers either disappeared or joined forces, resulting in a handful of well-known companies. The best known of these are DC Comics and Marvel Comics.

DC Comics

DC Comics started out as a small company. Pulp publisher Harry Donenfeld bought out an independent comic company in March 1934 and created the label *Detective Comics*; this company later evolved in National Periodicals, but it kept the DC logo for

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[24] W. Robert Johnston, "Splash Panel Adventures!" *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 3, no. 3 (Summer, 1989): 38-53, online via JSTOR, www.jstor.org (15 October 2008), 51.
[25] Johnston, 45.

its comic books.[26] DC based its stories off of movie serials and pulp fiction novels in an

attempt to draw in new audiences, as the sale of comic books based on humor seemed to

be falling.[27] DC's answer to this loss of interest was to make comic books based on

detective stories and crime-fighting, not laughter. DC changed the face of the comic

book industry in 1938 when it introduced a new type of hero that was created by two

Cleveland, Ohio boys, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.[28] This hero, aptly named Superman,

had powers that could only be described as super. Hailing from the planet Krypton,

Superman was sent to Earth as a baby by his father, in the hopes that the infant would

escape the destruction of Krypton. Superman was found and adopted by a Kansas couple

and raised with strong Midwestern moral values. The couple named him Clark Kent and

encouraged him to live a double life, hiding his abilities from the outside world.

As Clark Kent, Superman was bookish and nerdy; he wore glasses and was shy

and awkward around women. This use of disguise allowed readers to connect with the

persona of Clark Kent, while dreaming about being Superman. Clark Kent was not just

an alter ego, he was also the reader.[29] Unlike other comic strips of the time, Superman

lived in modern times, in a big city filled with gangsters and crooked politicians, in a

world much like that of his readers.[30] Representing the perfect immigrant experience in

America, Superman grew up, moved to a big city, got a fancy job as a reporter for a

major newspaper, and then went about protecting truth, justice, and the all-important

American-way. Superman was a smash hit with readers in the 1930s, prompting DC to

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[26] Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1971), 11.
[27] Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 5.
[28] Johnston, 45.
[29] Johnston, 45.
[30] *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked,* produced by James Grant Goldin, 90 minutes, Triage Entertainment, 2003, DVD.

encourage its artists and writers to come up with other superheroes.[31] Superhero fantasies

were a way for people to deal with the realities of the Great Depression. These

superheroes did what was necessary to save people, with no regard for the law.

Vengeance was more important than justice to a people that felt cheated by the economy

and the upper class. The New Deal and related legislation encouraged Americans to look

toward an all-powerful hero, the President and Federal Government, to save them from

the Great Depression. Superheroes like Superman were embodiments of this new idea,

that something could be all powerful. Other DC artists and writers jumped on the

superhero bandwagon, and soon DC had numerous titles that starred super-powered

heroes.

Marvel Comics

In 1939, pulp magazine publisher Martin Goodman launched Timely Comics. He

hired his nephew, Stanley Lieberman, as an office assistant.[32] Lieberman, going by the

penname of Stan Lee, was only 17 years old at the time. Over the years, Stan Lee would

move up the ranks, eventually become chief writer and editor for Timely. Following DC

Comics, Timely Comics started out with its own superheroes in issue 1 of *Marvel

Comics*, the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner. D.C. Comics was the top-selling of the

two publishers, but that would eventually change. For years, Marvel simply copied

trends put forth by DC writers and artists. After decades of writing the same basic stories

and characters over and over again, Stan Lee decided to try something different. In 1958,

Timely Comics hired artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko to work with Stan Lee.[33] Lee

decided to focus on stories with a science fiction theme. Stan Lee was born and raised in

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[31] Wright, 1.
[32] Wright, 18.
[33] Wright, 201-202.

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New York City. Familiar with the layout of the city, Lee decided that Marvel heroes

should live in the real world, in New York City, instead of an imaginary place. By the

1960s, Timely had switched its name to Marvel Comics, to reflect the switch to science

fiction stories.

Chapter Two: The Early Decades

The change from a rural to urban nation and the development of a consumer-based society marked the America of the 1920s.[34] The old rural majority suddenly became a minority. Many Americans had moved into the large cities, looking for work and some kind of economic relief. Even though they willingly left rural life behind, people held on to the myth of an ideal agrarian life long after moving to cities.[35] This tense urban environment based on anonymous mass society was a far cry from the close-knit rural towns Americans were used to. Comic book superheroes were created when America was coming out of the Great Depression. The Great Depression began after the New York Stock Exchange collapse on October 29, 1929. It caused Americans to question their nation. Many feared that the country would never recover. People, including 32nd President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt, blamed big business for the collapse and recession, seeing greed as being the main cause.

The American spirit did not start to recover until Roosevelt's election in 1933. His first one hundred days created a sense of optimism in Americans. A slight recession in 1937 brought back fears of American failure. Despite national suffering, American culture during the 1930s was based on consumption, not production.[36] The reason behind this focus was the promise of abundance. Despite the Great Depression and fears of anarchy and governmental collapse, Americans still believed in a better future. This

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[34] Berger, 75.
[35] Berger, 76.
[36] Rita Bernard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

contradiction weighed on the American mind. Americans doubted that the nation would survive yet at the same time they hoped for a better future. They needed to find ways to manage these very different beliefs. Batman, a comic book superhero created at the end of the Great Depression, exemplifies this cognitive dissonance. He came from a wealthy family but he knew tragedy. He faced corruption and evil men, but fought against them because he believed in a better world.

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The Creation of a Dark Knight

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The character of Batman was created in response to DC Comics' call for superheroes.[37] Artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger worked together to come up with the final design for the character. Both men liked the idea of a superhero that based his costume on a bat to strike fear into the hearts of criminals that he faced. In an attempt to distinguish their new character from other DC superheroes generated at this time, Finger and Kane made Batman a mere mortal with no special powers.[38] Instead of powers, Batman had wealth and determination.   Finger and Kane gave Batman a special motivation for fighting crime: as a young boy, Bruce Wayne witnessed the brutal murder of his parents by a common street thug. Driven by his desire for revenge and funded by the vast inheritance his father left him, Bruce Wayne eventually decided to stalk the nights as the Batman. Batman, the Dark Knight, made a solemn vow to avenge the death of his parents, much like a knight taking up a quest.

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[37] Daniels, 12.
[38] Daniels, 12.

With a strong personal motivation in hand, Batman was introduced in *Detective Comics,* issue 27, in a story titled "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate." In the story, Gotham City police commissioner Jim Gordon receives a phone call informing him of the murder of Old Lambert, the "chemical king."[39] He brings his friend, millionaire Bruce Wayne, along with him to the murder scene. There they find out that the prime suspect is Lambert's son, who claims innocence

Figure 1 - *Detective Comics* 27, DC Comics, Inc., May 1939

right away. Steven Crane, a business partner of Lambert, informs the police that Lambert's life had been threatened. Crane is murdered by thugs, who steal a contract from him. While escaping, the thugs find themselves confronted by a masked man, Batman. Batman recovers the contract from the thugs which leads him to the laboratory of Alfred Stryker, another business partner of Lambert. Batman gets to the lab in time to see Stryker's assistant, Jennings, attempt to murder Lambert's final partner, Paul Rogers. Stryker reveals that he secretly made a contract with Lambert's partners for control of the

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[39] *Detective Comics,* issue 27, DC Comics Inc., May 1939. A note about comic book citation: Comic books are notorious for not having consistent publication information. Issues were sometimes written and printed months before the dates on the covers. Writers and artists were not always listed for each story, either. Comic books also have inconsistent page numbering, if any at all. For the sake of consistency, this thesis cites comic books by title, issue number, publisher, and cover date. This information should be enough for the reader to track down relevant issues.

chemical company and was killing them off to cover it up. Batman swoops in and

rescues Rogers, knocking Stryker into a vat of acid, killing him.

Bruce Wayne was a victim of the sort of street violence that Depression-era readers knew all too well. Batman was such a hit with audiences that he got his eponymous book in the spring of 1940, *Batman*. His best-known nemesis, The Joker, was not introduced until issue 1 of *Batman.* In his introductory story, The Joker, a grinning clown-faced killer, announces his crimes on the radio, taunting both police and Batman.[40] The Joker murders both innocent civilians and other criminals, narrowly escaping

Figure 2 – *Batman* 11, DC Comics Inc., June/July 1942

capture by Batman. The "Clown Prince of Crime" captures Robin and attempts to inject him with a special poison that kills the victim, leaving a twisted smile on their face. Batman rushes in and saves Robin. He defeats The Joker and sends him off to jail. But The Joker proves too tricky for prison and escapes again and again. Ten issues later, in *Batman* issue 11, The Joker, after another successful escape, taunts Batman with newspaper ads about his crimes.[41] Robin attempts to track down The Joker but is captured and nearly killed. When Batman catches up with The Joker, he physically beats the criminal to the point that The Joker has to be hospitalized. This Batman is a vengeful superhero, brutally showing The Joker the price of attempting to kill a child.

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[40] *Batman,* issue 1, DC Comics Inc., Spring 1940.
[41] *Batman¸* issue 11, DC Comics Inc., June/July 1942.

Early versions of Batman had a squarish anatomy and the overall visual mood of the art style was that of film noir. The city of Gotham, where Bruce Wayne lived, had gothic visual elements, such as gargoyles on rooflines and steep, angular roofs. Bruce Wayne appeared to be as a wealthy social reformer who saw the justice system as failing the people of Gotham City. As a young boy, Bruce Wayne was exposed to the same type of violence and street crime that many city-dwelling Americans were familiar with. This early version of Batman was gritty and prone to violence; in one issue, Batman defeats villains by shooting and killing them with a gun.[42] The police viewed Batman as an uncontrollable vigilante who needed to be brought to justice just as much as the criminals he hunted. Batman operated outside of the law to free himself from the type of restraints that official law enforcement experienced. Criminals could not hide behind laws and regulations in the world of Batman. While Batman championed the common man, he was also against labor unions. Media in the late 1930s and early 1940s associated unions with corruption and mob activity. Americans were afraid of the instability that labor militancy brought to their daily lives. Often, Batman faced off against corrupt union officials and mobster with union ties, pointing out the dangers of labor militancy.

Like other early comic book writers and artists, Bob Kane and Bill Finger grew up in a lower working class environment and were directly exposed to the sort of crime and corruption Batman fought against.[43] All it takes to understand why Kane and Finger would create such a dark superhero is a look at the time in which they made him. Kane and Finger grew up in the shadow of the Great Depression. Self-made wealthy men were

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[42] *Detective Comics,* issue 32, DC Comics Inc., October 1939. In "Batman vs. the Vampires", the second part of a two-issue storyline, Batman tracks down two vampires and kills them by shooting them with a gun that has silver bullets. Later versions of Batman have a strict anti-gun policy.
[43] *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, Paul Levitz.

once prided by Americans, but after the Depression they were seen as part of the problem. Wealth was not a sign of hard work, but a sign that a person had prospered by the hard work of others. Living in underprivileged neighborhoods, both men were exposed to organized crime, corrupt politicians, and greedy business men. When it came to creating villains, they used what they already knew as models. Bob Kane and Bill Finger grew up watching the attempts of social reformers to relieve the burden of the poor thwarted again and again. They created a hero who worked for reform outside of the system, a hero who brought about change on an individual level.

Part of the obsession with crime and corruption found in the pages of early Batman comic books can be seen as a reaction against city life. Many people felt that politicians and city officials were corrupt and untrustworthy; organized crime was making its way through every major American city. The Great Depression caused Americans to question the older American ideal that hard work led to success. Many people worked as hard as possible just to make ends meet. Batman showed readers that hard work could lead to success. His hard work and dedication allowed him to gain physical abilities that ordinary men did not possess. These physical abilities allowed him to take down criminals. Americans needed reassurance that things would work out okay in the end; that someone was fighting for them. Kane and Finger created a superhero that represented these kinds of feelings. While Kane had experience in drawing comic strips, Finger was previously employed as a shoe salesman. Finger had no lack of knowledge of the tensions that were present in American society. Being part of the normal working class, Finger knew just how hard life could be.

Americans in the 1930s felt their country was falling apart, crashing down around them. Americans were scared and felt powerless. Batman represented a way for them to take power back, by brute force. Batman, like Superman and other heroes, never doubted for a second that he could solve the problems faced by society, no matter how many times The Joker got away.

Bruce Wayne, the alter-ego of Batman, was the 1930s image of the ideal wealthy man. He knew suffering and his desire to change the system was built on a desire to avenge the death of his parents. He redeemed his sin of wealth through his suffering. Bruce Wayne became a servant of the citizens of Gotham City. He became Batman because he was upset at the bureaucracy and red tape that allowed guilty men to go free. Frustrated at a system that not only failed him, but also failed the common man, Bruce Wayne became a vigilante and took matters into his own hands. He practiced lawlessness to defend law and order.

Depression-era popular culture focused on a celebration of the common man, the man who struggled to get by.[44] In the world of superheroes, Batman is the common man. Batman possesses no true superpowers. Aside from wealth, he has nothing that sets him apart from the common man. Batman relies on his own advanced knowledge, detective skills, and athletic ability to solve crimes and take down villains. In the 1930s, he made up for his wealth by not being greedy and by working to help the common man. While Batman defied the authority of local government, he did not attack the authority of the federal government. During the Great Depression, it was the federal government that offered relief to everyday Americans and was thus beyond reproach, even for caped crusaders.

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[44] Wright, 10.

Batman's villains, grotesque and strange, point out the perceived monstrosity of criminals and corrupt men who preyed on innocent people during a time of need. Their physical ugliness betrayed their moral ugliness, making it clear who was good and who was evil. Batman showed readers in the 1930s that there was no escape from justice, almost preaching in an evangelical way that good will always triumph over evil.

Response to Change

After surviving the Great Depression, Americans had to deal with another crisis. World War II began in 1939 and while the United States did not officially enter the conflict until after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the growing conflict weighed on the American psyche. Americans worried that, even though their nation survived the Depression, the world was lost. A foreign attack on American soil reinforced the idea that the world was spinning out of control. The atrocities committed by Nazis during World War II brought basic human nature into question. Many people felt that humans are naturally aggressive and hostile and that those feelings had to be suppressed.[45] Psychologists looked at international relations as being just a step away from anarchy.[46] Psychologists like Benjamin Spock saw insecurity everywhere and blamed it on social chaos. They encouraged parents to be nurturing and reassuring toward their children to help create a more stable society. Now more than ever, Americans needed reassurance that order and justice would prevail. Comic books answered this need.

As the Great Depression started to wane, DC editors decided that Batman was too harsh. Batman was banned from using guns and he gained a side-kick. Robin, the boy

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[45] William Graebner, "The Unstable World of Benjamin Spock: Social Engineering in a Democratic Culture, 1917-1950", *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (December 1980): 614.
[46] Graebner, "The Unstable World," 615.

wonder, was introduced in *Detective Comics,* issue 38. In "Robin the Boy Wonder," a circus owner, Mr. Haly, is threatened by gangsters after refusing to pay for "protection".[47] The next night, the Flying Graysons, Haly's star attraction, are killed due to the gangsters sabotaging their trapeze equipment. The son of the Graysons, Dick, overhears the gangsters and plans to go to the police. Bruce Wayne was in the audience and shows up as Batman, taking young Dick Grayson under his protection. Dick,

Figure 3 - *Detective Comics* **38, DC Comics Inc., April 1940**

trained as an acrobat, already has physical strength and skill, so Bruce Wayne/Batman trains him in the art of fighting crime. When Batman deems him ready, Dick puts on a red and green costume and is named Robin, the Boy Wonder. Batman takes on the leader of the gangsters, Bob Zucco, taking out his underlings. When Zucco plans to destroy a construction site, Robin shows up and fights Zucco. Batman shows up and helps Robin collect enough evidence against Zucco to have him sent to the electric chair for the murder of Robin's parents. Having avenged his family, Robin agrees to stay on as Batman's partner.

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[47] *Detective Comics*, issue 38, DC Comics Inc., April 1940.

Robin was the first young side-kick in any comic book; sales of *Detective Comics* doubled after his introduction.[48] Robin provided a much-needed opportunity for dialogue and he also provided a connection to younger readers.[49] He turned Batman from a loner into a father figure, helping him to act as a parental role model for children. Dressed in a decidedly cheerful red, yellow, and green costume, Robin tagged along with Batman and helped him take down villains. To make Robin more sympathetic to Batman's desire to fight crime, creators Kane and Finger decided to make him an orphan, too. Aside from providing children with a character they could connect to, Robin also served to reinforce Batman as being a common man's hero. Instead of handing the young orphan off to the state, possibly dooming him to growing up in an orphanage, Batman uses his vast wealth to raise the child, eventually allowing the young boy to become a crime-fighter, too.

The growing international crisis loomed in America's mind just as much as the growing independence of her children. Americans no longer wanted to see their own country depicted as a haven for wicked men. They needed heroes who could stand up to the evil that was growing in Europe. They needed to believe in their government and in their nation. In direct response, DC shifted gears and, instead of defending the common man against internal threats, heroes became patriotic defenders of the American way of life. Since the books were being read by soldiers, it became even more important that comic books present a more patriotic view of the country, to help remind the men what they were fighting for. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Office of Facts and Figures and the Office of War Information asked the entertainment industry to help raise American moral, to encourage public cooperation with government agencies, to identify the evil of

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[48] *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked.*
[49] Daniels, 13.

the Axis powers, and to do all of this while cloaking any propaganda.[50] To meet this

demand, Gotham City and Batman began to undergo some serious change. Instead of

focusing on national reform, DC needed its heroes to focus on global reform. Gotham

City shifted from being a gritty city full of corrupt citizens to a much cleaner city,

populated by generally nice people. To support the war effort, Batman and Robin began

asking children to buy war bonds and stamps. Batman stopped fighting local authority

figures and began cooperating with government officials to stop crime. Cooperation with

the government and trust in that government were essential to the war effort. Instead of

being depicted as corrupt, local authority was depicted as being just and worthy of trust

and admiration.

In issues of both *Detective Comics* and *Batman,* Batman and Robin promoted buying war bonds.[51] In issue 15 of *Batman*, Batman and Robin visit a university where two professors tell them possible versions of the future, based on the outcome of World War II. The first professor tells them what would happen if the Nazis win the war. According to the professor, Americans would be placed in concentration camps while Nazis looted American cities. In

Figure 4 - *Batman* **15, DC Comics Inc., February/March 1943**

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[50] Wright, 34.
[51] *Batman,* issue 15, DC Comics Inc., February/March 1943.

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this future, Batman and Robin attempt to aid Americans by staging a rescue of prisoners.

The people, although freed, have nowhere to go and are forced to live on the run.

Batman and Robin are caught and executed. The second professor tells Batman and

Robin what would happen if the Allies continue to stay strong. They defeat Axis powers

and Batman and Robin help to stop an attack on Gotham City. After the Allies win the

war, peace and freedom reign over the world. After hearing about these two versions of

the future, Batman and Robin pledge to support the war effort. They both purchase war

bonds and encourage everyone to do their part to help win the war.[52] This story

highlights the emphasis that Americans placed on co-operation during the war years.

Batman and Robin began working with government agencies, instead of acting as if they

were above the law. This story also highlights the fear Americans felt during the war.

The attack on Pearl Harbor meant that America was not immune from international

conflict, what was happening in Europe could happen in the United States.

By the end of the 1930s, Americans were looking for optimism, for hope that

things would work out all right.[53] This optimism forced Batman out of the darkness.

Audiences no longer wanted to focus on corruption or doubt, especially when the world

was at war. Americans could not afford to question their government or doubt local

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[52] This is just one of several *Batman* and *Detective Comics* issues that promote the buying of war bonds. *Batman* issue 12 (DC Comics Inc., August/September 1942) has a cover depicting Batman and Robin riding a jeep while Batman states that, "War savings bonds and stamps keep 'em rolling." *Detective Comics* issue 78 (DC Comics Inc., August 1943) contains a story titled "The Bond Wagon," in which Batman and Robin help the war effort by promoting the sale of war bonds. They hire actors to reenact scenes from the Revolutionary War. Nazi spies find out about the Dynamic Duo's plan and attempt to sabotage it. Thankfully, the actors help Batman and Robin defeat the spies, saving the day and the war bonds. This story highlights feelings Americans had about life at home during the war: Americans needed to be vigilant, constantly watching for threats at home. After Pearl Harbor, American soil was no longer a safe haven from international problems.
[53] Berger, 99.

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officials. Dark, gritty stories were no longer popular, as Americans felt the need to shelter their young from the evils of the world.

New Deal liberalism changed its focus to international reform, not just reform on a national level. America's involvement in World War II led people to feel that the United States had a responsibility to end suffering on a global scale. Enemies stopped being local corrupt politician and became war profiteers, foreign dictators, and threats to democracy. The virtues that were placed upon the "common man" during the Great Depression were shifted onto the United States as a whole. The United States was a source of virtue and morality, qualities that the rest of the world needed. Much like the government promoted abstract expressionism as being representative of the freedom possible in the United States, it also promoted comic books as showing the type of heroism possible in America. Comic books were shipped to soldiers overseas and became a huge part of G.I. culture, for the first time gaining a level of adult acceptance.[54]

The introduction of Robin marked the beginning of the end for the gritty version of Batman. Due in part to unemployment and progressive education reforms in the 1930s, more teenagers attended high school[55] and spent ever-increasing time with their peers and away from adults. Parents' magazines expressed concern over the way in which America's children were behaving and they placed the blame on music, movies, and comic books.[56] Concerned parents felt that graphic depictions of crime and violence were just too enticing to children. They also feared about what their children were exposed to while they were away. Parents began forbidding children from reading comic

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[54]Harvey Zorbaugh, "The Comics – There They Stand!" *Journal of Educational Sociology* 18, no. 4 (December 1944), 198.
[55] Wright, 27.
[56] Wright, 27.

books, to protect their young minds. Due to the war production, there was an increase in disposable income, which meant more pocket money for children. This meant, of course, more comic books. More comic books meant more concerned parents.

Chapter Three: Post-war Comic Books

After World War II ended, around 12 million soldiers returned home, with the goals of getting a job, raising a family, and buying a home.[57] Women had to leave the workplace, giving up their jobs to returning soldiers. Suburban developments sprung up outside of cities across the United States, offering affordable housing to millions of Americans. The G.I. Bill, passed in 1944, provided millions of soldiers with a college education.[58] A college education went from being an American ideal to an American reality. Almost sixty percent of Americans enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle by the middle of the 1950s, up from only around thirty percent at the end of the 1920s.[59] This was due in part to a change in the definition of middle class. In the 1920s, middle class referred to occupation, in the 1950s the phrase referred to income. People felt that they could live like bankers even though they were mill workers. Congress backed off from New Deal liberalism and became increasingly conservative. Congress overrode President Harry Truman's veto of the Taft-Hartley bill, putting restrictions on union behavior.[60] The American economy was doing so well that Americans felt less need for a super-powered government to protect them. Peace and prosperity finally reigned over America, after years of crisis.

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[57] Thomas C. Reeves, *Twentieth-Century America: A Brief History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 139.

[58] Reeves, 140.

[59] Reeves, 156.

[60] Reeves, 141. The Taft-Hartley bill outlawed closed shops, required unions to annual report on their finances, and compelled union officials to sign oaths stating that they were not Communists.

The end of World War II saw the beginning of another war, the Cold War. America came out of World War II more powerful than ever before, but joining the international stage made the rest of the world seem much closer, too close for comfort.[61] Being a superpower meant that people were looking to take America down. The war was won, but at the cost of handing over much of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. While the United States and the Soviet Union cooperated at the end of the war, this cooperation did not extend beyond the war. Both bodies had long-standing resentments from events before the war, but the bottom line was that the Soviet Union was devoted to a dream of a world united under communism while the United States was devoted to democracy and capitalism.[62] Because of the Soviet Union's desire to convert the world to communism, the United States felt the need to protect itself and its citizens from this kind of take-over. The National Security Act of 1947 provided for federal agencies whose sole job was to watch over the United States. Individuals who were thought to be Communists or Communist sympathizers were blocked from employment in the executive branch. Both parties, Democrats and Republicans, did not want to be accused of not upholding American values against "Reds".[63]

On April 22, 1954, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy openly began his witch hunt against Communists that he was sure had infiltrated the American military.[64] The fear of communism was omni-present in American life. Americans were afraid, not only of Communists, but of each other. The Cold War caused concerns about whether or not American's youth could carry on the war. Enemies could be anywhere, so parents had to

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[61] David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 9.
[62] Reeves, 141.
[63] Reeves, 144.
[64] Daniels, 83. Wright, 156.

be vigilant, making sure their children were raised to be good Americans. This paranoia eventually extended beyond Communism, to juvenile delinquency and anything else that threatened the stability of American society. Americans felt that life was finally what it should be and they did not want their lives disrupted. Wholesome values were promoted, as well as respect for authority and personal responsibility.[65] After all, it was governmental authority that helped Americans get through the Great Depression and win World War II.

After World War II, Americans felt triumphant; there was a powerful federal government, a thriving economy, and a United Nations. DC Comics adopted an editorial policy that encouraged less social commentary. Batman's bleak and menacing world dramatically changed to a bright and colorful world clear of ambiguities and noir shadows. Batman co-operated with the law and Robin became a straight-A student. Even Batman's enemies changed. Formally homicidal characters, like the Joker, became more interested in mischief than murder. In the early 1950s, comic book sales tripled.[66] Once the post-war fervor died down, sales dropped. Superheroes were so tied to the war effort that once the war was over and peace was won, people bought comic books less. People did not need heroes as much as they did during the war. America won, the super-power prevailed, and the superheroes were shelved.

Science!

The post-war period also saw innovations in science and technology. The dropping of the Atomic Bomb brought on the Atomic Age. Science was both comforting and terrifying. The dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima meant that world destruction was

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[65] Reeves, 154, 157.
[66] *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*.

a real possibility. But it almost meant the creation of atomic energy, electrifying homes all across the United States. Americans recast the atomic bomb in familiar, less threatening contexts, in order to control the uncontrollable, to use science for good and not evil.[67] There were advances in medicine, including the polio vaccine, bringing down the number of reported polio cases by over 33,000 in just a 17 year span.[68] In 1957, Russians launched the first satellite, *Sputnik*, into orbit around earth. A year later, America launched *Explorer I* into orbit. That same year, NASA was founded, to help the United States win the space race. Americans became fascinated with science and technology and popular fiction turned to science fiction for story content.

The Comics Code Authority

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, various civic groups raised strong objections to crime and horror comic books. These groups believed that such comic books contributed to a rise in juvenile delinquency and kept children from reading good books.[69] Some concerned groups even suggested that reading comic books harmed children's eyesight because of the poor print quality.[70] In the wake of World War II, there were fears that love of characters like Superman and Batman and faith in strong perfect men who solved all problems would lead to a totalitarian state.[71] Foreign nations, including England, looked down on American comic books.[72] DC Comics created an editorial advisory board that had PhDs and professors watching over content.[73] The Board included English

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[67] William Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 31.
[68] Reeves, 164.
[69] Johnston, 46.
[70] Robert L. Coard, "The Comic Book in Perspective," *Peabody Journal of Education* 33, no. 1 (July 1955), 18.
[71] Coard, 19.
[72] Coard, 18.
[73] Coard, 18.

professors, psychologists, and other trust-worthy professionals. DC made sure to let

parents and children know that it was doing this for the protection of America's youth.

This was not enough for concerned parents, though. Eventually people like

psychologist Fredric Wertham began blaming the ills of society on comic books.

Wertham was a senior psychiatrist for the Department of Hospitals in New York City

from 1932 to 1952 and he also directed mental hygiene clinics at Bellevue Hospital.[74]

His work required him to deal with juvenile delinquents and over the course of his career

he became very concerned with finding a way to prevent juvenile crime. In 1954, he

published a book titled *Seduction of the Innocent.* Wertham's book included sensational

accounts of juvenile violence, described in as much detail as he could muster. Wertham

linked this violence to comic books on the basis that the children he dealt with all

admitted to reading comic books.[75] While his scientific method leaves much to be

desired, his book still hit a chord with American parents.[76] Parents had a culprit to blame

for the growing disobedience and misbehavior of their children. Wertham presumed that

comic books had an ability to suggest and stimulate behavior.[77] He went so far as to say

that Batman and Robin represented homosexuality; his evidence for this is that a

homosexual patient of his once admitted that he would have been willing to trade places

with either member of the Dynamic Duo.[78]

Wertham's accusations led to an official investigation of comic books by a United

States Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency.[79] In the spring of 1954, Republican

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[74] Daniels, 85.
[75] Wright, 93.
[76] Daniels, 87.
[77] Daniels, 86.
[78] Daniels, 87. Wertham also said that Wonder Woman was a "lesbian sadist" because, in her pursuit of justice, she often beat up male villains.
[79] Daniels, 84.

Senator Robert C. Hendrickson, chairman of the subcommittee investigating comic

books, declared that the books were produced only for profit.[80] He felt that comic books

were not concerned with improving the minds of young readers. While the committee

ultimately decided to take no action against comic books, the feelings of the American

people were pretty clear. Facing denunciation for juvenile delinquency, comic books

needed to change their image. Unlike during World War II, there was no clear

bandwagon to jump on this time.

Comic book companies reacted by establishing the Comics Code

Authority in October 1954. This organization had the task of setting up a

list of restrictions for comic books. While the organization could not

Figure 5 - CCA stamp   force comic books to comply, they granted those who did the right to

publish their titles with the Code Authority seal on the covers ("Approved by the Comics

Code Authority"). One of the primary requirements of the Code was that good always

triumphed over evil and that villains were always punished for their crimes.[81] To meet

this requirement of the code, the comic world had to be no worse for the villain's

attempts at destroying order. Female characters had to be modestly dressed. They

generally lacked curves and had a "Dior look".[82] Female characters were not allowed to

do anything more than kiss.[83] Murder victims could not be depicted full length in a pool

of blood; instead they had to look as if they were asleep.

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[80] Johnston, 47. Senator Hendrickson noted that comic books in the early 1950s brought in an annual profit
of around twenty million dollars.
[81] Daniels, 137.
[82] Johnston, 49. "Dior look" refers to the type of clothing created by French fashion designer Christian
Dior. His first fashion line appeared in 1947 and included signature dresses and skirts that were mid-calf
length and jackets that had below-elbow length sleeves, covering arms and legs in a conservative but
flattering manner.
[83] Coard, 20.

DC immediately changed characters to meet all of the requirements of the code. Batman's main enemy, the Joker, changed from being a sociopathic killer to being a trickster-thief more concerned with causing mischief than murder. One of the major changes for Batman came in the form of technology. Not only did Batman suddenly have more gadgets than he knew what to do with, he also ended up with a highly-trained, crime-fighting dog (by the name of Ace, the Bat-Hound) and the villains he fought used more technology and science than out-right violence. Instead of drawing from detective stories, writers for Batman started focusing on more science-fiction plots, with Batman facing bizarre space aliens and dealing with scientific experiments gone awry. This science-fiction focus took the blame for crime away from society and put it on technology. Gotham City became a slightly futuristic city with almost no slums and lots of well-dressed citizens. Even Batman's trusty car, the Batmobile, got a sleek redesign. All of these "happy" changes to Batman reflect a basic American fear of corruption of youth. These changes occurred because parents and professionals wanted to protect their children from the evils of the world. They felt children should be sheltered, not exposed.

Chapter Four: The 1960s and 1970s

In the early 1960s, America was more stable so heroes became vulnerable and disoriented. There were no great problems that their superior physical strength and brute force could solve. The problems they faced required thinking and reflection, not just muscles. Adding to the stress of the Cold War, Americans also had to deal with the civil rights movements, dissent over the Vietnam War, and a youth rebellion during the 1960s. Children in the 1960s could not emulate their parents' achievements. The absence of an obvious economic challenge caused young Americans to look for something to overcome.[84] They needed something to define themselves. By the 1960s, intercontinental ballistic missiles were developed and kept in underground sites across the United States. These missiles could hit targets over 7,000 miles away from the launch site.[85] Between atomic bombs and intercontinental missiles, the world became a very dangerous place. In 1962, televised coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis showed children that their parents could not protect them or save them from possible death.[86] The assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 was another blow to American feelings of safety. It was the first time in over sixty years that an American president had been assassinated.

In early 1965, America began bombing raids against North Vietnamese military bases. By June of that year, Congress approved $400 million to back the effort to protect

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[84] Charles Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), *xvi.*
[85] Reeves, 165.
[86] Kaiser, *xvii.*

South Vietnam from Communism.[87] American officials believed that South Vietnam was

a vital part of the free world and that the loss of it would endanger all of Southeast Asia.

Initially, the vast majority of Americans agreed.[88] Part of the campaign involved massive

bombing raids on North Vietnam as well as search and destroy raids in South Vietnam

against the Viet Cong. United States troops used new combat technologies, like napalm

and herbicides, indiscriminately, destroying the South Vietnamese landscape and ruining

many villages. Due to this destruction, the South Vietnamese people became

increasingly hostile toward American troops. Americans back in the states witnessed

newscasts on television that depicted events happening over in Vietnam. Many were

shocked by what they saw on television. Not since the Civil War had average citizens

been exposed to the horrors of war in such a way. While political leaders managed to tie

World War II to daily concerns, there was no way to do the same thing with the Vietnam

War. Once it was clear that this war would not be won easily, Americans lost their will

to fight. Antiwar protests were common, causing unease at home. In some cases,

protesting college students seized campuses and publicly burned their draft cards.[89] Once

again, the world seemed to be falling apart. College protests received national news

coverage, making the possibility of anarchy in America seem real.

By the 1970s, Americans felt disillusioned and wanted a return to reality.[90] There

was a world-wide oil crisis and another economic recession. Americans lost faith in

politicians and economists.[91] The Great Depression and New Deal legislation linked the

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[87] Reeves, 183.
[88] Reeves, 183.
[89] Reeves, 184.
[90] Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 16.
[91] Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 53.

government to the economy in the minds of Americans. The failing economy thus meant that government was failing. The United States lost the Vietnam War, affecting the image Americans had of their country. Many Americans felt that there was no way to end the Vietnam War honorably.[92] The super-power was not all-powerful. The civil rights movement slowed down and certain hopes of the 1960s, like national healthcare, fell flat.[93] The Watergate scandal and President Richard Nixon's paranoia caused Americans to lose trust in their government. Historians have labeled the 1970s "the Me decade" because many Americans retreated from social purpose.[94] Instead of trying to improve society as a whole, Americans focused more on improving their own lives.

Tongue-in-Cheek: Batman in the 1960s

Americans were confronted with images of violence and civil unrest on television and in newspapers. DC's reaction to current events was to sugar-coat the world its superheroes lived in. In regards to Batman, DC removed any remaining traces of vigilante behavior. Instead of acting outside of the law, Batman and Robin were deputies of the Gotham City police force. They even had a special bat-phone that served as a direct hotline for Commissioner Gordon. Instead of filling in for a corrupt police force, Batman helped the honest policemen of Gotham City with cases that were too hard for them to solve or too dangerous for them to handle. Instead of being dynamic, Batman gave up his individuality for the good of American children. In this way, Batman reflected the private lives of Americans. In an era of disorder and confusion, average Americans attempted to conform as best they could to American ideals.

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[92] Berkowitz, 32.
[93] Miller, 2.
[94] Berkowitz, 158.

In a time of protests, not only about the Vietnam War but also about civil rights, Batman began stressing responsibility and respect for authority. American parents found comfort in the kinds of stories that comic books were telling their children. Batman comic books acted as a source of escapism for Americans who were faced with a world full of increasing shades of grey. The pages of Batman comic books were filled with images of the world as it should be. Superheroes worked with the government, not against it. Local officials and police officers were guardians of peace and were above reproach.

Unlike World War II, the Vietnam War was generally not mentioned in Batman comics during the 1960s. This lack of mention is important; it shows how uncomfortable the American public was with the Vietnam War. This war, unlike the one against the Nazis, was not clear cut. While Americans wanted to protect the free world from Communism, many were afraid of pushing it too far. They had seen what could happen when political ideology was pushed too far in World War II.

The full bloom of this toned-down, somewhat campy version of Batman was the live-action television show, first aired in 1966. During its initial run, it was one of the most popular television shows on the air and both movie and television stars lined up to get guest spots on the show.[95] While providing an excellent means of escapism for American viewers, it also pointed out how Americans felt about comic books. Comic books were supposed to make people laugh, plain and simple. Even the song for the show was a light-hearted, peppy, and repetitive melody with cheery female vocals. The 1966 television show was meant to be a "put-on" and even Adam West admitted that it

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[95] Wright, 225.

was satire.[96] This show highlighted a new view of superheroes. The concept of a

perfectly good hero who respects authority and always wins was hilarious to average

Americans, a joke to be laughed at. A new generation of readers growing up in a society

where challenging authority was okay demanded more relevant stories. College students

accepted comic books as a type of alternative culture and they expected more from the

books.[97]

By the end of the 1960s, intellectuals and social scientists began to see teenaged

rebellion as a normal part of adolescent development, not as a sign of the degradation of

American youths.[98] American interest in anti-heroes and realism emerged. By 1969, DC

began to return Batman to his noir roots and he once again became the grim avenger of

the night.[99] Dennis O'Neil and Neil Adams combined for the remake of Batman in the

late 1960s and early 1970s. DC took cues from the youth culture and began presenting

more left-wing stories that centered on political commentary.

After decades of camp and escapism, Batman was allowed to return to realism.

Dennis O'Neil felt that it was too late for his generation, but that maybe the up and

coming one could learn from the past.[100] This sentiment echoes instructional children's

literature from the late 1800s. O'Neil was intentionally trying to educate younger readers

and teach them how to behave, using heroes as models for how good people should act.

As a result of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the opposition to the civil rights

movement, antigovernment attitudes gained favor in America.[101] Encouraged by a large

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[96] Berger, 169.
[97] *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*.
[98] Wright, 200.
[99] Wright 233.
[100] *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, Dennis O'Neil
[101] Wright, 265.

fan base consisting of not just children but also adults who grew up with their comic books, DC let their writers and artists explore grittier storylines. By the 1970s, Batman and Robin had split up. Robin finally aged and graduated high school, moving on to college. Batman joined the Gotham City Council as Bruce Wayne and headed up the Wayne Foundation, to fight social ills. Batman also dropped most of his bat-objects and went back to his solitary roots. Allowing Robin to age, instead of staying eternally young, was another attempt at realism. After being a boy for over two decades, Dick Grayson/Robin finally got to go to college. Dick Grayson's move to college also reflects American society. By the 1970s, there was a higher availability and affordability in regards to colleges. Not only did Americans experience an increase in disposable income, but student loans were widely available. A college education became the standard middle class goal of parents for their children, based on the belief that it would lead to better jobs and higher pay for their children. As an orphan, Dick Grayson becomes the ultimate expression of this American goal.

The Amazing Spider-Man

By the 1960s, Stan Lee was in his 40s and he was tired of writing what he felt was nonsense.[102] He wanted to write heroes who had personal lives, who were real people. He strived to make fantasy realistic, as opposed to over the top. Unlike DC characters, Marvel heroes lived in a real city, New York City, went to real places, drove on real streets. This allowed characters to meet across books, since they all lived in the same city. It also allowed readers to connect to the characters more. Not only did events in the comic books happen at locations that readers knew about, but it also allowed the characters to respond to real world events. While older comic book writers and editors

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[102] Lee DVD

changed continuity constantly, Lee stressed keeping an official timeline and continuity, to keep track of cross-overs and story arcs in all Marvel books.[103]   Marvel comic books also had a different art style. In the 1960s, Marvel artists began using a fluid, open drawing style with expansive layouts and a lush romanticism.[104]

In an attempt to write more serious material, Stan Lee created a comic book titled *Amazing Adult Fantasy*. It started out as a collection of short science fiction stories dealing with "normal" people. Lee wanted to create a book for adults, not just children.[105] The comic book did not sell well and was slated for cancellation. For the last issue, *Amazing Adult Fantasy* issue 15, Lee decided to test out a superhero he had created but not yet used. Building on the Marvel science fiction theme, this

Figure 6 - *Amazing Fantasy* **15, Marvel Comics, August 1962**

hero gained his powers due to a bite from a radioactive spider. While this character was a superhero, Lee also made him a rather normal person.

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[103] Lee DVD
[104] Johnston, 49.
[105] *Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters, and Marvels*, produced by Eric Mittleman, 95 minutes, DHG Production Company, 2002, DVD.

Unassuming high school student Peter Parker was an orphan living in the Forest Hill area of New York City with his aunt and uncle, May Ben and Parker. [106] Poor Peter Parker is teased by his classmates for being a bookworm and a good student. One evening, during a demonstration on radiation at a science hall, Peter is bitten by a radioactive spider. He discovers that the bite has endowed him with super-strength, the ability to climb walls, and amazing jumping skill. Peter sees a sign promising $100 to whoever lasts three minutes in a wrestling match against "Crusher Hogan". Peter goes home, changes clothes, puts on a hood, and goes to challenge Hogan. Not only does Peter last three minutes with Hogan, he also lifts the wrestle above his head. Impressed by this display, a television producer in the audience gives Peter his card, telling the boy to call him. Using his intellect, Peter designs a gadget that fires adhesive webbing.   He also creates a costume and names himself Spider-Man. Spider-Man begins his career as a television celebrity. When a thief runs past him at a studio one night, he selfishly refuses to help the security guard, letting the thief escape. Later on, at a robbery, his Uncle Ben is murdered by the same thief he refused to stop. Feelings of guilt cause young Peter Parker to decide to use his powers for the greater good, to fight crime as Spider-Man.

Unlike other heroes, this superhero was not an adult, but a teenager. Peter Parker had to worry about school, money, and family issues on top of worrying about crime. As an orphan and after losing his father figure, Uncle Ben, Peter must find out how to be a hero and a man on his own. Lee wanted this hero to have a full life outside of his costume. When the sales figures came back, the issue proved to be a hit and Spider-Man was given his own title, *The Amazing Spider-Man*.[107] Lee has said that Spider-Man

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[106] *Amazing Fantasy*, issue 15, Marvel Comics, August 1962.
[107] *Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters, and Marvels.*

caught on because readers could relate to a shy guy who was not good with girls and had to worry about his family.[108] This naturalistic superhero was far from perfect and often questioned why he bothered trying to save the world. In the first issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man,* Peter Parker/Spider-Man successfully pulls off the daring rescue of an astronaut in distress, but J. Jonah Jameson, the editor of the Daily Bugle, accuses Spider-Man of setting up the rescue in an attempt for publicity. Spider-Man has to face the consequences of his televised career.[109]

Just like Batman, Spider-Man had a reason for being a superhero. When he first got his powers, young Peter Parker decided to make money by fighting professionally. He did not start out with a desire to save the world. The responsibility for the death of his uncle weighed heavily on Peter's mind, finally causing him to fight crime. Stan Lee decided to make all the villains Spider-Man faced scientists, doctors, and professors because he could not think of any other way for the villains to get superpowers.[110] Spider-Man and his villains represented the two primary views Americans had of science, the ability of science to save the world and the ability of science to harm the world.

Peter Parker did not get a steady girlfriend until he graduated high school and started attending college at Empire State University. There he met a blond named Gwen Stacey who was sweet and loveable, but somewhat bland. Eventually, Peter meets Mary Jane Watson, a hip sassy red-head. Mary Jane started out as a young hipster. Unlike Gwen, Mary Jane was a strong modern female personality.[111]

Spider-Man and the Comics Code Authority

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[108] *Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters, and Marvels.*
[109] *The Amazing Spider-Man*, issue 1, Marvel Comics, March 1963.
[110] *Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters, and Marvels.*
[111] *Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters, and Marvels*. In this taped interview, Stan Lee states that at the time he created the character of Mary Jane Watson, he had no idea of the drug-related reference the name carried.

To keep the wider audience, comic books had to keep up with the times. For decades, comic book superheroes seemed almost trapped in time. They stayed young and perfect. This convention finally changed in the 1970s, and Spider-Man was at the forefront of this change. Characters that do not age are characters that are out of touch with time. The addition of aging shows that Americans were no longer willing to believe in perfection and desire heroes that are more real, more natural. By the 1970s, Americans needed a hero they could relate to. They no longer needed a perfect being.

The world in the 1970s was vast and confusing, there were no clear heroes. Americans saw an explosion of religious cults, self absorbent pastimes, and drug and alcohol use. People needed heroes again, but they needed a different kind of hero. To tap into the growing counter-culture movement, Marvel set itself up as the young upstart, a revolutionary publisher as compared to the more established and well-known D.C. Comics. Comic book sales increased throughout the 1970s.

Stan Lee was asked by the Office of Health, Education, and Welfare to do an anti-drug story, to address the growing problem of drug addiction. Lee came up with a three issue series about the dangers of drug use. The first issue in the series, *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue 96, depicted a drug addict about to leap off a building because he thought he could fly.[112] Spider-Man saves the addict from falling to his death. The next issue in the series, issue 97, brings the problem home when Peter Parker/Spider-Man discovers that his roommate, Harry Osborn, has been popping pills.[113] After an argument with Peter Parker, Harry sneaks off and buys more pills from his dealer. When he returns home after patrolling the city, Spider-Man finds out that Harry has overdosed from the

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[112] *The Amazing Spiderman,* issue 96, Marvel Comics, May 1971.
[113] *The Amazing Spiderman,* issue 97, Marvel Comics, June 1971.

pills. Just at that moment, the Green

Goblin appears, having followed Spider-

Man back to the apartment.

In the third and final issue of the

drug use series, the Green Goblin tries to

attack Spider-Man.[114] At the sight of

Harry, who is in fact the Green Goblin's

son, the Goblin runs away, leaving

Spider-Man alone with Harry. Later on,

Peter Parker is confronted by Harry's

dealer, who asks him to tell Harry that

he has more pills. Peter calls the dealer

a creep and the dealer has his thugs

Figure 7 - *The Amazing Spiderman* **96, Marvel Comics, May 1971**

attack Peter. Peter is attacked by the

dealer's thugs, but he defeats them using his super-strength. Peter then warns the dealer

that if he catches the man dealing drugs again, he will give him a more severe beating.

At the Daily Bugle, J. Jonah Jameson and Joe Robertson have learned about Harry's drug

abuse and discuss whether or not to run the story. Joe tells Jonah that Harry shows that

drugs are not just a ghetto problem, but everyone's problem.

Aside from showing the negative impact drugs can have on health, the three issue

series ends with well-known characters telling readers that drugs are everyone's problem.

The drug use is not graphic; Harry only takes un-named "pills" to get his high. However,

the Comics Code Authority refused to back the issue because it mentioned drug use.

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[114] *The Amazing Spiderman,* issue 98, Marvel Comics, July 1971.

Marvel decided to publish the story without a Comics Code Authority seal, not only

because it was written at the request of a government agency but also because of the

strength of the story. Marvel's decision proved to be the right one. The issues sold well

and Marvel received positive write-ups in many papers, including the New York

Times.[115] This mainstream media press drew more readers to Marvel Comics. Due to

this reception, the Comics Code Authority rewrote the code, allowing drug use as long as

it was shown in a negative light.

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[115] *Stan Lee's Mutants, Monsters, and Marvels*.

Chapter Five: The 1980s

       Changes in marketing affected the content of comic books in the 1980s. Comic books were originally sold to independent magazine distributors that sold them to newsstands at twenty percent below the cover price. Any that went unsold could be returned, putting the loss of profit for unsold issues on the shoulders of the publishers. Newsstands did not make much profit from comic books and thus devoted only a small amount of space to them.[116] Newsstands only carried the best-selling titles. Magazine distributors did not get new issues to newsstands quickly, making fans wait weeks for new issues of their favorite titles. In the mid-1970s, this changed. Phil Seuling, a comic book convention organizer, founded East Coast Seagate Distribution Company in 1974. One of his primary goals was to speed up the distribution of comic books, as well as lower the price and increase the profit for comic book vendors. Phil Seuling negotiated an agreement with publishers to get a fifty percent discount for all comic books he purchased on a non-returnable basis.[117] By the 1980s, other retailers copied this idea, resulting in the creation of specialty shops for comic books. These shops catered to comic book fans and were able to sell more titles than newsstands. These dedicated fans and readers were more willing to purchase new titles than newsstands. Direct sales encouraged more experimentation and creativity on the part of the artists and writers because they knew who their audience was.[118] Direct sales also helped increase profits

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[116] Johnston, 50.
[117] Johnston, 50.
[118] Johnston, 51.

for comic book publishers themselves, since they were no longer responsible for unsold issues.

Thinking outside the Panel

Comic books of the 1980s starred heroes that were enigmatic and alienated.[119] The heroes of 1980s comic books faced troubles that men brought on themselves by ineptitude. These changes were due in part because of the industry's knowledge of an older audience. Publishers saw readers as being in their early twenties or as being witnesses to or participants in the Vietnam War.[120] These readers experienced events such as the *Challenger* space shuttle exploding on national television. Media and culture did not shelter these readers from graphic events, so comic book publishers felt more comfortable with content that was once forbidden. Following Stan Lee's example of naturalistic superheroes, DC writer John Byrne created a Superman that struggled with shaving steel-strength stubble before a date with Lois Lane.[121]

Writers and artists took in all facets of 1980s visual and popular media to create a narrative graphic style that reflected the ambiguous and anxious feelings Americans had about their country and its future.[122] Comic books cities that were once idyllic became sinister and troubling.[123] Cities did not offer hope in the 1980s and, like in the 1930s, traditional authority figures were depicted as being incapable of solving problems.[124] Comic book artists started using splash panels in every issue. Splash panels take up whole pages, as opposed to much smaller traditional panels. They also usually have

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[119] Johnston, 39.
[120] Johnston, 40.
[121] *The Man of Steel*, DC Comics, Inc., 1986.
[122] Johnston, 40.
[123] Johnston, 43.
[124] Johnston, 43.

graphics that extend beyond the border of the panel, allowing art and action to spill over.

By the 1980s, a number of writers, editors, and publishers were female.[125]

Batman Returns: The 1980s

Frank Miller's 1986 graphic novel *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is the culmination of Batman's return to his dark noir roots. The Batman presented in *Dark Knight* is older, slightly mad, and tries to deal with a dark Gotham City that is riddled with corruption and vice. Advancements in printing techniques and inks allowed for a much more detailed art style. Instead of having to stick to heavy lines and limited shading, artists could now draw in whatever style they wanted. This change helped to make the visual mood

Figure 8 - *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* **issue 1, DC Comics Inc., February 1986**

of *Dark Knight* gothic and somewhat creepy.

Dark Knight opens with a Bruce Wayne that has retired his mantle of Batman after the death of Jason Todd, the second boy to wear the mantle of Robin, ten years prior.[126] Bruce Wayne is now 55 years old and an alcoholic. Police Commissioner

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[125] Johnston, 40.

[126] *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics, Inc., 1986. The character of Jason Todd was killed by The Joker in *Batman* issue 426. The Joker beat Jason Todd/Robin and left the boy to die in an explosion.

Gordon, one of Bruce Wayne/Batman's allies, has been forced to retire at the age of 70.

No one is left in the police force that has any respect for Batman and many are glad that the vigilante disappeared. During Bruce Wayne's retirement, Gotham City, left without a hero, has fallen prey to violent gangs, notably The Mutants. One day, Bruce Wayne stops by the place where his parents were murdered and is confronted by members of The Mutants. He fights them off, with the help of a young girl named Carrie Kelly. This encounter, refreshing the memory of his parents' murders, causes Bruce Wayne to decide to put the Batman costume back on, to fight The

Figure 9 - *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*
issue 2, DC Comics Inc., April 1986.

Mutants. He eventually tracks down the headquarters of the gang and attempts to take on the leader, partially to prove to himself that he can still fight. Old age has caught up with Batman, and he is unable to defeat the leader. Batman only survives due to the quick thinking of Carrie, who has become the new Robin. They escape The Mutants and return to the Batcave.

The leader of The Mutants threatens to unleash his army on Gotham City. When the mayor tries to negotiate with him, he rips the major's throat out with his teeth.

Batman decides to set a trap for the leader of The Mutants. He and Carrie disguise themselves and infiltrate the ranks of the gang, spreading a rumor that the leader wants an assembly. This time, Batman is better prepared for the fight. Batman challenges the leader and finally defeats him in front of The Mutants. Many of them, after seeing their leader defeated, accept Batman as their new leader and take the name The Sons of Batman.

News of Batman's triumph spreads through Gotham City and into the walls of Arkham Insane Asylum, where The Joker lies in a catatonic state. The news that Batman has returned causes The Joker to wake up. He manages to convince his doctor at Arkham that he is finally sane and should be released. After his release, a late night talk show has him on as a guest. The host marvels at the reformed Joker; many people felt that The Joker was merely a victim of the hatred of Batman and not really a criminal. Seeing this and refusing to believe that The Joker is not a threat, Batman rushes to the television station. Once he arrives, The Joker releases a cloud of Joker Venom and runs away, on a brutal rampage. The Joker manages to find and kill a group of Cub Scouts at a county fair. Batman finally catches up to The Joker and in a fit of rage, breaks The Joker's neck. The Joker survives but is barely alive. In an act of suicide, he twists his head until what remains of his spine snaps, framing Batman for murder.

Batman begins training The Sons of Batman, who take to the streets dispatching vigilante justice wherever a crime is committed. Batman and The Sons manage to clean up Gotham City, but incur the wrath of the federal government. The government views the success that Batman and The Sons have at restoring order to Gotham City as an embarrassment. Superman is sent to stop Batman, but Batman is prepared. The two meet

up to fight at Crime Alley, where Batman's parents were murdered. During the fight, Batman uses synthetic kryptonite and a special exoskeleton to defeat Superman. Shortly after the fight, Batman dies of a heart attack. On his death, Bruce Wayne/Batman's faithful butler, Alfred Pennyworth, detonates bombs that were planted all around Wayne Manor and the Batcave. Alfred suffers a stroke after the explosions and dies as well. On Batman's death, his secret identity as Bruce Wayne is discovered. Since Wayne Manor and the

Figure 10 - *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* **issue 4, DC Comics Inc., June 1986**

Batcave were destroyed, no one could piece together exactly how Bruce Wayne had carried on his dual life. Superman, as his alter-ego Clark Kent, arrives at the funeral for Bruce Wayne/Batman, racked with guilt about his former friend's death. Superman then hears a heart beat inside the coffin, but chooses to walk away. Carrie later digs up the coffin and reveals a still-living Bruce Wayne. Bruce Wayne faked his death so that he could start a new life, teaching and training Carrie and The Sons of Batman in secret, in unmapped tunnels under the ruins of Wayne Manor that were hidden by the destruction of the Batcave.

In *Dark Knight,* Batman has aged considerably and he gives in to his emotions, particularly during the fight with The Joker. Batman's loss of control over his emotions mirrored the loss of control felt by Americans during the recession caused by Reagan-era politics. This turn in financial prosperity brought back Depression-Era feelings. Batman's return to his more violent Depression-Era self reflected the dissatisfaction and mistrust Americans once again felt in regards to wealthy businessmen and a corrupt society. Despite all of the darkness, at the end of *Dark Knight,* Batman decides to leave the Batcave to the new Robin and the other youths who follow him. He places his faith in the next generation. This is evidence of an American hope that the future will be better and that the future is in the hands of the next generation.

Chapter Six: Final Thoughts

Comic books were designed to appeal to the masses. They arose from the invention of mass production and mass media and would have never existed without these inventions. Comic books and their superheroes are worth studying because they can act as an indicator of popular culture's changes of taste and belief. Historical records can not tell us what life was like for everyday Americans, how they felt about their lives and about the world. Items like comic books can help us gain a better understanding of how these individuals felt about the world at large. Comic books superheroes can act as guides to American ideals, values, and fears. Comic books are part of American mass culture and, as mass-produced items, are often over-looked. Part of my goal in doing this research is to help foster the idea that comic books are more than just a source of entertainment and amusement. They also have historical value. Superheroes have a lot to say about the superpower that created them and can help foster a deeper understanding of American culture.

While this concept might seem like common sense, little work has been done with comic books. This thesis is meant to help bridge the gap in scholarly research on comic books. Most of the research that is out there is comprised of general histories of the medium or defenses of comic books as true forms of literature and art. In *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*, Joseph Witek chose to focus on three comic books that are exceptional, not the norm. Witek stays away from superheroes and only looks at critically acclaimed innovators who

used the comic book form to present historic narratives. Mila Bongco presents a history of comic books in *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books.* She focuses on how changes in the comic book industry affected comic books themselves. She provides a detailed look at the mass production aspect of the comic book industry and at how different distribution methods affected comic books. Bongco also attempts to defend comic books against possible critics. She combines literary analysis with visual analysis, making an attempt at a fine arts study of comic books.

Some work has been done on comic strips, but comic strips are perceived differently than comic books. Comic strips are delivered as part of the daily newspaper and generally rely on humorous punch lines.[127] Comic books, on the other hand, have less humorous themes and much longer narratives. The visual style of comic books relies on creating a sense of motion, action, and dramatic tension. The visual style of comic strips is usually much simpler and more static. The types of narratives found in comic books are closer to those of pulp magazines and dime novels than those found in comic strips. Treating them as merely an expanded form of comic strips is a little faulty. Most of the books on comic strips treat comic books as merely off-shoots of comic strips, not a distinct entity. In *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us about Ourselves,* Arthur Asa Berger focuses only on comic strips, not comic books. Berger starts out applying a solid methodology to the strips of The Yellow Kid and The Katzenjammer Kids, but then relies heavily on Freudian psychology to look at other strips.

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[127] Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar,* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 6.

<center>**The Bullpen**</center>

The secret identities of superheroes provide a window into American thought. Batman's secret identity, Bruce Wayne, is his caricature of what a wealthy bachelor should be. For Batman, the mask is his real identity and Bruce Wayne is his assumed persona. Frank Miller touches on this in *The Dark Knight Returns* by showing Bruce Wayne fighting the desire to put on the mask of Batman. In the 1930s and 40s, Bruce Wayne was a playboy who spent all his time at parties. Bruce Wayne, as himself, had little care for the everyday man. The 1970s saw Bruce Wayne create Wayne Foundation, a charitable organization aimed at fighting social ills, mimicking the behavior of wealthy Americans during the same time period.

The preoccupation with violence that most comic books have, that the hero has to save the day by pummeling his enemies, reflect the continual conflicts the United States has had. First, it was the Great Depression and the conflict between the poor and the extremely wealthy. Then it was World War II. The Cold War conflict was not just a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also between ideals of democracy and Cold War policies.

Comic book superheroes believe that violence has the ability to create peace. Seldom do superheroes ponder whether or not their violence might cause an escalation of violence in villains. Batman rescues Robin numerous times by physically beating villains. Spiderman rescues citizens of New York in the same way. Most of each comic book issue is devoted to rationalizing or explaining the violence committed by superheroes. Heroes and readers expect to find resolution through violence. The United

States was established through the use of violence and violence is how democratic values are defended and enforced.

Superheroes act to justify the distribution of power in America. While democratic ideals place power in the hands of the everyday man, the reality is that power is divided unequally among different groups. Comic book superheroes assert the entitlement of specific, special individuals to a privileged form of violence and power. Superheroes are allowed to use their powers to solve problems and fight crime because they are superior to normal people. This does not just refer to their super powers, but also to their moral superiority. Many, like Batman and Spider-Man, experience a personal tragedy that defines them and moves them to action. It is this combination of specialness and tragedy that justifies their actions. It also justifies the place of the United States as a superpower. America's super abilities and assumed moral superiority justifies the use of violence to protect freedom and democracy. This kind of justification is important because democratic values do not mesh with the concept of being a global superpower. Americans, especially during war time, need a way to explain why they are allowed to take aggressive action against perceived threats to democracy.

Comic book origin stories can be seen as a type of narrative of national history, designed to help explain the current conditions in the nation. Batman was confronted by violence and evil at a young age. He spent his life trying to build up his strength, his power, so that he could overcome the evil in the world and save others from the trauma he experienced. Just like Batman, the United States had to spend time building up strength and working on internal improvements to become a superpower. In the same way that Pearl Harbor caused the United States to join World War II, the death of his

Uncle Ben drove Spider-Man to fight crime. Spider-Man's motto, "With great power comes great responsibility," is very similar to the way the Americans view their place in the global community. As a superpower, the United States has a responsibility to the rest of the world.

Times when comic book sales dropped and comic books fell out of favor always forced a change in comic books, in the type of story told, in the way the superheroes were depicted. Whenever superheroes did not fit how Americas felt, the superheroes were deliberately changed to match the Americans felt. The cheerful, bright Batman was eventually discarded because he no longer spoke to his audience. The reality portrayed in issues of *Batman* from the 1950s and 1960s had been proven to be false. The world was not all sunshine and rainbows, so *Batman* had to be adapted. *Batman* had to reflect the newly discovered possibility of defeat and disappointment, of the new sense of limitation, as well as a certain type of hopefulness. The failure of the Vietnam War caused a crisis; the expectation of perpetual and global strength and power was negated.

Batman and Spider-Man are alternately vilified and praised as society changes. When Batman marks out corruption and is an agent of change, he is the enemy of the police, a wanted vigilante. Although he tries his best to help the citizens of New York City, Spider-Man often receives bad press. This is similar to the way in which social reformers, people who clamor for change, are vilified in the press and by authority figures.

Victories of superheroes reflect a basic sense of optimism that has been a part of American culture since the Great Depression. Comic book superheroes believe that human heroism can shape the course of future events. Batman and Spider-Man both fight

crime in an attempt to make the world safe. They believe that their actions can make the future better than the present. The recent presidential election is further proof of this optimism. The American public's response to President Barack Obama's message of hope and unity shows why superhero movies have been doing well. Americans are still optimistic and still believe good will triumph over evil in the end. America, to this day, represents a new start for immigrants. It is a nation where history can be overcome and the future is open to all. Superheroes always win in the end, no matter how hard the struggle, no matter how bleak the future seems. To this day, Americans respond to this optimism, they embrace it. No one tires of seeing their favorite hero save the day. Americans ultimately have faith that their superheroes, and the superpower nation that created them, will win in the end.

For those interested in more information on comic books, there are numerous useful websites. This appendix contains a small selection of websites for those interested in learning a bit more about comic books. This appendix is divided into three sections: the first contains official websites of popular comic book publishers, the second contains official websites of museums that are devoted to comic book art, and the third contains miscellaneous websites that are related to comic books. Most of the publisher websites contain sections that provide brief overviews of the back-stories behind their popular characters. They also list current issues as well as any movies and television shows involving their characters. The websites for comic book museums and galleries can help individuals gain a better understanding the place comic books hold in American culture. The miscellaneous websites provide a look at comic book culture as well as any interesting current news about the comic book industry.

Comic Book Publishers:

Dark Horse Comics: < http://www.darkhorse.com >. Dark Horse Comics is an
  independent comic book publisher, offering lesser-known comic books such as
  Hellboy. Dark Horse also publishes the *Star Wars* comic books.

DC Comics, Inc.: < http://www.dccomics.com>. Batman, Superman, The Flash,
  WonderWoman, and The Green Lantern are some well-known DC Comics
  characters. DC Comics' website includes information on new releases and any
  current news, such as new movie releases.

Image Comics: < http://www.imagecomics.com/ >. Image Comics is an independent

comic book publisher. Some of Image's comic books are much darker than those

offered by Marvel and DC Comics, such as *Spawn* and *Witchblade*.

Marvel Comics: < http://www.marvel.com>. Well-known Marvel Comics characters

include Spider-Man, The X-men, The Hulk, Ironman, and The Fantastic Four.

Marvel's website includes biographies for their well-known characters. Marvel

also offers free online viewing of select issues of comic book titles on their

website. For a subscription fee, individuals can browse older issues, including the

first 100 issues of *The Amazing Spiderman.*

Comic Book Museums and Galleries:

Cartoon Art Museum, San Francisco, California: <http://www.cartoonart.org/>. The

Cartoon Art Museum collects and preserves examples of cartoon and comic art.

The museum has exhibits that focus on the artwork of specific animators and

illustrators.

Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center, Santa Rosa, California: <

http://www.schulzmuseum.org/ >. The Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research

Center provide exhibits on the comic art of Charles M. Schulz, the creator of the

Peanuts comic strip, as well as exhibits and presentations on cartooning and

cartoonists and illustrators.

Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art, New York City: <http://www.moccany.org/>. The

Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art (MoCCA) presents retrospectives of specific

comic books and comic book publishers. The MoCCA also has regularly

scheduled lectures on comic art topics and has a yearly art festival in the summer.

Miscellaneous Comic Book Related Websites:

< http://www.comicbookresources.com/ > Comic Book Resources is an online comics

magazine, providing visitors with current information about the comic book

industry. The website includes reviews of current issues of comic books and

press releases from comic book publishers.

< http://www.sequentialtart.com/ > Sequential Tart is a webzine about the comic book

industry that is devoted to promoting awareness about the role women play in the

industry. The site contains articles about depictions of women in comic books, as

well as interviews with women who work in the industry. While the webzine

initially had a women-only focus, it has expanded over the years to include the

comic book industry as a whole.

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