

FRANK MILLER'S IDEALS OF HEROISM

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INTRODUCTION: METHODOLOGY AND CRITICAL CONTEXT

The Project in Brief

Just as a society develops culture by *what* it communicates to its members, it also advances culture by *how* it communicates these ideals. Some of these avenues of discourse may be dominant in the general population, or “pop culture,” while others may have gained prestige by their presence in academic dialogue; other modes of expression may be considered subordinate by society at large based on their arising out of a minority populace or viewpoint which does not figure in to the dominant modes of expression. Even with such inherent cultural hegemony, these areas and manners of discussion often overlap, so that one camp may refer to another; indeed, postmodern culture (and possibly now post-postmodern culture) establishes this as the norm. My particular interest for this project is to explore the kind of person society tells itself is worthy to be emulated – namely, what our society holds as a heroic model, and whether this model can be seen as progressive or oppressive in relation to non-dominant groups. Such interrogation can serve as a signpost for where society is headed, versus where it should be going; that is to say, the exploration of a particular heroic model will reveal what *is* the case, and the criticism of such a model could suggest what *ought* to be the case. This is not to say that an individual should not have the right to express a particular viewpoint or manner of representation, but rather it is simply to look for symptoms of modes of cultural thought that should be exposed in hopes of addressing and treating them; that is, it is not so much a legal matter (e.g. issues of censorship) so much as an ethical one (i.e. bringing awareness to widespread notions in order to critically reevaluate them).

While this kind of criticism explores cultural ideology, it is obvious that it is also inherently political. For example, it raises the following questions: according to our society, can women, minorities and other oppressed groups be considered heroes? If so, do they (or should they) differ from the expectation of the Caucasian male hero? Would female heroes in particular be subject to a masculinized notion of the hero, or in contrast simply be fetishized? Would they have a place of prominence, or would they simply be “side-kicks” in a still male driven world? While being categorized or idealized as a hero might appear liberating to a particular group’s representation, does the portrayal of a character (and the stereotypes that may be employed) undermine those areas of progress? These are all questions I wish to address in my project, particularly as they relate to the works of Frank Miller; specifically, after a broad analysis of Miller’s earlier works I intend to explore the heroes (or antiheroes) in the film *Sin City* and in the graphic novel *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*¹. Miller has been a significant focal point in the realm of comics, particularly since his *The Dark Knight Returns*² rejuvenated the superhero genre in the mid-1980s; however, both the film *Sin City* and *DK2* are relatively new, so there is much critical academic evaluation to be done in general in regards to both works. Yet for this project specifically, I intend to argue that *DK2* serves as a departure or sorts from Miller’s ideals of heroism in his middle years (such as those presented in *Sin City*), as the protagonist becomes more of a revolutionary engaged in revamping society than the vigilante or “lone wolf” on the fringes of society.

Both works show a hero amidst society at its arguable worst – *DK2* is in a totalitarian/dystopian frame, while *Sin City* is violently anarchist; the contrast in setting

¹ Hereafter cited as *DK2*.

² Hereafter cited as *DKR*.

between the two works allows for the exploration of heroism in different contexts and seeing which ideals remain constant amid the varying environments. In the latter work, I hope to make the case that the film, while an adaptation, still bears Miller's literal authorship and hence is suitable to look at for the purposes of this paper; it can be seen as a Bazinian “digest”³ of the graphic novel series, which lends itself more easily to this kind of comparative discussion rather than looking at the whole series. In the former work, two characters (The Question and The Green Arrow) refer to Ayn Rand’s ideals, and accordingly Miller positions his own ideals in relation to Rand’s. As I will discuss in detail later, Rand’s heroism is a sort of supreme individualism, since Rand portrays collectivism as inherently corrupt. In contrast, Miller's heroes tend to be individualists because the current system is corrupt, not because it is entirely hopeless; however, Miller’s *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* provides a third option, which is that of the revolutionary who leads a collective fight against corruption in order to reestablish the system.⁴ Thus, Miller’s position becomes somewhat ambiguous; the individual hero is the hope of society, yet the language used is that of leftist revolution (and mainly against unlawful capitalist business endeavors). As a result, I will view the ideals of heroism of both authors as political statements.

Methodology

Before beginning, however, it may be beneficial to explicate my general methodology; more in-depth methodology and critical context will appear in each of the subsequent chapters. The approach I will take to the texts in question will be both

³ This term comes from André Bazin’s essay “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest,” which will be further explored in Chapter 2.

⁴ As will be explained in Chapter 2, Miller owes much to the tradition of hard-boiled fiction and film noir.

formalist and ideological. First, a familiarity with the formal elements of a work of art is necessary for its comprehension; ideas are made known through various levels devices and techniques which may or may not be medium specific, and hence must be addressed in order to show an understanding of the ideas presented. This approach may manifest itself on a micro-scale of simply referring to a particular device used in a work (such as a metaphor or an evocative shot), essentially performing a “close reading” of such devices. The primary detriment of pure formalism, however, is that no artistic or critical work is apolitical. Even choosing to work within a particular genre can be political; as I will discuss, Sin City operates within several film noir conventions, and how it participates in or revises those conventions (such as gender roles) can be read as political statements. Terry Eagleton puts the danger of pure formalism rather aptly, stating “Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish” (Literary Theory 19). Therefore, a work can either by-and-large uphold various hierarchies (whether knowingly or through simply maintaining the status quo) or it can attempt to undermine those hierarchies; this does not rule out nuance or ambiguity, however, for a work can surely support hegemony in one area while discrediting it in another, but rather is to say simply that works do position themselves ideologically whether intended or not.

As such, my readings will also employ ideological criticism. Formal elements alone cannot contain the full expression of a particular work or medium; for example, quite apart from form is comic’s long-running tendency to take heroes seriously – in fact, the “superheroes” of comics can be seen as the ultimate cultural representation of the ideals of the hero. While much of recent literature and film explore the “everyman” or

even “antiheroes,” comics have a propensity to not only employ traditional heroic models but to value the heroes presented in those models. Keeping in mind a medium’s formal and generic tendencies, I hope to treat differing media (comics, film and novel) respectfully. Yet pure formalism seems to be a rather empty concept, since if akin to grammar and speech pure formalism could be seen as a collection of devices for expressing ideas but without any meaning – that is, syntax without semantics. In addition, an author may have unknowingly expressed a particular idea; ideological readings tend to view particular works as symptomatic of broader cultural attitudes, which an author may have internalized and represented with or without any conscious reflection. Despite the usage of different terms, ideology and formalism are still inherently related; as suggested above, one relates to how something is expressed and the other to what is expressed. Politics often creates structures in which a form dominates, such as Romantic notions of the author leading to Modernist aestheticism; the form then in turn becomes grounds for an individual author to express ideological conceptions.

With all of this in mind, I hope to employ both formalist and ideological criticism in order to achieve as robust a view of the text and its utterances as possible; yet with hero criticism as my avenue of inquiry, I will certainly be employing elements of feminist and multicultural criticism on the ideological side of things, due to the fact that all the texts in question exhibit white male hegemony in regards to what kind of person exists as the ideal hero. As bell hooks argues, racism (and I would add sexism, as I am sure she would agree) “is not simply prejudice. It does not always take the form of overt discrimination. Often subtle and covert forms” of such domination exists (183). A single work may employ certain hegemonic perspectives while criticizing others, and some

perspectives may be so buried in Western consciousness due to thousands of years of gender and race representation that our society needs to constantly review art and other means of expression in order to diagnose – and possibly surgically extract – these views. As stated above, ideology is not the only means by which art may be examined; in fact, I fully expect to appreciate certain formal and ideological viewpoints I encounter in these works of art, just as I denounce other elements within the same works.

Finally, in addition to the basis of general methodology it seems necessary to explore the traditional understanding of what a hero is and can be before seeing how Miller uses or revises the traditional understanding of the hero in his own works. My understanding of the hero and superhero will be largely informed by the typology presented by Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Richard Reynolds. In brief, Frye (1957) and Campbell (1949) both provide a basis for understanding the traditional roles that a hero plays, as well as the conventional characteristics he or she employs; while their models mainly explore Western heroism ideals, they aim to establish a nearly universal typology. Frye's work explores the messianic image in which human inability to create order in the world (such as a garden from wilderness, or a city from mere minerals) requires divine intervention, and the messianic figure bridges the gap between the human and the divine in order to accomplish these goals. Thus for Frye the "pastoral" role of an individual hero leading the masses participates in a widespread and even archetypal image of the messiah, a role which will be explored. Rather than looking at a particular role the hero can play, Campbell traces the progression heroes of all kinds tend to take throughout the development of her or his adventure. According to this mold, the hero leaves the familiar

world for an unfamiliar one, facing obstacles (or even death) which are eventually overcome; the hero is either rewarded or the reward is stolen, but then reemerges from the unfamiliar world so as to restore order to the familiar world. Campbell sees this progression recurring so often that he refers to it as the “monomyth,” which has regular variations but essentially adheres to the same basic pattern.

Lévi-Strauss (1963), while still upholding an element of universality through the recognition of consistent binary oppositions in mythology (such as society and nature, or individual and other), states that these patterns do occur in culturally specific incarnations. I suggest that whether patterns are inherently universal or we simply impose them universally, Western thought tends to see consistent structure throughout various mythologies; at the same time, however, an individual culture’s mythology is unique, upholds its own particular values and, while structural elements are helpful for discussions such as this, I hope to avoid the temptations of reductionism which would limit a mythology to its mere structural elements. The same could be said of a particular work; while the works addressed in this paper will participate in this hero typology on some level, they may revise traditional understandings of the hero as well. I will simply approach the variety of traditional heroic qualities as sufficient conditions for a rough outline of how a hero acts; variations may occur and are expected, which should avoid the pitfall of reductionism while attempting to reconcile distinct elements that structuralist and poststructuralist schools have to offer. Building upon this notion of the hero to apply to the language of comics and comics-based film, the superhero also traditionally fulfills certain sufficient conditions. Finally, Richard Reynolds (1992) approaches superheroes as “modern mythology,” and also gives an almost “monomythic”

rendering towards superheroes; the qualities of lost parents, coming upon super-powers to achieve the level of near divinity, keeping a secret identity, and striving for both ideal justice and a degree of personal normality are all common characteristics of the recent costumed heroes of comics. These sufficient conditions provide a solid foundation to begin inquiry into Frank Miller's particular take on the hero as manifested in his oeuvre.

CHAPTER 1: THE ROAD TO SIN CITY

What is a Hero?

“Hero-worship is an imaginative passion in which latent ideals assume picturesque shapes and take actual persons for their symbols.”

George Santayana, *Reason in Society* (157)

If the above quote is accurate, then the hero is simply an individual onto whom cultural ideals are projected. From a Freudian perspective, this notion is akin to the male child’s view of the Symbolic Father: the child fears the Primal Father’s threat of castration, which the mother embodies; this foreboding Father is displaced onto the ideal Symbolic Father, with whom the child associates and from whom the child learns what is culturally “masculine.” (Eagleton 134) A similar process seems to occur with the hero, though somewhat inverted. Rather than learning valued ideals from the hero, as the child does with the father, society sees valued qualities in an individual who is then exalted to a heroic-symbolic level, becoming an “ego ideal” for what society’s members; for example, Hercules becomes the hero for a group that values physical feats of strength, Odysseus for the group that values overcoming obstacles through wit, etc. Even dubbing such valued qualities “virtues” suggests this male association with the heroic; the word’s etymology betrays this, as *vir* is Latin for “man” and *virtus* for “manliness” which is equated with the notion of “valor.” (OED) This is not to say that, of course, that women cannot be seen as heroes, whether in our contemporary society, the past, or through retroactively ascribing a heroic label to women who may not have been valued in their own era; however, it is to say that in our society the notion of the hero as been traditionally defined by the qualities possessed by an ideal masculine figure in our culture. Understanding culture to be, as Clifford Geertz says, “an ensemble of texts... a

story [people] tell themselves about themselves,” the cultural notion of heroism tends to uphold such “masculine” values because ours has been a male-dominated discourse; that is, our culture has told itself stories of male heroes embodying what society holds to be qualities worth emulating. We repeatedly tell ourselves stories in which a virtuous man must rescue the helpless woman (from fairytales such as *Sleeping Beauty* to science-fiction epics like *Star Wars*), or the skilled man who protects the society that cannot protect itself (as told in *Beowulf*). Before exploring how Frank Miller may uphold, denounce or revise such gendered notions of heroism, we shall first explore several models of heroism that frequently appear in cultural discourse.

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye presents a particular heroic model based on archetypes of common imagery in Western literature, “in the context of its Classical and Christian heritage”; he views these archetypes as a sort of grammar, or guidelines by which literature is structured. A significant portion of mythology is structured around the desire for order, which is “assume[d] under the work of human civilization” (141). Frye states that the human desire for establishing order gives preference to taking the mere image of the vegetable and making it into a complete garden, cultivating the single plant into both a defined location as well as an arena for repeating the process. Similarly, imposing human order on a lone animal creates a flock that submits to human confines and purposes, and the mere mineral, when organized on a grander scale, becomes the buildings which make up a city. As a result of this drive towards order, the personification of this ideal manifests itself in the motif of a human as shepherd or pastor; this ideal is taken to its furthest extent in the messianic image, that which united God and humanity in a single individual who acts as the shepherd or

ordering principle over the universe (143). While this sort of individual exemplifies the more general heroic model, Frye does delineate several different kinds of heroes: 1) The Divine Hero, who is “superior in *kind*” to both humans and a normal human atmosphere; 2) The Romantic Hero, who is “superior in *degree*” to normal humans and typical human situations (“laws of nature are slightly suspended”), but is human nonetheless; 3) The Leader-Hero, who while “superior in degree” to other humans (more intelligent, virtuous, etc.), is still limited by normal human surroundings; 4) The Common-Hero, who, as implied by the name, is on the same level of an average human and her surroundings; and 5) The Ironic Hero (or Anti-Hero), who is inferior in skill, intellect, power, or possibly even moral character to the average human, yet exists in a normal human atmosphere; and while this kind of hero lacks qualities that are typically understood as heroic, he or she still manages to achieve heroic actions.⁵ Additionally, the term “Anti-Hero” can in turn refer to an individual who may be superior in powers or skills but is generally morally inferior. There can be a thin line between these latter heroes and villains, yet the Anti-Hero is generally working for the benefit of some aspect of society (even if that amounts to only an individual) and confronts an even more immoral antagonist.

While Frye emphasizes the cultural value of a particular quality made evident through archetypes, Joseph Campbell’s The Hero with a Thousand Faces stresses the “monomythic” aspect of the hero, or the progress of adventure of that is common throughout heroic narratives. Campbell’s synthesis of various mythologies suggests a common quest in which the individual is summoned from the familiar world (usually a

⁵ Apparently there is no room in Frye’s model for heroic action on the part of an individual who is inferior both in degree and in environment to the average person; this may be due to the fact that the standard of heroic action is measured by the benefits average humans reap from it.

hut or castle) to face a challenge; it is here that the hero encounters a “protective figure” who bestows the hero with some sort of power (a weapon, amulet, etc.), and thus the hero is well-armed for the task ahead (69). The hero then proceeds to either defeat an obstacle blocking progress of the adventure or is here slain. The hero enters an unfamiliar world, a “dark kingdom,” in which he or she is both tested and helped by various individuals; the hero then prevails through the tribulation and is rewarded (usually through marriage or fame, and in variations may have the reward stolen) then returns home. At this point, the hero reemerges from the “dark kingdom” (via literal or figurative resurrection) and brings a gift (or “treasure”) back to society which “restores the world” (245-246). Once again, the ordering function of the hero is ultimately stressed, as the rather complex narrative process bestows the heroic individual with the authority to establish such order.

While both Frye and Campbell may seem to emphasize commonality over difference, Claude Lévi-Strauss clarifies that not all aspects of heroic narratives can be considered universal. In his work Structural Anthropology, Lévi-Strauss compares myth and language; according to his construction, myths are comprised of certain governing qualities just as language is governed by structural (or “grammatical”) guidelines (209). Just as all human societies have language, all human societies also have culture; to this extent, both could be said to be “universal” in that all cultures have them. However, just as one language’s grammatical structure may differ from another, so one culture’s mythology may have elements that differ from those of another culture. So the *presence* of culture is universal, but the *structure itself*, as well as the ideals represented through that structure, can be diverse. This is not to negate Campbell and Frye, however; while not all cultural stories may have the same qualities, certain ones to reappear frequently.

Lévi-Strauss thus argues that the “function of repetition is to render the structure of myth apparent” (229). To synthesize Campbell and Frye with Lévi-Strauss, it is evident that one can find common elements in the myths and narratives of various cultures, and even draw examples of heroic ideals from narrative structures that tend to be repeated, while heeding the caveat that one should not reduce the diversity of all cultural narratives to mere universals. Indeed, to subject a given culture or individual to a foreign narrative could be considered another form of colonial oppression.⁶ Yet if one can avoid the reductionist tendency to see all cultural as basically the same while respecting cultural difference, looking at a particular tradition (in this case, Western tradition) can illuminate prejudices towards certain models of heroism that may be simply accepted on face-value or engrained in cultural attitudes; this widespread acceptance of such ideals and its long historical tradition may allow an individual to unknowingly employ the ideals in current examples of storytelling.

With this general background established, we can now proceed to examine Miller’s earlier works and the kinds of heroes he employs. Frye and Campbell provide a broad structure through which heroes can be evaluated, while Lévi-Strauss presents the warning that commonalities are not pure universalities. Again, this brief survey of works treats a particular author’s heroic notions as aspects of *culture* – stories society tells itself about itself, which are historically informed by stories society has told itself in the past; that is, Miller’s works may be unique in the way they use the language and conventions

⁶ See David E. Hoegberg’s “Caesar’s Toils: Allusion and Rebellion in *Oroonoko*,” in which he argues that the title character is subjected to allusions of “pre-existing classical narrative models, especially those of Achilles and Julius Caesar,” rather than being understood in distinctly African terms (*Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Volume 7, Number 3, April 1995).

of comics, but rather than existing in a vacuum these works respond to cultural standards of what a hero should be.

Miller's Early Heroism Ideals

To begin, it must be established that Miller often works within the language of the *superhero*. This kind of hero is not an actual person onto whom qualities are imaginatively projected (as in the above Santayana quote), but rather is a complete product of the imagination, idealized beyond what an actual person could embody. These heroes are “super-powered” heroes, such as Hercules was in classical mythology; they are demigods on earth. Yet these heroes are not a separate category from the kind proposed by Frye, Campbell and Lévi-Strauss, but are rather a subset within their broader categories; they still fulfill the functions any sort of heroes is expected to fulfill, but are restricted by certain commonalities that are unique to the superhero. As Richard Reynolds notes in Superheroes: A Modern Mythology (a title which betrays the link between old and new idealized heroes, such as Superman and Hercules), these commonalities (or sufficient conditions for superheroism) can be thematic: these heroes are often separated from full integration into society; they have superpowers; they value justice over the law; they live in relatively “normal” surroundings; they have a relatively “normal” alter-egos (which protect their secret identities); while not limited to the law, they often exude patriotism for their country, and their stories “use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder” (16). This latter point in particular is used by Miller to create a sense of the “absurd,” which is a theme that permeates his works; he states that his draw to criticism of “current times is the sense of complete absurdity... things spinning out of control at such velocity” (Brownstein 8). While not all of his

heroes can be described as superheroes, the excesses common to superhero narratives lend themselves to commentary on the absurd in the current states-of-affairs, even if through common Miller techniques such as distorting through caricature.

In addition to Reynolds's thematic qualities found in superhero narratives, certain sufficient conditions can also be iconic, as clearly evidenced in the signifier of the costume (which most frequently employs form-fitting tights): the costume "marks out heroes... in contrast to the non-costumed ordinary world" (26). In fact, this latter signifier is so strong that if shown an individual who wears such a costume – even if it is incredibly obscure or simply made up – one would instantly assume that such a character is a superhero. While not limited entirely to superheroes (as evidenced by both *Sin City* and *300*), Miller does make extensive use of these conventions – even if it is to turn such conventions on their head now and then.

This model seems to accord with Frye's delineation of *mythoi*, which he states, based on tradition, are Comedy, Romance, Tragedy and Satire/Irony. Of these four models, superheroes tend to focus on the mythos or Romance, which centers on the heroic quest. This kind of cycle generally employs some tale of origin and a period of youthful innocence before the hero is summoned to a particular quest (198-200); the motif of the "hero arming oneself" in superhero narratives is a clear and pervasive signal of the hero responding to the call and preparing to engage an enemy. Other elements which are not specifically Romantic may be present⁷ (such as the tragic loss of parental figures, common in superhero narratives), but apart from such stories of origin the

⁷ This may be explained in part by the overlap between stages in several *mythoi*; for example, the "phases of tragedy move from the heroic to the ironic, the first three corresponding to the first three phases of romance, the last three to the last three of irony" (Frye 219).

superhero seems trapped in an endless cycle of quests with only momentary resolution. For example, as soon as Batman may dispose of a particular villain (often through handing the villain over to the Law), the Bat-Signal may appear in the sky, calling the hero once again to face another adversary.⁸

In order to evaluate if there is a level of continuity in his oeuvre, it should be beneficial to explore the characters in Miller's earlier works first before examining other works in more detail. Despite the varying societal structures and worldviews we find in Miller's heroes, there is a degree similarity as ideals (or "virtues") remain consistent.⁹ In lieu of an overall in-depth critical survey, as not much is available on Miller's general politics represented in his oeuvre other than popular reviews, this survey of Miller's heroes will be highlighted by what criticism there is. His own comments, as well as academic criticism here or there, should aid in this understanding.

Ronin (1983)

While Miller had done artwork and the occasional storyline for Marvel Comics as early as 1979, working mainly within the pre-established continuities of *Daredevil* and *Spider-man*, his graphic novel, *Ronin*, is his first entirely original work. Apart from its technical innovations¹⁰, *Ronin* establishes several themes which recur throughout Miller's works. Set in the near future, the story centers around the lone center of order in New

⁸ It is this sort of perpetual narrative that creates elements of difficulty (or even flat-out contradiction) in superhero continuity; in 1986, the continuity of DC's universe was so complex that it issued a limited series in which certain characters and alternate worlds were entirely destroyed in order to simplify the development of future narratives (Reynolds 38).

⁹ As the bulk of Miller's works are devoted to exploring culturally "ideal" qualities of the male hero in particular, the use of this term may not be entirely off base. Two female heroic figures, Elektra and Martha Washington, will be explored in brief below.

¹⁰ "His breakdowns and page layouts [in *Ronin*] were startling departures. On some pages, all the panels were page-wide horizontals; on others, all page-deep verticals... the story was drawn in a graphic style as personal in execution as it was individual in conception" (Harvey 148).

York – The Aquarius Complex. This corporation is in the process of developing biocircuitry, which would enable technology to not only grow and develop like organic life, but also be integrated with human flesh to create a cyborg. While the protagonist, Billy Challas, was born without limbs, he has exceedingly strong powers of telekinesis; The Aquarius Complex intends to use his abilities to create a technological breakthrough. The company's cognizant computer, Virgo, knows Billy's dark past – in a fit of rage, he accidentally decimated a bully who mocked him as a “freak” – and implants a fantasy in Billy's mind in which he imagines he is a ronin, or masterless samurai, in order to rebuild his sense of self confidence for the good of company; Virgo then adopts a maternal role, causing Billy to both fear and trust Virgo. Billy uses the company's biocircuitry to create limbs for himself, and fashion his likeness into that of his fantasy. However, when he becomes romantically involved with the wife of the creator of biocircuitry and becomes aware of the company's desire to use him to develop the technology as weaponry, he telekinetically destroys the entire complex, including the manipulative Virgo.

The American Heritage Dictionary states that the astrological “Age of Aquarius” represents a blissful era of freedom and harmony among humans. This appears to be the case at the novel's outset, in contrast to the chaos outside the complex. Virgo is named after another astrological sign, which represents a perfectionism which is both “conscientious” and “methodical” (OED). According to Frye's schema, Billy ironically acts as the ordering principle in the story by destroying what appears to be the lone semblance of order in the city; but while the complex has set up order, the cognizant yet inanimate Virgo lacks heroic virtue, and thus must be destroyed in order to rebuild. Billy's station is somewhat ambiguous, according to Frye's traditional delineation of the

hero. He is initially cast as an ironic hero, due to his physical disability and his lack of psychological control; however, he is super-powered as well, and thus embodies an element of the divine hero and while he is technically still human, his appropriation of the role as ronin elevates him to an iconic hero.

This progression from ironic to iconic hero mirrors Campbell's schema as well. Billy's familiar world from which he is called is the incubator of sorts where he interacts with the computer Virgo, who also plays the role of the "protective" figure who empowers him with the biocircuitry. The "dark kingdom" of New York City, full of neo-Nazis and other racial supremacists, serves as the arena where he not only hones his skills (learning to master a sword in a matter of hours), but also meets Casey McKenna, his romantic interest. However, his ultimate test comes as a psychological battle however. Virgo attempts to control the ronin through associating his destructive powers with the guilt of his murderous past, manipulating him to succumb to her maternal authority; as she has controlled his mind for years, even feeding him the ronin-fantasy he has come to embrace, this task is exceedingly difficult. However, Casey manages to shift Billy's perspective to embrace both his powers and his fantasy-identity in order to overcome Virgo. The novel ends before order is established, however; in fact, the final panels simply show the complex being destroyed, with the ronin standing victorious in the final metapanel. This is another of Miller's variations on traditional themes, along with the "protective" figure being a villain in disguise and the comfortable home being more despotic – and thus not worthy to return to at the end – than the anarchic "dark kingdom."

Apart from the recurring martial arts theme (which, as we will see, is a favorite of Miller's), this graphic novel establishes several key heroic notions in Miller's works.

First and foremost is the notion of facing a test; as Miller directly asserts, “I try to define a hero by the test he goes through” (Interviews 71). As stated, Billy’s test was both physical (learning the skills of martial arts in a brief span of time) and psychological (overcoming Virgo’s manipulation). He also marks the starting point for the hero as one who simply conquers the villain; no hints are given that he will rebuild a better society, although the ambiguity of the denouement leaves that door open. As a result, the Miller hero often does not restore order to a society in decay, but simply attacks the institutions which perpetuate autocratic control. Yet as complex as Billy’s heroism is, Casey’s is arguably more so. She exemplifies what Larry Rodman dubs Miller’s “buff, intelligent and devastatingly attractive heroines with elaborate codes of ethics and wills of iron who can only be pushed so far” (124). As a result, she is neither a pure sidekick, who simply does whatever the hero orders, nor is she the hero herself. Instead, she is the motivating force for the hero; Billy would never have the strength to oppose the control of Virgo without the prompting of the object of his fantasy. Thus, she embodies the adage “behind every great man is a great woman”; she is simply the stabilizing force that keeps the super-powered hero focused on the destruction of tyranny.

This is not her story, for while she discovers the Virgo conspiracy, she does not have the power to alter its ramifications. The aforementioned final metapanel illustrates this in graphic form: enshrouded in darkness (suggesting the literal destruction and symbolic awe of his powers), the ronin (no longer Billy, apparently) stands triumphant; Casey kneels on the ground looking up at him with her back facing the reader, and the panel’s composition lines up the reader’s gaze with hers – we are at her level, viewing the mysterious embodiment of power with wonder. This layout is complex in its psychology;

her qualities make her the object of fantasy, since she is both a skilled warrior and a beautiful object of the presumed male gaze, making her more of a “Lara Croft” heroine than the traditional “princess in the tower.” Yet in the final panel, her gaze leads the spectator’s gaze to the ronin, associating the reader with Casey through her subjectivity. Thus, while the ronin is the subject of fantasy – the admirable and powerful hero – Casey’s role is more complicated as she is both the object of fantasy desires and is given a silent subjectivity in the final panel.

Daredevil: Born Again (1985-1986)

Although Frank Miller did not invent Matt Murdock/Daredevil as he did the ronin character – this credit goes to Stan Lee and Bill Everett (George 19) – he did work to revive the superhero in his own signature style. As Elvis Mitchell writes, Miller took the character’s mere “original story and built a mythology” around it, adding the quality of “tough-minded weariness from action pulp” (13). Miller began working on the Daredevil series in 1979 as an artist; this was his foray into working with the pre-established mythology of other superheroes.¹¹ Yet after establishing himself as a unique voice in comics with *Ronin* Miller returned to Daredevil several times and in 1985 began *Born Again*, which is a run within the Marvel continuity but has been collected into trade paperback format (attempting to present it as a “graphic novel”).

Here we see the apparent demise of Daredevil when his secret identity as the lawyer Matt Murdock is sold to Daredevil’s nemesis, Kingpin. As hinted at above in Reynolds’s conception, the secret identity in superhero narratives functions as the means through which the hero can both live a “normal” existence and also provide heroic

¹¹ Later, Miller would more noticeably alter the pre-established mythology of Batman; see Chapter 3.

services to society. With this buffer gone, Kingpin is free to attack all that the person behind the mask holds dear, rather than simply defeating the icon of the hero in battle; thus, the story takes up the Marvel tradition of defining “power as curse” in a sense, as Murdock’s “responsible” use of powers ultimately leads to his (temporary) downfall. In the story, the crimelord Kingpin uses his influence to pressure a policeman with a clean track-record to testify that Murdock committed perjury, leading to his disbarment, the first step in the destruction of the secret identity upon which the hero relies so heavily. Eventually Kingpin hires Nuke, a “supersoldier” who was created by the government (like Captain America), to kill Daredevil. Nuke’s over-aggressive tendencies backfire, causing him to kill numerous civilians in Murdock’s home neighborhood of Hell’s Kitchen; once Daredevil defeats Nuke, he brings the supersoldier to the press as evidence of Kingpin’s influence in the military, thus damaging the public perception of the Kingpin as a legitimate businessman.

Unlike *Ronin*, which gives the complete storyline of the protagonist, *Born Again* acts as an episode in the ongoing adventures of the superhero. Thus, it is a little more complicated to ascertain how the story arc fits into the schemas presented by Frye and Campbell. Instead of restoring order to society, the hero must restore order to his own life as he is the target of the villain’s efforts. In the complete storyline of Daredevil (if there ever is one in the future, which is doubtful given the constant additions and revisions), this would simply be an episode in which the hero faces a test along the way between the hero’s summoning and the restoration of society. Yet despite the familiar surroundings of Hell’s Kitchen, one can view Murdock’s downfall as a “psychological dark kingdom”: the turf is familiar, but Murdock’s life as he was accustomed to it is unrecognizable for

most of the story. This episodic quality is pivotal in the continuity of the superhero, however, even if it complicates the participation of the traditional understanding of the hero. The reader rarely (if ever) sees the full cycle of the hero's adventures, for as long as she is alive she will be called back for more service. Of course, the market demand plays into this construction; to complete the saga of a certain character who has a following of fans would obviously cut off the supply that is so demanded, and in some cases it is easier to revive a character that already has a strong cultural presence than to create new ones.

Aspects of Miller's own heroic values are also made clear in this storyline. First of all, there are certain qualities that were already a part of Daredevil's character which drew Miller to him at the outset. Miller states that Daredevil's blindness "makes him all the more heroic" (Interviews 19). Ostensibly, this is due to the fact that Daredevil's primary characteristic is a disability, rather than a super-ability; of course, in place of sight each of his other senses are augmented – so much so that he can generally even read newspaper print with his fingertips – but this impairment is still a key departure from the typical costumed hero. In addition, Miller is drawn to how much Daredevil is actually defeated in battle: "Part of Daredevil's appeal to me is that he loses one fight out of every three. What makes him a hero is that he is beaten occasionally and still comes back" (21). This contributes to the sense that the superhero must exhibit some kind of "extra effort" – mere powers alone may make a character capable of certain actions, but it is the moral self-restraint and determination which sets apart the superhero from the mere super-powered.

There are certain qualities in Daredevil's character of which Miller disapproves, however, and he makes that clear in the construction of this story. First, according to Elvis Mitchell's criticism, Miller "jerks the smugness" out of Murdock's character, which is "a reaction to the pastel selfishness of the '80s" (13). While this smugness shall be explored in more depth in Chapter 3, it is worth noting that Miller's superhero ideals are not self-contained, but react against broader social climate issues, such as the individualism of the Reagan Era. Miller also disagrees with Daredevil's no-killing policy; when left with his own heroic creations, killing and maiming villains are par for the course (as evident in *Sin City*). Yet in a move that asserts Miller's authorial presence,¹² *Born Again* has Daredevil kill the military helicopter pilot who transports Nuke (153); although he is reticent to do so, even apologizing as he does, Daredevil sees that killing as the only way to cease the civilian deaths in his own neighborhood, Hell's Kitchen.¹³

Additionally, one can glean Miller's heroism ideals by looking at the villain; such an approach would define the hero by negation – what is bad in the villain is absent in the hero. In *Born Again*, Nuke may have certain enviable qualities, such as physical strength; but his military training and testing to become a "super-soldier" leads him to commit indiscriminate violence. In contrast, Daredevil is governed by the traditional superhero stance of upholding law and order; in fact, Daredevil's alter-ego, Matt Murdock, is a lawyer when not personally fighting criminals. A more appropriate comparison would be between Nuke and Captain America, the latter of whom makes a cameo appearance in the

¹² Rarely does an author change the long-running stance of character, even in a single instance, to suit the author's own ideals. Miller states that he does not consider himself bound entirely to precedent: "I've found that I can ignore most of the Marvel Universe painlessly. It's really up to me to define" what happens to a given character (25).

¹³ Such a tension between personal guilt over transgressing ideals and simply "doing the right thing," is, according to Miller, a manifestation of Murdock's latent Catholicism (Morris 56).

story. Captain America was the original super-soldier, given an experimental serum to increase his physical abilities, to fight in World War II. Along with the ideals of the era, Captain America embodied the sort of soldier after whom other soldiers would model themselves, given his discipline, strength, and uncompromising patriotism. Nuke, a character created by Miller in response to the role served by Captain America, can be seen as the foil of such a naïve view of the military. He too is governed by extreme patriotism, but is undiscerning; convinced by Kingpin that Daredevil is an enemy of the spirit of America (Kingpin states “I am a corporation – in the conglomerate that is America,” 138), Nuke is willing to destroy all in his path in order to protect his ideal of American as a haven for big business. Even Captain America’s unquestioning loyalty to the government has its limits, when he finds out that Nuke was loaned to Kingpin by the government. Through this link between the criminal world and the military, Miller suggests that the times have changed since World War II, and hence patriotism is no longer manifested through automatic support of government operations, but rather is made evident through upholding the ideal of justice. This issue of acting to achieve ones own ideals versus blind service to a governmental institution is one Miller frequently revisits.

Elektra: Assassin (1986-1987)

Elektra Natchios was Miller’s first original character to gain notoriety. First appearing as Matt Murdock’s love interest, she soon became a costumed character in her own right. Clearly an allusion to the figure in Greek mythology (“Electra”), Elektra has a few similarities to her namesake; she had a close bond with her father Hugo who, as with Agamemnon, was murdered; Hugo was accidentally killed by a policeman during a

hostage situation, however, and thus rather than seeking revenge on her mother for the death of her father, as in the Greek myth, Elektra displaces her rage onto law in general and becomes an assassin (Marvel.com). The present story in question, *Elektra: Assassin*, occurs outside of Marvel continuity, however, and thus enables Miller to explore the character without regard to how it will affect future development of the character (Interviews 125).

In this graphic novel, Elektra discovers a plot devised by the organization with which she was once affiliated, the occult martial arts group known as “The Hand,” to possess a presidential candidate; upon winning the election, they plan to use the commander-in-chief’s control of nuclear weapons to start a nuclear holocaust and end all life on earth. A cyborg working for the government agency S.H.I.E.L.D. named Garrett is sent to kill her for exposing the link between “The Hand” and the government (especially as she kills various agents along the way); however, she controls his mind to fight against the government, and when their assassination attempt on the possessed and newly-elected president fails, she telepathically projects Garrett’s mind into the president’s body, allowing Garrett (who is still under her control) to act as president.

While this work is clearly the most outlandish and fantastical of the works I explore here, it provides a forum for Miller’s critique of the current political system. Obviously, the first major criticism is that political figures appear to be mere pawns; the control of special interest groups may not be as diabolical as Miller presents it in *Assassin*, but the use of the mind-control in the story does suggest that political leaders tend to be panderers. It is the leftist leader with the charismatic personality and stationary grin who is portrayed as a panderer (as connotated in his surname, “Wind”); the same

cut-out is used in Bill Sienkiewicz's art his every time his face appears, suggesting the somewhat robotic nature in which political figures campaign. The incumbent rightist candidate has his own issues, however; a figure with a Nixonesque face, he constantly refers to the "guts" he has to use the little black box with the red button to start nuclear holocaust at any moment. At one point we seen him in bed with his wife, and it is clear for the first time how small in stature he is in comparison to her, suggesting that his political aggressiveness is a form of overcompensation. These attacks on both of the dominant parties in the US political system – the pitfall of leftism as being wishy-washy regarding ideals versus the hard-and-fast devotion to ideals that are dangerous on the right – establishes Miller's relative ambiguity regarding a particular political viewpoint through what comics are quite adept at doing, namely caricature; though a form a distortion, this technique draws attention to flaws that might not be quite so obvious in more "realistic" art forms and provides satirical commentary. While both sides are critiqued, the only admirable person in the story seems to be the assassin who pursues morality on her own terms, apart from institutions; thus, Elektra serves as a model of the "existential hero," a self-determined type that recurs within Miller's works. As with *Born Again*, the individual hero serves the best interest of the country better than government agents with blind allegiance.

Being Miller's first original character for Marvel comics, Elektra clearly establishes his ideal of the female protagonist. Of course, problems are immediately apparent when considering that a character is created by a male who is working within tradition of female character as object of the gaze that is so apparent in comics. This of course is borrowing terms from Laura Mulvey's feminist film criticism, which

established the “woman as image” and the “man as bearer of the look” (841). The male character in comics can be present as an image of sorts, as Superman’s form-fitting costume accentuate his bulging muscles to denote his power, but as in the so-called “hardbody” films of the 1980s, such a character is still active and serves as the subject of the presumed male power-fantasy. Comics seem to have tended to emphasize the active female hero more consistently than film, however, given that women can still be active costumed heroes (e.g. Wonder Woman), even if damsels in distress are still often the objects of rescue (e.g. Mary Jane Watson). Yet despite this activity, it is still clearly surrounded by an aura of sexuality. In fact, Wonder Woman’s creator, Dr. William Moulton Marston, specifically cites that the language of sado-masochism provided a key role in her formulation. Apart from the obvious tight leather clothing and weaponry comprised of ropes and whips, Marston writes, as quoted in Reynolds, “Give [villains] an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to and they’ll be proud to be her willing slaves!” (34; it is also important to note that Marston was a psychologist, and thus very intentional in this formulation) The female superhero traditionally is thus not the mere passive image as in Mulvey’s criticism, yet still acts as a sexualized object in order to achieve the superheroic ideal of justice; such a woman is powerful, but as a fetishistic object of sexual desire associated with her role as punisher. Elektra’s mind-control (apparently a combination of occult skills and sexual seduction) of Garrett serves a similar purpose.

Rather than being the passive image, Elektra is the lone figure standing between the possessed presidential candidate and the annihilation of humanity; in addition, it is not the woman here who is the “sidekick” for the more powerful male, but Garrett who is

powerless under her control who acts as the sidekick. While elements of this conception still may be problematic, it does provide for a degree of female association with the protagonist, rather than simply having a sexualized passive object-image. According to Tania Modleski's feminist criticism, there are moments in film – even ones directed by men – in which female desires can be satisfied through association with a particular character; she cites the *Rear Window* as an example, as Lisa actively pursues unravelling the murder while Jeff is confined to his room, and particularly as “the film gives [Lisa] the last look” (860). Instead of being an example of Mulvey's “active/passive heterosexual division of labour” (842), Elektra's role as sexual object of male desire on the part of Garrett (and possibly on that of the reader) in *Assassin* is more complex, as it is merely a means to achieve her own goals of actively pursuing what she views as just. As a result, Elektra serves the role of hero as the establisher (or preserver) of order, embodying certain so-called “virtues” that traditionally accompany such a role while doing so in a manner that is distinct to the female hero of comics.

Give Me Liberty (1990)

Martha Washington, the hero of Miller's *Give Me Liberty*, is another Miller original character.¹⁴ The story tells of the various trials a young African American girl (and then woman) must face on her journey from extreme oppression in an urban ghetto to becoming a hero. Here the somewhat rare “female hero” in comics is further complicated by the even rarer “ethnic minority hero.” Martha grows up in “The Green” (an extreme dystopian version of “Cabrini-Green” in Chicago), where her father dies as a victim of police brutality during a protest against The Green's abject conditions.

¹⁴ A character which he revisits in *Martha Washington Goes to War* (1994) and *Martha Washington Saves the World* (1997).

Witnessing the murder of her role-model and teacher, Donald, she suffers a psychological trauma that leaves her unable to speak and is thus confined to a psychiatric hospital.

Seeing joining the military as her only opportunity for a better life, she signs up to fight industrial cattle farmers in the Amazon – a corporation so expansive that it instigates Vietnam-like warfare against the US military. Despite the efforts of a corrupt Lieutenant to silence her from divulging his involvement with the meat industry, she becomes a decorated war hero. She faces several more trials of a massive scale, as different extremist factions vie for control of the near-anarchic United States, and eventually emerges the hero who once again saves humanity from tyranny and extinction.

The political themes in this heroic tale are immediately apparent given the main character's name and the novel's title, taken from the Patrick Henry speech regarding British rule in the colonies. The novel's subtitle, "An American Dream," obviously refers to the perception (or at least aspiration) that one can attain success in The United States through self-determination and with the aid of the freedoms provided by the state; Martha's freedoms are barely apparent in the text, yet she still provides attains success through this basic model. Additionally, the novel once again uses the technique of caricature to comment on the political condition of the country: a moralist surgeon, representing ultra-conservative views, uses the metaphor of surgical extraction as the means of "purging" The United States of alleged perversions and gains control of an entire U.S. territory; the initial president, in Miller's critique of uncaring rightist views, cuts the federal funding which supports psychiatric hospitals, in turn causing their patients to be forced to live on the streets; and the leftist candidate, who is initially seen as a progressive savior in comparison to previous leader, eventually becomes an enraged

alcoholic when his government programs begin to fail, critiquing perceived liberal excess. As a result, Miller's hero is not defined as much by upholding or disavowing certain political ideals, but rather is transformed by "Certain notions of right and wrong" (Interviews 74); that is, the hero is defined by ethics and overcoming moral opposition, rather than through climbing pure physical or philosophical hurdles.

In addition, the novel clearly addresses the issue of subjugation in the US. Ethnic minorities are portrayed as an afterthought at best, if not the subjects of systematic oppression on the part of the country; African Americans are confined to prison-like conditions in ghettos like "The Green," while a group of Apache Native Americans fight back for the land that was taken from them before and after the founding of The United States, only to be given a carcinogenic plot of land on an oil refinery. Yet ethnic groups are not the only victims of systematic oppression, but so are individuals with "special needs." Certain qualifying children at the psychiatric hospital are subjected to genetic testing in the attempt to develop and hone telepathic abilities for use on the part of the government; one such individual, who Martha as a child inadvertently named "Raggedy Ann" due to her perceived resemblance to Martha's childhood doll, actually becomes Martha's sidekick. At the same time, there are moments during which the novel portrays oppressed groups as something to be feared, rather than necessarily deserving social equality. A terrorist group called "Aryan Thrust" – comprised, paradoxically, of gay Nazis – threatens to destroy the White House in retaliation for the "accidental" destruction by the government of their operation's base. Although clearly reacting to a certain level of victimization while also being an example of caricaturing the wide range of special-interest groups (as evidenced by the near oxymoronic nature of "gay Nazis"),

this faction seems to be a mere conglomeration of mainstream American fears, as homosexual lifestyle is linked to racist fascism. Whether this is simply a critique of the oddity of special-interest groups in the US or an absurd example of homophobia is unclear in the text.

However, Miller once again presents the gendered hero with complexity. Martha at times appears more vulnerable than traditional male characters in comics, as she breaks down and weeps after witnessing the gruesome deaths of her fellow military personnel when exposed to toxic gas. This sort of moment would rarely appear in a narrative based around a male hero; however, in the very next page she is seen wiping her tears and with determination saying to herself, “I won’t die here. This won’t kill me.” While such vulnerability may seem out of place in comparison to male characters, this story is a sort of *bildungsroman*; much of it takes place with Martha as a young girl, but a literal “coming of age” is subordinate in the narrative to a “coming into heroism.” When asked if “Martha progressively gets transformed from a human being into... maybe a kind of icon?”, Miller replies that she is simply transformed into “A hero” (Interviews 72). By this, of course, he means the kind of individual who overcomes moral tests (which are often comprised of physical or psychological tests) and returns to face difficulty, doing what she presumes is right.

Additionally, Martha – despite her iron will and ability in battle – acts as a mother-figure to “Raggedy Ann,” often even carrying her even though she seems to be an adult, and assumes the familiar role of woman-as-nurturer. Again, this role is not easily reduced to resorting to mere stereotypes though; while a male figure would probably not be as likely to assume that nurturing role, Martha is no 50s sitcom house-wife, but instead

develops her own ideals and actively pursues them. Finally, Martha is not really portrayed as a sexual object, even in the intentional manner as with Elektra uses her sexuality in order to achieve her desired ends. At one point it is, rather humorously, made clear that Redfeather, the Apache chief, is attracted to Martha; “Raggedy Ann” telepathically reveals Redfeather’s thoughts while resting in the rainforest as he gives Martha a massage. So while this scene presents her as an attractive woman, the light and humorous tone distances it from the overt prominence sexuality plays in Elektra. In fact, even the panel in which she appears unclothed takes place in the context of being psychologically tortured and brainwashed by the aforementioned surgeon. Instead of being an object of sexual desire, Martha is more often than not shown as a muscular and skilled warrior.

Yet on top of being a female hero, Martha is also African American, which presents another level of complexity for Miller and Gibbons, the white male author and artist, respectively. Instead of falling prey to sexual objectification, Miller steers close to another stereotypical pitfall – that of the “asexual black female.” More specifically, according to Donald Bogle’s typology Martha seems to draw from several different stereotypes of African Americans that have pervaded white American culture: a female version of the overaggressive “buck,” and the “the nurturing “mammy” figure who apparently lacks any defined sexuality, and, as she ultimately works on behalf of the state that caused her oppression in the first place, a female version of the “tom” (3-13; Bogle refers to the conflagration of the “tom” and “mammy” as the “Aunt Jemima” subtype). At the same time, of course, Martha challenges all of these representations; as Larry Rodman notes, the story “features a heroine that would, according to the adventure

conventions of an earlier day, ordinarily be the cool supporting character. Miller's subversion is in making her the focus" (Interviews 124). Yet this analysis serves as a questioning of the ability of white culture (and particularly white men) commenting on black individuals (particularly black women); even a somewhat progressive and verisimilitudinous representation such as Miller and Gibbons provide is hampered by years of oppression of African Americans through the perpetuation of such stereotypes.

Despite these pitfalls of representation, the novel overall serves as a success story for a black woman who overcomes obstacles to achieve the American Dream. Significantly, Martha Washington is not a superhero. It is not her superpowers that allow for her success, but rather her determination and character. As a result, Miller avoids what Anna Beatrice Scott calls the "Magical Negro" image¹⁵ that is associated with the powers and origins of black superheroes (e.g. DC's Bloodwynd, who receives his power from a gem created in a cauldron that contains the soul of a murdered slave owner; 299). Rather than originating in Miller establishes Martha as a non-superpowered human in the interest of refusing to downplay the obstacles that face the African American community. Martha's success does not suggest that the system will always allow others to follow suit through sheer determination, however, but takes social conditions seriously; her strength of character and determination to prevail barely helps her to succeed, while many others (like her teacher, Donald) face the consequences of an oppressive system in a manner that prevents them from every achieving social equality (or at least the appearance of social equality, as Martha is never totally free from attempts at subjugation on some level).

¹⁵ Scott notes that this idea associated with "blackness" is pervasive in popular consciousness, as evidenced in the films *The Green Mile*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *Ghost*; while attempting to be positive images of black characters, each of these characters acts as "yet another white fantasy of being loved, cared for, and vindicated by blackness itself" (299).

Martha serves traditional heroic role in repeatedly responding to the call to establish order, but she is arguably tested more than any other hero in Miller's works; she overcomes extreme subjugation regarding gender, ethnicity and economic status in a clearly white male-driven world. Yet such a positive view of the ultimate destination of the work might benefit from the "oppositional gaze" advocated by bell hooks. Such a gaze does not simply accept the given subject matter, but is actual able to "change reality," since identities of such spectators "were constructed in resistance, by practices that oppose the dominant order," and are thus equipped to diagnose cultural prejudices rather than simply accepting them (116, 127). As a result, it seems possible to achieve a female-oriented spectatorship akin to Modleski's model with *Give Me Liberty*, if such an oppositional gaze is also employed.

In sum, these brief chronological analyses of Miller's works bring us from the beginning of his career to the era in which he develops the *Sin City* narratives. There are a few major omissions, however; much of Miller's work in the Spider-man and Daredevil continuities is not addressed, nor is his neo-horror graphic novel *Elektra Lives Again* (1990), nor the dystopian detective graphic novel *Hardboiled* (1990). To address each of these would be not only be cumbersome, but more importantly also either redundant or simply not as illuminating regarding the ideals of heroism he conveys. Most notable, however, is the absence of 1986's highly influential graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*; yet as much of the themes and content *DK2* responds to *DKR*, I shall address this work in Chapter 3 rather than placing it in the chronology here. However, the works I did address should set the stage for examining *Sin City* and *DK2* in more extensive detail, particularly as relating to Miller's heroic conceptions found in the above works.

CHAPTER 2: *SIN CITY*: A WORLD WITHOUT HEROES?

Miller as the Adapted Film's Author

Frank Miller came to New York City in 1976 looking to establish a career in comics; what he brought with him was a portfolio built around crime comics, which had been out of vogue in the realm of comics since the Wertham trials¹⁶ – an event which eventually led to the demise of EC Comics, the foremost crime comics producer, as well as to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority. Under the code, comics artists could not portray figures of authority as being crooked, nor “any methods by which criminals operated”; in fact, even the word “crime” was banned from being used in the title of a given comic (Harvey 43). As a result, Miller acquiesced to the market demands of the time, learning the ropes and paying his dues with superhero comics (as mentioned in Chapter 1). Miller became such a strong authorial presence as a comics writer and artist – largely due to his success with *The Dark Knight Returns* – that, as Will Eisner notes, readers began “buying Frank Miller” rather than the characters with whom he worked, which were largely not originals (Brownstein 200).

Such success allowed Miller to return to the genre of comics he had always wanted to do, and the result was the *Sin City* graphic novel series. The language of superhero comics and that of crime comics can be dramatically different. Superheroes, as mentioned in the previous chapter, are examples of rather blatant hero ideals. The protagonists of *Sin City* are clearly not superheroes (though Marv seems to have superhuman strength and pain tolerance); by all appearances some would be considered

¹⁶ Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's charge that comics were an integral part of the perceived growth of juvenile delinquency in the 1950s culminated in investigations by the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954, which eventually led to the all but forced Comics Code Authority; this code limited comics to be essentially a children's medium, as good always had to triumph over evil and certain genres (such as horror) were no longer allowed (Harvey 42-43, 138).

no better than the “bad guys” – in fact, the narrative hints that in their past a couple of the protagonists might have done some rather villainous deeds. For Miller, however, certain elements of a given protagonist’s character in the *Sin City* series remain consistent, as we shall explore below.

Before examining the heroism ideals manifested in *Sin City*, it is necessary to establish why it is prudent to discuss the film instead of the comics series. The first reason is a pragmatic one. The film unifies the experience of multiple *Sin City* narratives in one cohesive work, providing, as co-director Robert Rodriguez suggests, a “sense of what *Sin City* is about” (Gross). While the film for the most part avoids the Bazinian “Cinema as Digest¹⁷,” it does provide a convenient way to begin exploring the narrative world of this fictional city. Second, the film provides an opportunity to address a common misconception about comics as an art form – namely, that they are simply “movies on paper,” and hence should not be considered an independent art form. Addressing the film as an adaptation provides the opportunity to compare the art forms at a more general level. In addition, examining the film provides a look into a historically relevant aspect of Miller’s career, in which his involvement in the medium of film seems to be in its nascent stages.¹⁸ The final justification is more complex, and requires some unpacking; stated simply, it is that if Frank Miller is in actuality the author of the film, then his ideals in general should be preserved, and thus (of more particular importance to this project) his ideals of heroism as well.

¹⁷ According to Bazin’s article “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest,” film adaptations concentrate on certain elements and necessarily leave out others; however, the goal is not necessarily to reduce a work to its bare bones, but simply to put it in a form that is more accessible to more people. (Film Adaptation. Ed. James Naremore. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.)

¹⁸ Miller was involved in writing both *Robocop 2* and *3*, but had little authorial control, which led him to give up on direct involvement in film until Rodriguez approached him about adapting the *Sin City* series.

To begin the examination of Miller's authorial role in the film, it seems necessary to provide delineations of both the term "adaptation" and the term "author." Most of the available criticism on issues of adaptation regards adapting a film from a written text; yet generally speaking, much of the debate surrounding film adaptation concerns itself with fidelity – whether a work should aim for fidelity, or whether such an enterprise is even possible – and hence can be applied to the discussion at hand. The former aspect of the dialogue is one largely based around ethics. Inherent in such a conversation is a sense of the deontological (or duty-based) relationship to the original work; this stance implies a right of the original text to be "preserved" in the adaptation, and the duty placed on the filmmakers through a fear of offending the author or the work's audience, or possibly even a sense of a text or author's sacredness, as may be the case with long-canonized works. The latter portion of the debate is more practically oriented; rather than asking "ought this be done," the main question here is "can it be done?" As a result, this debate is based more around issues of ontology, the differences in essence or being of the source text and its filmic adaptation.

In regards to this first area of debate, André Bazin's essay "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest" proposes that a key way in which a film adaptation can achieve fidelity to the source text is by attempting to find a "cinematic equivalence." His usage of this mathematical term seems to suggest that a certain novelistic quality can be expressed via filmic means without losing the impact of the original. The emphasis here is of course on the criterion of fidelity. Bazin writes, "All it takes is for the filmmakers to have enough visual imagination to create the cinematic equivalent of the style of the original" (20). At the same time, however, Bazin acknowledges the inherent differences between written

and filmic media; implicit in this phrase is an understanding of film's emphasis on the immediate and the visual, rather than the more verbal-conceptual nature of prose.

On the other hand, Robert Stam, falling into the latter camp of adaptation discourse, contends that these differences, rather than being able to be bridged between the two media by equivalence, instead make such attempts at fidelity impossible. Novels (or any other media, for that matter) and films must be viewed distinctly as they are better suited for certain respective enterprises. For example, novels move from the abstract to the concrete as the reader envisions what is written on the page, while film moves from the concrete to the abstract as a particular image is presented to the spectator who then internalizes it as an idea; put more simply, film shows a given circumstance while literature simply relates it. As Stam argues, a written text "does recount but it does not literally represent," which is to say that film gives primacy to the immediate image over intangible conceptions (18).

This echoes an earlier analysis by George Bluestone, who states that both film and the novel are more suited to "telling" particular aspects of a story; in particular, films are not as well equipped to address dreams, memories, ideas, etc., while novels cannot compare with film's immediate visceral reality. As he writes, there is an intrinsic distinction in "media's ability to handle tropes, affect beholder, [and] render states of consciousness" (20). This key difference between the written word and film illustrates, for Stam, that all media are inherently singular, which makes the ideals of "fidelity" and "equivalence" misguided. Rather than searching for Bazinian "equivalence," Stam in particular seems to suggest that the adaptation should simply treat the source as a databank to be referenced for story, characters, and other diegetic elements; for

Bluestone, the film can only adapt from the novel's "raw material"¹⁹ of the source text (62).

This is not to downplay the similarities between film and the adapted media, however; it is obviously possible to adapt, in this case, a series of graphic novels into film, which suggests some level of similarity, but it necessarily addresses the narrative differently given the differences between film and comics. Both are primarily narrative media, or at least are well-equipped to tell a story – in fact, most of the time adaptations do tell the same story as the original. So while the story level may be the same (or almost exactly the same), it is the discourse level of *how* the story is told that makes the difference. While much of the dialogue, characters, setting, etc. can be the same, the discourse level effects how the story is perceived. From the standpoint of evaluation, this can either make or break the enjoyment.

Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics and Robert C. Harvey's The Art of the Comics Book provide the vocabulary and conceptual organization for how to view comics as a unique medium. They each explore the commonalities between comics with other art forms, such as comics being a primarily narrative medium (Harvey 3), or that its panel composition is akin to that found in film and other visual media due to the analogues of "camera angle," "close up," etc. (175). However, there are several key differences that make comics truly distinct. The "gutter," or space in between panels, provides a level of ambiguity as the reader has to fill in what happens from one panel and the next; in McCloud's terms, "This phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It's called *closure*" (63).

¹⁹ This is what Dudley Andrew would later aptly call "the skeleton" of a source (464).

In addition, time itself is manipulated by space, as the composition orders the reader's perceptions so that multiple moments in time can exist within a single panel; whereas the images from a projected film occupy the same space (i.e. the screen), "each frame of comics must occupy a different space" (McCloud 7). Film can use the same physical space (the screen) due to the motion of objects contained within that space, while the objects in comics are static and hence rely more heavily on the manipulation of space to convey passage of time rather than the actual observation of time passing frame by frame in film – time is spatialized, in other words.

Finally, comics synthesize written words and images into an organic whole: "words and images combin[e] to transmit a connected series of ideas" (McCloud 152). Film can employ written words (such as signs, subtitles, etc.), but the presence of actual sound in film generally means that word and image relate sonically. Comics, on the other hand, require a more synaesthetic approach to sound, as common sound-words such as "Blam" exemplify; such usage of onomatopoeic signs take on an almost graphic quality, often in bright colors and jagged lines to "explode" off the page and approximate the shock of, for example, a supervillain being pummeled. Some of these differences lead to the suggestion of comics's inferiority as a medium.

Robert Stam argues that there is often prejudice against filmic adaptations of literary texts; film is a younger medium and hence has not had as much critical and academic history surrounding it in order to create prestige, and many hold that the visual image is more "obscene" than that created in the mind and hence cheapens the experience of the narrative in question (6). Comics seem to reverse the prejudice Stam finds as graphic novels are a "younger" medium, academically speaking, than film, and there

seems to be a popular conception that comics are incomplete on their own and that they find their fulfillment in film. Yet despite these differences in kind and respect, the aforementioned similarities between film and comics that are considered “vulgar” or “bodily” allow more points of intersection in the adaptation process than there are for novel-based adaptations.

The very term “adaptation” accounts for both the aforementioned similarities and differences between a film and its source. As hinted at in a montage sequence in the film *Adaptation*, as a fish “grows” legs and begins to walk on land, the adaptation of a particular species in the biological sense entails its ability to adapt to a new environment through certain structural changes without losing all elements of its form. However, the term “equivalence” does not account for the differences inherent in adaptations, but rather it only emphasizes the similarities. In the adaptation process, certain elements will be lost as others inevitably will be gained. As a result of narrative similarities, a work can truly be called an adaptation rather than a mere allusion or reference; yet as a result of these discursive differences, the standard of pure “fidelity” seems rather unattainable. So rather than relying on a term that only accounts for part of the process of adaptation, is there the possibility of a term that can do justice to such a complex process while not tethering it to the standard of fidelity?

In continuity with Bazin’s turning to mathematics as his source for the term “equivalence” but with the goal of honing the meaning to be more accurate, it seems that the mathematical term “congruence” might be able to account for the nuances of adaptation that “equivalence” inevitably leaves out. Whereas equivalence suggests an inflexible tautology (such as the classic example “a bachelor is an unmarried man”) with

no ontological difference, congruence can mean “correspondence in character or qualities,” or “conformity, accordance, harmony” (OED). The inflexibility of the term “equivalence,” purely understood, would place upon the filmmakers the onus of complete reproduction of the source work’s qualities onto the screen. This seems to be rather impossible to achieve; can one understand two works as having the same essence while they “look” entirely different? Does not the discourse level affect the story, and form affect content? The term “congruence” allows for both the similarities and difference in these levels, where “equivalence” does not. The commonalities between film and comics noted by McCloud and Harvey mentioned above provide fodder for such congruence between a film and its adapted source. Yet can a work that has these elements of congruence still bear the authorship of the source text?

Authorship issues are innate to such discussions of adaptation, and Andrew Sarris provides the means to evaluate whether a filmmaker is the *auteur* of a film or simply the film’s facilitator. The question of who is an *auteur* and who is not is a difficult one, given the nature of definitions. In his essay, “Notes on the *Auteur* Theory in 1962,” the first criterion a filmmaker must satisfy in order to be considered an *auteur* is technical ability, which is to say, rather simply, that a good filmmaker must be able to make films well. The second area is a recognizable style; looking at an individual’s oeuvre, one should be able to identify common threads throughout the majority, if not all, of the works. Finally, a filmmaker should have a consistent worldview; roughly speaking, this can be seen as “what” an individual says, while the first two are the “how” it is said (562). Only the director who has all three can truly be an *auteur*. Who decides which directors make the cut complicates matters, but Peter Wollen, quoting Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, argues that

the auteur theory is still “indispensable” due its ability to identify a “pattern formed by these motifs, [which] gives an author’s work its particular structure” (567). While Miller had worked in film before *Sin City*, it was as a screenwriter²⁰ and was a rather unpleasant experience. His few years working on Robocop 2 and 3 were “hellish,” since, as he was “trying to be an author”; in contrast, “Even working on other people’s characters, I function as an author in comics. But in the movies, I’m a replaceable component” (Interviews 113). Here, the question of whether the film *Sin City* retains Miller’s authorship is especially complicated since he is not generally perceived as a filmmaker.

Of course, there are certain political ramifications of using the term “author” which also complicate matters. In his essay “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault states that the author sets a particular discourse in motion, historicizing the author as not an isolated source, but rather a “function of discourse” (280). He also argues that the “author-function is not universal or constant in all discourse” (285). For example, he states that certain literary traditions (such as folk tales) do not have any known authors, thus even in societies that value authors the authorial role can differ based on certain variables. In other words, there may be epistemologically distinct views of authorship – that is, there may be multiple ways in which societies can make knowledge claims about the role of the author-function. Foucault would argue that this de-centering or adjustment of the authorial role occurs in all circumstances, but the film at hand in particular invites such an understanding. Miller’s role in the film’s process is largely based on his role as

²⁰ Screenwriters can arguably also serve as auteurs at times, however. Charlie Kaufman could potentially serve as a recent example; while recurring collaborators Spike Jonze (*Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*) and Michel Gondry (*Human Nature*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) bring out different emphases in Kaufman’s screenplays, and hence call this categorization into question, Kaufman does seem to satisfy all three of Sarris’s criteria – particularly the latter two, as the questionable subjectivity of his protagonists provide a recognizable style of narrative while providing the “interior meaning” of the unreliability of the human mind.

the discourse's initiator and supervisor, and in that sense serves the author-function; yet at the same time, his involvement is adjusted in such a way as to call "pure" authorship into question, even more so than in an average film. However, even Foucault's system does not entirely deny the possibility of authorship; one can use term "auteur" as the initiator of discourse with unique artistic vision without succumbing to a view that espouses that the author has the final say in a work's interpretation – that is, one can heed Barthes's caveat against that which is "tyrannically centered on the author" (209).

Miller is clearly the initiator of the filmic discourse, rather than Rodriguez; as the graphic novel is a primarily narrative medium with direct visual components, there are inherent commonalities between the graphic novels of *Sin City* and the film based on it. Unlike a novelistic adaptation, which for the most part adapts words into images and sounds, both the verbal and visual were adapted for this film; as such, the graphic novels serve as both a screenplay blueprint and a story board at the same time. For example, the opening sequence, which is based on a short story called "The Customer is Always Right," the film recreates the panel composition on the screen (with the exception of the film having a consistent aspect ratio, versus the novel's varying panel shapes and sizes); one panel on the third page of the story in particular stands out in relation to the film as it presents the assassin (played in the film by Josh Hartnett) and his ironic client/target (Marley Shelton) embracing in the center as an almost negative image with high contrast between black and white. The vast majority of the dialogues and monologues in the novel are also preserved; mostly, the film provides a typical adaptation technique of condensing dialogue. In the section based on *The Big Fat Kill*, the dialogue of one of Jack's cronies on page 11 is given to Jack (Benicio del Toro) in the film; as the crony basically speaks

of Jack's behalf (paternalistically commanding her to get dressed for a night on the town), the alteration does not dramatically change the adapted text. The similarities between the two texts do not necessarily add up to filmic authorship on Miller's part; however, these characteristics are by no means the full extent of Miller's role in the film.

In addition to being the initiator of the *Sin City* discourse by virtue of having authored the graphic novels²¹, Miller is credited as the film's co-director. This is not simply due to his works being used as "story boards" for the film, but he actually had input into directing the actors and achieving certain visual composition ("The Making Of"). While Miller did not necessarily know how to technically achieve the look of the novel series on the screen, his input was esteemed enough by veteran director Rodriguez that the latter dropped out of the Director's Guild just to have Miller be credited as co-director, rather than simply "producer" or "comics creator" ("The Making Of").

Rodriguez, the film's other co-director, served mostly as a facilitator for the adaptation, as he also fulfilled technical roles as editor, cinematographer (and also score composer).

Rodriguez is more a facilitator or *metteur en scène* of Miller's vision, albeit a highly proficient one since he had to be exceedingly innovative to pull off such a vision. Miller, on the other hand, provides the common style and worldview. Miller's technical ability is more in regards to storytelling, characterization and composition, so Rodriguez does fill out the gap in Miller's ability; however, it is still finally Miller's vision that is shown on

²¹ Rodriguez in a sense initiated the filmic discourse by approaching Miller to adapt the graphic novels into a film; however, Miller can still be seen as the ultimate initiator of the film as well, since without his creation of the world of *Sin City* the film obviously would never have been made. Thus, the film adaptation serves as a "sub-discourse" of sorts of the graphic novels.

screen. It is Miller who satisfies the majority of aspects of Sarris's three criteria, rather than Rodriguez who acts as a technical facilitator of Miller's vision.²²

Robert Rodriguez, who in addition to being the co-director of the film *Sin City* and the originator of the notion of adapting it to screen, suggests that the film and graphic novel series are so similar that the process of bringing the novels to the screen should not be called "adaptation": he wanted to "literally translate a raw, unaltered version of them to the screen – *translate*, not *adapt*" ("The Making Of," emphasis added). Inherent in such an adjustment of terminology is the notion that Miller's authorship is still retained; most do not question that a translation of The Brothers Karamazov is still *by* Dostoevsky, for examples, even though some translations could be shown to be more accurate than others. Rodriguez further states, "I felt [the graphic novels] were fantastic exactly as they were... I didn't want to make Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City*. I wanted to make Frank Miller's *Sin City*. I knew that with the technology I already knew how to use - lighting, photography, visual effects - we could make it look and feel exactly like the books" ("The Making Of"). The film is rather technically complex in its use of digital backdrops, which approximate the "inky quality" (i.e. more pure black and white) rather than the inevitable grays which would occur in filming an actual set (Gross). In fact, Frank Miller, whose jaded attitude towards the film industry from his lack of authorial control in co-writing the latter two Robocop films was overcome by Rodriguez's cooperation, states, "all those things filmmakers always said couldn't translate from the comics – the

²² Rodriguez's function is essential in the production of the film, however; thus, one could argue that Miller and Rodriguez together make one auteur, though giving Miller the priority of *style* and *vision* (criteria 2 and 3, respectively, and what are arguably, for Sarris, closer to the heart of the term "auteur") while attributing the *technical ability* of filmmaking (criterion 1) to Rodriguez. Miller is not without technical filmmaking ability himself, since his art serves as the storyboard and he helps direct the actors, but the majority of the filmmaking expertise comes from Rodriguez.

particular kind of dialogue, the fast jump cuts from image to image – well, we could make them all happen in a new way" ("The Making Of").

While *Sin City* did (at least to date) bear the most similarities to the dialogue and technique of graphic novels than any other film employing real-life actors, Rodriguez's classification of the film as a "translation" does obscure the contrasts between media so exactly laid out by McCloud and Harvey. First of all, the film does not manipulate time spatially via panels. The closest approximation film has to this process involving panel layout is the use of split screen (a technique Ang Lee employed in *Hulk*); it would have been possible to recreate both the size and shape of the given panels on a page, and use an overall aspect ratio which would approximate the proportions of the novels pages. With this layout, a filmic "panel" could play for a few moments, and then stop as the next panel begins. However, this would probably appear to the spectator more of a novelty than anything, and would probably grow tiresome after a sequence or two.

This leads to the second point, which is that the film "fills in the gaps" that occur in the gutters between panels. Even if the split-screen technique were used, the passage of time in film would most likely provide material that was not originally there; as opposed to the single panel in comics, a sequence in a filmic panel would be comprised of twenty-four frames per second, inevitably creating physical motion and extra material. Of course, to "remedy" this difference and remove motion from these panels would be to simply create photographic comics on screen – it would cease to be film. Tacitly acknowledging this ontological difference between the media, even if Rodriguez's terminology of "translation" does not, the film chooses to stay a film, and as such fills in gaps between panels. In the aforementioned scene based on *The Customer is Always Right*, for

example, the film shows the assassin walking towards his client to initiate their kiss; the novel simply shows a panel where the two are kissing, leaving more ambiguity as to who actually initiated the kiss. Such a presentation of these fluid moments is an actual alteration from the original comic; as it adds material to the original, it cannot be considered a pure translation.

Thirdly, and obviously, the film uses actual actors. The filmmakers do try to recreate the iconic²³ look of certain drawn characters, such as Marv (Mickey Rourke) and Roark Jr. (a.k.a. “Yellow Bastard,” Nick Stahl) in particular; yet Frank Miller’s drawings are more evocative than explicit in detail, particular regarding the women he draws. As Miller states, his goal when drawing the “impossibly proportioned” female characters was to “evoke as much as possible from the reader” with “as few curves as possible”; in lieu of stylizing every female in the film, the filmmakers opted to cast women based on “their faces” and chose to shy away from bodily prosthetics as physical form was not as iconic for the women²⁴ (Gross). Additionally, the digital sets are more detailed than those in the comics, despite Rodriguez’s attempt at achieving the same inky quality; there is definitely more contrast between shades than there would be filming in black and white on an actual set, but a certain level of gray is still perceptible, unlike the comics, and the set has vastly more detail than Miller’s near-abstract *mise-en-scène*. Finally, the film employs actual sound, versus the synaesthetic approach of comics. Throughout the film, characters actually speak their lines rather than using the word-bubbles familiar to comics, and the film employs actual sound effects rather than comics’s onomatopoeic

²³ “Likenesses, or, as I prefer to say, *Icons*... serve to represent their objects only in so far as they resemble them in themselves” (Pierce 460).

²⁴ In contrast to Angelina Jolie’s Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*); the “impossible proportions” of the protagonist of the original video games must have appeared to be iconic enough to the filmmakers as to require breast-enlarging prostheses, thus staying in line with the adolescent male videogame-fantasy.

expressions. On the final page of episode six of the graphic novel *The Hard Goodbye*, the images of Marv shooting the priest (played by Frank Miller in the film) who serves as a Roark lackey occurs within the actual lettering of the word “BLAM” in a unique stylization based on comics conventions; the film takes the same images, but rather than squeezing them into letters gives them the full screen while we hear the sound of the gun being fired.²⁵

This comparison between source and adaptation illustrates how adaptations can exist on a continuum. On the extreme are adaptations from the written word to a visual medium, such as film; comics and film may be closer together on the continuum than, say, taking a hieroglyphics narrative and adapting to film, but they are similar in that film makes them both more concrete and less iconic. Also, the comparison between comics and hieroglyphics illustrates that such films do not simply translate a work from one language to another, but rather adapt a work from one entire medium to another; such a film may convey the same or similar content, even more so since visual components also remain. Yet downplaying the differences as Rodriguez does – particularly in the context of a culture that seems to value film over the comics medium – could make comics seem superfluous. One might ask either “why make comics to begin with when one can make a movie that's exactly the same,” or “is a graphic novel somehow incomplete until it has been ‘translated’ to the screen?” The inaccuracy of the term “translation” suggests that the film is rather an “adaptation,” the latter being a term which both recognizes the inherent differences between comics and film and avoids the hierarchical ramifications

²⁵ Apart from discursive differences, there are a few minor narrative divergences as well; the film adds the final sequence in which Becky (Alexis Bledel) is set up for an assassination in the elevator (ostensibly for her betraying Old Town), and *That Yellow Bastard* is not split up in the graphic novel as it is a continuous narrative there.

which may follow if one does not value comics. At first glance, using the term “adaptation” rather than “translation” might seem to distance Miller from an authorial position. However, Miller’s role in the film is not simply limited to “muse,” but instead he serves as both initiator of the discourse and co-director.

In addition, the aforementioned aspects of congruence to the graphic novel series highlight Miller’s stylistic authorship, Sarris’s second criterion. Rodriguez, while credited as co-director, acts as a technician or *metteur en scène*. As Peter Wollen notes, “the work of a *metteur en scène*... does not go beyond the realm of performance, of transposing into the complex of cinematic codes and channels a pre-existing text: a scenario, a book or a play” (566); in this case, Rodriguez’s role mostly consists in figuring out how to adapt, technically speaking, the pre-existing text of the graphic novels into “cinematic codes.” This is not to trivialize the function Rodriguez fulfills, since without his technical expertise in film Miller would clearly have never been able to direct *Sin City*; yet the overall vision, style and worldview is still Miller’s. While “faithful” is a mistaken term to describe adaptations, if there ever were a film adaptation that successfully achieved discursive congruence, this is it. These congruent elements are present in both style and the discourse level generally; yet on the level of interior meaning the film is not only congruent, but actually is equivalent since the same worldview is present. That is to say, discourse is seen as the way in which content is conveyed, and hence changes in relation to a particular narrative medium; content, or the story itself, on the other hand, does necessarily have to change when a text is adapted. In the next section, we shall move from the discursive level to a particular aspect of Miller’s worldview that remains consistent in the film – namely, that of his heroic ideals.

The Thin Line between Heroes and Villains

Along with the other Miller heroes, those of the film *Sin City* attempt to establish some sort of order while going through a narrative progression based on overcoming obstacles. Yet, as mentioned above, these individuals are clearly not “good guys”; rather than standing up for a picturesque view of what life should be (stated so succinctly in the tripartite schema of “Truth, Justice and the American Way”), these characters are tough and violent, wear leather instead of tights, and whatever ideals or sense of order they aim for are achieved through acts of vengeance.²⁶ The three main protagonists of the film are Marv, a hulking figure who takes pleasure from his violent vengeance, has a psychological condition which causes him to confuse fantasy and reality, and, despite his violent tendencies, has a soft spot for women who show him compassion; Hartigan (Bruce Willis), a rare “good cop” in *Sin City*, despite suffering from angina, pushes himself to extremes of all sorts in order to protect an innocent girl, Nancy (Makenzie Vega, while Jessica Alba plays the adult Nancy), and seems to take the saying “the punishment should fit the crime” rather literally, and Dwight (Clive Owen), who composedly and ironically also uses violence to avert further violence, again to protect the women closest to him. To understand this type of hero, it is necessary to compare the film with the individual genre influences which converge in both these characters and the overall style of the film. These influences are primarily crime and detective comics and fiction, along their filmic relations of film noir and Western fiction.

²⁶ Apart from the influences discussed below, Kim Newman argues that this sort of hero is informed by kung fu and samurai ethics of honor and justice via revenge (2), as first seen in the character Elektra in Chapter 1.

As mentioned above, crime comics were quite controversial during the Wertham trials; in fact, these comics were (rather questionably) linked to the juvenile delinquency scare of the 1950s, in large part due to Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, which argued that "crime comic books glorified a life of crime... teaching how to rob and kill" (Harvey 42). Ironically, many crime comics were actually quite moralistic, and in fact could be considered contemporary morality plays. Titles such as *Crimebuster* always provided a "moral lesson [which was] implicit in the career of the criminal – in his increasing depravity – as well as in his fate, his ultimate defeat at the hands of the law" (41). Bearing similarities to tales such as *Dr. Faustus*, the emphasis is that while what is off limits may seem appealing the negative consequences of overstepping boundaries will eventually manifest themselves. However, it was titles like *Crime Does Not Pay* which drew the ire of Wertham and the US Senate; such comics actually portrayed the "life stories of criminals, tracing their paths to power. This narrative maneuver made the criminals the protagonists of their stories" (41). It was this sort of comic that appealed to the post-war generation, which no longer had any need for the superheroes as the "supervillainies of the Nazis and the Japanese" (40) no longer permeated social consciousness.

Sin City acts as a synthesis of these two kinds of crime comics. On one hand, the tough protagonists do not care for the law so much as for justice in the form of personal vengeance. Marv's entire story is based around his search for the killer of Goldie (Jaime King), with whom he had a one-night-stand and who, unlike most women in his life it seems, was "nice" to him. He has no trouble maiming and killing people all along the way to get to his goal; in fact, his tactics seem just as grotesque and psychotic as those he

is out to get. Kevin (Elijah Wood), the cannibal with an unwavering smirk, kills women in order to devour them and “consume their souls”; when Marv discovers it was Kevin who killed Goldie, he sets up an elaborate trap culminating in Kevin being eaten alive by a wolf while Marv watches. If not for the small semblance of “justice” (whether or not this is just at all is questionable) resulting from Kevin’s demise, this kind of hero would not seem heroic at all; Marv is a far cry from, for example, a superhero such as Daredevil who is wracked by guilt and apologizes when he is forced to kill someone for the greater good.²⁷ Yet on the other hand, these are strongly moral tales; in fact, Miller calls them “morality plays” of sorts and says that the series is called *Sin City* “because the basic subject of *Sin City* is virtue” (Gross).

As mentioned before, one of Miller’s criteria for heroism is the ability to overcome extreme obstacles. Marv unflinchingly endures torture from Wendy, Goldie’s identical twin sister (except Wendy is in black and white, vs. Goldie’s color), who believes Marv is responsible for her sister’s death; and rather than simply walking away from the situation when he discovers that the Roark family, who practically own Sin City, is involved in Goldie’s death, his determination for vengeance drives him further. In such a world as Sin City, arguably only a character like Marv could endure the grueling path to actually confronting institutional corruption; anyone with less skill and determination (even if it does border on violent psychosis) would either have been killed or forced to give up the search. Thus, despite all of the qualities which clearly demarcate Marv as a criminal, the “virtues” of patriarchally sheltering women and overcoming extreme

²⁷ Apart from this inherent difference between a Miller original character and one he adopts, practically speaking this apology might exist to satisfy the demands of the Comics Code; the *Sin City* graphic novels skirt these demands as they are published outside the code.

adversity while striving for vengeance are what the film ultimately deems admirable in him.

Sin City also clearly bases its kind of protagonist on film noir. While both sides of the argument acknowledge the role the “hardboiled” characters from pulp detective fiction play in noir conventions, noir is in itself a rather complex genre to define, as some believe what makes a film a “noir” film is sheer style while others believe there are more thematic elements. Mark Conard delineates the necessary and sufficient conditions that are generally found in *film noir*. Those who argue that noir is in fact a specific genre would state the collections of sufficient conditions (qualities that often compose a given thing but are not necessary) of the genre as being a disorienting narrative structure, a *femme fatale* who often plots to rid of her husband, and an antihero who is in some way at odds with society, among others (7). He states that some reject that noir is a distinct genre, but rather state that it is an atmosphere or sensibility that can occur in multiple genres; this sensibility is categorized by the necessary conditions of pessimism (whether on the part of the protagonist or in the actual narrative structure) and a denial of traditional moral values in the depicted world.

Sin City satisfies both the necessary conditions as well as a few of the sufficient conditions of noir. A general ambiance of pessimism ever-present, as *Sin City* is not only in a constant state of physical darkness (aided, of course, by the black-and-white), but its corruption runs beyond mere street thugs to the institutional level with the Roark family. While certain traditional moral values are emphasized, such as Marv’s qualities of perseverance and protecting the “weak,” his exceedingly violent methods of achieving his goals seem to advocate a non-traditional notion of the expendability of human life for the

sake of vengeance. The narrative structure overall is not particularly disorienting, but there are a couple of exceptions: the spectator sees Wendy at first through the perspective of Marv, who thinks it is Goldie (the film makes this less ambiguous than the graphic novels in differentiating between the twin sisters by portraying Goldie in color; when the film shows one who appears to be Goldie but not in color, the spectator knows to be more cautious than Marv in leaping to conclusions), and the arrangement of four stories into one film creates points of intersection that may be confusing, particularly as the film breaks up the section based on *That Yellow Bastard* to act as narrative bookends to the bulk of the film.²⁸

Finally, while there is no single *femme fatale* plotting against her husband, the women of “Old Town” in a sense collectively fill this role. The most famous example in film being *Double Indemnity* (and more recently in the neo-noir *Body Heat*), this kind of storyline portrays a woman essentially seducing a man in order to rid of her husband and take his money. The *Big Fat Kill* sequence hints at a backstory involved in the establishment of Old Town as the stronghold for prostitutes, where they rule however they see fit: the women partnered up with the police in order to rid of the pimps and assume their power. While “pimps” may not be husbands, they do represent the sort of patriarchal stifling experienced by the noir *femme fatale*, albeit to a much further degree (then again, everything in *Sin City* is taken to a further degree). By removing the control of the pimps, the women of Old Town assume the power which enables them to pocket their own proceeds, rather than simply taking whatever cut the pimp gives; thus, they not only rid themselves of the patriarchal figures but also “take their money.” The police are

²⁸ Excluding, of course, the brief sections based on *The Customer is Always Right*.

not duped into playing a role in this scheme, however, which is a variation on the traditional noir schema; in fact, they still have more power than the Old Town women, as played out in the narrative – when they find out that Jack (Benicio del Toro), the man they just murdered, is a cop, they do whatever they can to dispose of the body and evade all-out war. One mystery remains, however: why would a conglomerate of prostitutes remain prostitutes when they have such power? This problem is easily explained given the genre conventions, considering them as a group of *femme fatales*. What drives the femme fatale can be ambiguous; the money involved in their profession may be enough, or they could use their profession as a means of showing power through sexual dominance (as their leather outfits seem to suggest), or such characters may simply be unwavering in their unexplained motivations – that is, they merely “are what they are.”²⁹

In “A Darker Shade,” Jason Holt contrasts qualities of classic noir films (such as *Double Indemnity*) with those of “neo-noir” films, emphasizing that neo-noir is generally less restricted, both formally and thematically (37). Formally speaking, classic noir films are black and white, and generally play with those restrictions to establish mood through shadowy lighting. Neo-noir films are mostly in color, though some may play with lighting inspired by the classic films.³⁰ *Sin City* bridges these divergent elements as it is mostly in black and white, but has splashes of color – the woman’s red dress in *The Customer*, or the literally yellow skin of the “Yellow Bastard.” The classics often employ

²⁹ Although there is a case of overt betrayal in the film with Becky (Alexis Bledel), the circumstances surrounding this betrayal seem to differ from those of the classic *femme fatale*. First of all, Becky’s motivation is complex; while benefiting monetarily from the scenario she is initially motivated to cooperate with the mercenaries due to their threatening her mother’s life. Additionally, despite her vocation as a prostitute she does not seduce, use and betray a man for personal gain, but rather merely sells information in an act of betrayal against a group of her female friends.

³⁰ Carl Franklin’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* would be a good example here, though thematically it may divert from traditional noir narratives in its handling of racial “passing.”

voice-over narration, while the neo-noir films generally do not, unless again to call to mind the mood of the classics. Once again, formally speaking *Sin City* is more similar to the classics than to neo-noir; in fact, while the long stretches of narration present in the film were actually trimmed down from the graphic novels, they almost seem novelistic in the sheer length of such monologues. However, original noir films were under the Production Code, thus limiting sexuality and violence; in lieu of the explicit, these films tried to evoke a sense of foreboding through music and lighting. *Sin City* is not graphically sexual, though there are a few instances of female nudity and scanty clothing is pervasive; however, the violence is quite extreme in comparison to an average film of today, achieving an almost “cartoony” level as it pays homage to its drawn source.

Finally, classic noir films, as prompted by the Production Code, tend to satisfy the desire for justice (though some play with darker view that justice is mere chance), while neo-noir films are free to explore “realism” in their endings by concluding the film however seems to fit the storyline.³¹ Here *Sin City* is again more like classic noir than neo-noir, as each of the three major sections conclude with an example of the protagonist satisfying his drive for justice through extreme violence; twice Hartigan is shown disarming and castrating Roark Jr., Marv is shown enjoying reaping his vengeance on Cardinal Roark (Rutger Hauer; Marv even admits “It was beautiful”)³², and Dwight prevents war in Old Town by teaming up with Gail (Rosario Dawson) and company to

³¹ *Chinatown*, for example, ends with overt injustice. The villain Noah Cross (John Huston) escapes the legal ramifications of both causing a local drought and covering up his incestuous relationship with his daughter (Faye Dunaway); rather than being able to install justice, the protagonist Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) is simply told, “Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown.” This pessimism concerning justice (and the offices that exist to uphold it) is motivated not only by Roman Polanski’s own authorial stamp but also by the Vietnam-Watergate zeitgeist, suggesting noir’s ability to adapt to speak on behalf of a given era’s moral persuasion.

³² The film does show Marv facing the electric chair after killing Roark, but he is defiant to the end and actually seems to enjoy “going out with a bang.”

simultaneously eradicate the gangsters who wish to expose Jack's murder in order to gain footing in Old Town as well as destroy the only remaining evidence of Jack's murder – his head. This urge for justice may have more extreme manifestations (and even psychopathic ramifications, as with Marv), but still provides a very clear view of virtue and justice rather than the ethical ambivalence of neo-noir films. In these ways, the film is more like the classic noir films than more recent neo-noirs while at the same time emphasizing sexuality and violence to a degree that only neo-noir films do.

Since *Sin City* seems to uphold most of the conditions of being considered noir or neo-noir, we can now address issues of representation that a noir work either maintains or amends. Mark Bould (113) and Graham Fuller (14) describe the male heroes of *Sin City* as being drawn from pulp detective fiction typology: they are laconic (except during their interior monologues) but active, each aiming to restore order in his world by asserting his own masculinity through emasculating villains and either protecting or avenging the woman he loves. In each of the three main sequences, castration seems to be an ever-present threat. After Marv gains the upper hand over two hitmen (Jason Douglas and Randal Reeder) who were sent to stop his “killing” and “do-gooding” (ironically equated here) he interrogates one of them regarding who sent him; he shoots the man in the stomach, and when the man still does not respond Marv says, “I guess when I shot you in the belly I aimed a little too high.” Marv finally convinces the hitman to talk after shooting him in the genitals. As the hitman would most likely have died from his stomach wound, this establishes the recurring theme that castration is almost a “fate worse than death” to the men of Sin City. Later at the Roark Farm, after the police kill Marv's friend and parole officer Lucille (Carla Gucino), Marv “gets even” by hitting one in the genitals

with an ax. Here the tacit point is made that a threat to an “innocent woman” must be judged by attacking male virility.

This is taken even further when Hartigan rescues young Nancy Callahan from Roark Jr., he shoots off the latter’s hand (which grasps a gun) and genitals, saying “I take his weapons away – both of them.” As a result the hero not only achieves a sense of personal vengeance for the crime committed, but asserts his own power by removing the villain’s power (or “male potency”) to act. When Hartigan awakes in the hospital from a coma, Senator Roark (Powers Boothe), who in typical villain fashion divulges his plan to the disabled hero, states that Hartigan will be framed for raping Nancy and will be prosecuted for turning his son into a “brain-damaged, dickless freak.” The Senator states that power does not come from a badge or a gun, but controlling the populace: “once you got everybody agreeing with what they know in their hearts ain’t true you got ‘em by the balls.” Here the film changes the dialogue to reflect this sense of power being equated with sexual dominance – the novel simply states, “you got ‘em *trapped*” rather than “by the balls” (19). At same time, Hartigan (as James Stewart’s L.B. Jeffries in *Rear Window*³³) is rendered unable to physically act, being confined to a hospital bed and then imprisoned for years, amounting to a sort of “psychological castration”; in fact, this link to between the inability to exact vengeance and sexual incapacitation is strengthened by the fact that as Hartigan is tortured as an attempt to get him to sign a confession, the interrogator offers him a prostitute as a reward, noting that he “won’t be getting any” in prison. The end of the film presents a parallel scene to the initial confrontation with

³³ See Tania Modleski’s article “The Women Who Knew Too Much,” on *Rear Window*’s reversal of the “active male, passive female” model often employed by film (*Film Theory and Criticism*, Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Roark Jr., who now has kidnapped the adult Nancy; this time Hartigan rips Roark Jr./ “The Yellow Bastard’s” regrown genitals³⁴ off with his bare hands, saying the same line as before.

Finally, when Jack brings his “troops” to Shellie’s for an unwelcome visit and hits Shellie (Brittany Murphy) for her defiance, she states, that it is “an African love-fest” inside in order to get Jack riled up; by appealing to the stereotype of the oversexed black male (or the “buck,” in Donald Bogle’s terms), she begins the process of threatening his masculinity. “I wish you dropped by earlier, Jackie-boy; then you could’ve met my boyfriend – coulda seen what a real man looks like,” to which he responds, “There you go, after my nuts again.” While Shellie’s definition of a “real man” seems to be based on how he treats a woman, Jack takes her meaning sexually – a comparison to another man is a threat to one’s own sexuality. One of Jack’s cronies then makes sexual advances on her; she grabs a knife and threatens, “Shut up and keep your hands to yourself or I’ll cut your little pecker off.” Clearly, she knows that the best way to intimidate a man in Sin City is to threaten his sense of masculine power which is based on genitalia; in fact, this could be seen as a double threat, since she comments on his size – even if she did not physically remove it, it is still a “little pecker” and is thus inferior. As Toril Moi notes (in the language of Cixous), “masculine value systems are structured according to the ‘economy of the proper.’ Proper – property – appropriate: signaling an emphasis on self-identity, self-aggrandizement and arrogant dominance”; such a system of what is “proper” is built around the “fear of castration” (111-112). In this film, castration is viewed as a threat because it not only removes the “property” of the male (the genitals),

³⁴ Apparently, Senator Roark believed it was more important for a male Roark to have offspring and “virility” than a “normal” appearance.

but also undermines the “proper” role of the male, which assertiveness and action. In Bould’s words, the men of Sin City engage in acts of “over-performed heterosexual masculinity,” (113) particularly by physically attacking the genitals of a male nemesis; yet women also participate in this attack on male genitalia, but do so in word rather than deed, knowing the threat it presents to men.

The women of Sin City, whether the object of the protagonist’s pursuit or not, are generally portrayed as being both attractive and tough³⁵; the women of Old Town are the perfect example of this, as Dwight states in his voice-over, “The ladies are the law here, beautiful and merciless. If you’ve got the cash and you play by the rules, they’ll make all your dreams come true – but if you cross ’em, you’re a corpse.” As he says this, the camera zooms in on various body parts of the women, then displays their guns – a symbol of their power. Thus the film simultaneously objectifies women, as Miller is very open about Sin City being his own fantasy realm (Gross), while presenting them as having power as symbols of castrating threat. Women in the film are genuinely powerful at times, but as it is the men who are the primary examples of action this occurs particularly in their sexual control over men. For example, Marv states that it is unfortunate that Lucille is a lesbian, as she could get any man she wanted; he states this not only as if women’s bodies are made for men (as opposed to themselves or each other), but also is a testimony to the power of the female figure. Men such as Marv, who has near superhuman strength (he kicks down a door at one point, causing the SWAT team behind it to go flying into the air), could easily be under the control of women such

³⁵ They serve as more explicit versions of the ideal represented in Wonder Woman, mentioned in Chapter 1; Dwight even refers to Gail, one of the Old Town women, as “my warrior woman,” furthering the connection with an indirect Amazonian allusion.

as Lucille if she only chose to use that control. However, as she does not use the most powerful weapon with which she is endowed (the control of powerful men, rather than an interior power), she ends up being killed; Marv's cold and pessimistic view of authority allows him to be aware of the police set-up on the farm, and subsequently he gains vengeance through killing and emasculating Lucille's killers.

Kim Newman argues that while the female characters of the film are physically objectified, as is standard in classic noir films, and despite their roles as prostitutes, strippers and killers, they are ironically seen as beacons of purity; they tend to lack the double-dealing emphasis present in noir's *femme fatales*, and represent the ideal woman of the chivalric code (2). As mentioned before, the women of Old Town could be seen collectively as *femme fatales*, but each section also has its own "pure" woman: Marv has Goldie, whom he idealizes based on her sexuality and because she was simply "nice" to him; Shellie admits that she slept with Jack once, but only because she "felt sorry for him," and Hartigan has Nancy whom he idealizes as the "skinny little Nancy" who writes letters to him in prison – even after he ends up being attracted to her during her routine as a stripper, this innocent child image still permeates his thoughts he once again needs to rescue "skinny little Nancy," even if she has "filled out" in his words. These ideals of the female whose honor must be defended is in contrast to the incorrigible corrupting influence of the male villains; there seems to be an almost Manichean split between good and evil – symbolically aided by the lack of a normal range of greytone in the film – when it comes to these women and the villains who threaten them. While "purity" as an ideal may at first seem a boon to the representation of women, it actually becomes a sort of double-objectification; women are reduced to the physical body *and* elevated to an

abstract standard of moral purity, and are not allowed to occupy the same plane of complexity and moral ambiguity as the leading men do; hence, they are subjected to reductionist views either way, rather than being seen as complete and well-rounded human individuals.

This idealizing in particular is reminiscent of troubadour poetry and courtly love; here the hero is sent on a series of quests to prove his love for a woman out of whom he has created a sort of deity.³⁶ According to the chivalric code, a man must challenge anyone who physically or verbally denies the purity of his lady love, and his victory is believed to be proof of his love's purity. Marv's story in particular illustrates this fact: he must literally confront the face of the church to avenge Goldie's death, and even after gaining his vengeance by killing Cardinal Roark he faces death with Goldie constantly in his thoughts; as he dies from electrocution, the camera zooms into his eye, where he and Goldie lie in the red heart-shaped bed where they spent their one night together (she is, of course, in color while he is not, emphasizes her near-angelic quality in his mind). Thus, while drawing on the traditional stylistic vocabulary of film noir, the film also makes a key inversion that is not normally present: prostitutes become saints, while the government and church – normally seen as symbols of order – are the focal points of corruption and depravity (Fuller 16). Even Dwight, who seems to “get the girl” (Gail) at the end of his section, seems doomed in his view of her as the out-of-reach ideal when he admits in his voice-over monologue, “You'll always be mine – always, and never.”

³⁶ Famously parodied in *Don Quixote*, in which the title character goes on quests to win the love of Dulcinea (whose true name, less romantically, may in reality be simply “Aldonza”); ironically, Don Quixote's sidekick Sancho Panza sees the truth of the matter – not only is Dulcinea a peasant woman, he believes she is actually quite ugly.

Dwight is even deemed a “Lancelot” figure by Gail at one point, drawing a comparison to the doomed love of Lancelot and Guinevere in *Le morte Darthur* (of course, the difference is that Dwight is also a “hardboiled” character, rather than a pining troubadour – while his desires are clearly conveyed, he acts and talks as if he could take her or leave her). Similarly, an Arthurian title is invoked for Hartigan, as he calls himself “Galahad” when he “charges in” to rescue Nancy at the end, despite his heart troubles; here the analogy represents the “purity” of Hartigan himself, for, as mentioned above, despite his attraction to Nancy he still views her as an innocent little girl. He even commits suicide to protect her from Senator Roark’s vengeance, and as a result dies before he ever truly “attains” his lady love sexually, unlike Marv and Dwight. Despite being “dangerous,” the women of *Sin City* are still consistently rescued by male figures who reduce them to the status of “damsel in distress,” asserting the degree of their power over these tough women; at the same time, these same heroes defeat their male antagonists by literally or figuratively emasculating them, not only achieving a semblance of justice but removing their power to act. As a result of placing *Sin City* within the noir tradition, it is evident that the film both employs and reevaluates certain conventions prominent in film noir.

While these gender roles may be derived in part from noir and detective fiction (Fuller notes that even the Arthurian references may have roots in the hardboiled detective fiction of Raymond Chandler, who often made such references), the film also owes much to the Western genre. The cities and locations used by DC Comics, unlike Marvel Comics, were fictional; however, they were based on actual American cities. Miller notes that Batman’s Gotham represents the “dark” underbelly of New York City,

while Superman's Metropolis represents the mostly "light" and productive side of NYC (Brownstein 264). While Miller aims to keep Sin City (short for "Basin City") an entirely mythically ambiguous pan-American locale³⁷ there are several clear allusions at times which suggest that it may in part be based on the darker aspects of Las Vegas. Vegas is known for its widespread prostitution (and even its limited legality), and the deal struck between Old Town and the police force seems to bring this to mind; in addition, in the graphic novel Marv mentions that the city has been run by the Roarks since at least the "gold rush days," (11) which seems to place it at least in the American West.

Yet apart from these surface similarities, the heroes of the film owe much to the established notions of the Western hero. John Cawelti notes the similarities between protagonists in Western and detective fictions; generally speaking, both forms present a laconic male with training in violence who opts for immediate and local honor, versus epic heroes who derive honor from their deeds being relayed throughout time, or aristocratic heroes who gain honor for their families (183-184). In addition, when the order of their respective worlds is threatened they (often reluctantly) agree to attempt to restore order. Such detached and often pessimistic protagonists contrast with the more typical hopeful American heroes, as they were born out of the war and depression generations, which had doubts about established authority or anxiety about worldwide insecurity. Hartigan and Marv act as retired or lay detectives, respectively, who employ the aloof yet tough and involved type and feel that their involvement in the world can at least restore order on a microcosm. Marv's bar of choice is a Western-themed strip club, which essentially serves as the saloon where the hero confronts the villain (in this case,

³⁷ Sin City will often show both palm trees and skyscrapers in a single setting, contributing to this geographical ambiguity.

the aforementioned two assassins). While Hartigan does not frequent the bar, the suggestion that Nancy could be there leads him to it; as he enters through the hinged double-doors (which serve as another allusion to the Western saloon), he finds Roark Jr., the villain in this story, had followed him there.³⁸

Cawelti argues that when a particular quality is present in multiple genres – whether a character type, a circumstance, or some other pattern – then that quality is deemed essentially important to the culture that produced the artworks that employ it. As the Western and detective heroes were based on ideals of the post-War and depression eras, the link is made between that bygone era and now; despite the present times not being in as widespread economic dire straights as then, the ineffectuality of typical American optimism, and hence the need for a hardboiled hero, is resurrected, in part due to Miller's perception of institutional corruption which is symbolized by the Roark family. As such, Miller's variations on a very 20th Century notion of heroics still works to fulfill the traditional notion of the hero: all three achieve Frye's criterion of order, which they do via vengeance, as well as satisfy Campbell's criterion of overcoming obstacles to prove the hero's character and capability in a final battle.

While the heroes of *Sin City* represent a stance against governmental and religious vice, they still act as somewhat isolated vigilantes. While women can assume positions of power, it is the men who are the primary agents of justice; when legislators and law-enforcers are inept, corrupt or both, the male hero must stand for the lacking ideals. As a result, they are not mere tools of the system but either resist corruption from within

³⁸ Dwight even makes an appearance in the bar/saloon, and in a section not found in any of the three graphical novel sources, he comments that Marv would be more suited to a battlefield than the present urban environment.

(Hartigan) or attack the system from without (Marv). Such opposition hints at the need for systemic change; yet the single-minded male who defies the utterly corrupt system in order to protect the woman of his desires does so without actually changing the system itself. In fact, Dwight arguably defends the status quo, as he acts to preserve the peace by preventing war between Old Town and the police. Marv and Hartigan come closest to addressing systemic issues, as each kills one of the members of the Roark dynasty, but they only do so in order to protect individual women; that is, had not the Roarks been behind the deaths of their loved ones, they would have been unharmed (though neither necessarily complain about removing Roarks from power). In contrast, as we shall see in the next chapter, Miller does address this need for a hero who is capable of achieving systemic change in his recent work, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*; such an individual hero is capable of not only eradicating a corrupt system, but can work as a social organizer to achieve a body that is more powerful than the mere lone vigilante.

CHAPTER 3: THE HERO AS REVOLUTIONARY IN *THE DARK KNIGHT STRIKES*
AGAIN

Miller's foray into the Batman mythology, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), is probably his most influential single work to date. In this graphic novel, Batman comes out of retirement to face a gang called the Mutants who have taken control of Gotham in the absence of superheroes. After defeating the allegedly rehabilitated Harvey Dent (Two Face), Batman faces the gang with the help of his new Robin sidekick (13-year-old Carrie Kelley) and defeats the Mutants; however, Batman's nemesis The Joker has also allegedly reformed, and when released the two confront each other in a showdown that results in the death of The Joker. Finally, Miller's superhero revisionism pits Batman against Superman himself, the latter of whom essentially works as a lackey for a government which does not approve of superheroes working to achieve order without its jurisdiction; towards the end, Batman admits his belief in the authority of superheroes over that of the government when he (internally) tells Superman, "You gave them—the power—that should have been ours." Batman defeats Superman, but fakes his death in the process; with society at large believing he is dead, Batman trains a band of the former Mutants (now dubbed The Sons of Batman) to fight crime.

While this darker world comprised of unredeemable supervillains and sycophantic superheroes may be more common now, in the 1980s it was a marked departure from the kind of hero narrative the Batman mythos had become. In Batman Unmasked, Will Brooker notes the various incarnations of "changing meanings" Batman has taken on over the years before *DKR*, and traces these eras chronologically (9). He argues that despite these various adjustments, Batman as a character had essentially remained the

same; Batman was seen as an agent of order who defends status quo and the so-called “American way of life,” and despite his seclusion from society due to his alter ego and chosen path of preventing crimes similar to that which killed his parents, as well as the inherent admission within the role Batman plays as vigilante hero that society is ineffective in guarding itself, he essentially acts as a vanguard protector of normality. Brooker mentions that 1985’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series essentially wiped the increasingly complex DC continuity clean, which paved the way for Miller to “reinvent” Batman in his *The Dark Knight Returns* the very next year, leading to a view of Miller as the “creator” (with nearly all the authorial power that term carries) of the new Batman (262). From this point onwards, Batman comics (and the Tim Burton-instigated film franchise, until the full-fledged return to camp in *Batman & Robin*) were to bear the influence of Miller’s darker Batman.

As stated before, his works often employ elements *film noir* in their urban settings as well as their protagonists, who are mostly characterized by their pursuit of vigilante justice; Kim Newman offers that *DKR* also bears the additional influence of a “cyberpunk”³⁹ edge with its futuristic visions of inept authority and punk-themed gangs. Yet in addition to being “darker,” *DKR* also clearly links the notion of the superhero with “myth.” *DKR* presents a flashback in which the young Bruce Wayne falls into the batcave for the first time; after a swarm of bats fly over his head, one flies to him “with ancient grace... claiming me as his own.” When Wayne attempts to resist the urge to come out of retirement, he thinks that the bat “laughs at me, curses me. Calls me a fool. He fills my

³⁹ That is, “a science-fiction subgenre characterized by countercultural [protagonists] trapped in a dehumanized, high-tech future... Not until the publication of William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*... did cyberpunk take off as a movement within the genre” (“Cyberpunk”).

sleep, he tricks me... He struggles hatefully to be free.” While this scene links the double-nature of the struggling hero with that of the villain (aptly embodied by Two Face), it also establishes the bat as not only an emblem but a sort of totem animal for Bruce Wayne. Similarly to Billy’s “possession” by the ronin in the graphic novel of the same name, it appears that Wayne has been “possessed” by a nature spirit that compels him fight injustice,⁴⁰ whether such possession is purely psychological (as with Billy) or not. As a result, the kind of hero Batman becomes is more of an ideal, symbolic and spiritual, than simply a pawn for human institution like Superman (though by origin and ability Superman is more of the god figure). In addition, the return from the faked death at the end uses the language of resurrection; not only is Batman literally resuscitated from death at the end, but he also trains his militia *underground*, so as to eventually “resurrect” and establish order in the kingdom above. *The Dark Knight Returns* presents a fairly radical turn from the Batman tradition, establishing the potential for Batman to act as both a revolutionary and the ideal symbol of the hero rather than a vigilante who fights to maintain the status quo, particularly as Batman is set in opposition with Superman, who acts as the embodiment of the status quo.

While *DKR* not only shows Batman defying the government to create order from the anarchy of Gotham but also assembling a militia of sorts, it is the sequel to this work that brings the notion of the superhero as a revolutionary to fruition. *DK2* (2002) serves as continuation of many aspects of *DKR*, but there is ultimately a different scenario to which the hero must respond, and hence there are different kinds of obstacles to

⁴⁰ This origin in Miller’s account occurs in Wayne’s life chronologically before the traditional origin; in the traditional origin, which Miller still includes in *DKR*, young Bruce Wayne’s parents are mugged and shot before his eyes, leading him to assume a crime-fighting persona.

overcome. On one hand, *Sin City*, as discussed in the last chapter, presents a society which is internally in shambles; the hero seeks establish order on a microcosm in whatever ways present themselves, but he does not necessarily set out to change societal structures. On the other hand, in between the start of the *Sin City* graphic novels and *DK2* appeared another critically acclaimed work by Miller, *300* (1998).⁴¹ This presents Greek society (and hence the foundation of democratic society) facing an external threat; the primary heroes are 300 Spartans who face the Persian hordes in order to bide time for Greece to unite and assemble against the tyrannical Persian leader. *DK2* serves as a synthesis of sorts of between the heroic ideals of these two works; society is again in shambles due to internal governmental corruption, as in *Sin City*. Yet as in *300* the hero works on macro level to save society at large from the influence of corruption. Towards the end of *DKR* Batman leads the Sons of Batman to restore order to Gotham after a temporary blackout that resulted from an electromagnetic pulse from a diverted nuclear warhead. As stated above, after Superman appears to have inadvertently killed Batman, the latter “resurrects” to train his followers literally underground until they are ready for larger-scale activity; *DK2* provides that larger scale. In *DK2*, Batman acts as a revolutionary leader who does not simply restore order, but actually aims to revolt against the criminal who runs the political system.

Additionally, as *DK2* furthers the political discussion which had begun in *DKR* it is the politics of *DK2* which shall be my main object of inquiry. *DK2* could in fact be classified as a “political novel.” John Howe’s criteria for categorization as a political novel are, among others, mainly threefold: first, as it moves from addressing the “mere

⁴¹ *300* is a work which could easily merit a chapter of its own; however, given the scope of this paper a brief analysis of the work should suffice.

unquestioned workings of society” to “the *idea* of society,” such a work is concerned with exploring “the fate of society itself” (21); second it “must always be in a state of internal warfare,” opting to considering various viewpoints rather than perpetually towing a particular party line (24), and third, this “flux of experience,” as opposed to a monolithic viewpoint, “turns characteristically to an apolitical temptation” in an ambiguous manner that denies a oversimplified solutions to complex problems (25). While *DKR* does satisfy these criteria, *DK2* has several differences which separate it both politically and stylistically from the original.

First of all, *DK2* presents quite a different style from its predecessor. In lieu of the neo-noir discursive undertones of *DKR*⁴², *DK2* presents a very bright world, largely due to the experimental computer coloring by Lynn Varley, and befitting a world that is dominated by powerpop groups such as the “Superchix” (see below). However, Batman bears a noir influence as he still serves as the antihero who is in some way at odds with society. The new societal state of affairs of *DK2* is presented in Book 1, in which President Rickard is shown to be an oppressive and authoritarian leader. Jimmy Olson, now a journalist, denounces the president in television debates; these lack the rounded TV-shaped panels of *DKR*, but dialogue broken up by advertisements (e.g. using sexual innuendos to push a stock-brokering firm) clearly suggests that they are TV debates. Still, Olson accuses the president of repealing the Bill of Rights and killing dissenters (16). Soon, a “glitch” on live television occurs where the president’s face becomes pixilated;

⁴² Or Miller’s *Batman: Year One* (1987), for that matter – another work which could merit its own entire chapter. Geoff Klock notes that both *DKR* and *Year One* occur in the 1980s, “severing the unity... by setting the story of Batman’s first year in the same period of his aging Batman” (51). This is not much of a problem, however, since superheroes tend to have a convoluted relationship with time; as superheroes comment on the times or embody particular ideals of a given era, they also evolve with the times in a manner that is cyclical rather than linear.

Olson states that the president is a “computer-generated image,” and below we see Lex Luthor threatening the programmer whose folly caused the glitch (page 43-44). There is no need to explicitly say so, but the reader gathers that Luthor has assumed control of the country through Rickard and is a sort of “puppeteer.” While there is no clear reference to the current president as there was to Reagan in *DKR*, this arrangement reflects the rather common perception that Vice President Cheney is really the mastermind behind the current administration, of which President Bush is merely the spokesperson or figurehead. If so, this connection serves as a critique of common accusations against those in the Bush administration – that they illegitimately claimed victory, but through tampering with election results rather than having a fictitious candidate, and that they are abusing executive powers in order to remove the rights of citizens, as with controversial the wire-tapping program.

Book 2 furthers this commentary, as Batman personally goes after cabinet members named “Ruger-Exxon” and “Starbucks”; this connects the current administration to the issues of “free trade” and “globalization,” which are seen as both culturally homogenizing and exploitative of indigenous workers. The fact that Batman actually appears to kill these cabinet members with his cape seems to emphasize the severe criminality of such enterprises. He then carves a “Z” into Luthor’s face; while Catgirl (formerly Robin in *DKR*) cannot decipher this symbol, it is a clear link to Batman’s origins – in *DKR*, his parents are killed after leaving a theater which just played a Zorro film, emphasizing Batman’s devotion to the people in their struggles against a corrupt government.

While Batman opposed governmental policies in *DKR* (vs. Superman, who is seen as the figure who defends the status quo), his goal at the time was not to topple it; that is, Batman did not play his traditional role in sense of fighting for the status quo, yet he was somewhat traditional at least in the sense that he works outside the system (and even in defiance of the system) to achieve the order that the system is incapable of achieving on its own. Here, this latter traditional aspect is revised as well. As he admits to The Flash, “We blew it... we spent our whole careers looking in the wrong direction! I hunted down muggers and burglars while the real monsters took power unopposed!” (14) At the end of Book 2, Batman pulls off his mask to reveal his face to a mob of concert goers to rally them to “grab hold of a fad... and turn it into a revolution” (170). Ironically, the concert features “The Superchix,” who are a trio comprised of female performers who use the iconography of teeny-bopper groups (a la “The Spice Girls”) who sell their music largely through their scantily-clad image and sex-appeal. Yet these women support the resurgence of superheroes, and the connection is drawn between the teeny-bopper trend and tights-wearing superheroes (pages 94-96 show how the costumes of these two trends can be easily unified). Fads may be fleeting, but Batman recognizes that they unite a large portion of population, which is necessary for the wide-scale revolution he desires. Yet the presence of fads is also a commentary on postmodern culture, which (as exemplified by, e.g., the punk movement) is willing to rally behind various shifting signs in lieu of a stable sense of identity; however, Batman is able, through precise timing, to take hold of such a transitory postmodern phenomenon and transform it into a cohesive movement.

Yet the revolution is not simply the rallying of individuals behind an ideal in order to regain freedom from Luthor's tyranny; Batman realizes that he needs the help of multiple superheroes in order to pull off a revolution of such magnitude. Book 3 begins with Batman summoning Green Lantern, who now appears to have his own life and family across the universe, and has taken the form of the beings that exist on that planet. The text describes him as "pure will" and "sheer power," and he can seemingly teleport (or fly very quickly) through space (176). This scene not only reveals the power superheroes can wield, but also shows to what lengths they have gone in order to leave the society that condemned their presence. This scene is juxtaposed with the demise of Captain Marvel, who has taken "one hit too many" while trying to stop Brainiac (another Luthor ally) from destroying much of Metropolis (the panels compose the transformational word "Shazam" as lightning strikes and he explodes). Luthor's plan is to have the remnants of the Justice League (Superman, Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman) lose the battle against Brainiac in order to shake faith in superheroes and undermine the movement Batman helps along; originally, this trio worked for the government – Luthor would spare the Kryptonian city, Kandor, if the three delivered the rebellious superheroes to him (79). However, Luthor's increasing tyranny as he loses his grip forces the group to reconsider, especially as Metropolis is threatened.

It is at this point that the Superchix seem on the verge of breaking up; "Batchick" sees this as an effectual political movement, while "Wonder Chick" seems to be in it purely for the success – she states she does not know what a "zeitgeist" is, at which point Batchick calls her ignorant of cultural movements (182). This reveals the tension in such fads which unites such disparate elements as pop music for entertainment and

superheroes working for actual social change – namely, who is in it for what? The height of the group’s success reveals this tension within the band, suggesting that a movement that has no unified constants and simply leeches onto existing signifiers will eventually break down. However, this scene is followed by a speech Batman gives at the concert-turned-riot, which clarifies the goal of the movement. He states, “We aren’t here to rule. We aren’t here to bring chaos or anarchy. We’re here to end the reign of criminals.” Once again, Batman’s particular political views are not entirely clear, but are simply defined by negation – he wants to steer between the vicious extremes of Luthor’s corrupt totalitarianism and pure anarchy. Here a traditional aspect of the superhero role is revealed, namely, that the hero is defined to an extent by the villain; that is, the superhero acts merely to remove *particular* criminals from committing acts of injustice, rather than creating an alternative *system* that prevents injustice from occurring. So while Batman is a revolutionary to an extent, he offers no positive alternative – it is the role of society to decide its own system of governance, rather than simply bowing to the new dictatorial rule of Batman, however better the latter option may seem to be.

Lara, the daughter of Superman and Wonder Woman,⁴³ then receives a telepathic message from Brainiac that Kandor is in danger and that she must surrender to him or it will be destroyed. This opens up an interesting debate over humanity between father and daughter. Lara suggests that humans are not only ineffectual, but they consistently counteract the very goals they intend to achieve; as a most basic example, she states that mere survival is limited by the tendency of humans towards “killing their planet” and

⁴³ Such revision of DC’s franchise characters involved in this scenario becomes somewhat less threatening when the reader takes into account that Miller’s Batman tales exist outside regular DC continuity.

“killing each other” (193). While Superman maintains the traditional perspective – that superheroes exist to “serve” the world, rather than “command” it – Lara suggests that they, having the power, should take things over “for [humanity’s] own sake.” That is, while the current form of dictatorship is unjust, being at the hands of a criminal, a new dictatorship with a world run by superheroes with not only powers but a traditionally enlarged perspective that prevents the misuse of such power would achieve the goals that human beings are simply incapable of achieving on their own. Here Lara and Superman’s panels are divided by a gutter on the right side of the page, while their heads face different directions; they engage in this debate while flying, which provides the literal causality for the panel composition, but on the symbolic level this layout and composition presents the diametrical opposition of their views. Once again, Batman’s approach seems to be more along the lines of the “mean between extremes”; while human beings are incapable of achieving peace and justice on their own, that does not give superheroes the right to rule. With his penchant for technology, his vast wealth and ability to rally other super-powered heroes behind him, it is not impossible that he could have done this on his own much earlier, as Luthor ended up doing himself. However, Batman chose to train willing individuals (the Sons of Batman) and simply wait for the right time and social causes in order to lead the masses in a revolution they freely choose.

It is at this point that Batman appears, holographically (which is suggested by a translucent appearance, in contrast to his actual physical location in an incubation of sorts on page 198). He commands that Lara and Superman submit to his plan, which infuriates Lara since he is a mere mortal and is thus a member of a group for which she has little respect; however, Superman realizes that Batman’s knack for scheming is all that can

save both Lara and Kandor. Ironically, Superman's service to the status quo is only undermined when those things that are most dear to him are threatened (Kandor, Lara, Metropolis); contrastingly, as Batman does not allow things to be dear to him, relatively speaking, he can live in service to his ideals comparatively unthreatened. As Batman's plan for Lara to infiltrate Brainiac's ship with Dr. Palmer (The Atom) in order to free those from Kandor and restore their powers goes into effect, Superman goes up against the US military which is called in to "preserve the peace" by containing the riot Batman started. Superman admits his enjoyment in destroying the planes and helicopters, which of course have actual humans inside them; he states that he is beginning to understand that he needs to view himself not as human as he always did before, but as a "superman." Yet while this presents more of a connection than ever before to the Nietzschean concept of the "ubermensch" who exists above the customs of normal humanity (and even overcomes humanity itself), it is clear that he is still tethered by some normal understanding of human morality. He may be above humanity both in powers and perspective, but he still refers to Earth as "our planet" at the end of the book, as he gazes on it from space with Lara; that is, neither humanity nor the earth are to be abandoned, even if there no clear plan of action for establishing an alternative system (247).

Batman then breaks into Luthor's lair, but is easily captured given his frail condition. We see him tied to a wall, with his mask wrinkled, ear bent, and blood speckled all over; we can infer that Lex has been beating him for some time, and when he states that his is "at [Luthor's] mercy," his almost comical presence (compared to the strength and mystery that normally enshrouds Batman) assures us that this is probably accurate. In typical villainous fashion, Luthor divulges his plan to incinerate Metropolis

using space cannons. This is, of course, another connection to a Republican administration, as Reagan proposed the “Star Wars” defense system which would utilize weapons fired from space in order to protect the US against a nuclear attack. Miller thus voices a common fear that such technology in the wrong hands could be devastating, and what was intended for good could be used for evil purposes. Luthor admits that he already tested the system on Superman’s Fortress of Solitude, as well as the rain forest where the Thanagarians lived; this in turn connects the fear of technology to the abuse and exploitation of the environment, especially as the rain forest is viewed as both a wild life refuge and untapped potential for medical exploration, as well as prevention against global warming due to the sheer number of greenhouse gas consuming trees. Thus one man’s criminal activity is quickly elevated to a global problem, as is clearly suggested in the aforementioned scene where Superman and Lara look on Earth from space.

Yet it is not mere gizmos and strength that Batman relies upon now, but rather his uncanny ability to organize activity. Within his position of vulnerability, Batman states that he may not personally kill Luthor, but has arranged for his death; while Luthor clearly has the upper hand, the “Z” that remains on his face acts as a constant reminder of Batman’s mark on him and his life. Luthor announces that he will preserve industrial and military sites, as well as around 1 billion survivors; this of course serves as a critique of the right-wing again, which is often viewed as caring more about immediate industrial profits than the long-term or wider-scale effects that such activity may have on individuals. It is at this moment that an eerie green light appears all over earth, and we discover that the Green Lantern’s sole mission was to wipe out the space cannons, which he does by holding the earth in his palm in a rather godlike fashion. Batman admits

loving the look on Luthor's face, and when Hawkman's son bursts in and kills Luthor out of revenge for the death of his parents in the rain forest, Batman says, "Way to go, kid! That was great!" The Flash is obviously disturbed by Batman's near psychotic glee; however, as Superman seems to have learned as well, the adage "desperate times call for desperate measures" increases proportionally – the more desperate the times, the more desperate the measures. In addition, this could be seen as Batman vicariously participating in the retribution that he was never able to have for the death of his own parents; he could have killed Luthor personally earlier, but left room for an option he would find more psychologically satisfying.

As the Green Lantern saves the earth from mass destruction and Lara and Palmer save the Kandorians, most of the panels used are rather large – often only two per page, sometimes with a smaller panel off to the side providing commentary on the action. However, when Dick Grayson – the former Robin who has been masquerading as The Joker and killing every superhero he can find – breaks into the Batcave and begins to viciously beat Catgirl, there are suddenly 20 panels per page (238-239). This has two major effects. First, it quickens the pace of the narrative; rather than leaping from one large panel to the next, this seems to offer an almost shot-by-shot montage (to use filmic language), which break down the action and analyzes it. Second, it also reflects the scale of the problem; while the larger panels dealt with the literally global issue of saving the earth (or the city Kandor, for that matter), now the issue is reduced in scale – it is simply the life of one person, though still important to Batman. As she fights this mystery person, it is quickly but sequentially revealed that he is Robin – bits of his costume are revealed, culminating in one "montage panel" showing the "R" emblem on his costume.

The signifiers here are blended, however; he has the creepy grin, green hair and the pale skin of The Joker, yet has the R on his costume and eye-mask of Robin. Once his identity is divulged, he soon reveals that he cannot die due to his “radical gene therapy,” which he underwent after being fired by Batman for incompetence. Batman then opens a hole in the ground, revealing lava below, and states that Robin cannot regenerate if there is not anything left; both Batman and Robin fall in as Superman then swoops down to save Batman – apparently somewhat grudgingly, given his furrowed facial expression and his holding Batman out away from his body like a garbage bag. While most of *DK2* involves confrontation between the clearly good superheroes and the clearly bad villains, this appearance and revelation of Robin at the end shows that there is no ontological and ethical equivalence with superheroes – that is, just because one dons the comforting signifier of a costume associated with good does it not necessarily guarantee ethical action on the part of that individual.

In addition to scrambling the signifiers of costume, this scene also tacitly calls into question the motivation of heroic action. Both Hawkman’s son and Batman himself were largely motivated out of revenge for the death of their parents; Dick Grayson’s motivation for killing superheroes is also revenge, but for his own ego being assaulted when Batman let him go. This difference is, of course, the direction that their motivation takes them. Batman and Hawkman may go to the extreme of killing in order to achieve their ends, but they kill individuals who aim to harm humanity; that is, killing these villains is seen as a “greater good” (or at least a necessary evil). Grayson’s motivation, on the other hand, leads him to kill those superheroes who protect the earth because they are viewed as mocking his own ineptness through their success as heroes. This is a rather

classic example of the narcissism of the villain. The original Joker transformed his victims into his own likeness by killing them with a substance that gave them his oversized grin, which can be seen as a narcissistic projection – not only does he conquer others, but he transforms their faces, which is the body part most closely associated with identity, to look like his own. Similarly, Grayson goes after any hero who harms his ego by triumphing where he personally failed.

While the villains of *DK2* fill rather traditional roles, there are several different heroic models presented. Superman, who positions his relationship to society as a superpowered civil servant, essentially acts as a minion for the corrupt government. Initially a figure for democratic and even populist notions, as his early adventures were simply protecting common folk from criminals, World War II appropriated Superman to serve the broader call of defeating the Axis Powers; Miller argues that this view of unquestioning patriotism is now naïve, given the complexity of the global situation, and hence the superhero must be more discerning (Bogaev). Lara embodies this more detached view of questioning the status quo, but is tempted to go to the opposite extreme – namely, since she knows superheroes are already set apart from society she desires to take control, accomplishing human goals more effectively than humans could. With her and Batman's influence, Superman is eventually convinced of this model as well; he states, "I am not human. And I am no man's servant. I am no man's slave. I will not be ruled by the laws of men." Batman's role is once again even more complex than either Superman's or Lara's role. No longer a supporting pillar of standard American life, he instead sees the system itself as inherently corrupted – that is, beyond reform – and hence it needs a revolutionary leader to cause its demise in order to establish a new system.

Batman, then, acts as a political activist leading a band of guerillas (who were formed at the end of *DKR*) against the figures of corporate corruption who literally control political leaders.

Kristian Williams states that such language used in the graphic novel suggests a sort of leftist model of political revolution. The faults of the book, according to Williams, are the stylization of violence and depicting the reliance upon superhuman individuals to bring to world to revolution; both of these pitfalls suggest that the average individual has no place in political reform, especially without a knack for violence. However, this claim could be laid against any superhero at any time, since only the extraordinarily brave or skilled can face the extraordinary societal tribulations. However, on the one hand, Batman does not technically have any superpowers – only determination, physical skill, and wealth (the latter of which being implicated in his armory of gadgets). On the other, his wealth is what separates him from the “common” person – it allows him to pursue his training, rather than simply trying to make ends meet, and provides him with the resources to pursue a career as a costumed hero. So while Batman is an “average” human in that he lacks superpowers, in contrast to the divine Superman and Lara, he serves a role similar to both Frye’s Romantic Hero and his Leader-Hero: as a Romantic Hero his surroundings are mythical, given the nature of costumed hero narratives, but as with the Leader-Hero it is his character (intelligence for planning and determination) that ultimately sets him above the common folk and places him in the natural capacity to lead.

However, Williams states that there are several strong leftist elements that remain, despite the hero being “above” average citizens; these elements are mainly threefold. First, the novel suggests that the real criminals are not street thugs, but rather politicians

and corporations that exploit people on a mass level. Such widespread corruption cannot be solved on a case-to-case basis, as the superhero usually does; rather, the institutional core must be directly undermined and a new system established. Second, and in contrast to Superman's leaning until the end, the narrative undermines the traditionally conservative role of the superhero to uphold the status-quo. Finally, the novel establishes that humanity in general needs to reevaluate its relationship with itself and with the world before disaster strikes "our globally suicidal species" (38-39).

Yet the role of the "leftist revolutionary" is not the only political image Batman assumes in the novel. As he not only demands the submission of other superheroes to follow his plan to bring down the government but also reveals his social manipulation by appropriating the superhero fad for his own ends, does this assumption of control make him a totalitarian of sorts? The image of Batman riding on the horse at the end of *DKR* to restore order to the city in particular has levied the title "fascist" against Miller's Batman (as stated in the St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture, for example). Or does he rather view himself an *ubermensch*, who, as with Superman and Lara, is above common notions of morality and hence need not submit to them? In other words, is Batman aiming for a leftist revolution, or anarchist individualism? Miller explores this ambiguity in the televised debates⁴⁴ towards the novel's end. While Batman rarely explicitly espouses his own political views, two characters set up a political opposition through which one can discuss the political roles a hero ought to play.

This is the final ideological opposition in the novel, similar to the ones presented earlier between Luthor's totalitarianism and anarchy, and between Superman's servitude

⁴⁴ These "talking heads" debates have become a sort of authorial stamp for Miller, as they occur in *DKR* and both of the latter *Robocop* films, which Miller co-scripted.

and Lara's drive to rule. This occurs in a televised debate between The Question and The Green Arrow which directly voices the aforementioned "internal warfare" which Howe sees as a necessary aspect of the political novel. The Green Arrow rejoices that this revolution has put the power in the hands of the people; he also wears an outfit connoting a relationship to Robin Hood, who, while not necessarily a Marxist like The Green Arrow, also fought against the oppression by a few for the sake of the poor masses. The Question, on the other hand, responds by suggesting that "mob rule" will lead to a dictatorship, also stating that Ayn Rand "didn't go nearly far enough" in her ideological system (246). Rand's heroism is a sort of supreme individualism, since Rand portrays collectivism as inherently corrupt in her fictional works; while other works (Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead in particular) are more highly regarded as definitive Rand novels, her work Anthem provides the basic heroic model which continues throughout her "major" works.

In this novella the protagonist, Equality 7-2521, recounts (fittingly in the first person plural) how he is at odds with the collective society into which he is born; his natural physical and intellectual giftedness draws him away from the lock-step nature of the government and into personal studies, performs scientific experiments, culminating in the invention of the light bulb, and he ultimately falls in love with a woman he calls "the Golden One." He also witnesses the death of the "Transgressor of the Unspeakable Word," who discovered a word which was condemned by the government and as a result died a martyr's death by being burnt at the stake (50). He initially intends to reveal his invention for the good of society, hoping for acceptance despite his individualist ways. When society rejects his invention, due in part to his opposition to the government, he

flees to the forest where he meets up with the Golden One; here he finds an abandoned house with a library, and discovers for himself the word unspeakable word “I,” declaring that he will found a new society based around the “sacred word: EGO” rather than the notion of the collective (105).

As the novella pits the individual against any notion of the collective, rather than a synthesized camp which perceives a healthy relationship between the individual and the good of the whole, Thomas F. Bertonneau traces a tendency in Randian thought to absolutize distinctions in ideology rather than acknowledging nuances. He argues that the messianic importance ascribed to Rand by her followers is based upon a faulty understanding of history and an absolutizing of intellectual and moral camps.⁴⁵ Similarly, Randian thought as suggested in the construction of the Anthem narrative maintains that any system that does not guarantee pure individualism is dangerously close to totalitarianism. Such thought lacks nuance, pushing realms of thought to extremes or setting up philosophical “straw-men” rather than dealing with the complexities of moral and socio-economic systems. As heroes embody particular ideals, the Randian hero then is always a supreme individualist with views of governmental restriction; the government should simply exist to protect freedom and the ego, with as little intervention and regulation.

⁴⁵ For example, Bertonneau states that Rand ignored the philosophical and aesthetic contributions of the whole period of the Middle Ages (as well as their largely classical bases), stating that they were artistically and intellectually vapid while the Renaissance brought human thought back to the Classical plane of rationality and artistic integrity; as he quotes from Rand, “Have you ever wondered what they felt, those first men of the Renaissance, when – emerging from the long nightmare of the Middle Ages, having seen nothing but the deformed monstrosities and gargoyles of medieval art as the only reflection of a man’s soul – they took a new, free, unobstructed look at the world and rediscovered the statues of the Greek gods, forgotten under the piles of rubble?” (298)

DK2 directly responds to Rand's conception of the individual's relationship to the government. While The Green Arrow's views seem rather standard Marxist ideals, The Question (a character who was invented by Steve Ditko, the co-creator of Spider-man and an admirer of Rand) argues that his views are more extreme than Rand's, who already is rather far to the right; as such, The Question (who, incidentally, was rescued from Grayson earlier by The Green Arrow) seems to have gone beyond even his creator's views, possibly suggesting extremism simply leads to further extremism. Once again, however, Batman's and Miller's views (which are not necessarily equivalent) cannot be easily deciphered, nor can they be put into simple categorical terms. For one thing, Miller seems to have mixed feelings about Rand, and his opinion of her philosophy in relation to practical application seems to have changed over the years. In a 1981 interview, Miller states, "I did find a number of Rand's observations valid for me when I read them, years ago. In order to get somewhere in a profession... [y]ou have to... take the risk of believing in yourself even when you're wrong." However, he also states that he is not in total agreement with her; freedom can be a good thing, but one also needs limitations and "Walls to push against" in order to produce truly creative work (28). Both authors, generally speaking, exhibit highly individualistic personas as the heroic mold; however, the characteristics of Rand's heroes are developed in terms of a rationalization for conservative politics, while Miller's Batman exhibits more of a collectivist bent. Still, while being "no middle-of-the-roader" (Interviews 72) Miller can still be rather politically ambiguous; just as with the aforementioned tension between individualism and collectivism, he presents scathing critiques of corrupt right-wing government in his works while simultaneously presenting strong support of the current "war on terror" in his

interviews as a “liberal hawk” (Interviews 115), defying typical right-left categorization.⁴⁶

Ironically Miller’s view of women is also arguably more progressive than Rand’s in several ways. “The Golden One” in Anthem in particular is seen simply as a mother figure who has no influence on the future alternative society set up by the protagonist. Susan Love Brown suggests that this novel shows that Ayn Rand has an inherent tension between her objectivist (or ego-exalting) philosophy and her view of women; on the one hand, “Rand’s expressed attitudes support the equality of women,” but on the other “the undercurrents of her fiction” portray women who are either ineffectual or essentially nonexistent (275). Rand’s novel Anthem establishes the heroic model found throughout her later works, where the male heroes are led to self-actualization through reason; for Rand, reason is the only vehicle which leads the individual to individualism (Salmieri). Rand’s female characters, however, are passive and simply follow the path carved out by the assertive, rational male. The kind of hero Rand consistently portrays in her novels, namely male individuals who think outside the restrictions of collectivism in order to forge their own way in society (or in this case, create a new society), ironically undermines the very rational equality of individuals which Rand seeks. Brown argues that the elevation of Rand’s male heroes allows her to explore her own rational, left-brained intellect that is usually seen as “masculine” while still preserving her own conception of woman as being followers. It is ironic that such a supreme individualist who respects equality (and is also a female) would have her women characters be

⁴⁶ Miller also states his frustration with both the right and left attempting to censor artists, whether in the name of so-called “values-based” politics or conformity to political correctness: “Both political sides just can’t stand that pesky First Amendment” (Interviews 96). Additionally, he argues, “I find that people who tend to follow any party line, of the left or right, tend to all end up saying the same thing, which is ‘Do what I tell you’” (72).

peripheral to the male-driven world. While *DK2* does not explicitly respond to Rand's issues of gender, opting instead to respond to broader socio-political questions, the novel does present a few alternative schemas which differ from Rand's conception of the male hero. *DK2* does present male villains running the world and mainly male superheroes; however, just as there are three main kinds of superheroism that appear in the novel, there are also three different models of female superheroes.

First, Carrie Kelley begins her costumed hero career in *DKR* as the new Robin, the iconic superhero sidekick figure, and continues as Batman's sidekick in *DK2* as well. On one hand, this could be seen as a traditional limitation of females in comics – the realm of the superhero is essentially a male-ordered world, and if females are to participate it is either as an object of male fantasies (such as Catwoman or Wonder Woman) or as a submissive sidekick. On the other hand, one could look at this relationship as being more progressive; from this sort of hooksian oppositional gaze, not only is the hierarchy between hero and sidekick in this particular case based more on skill and age than gender, but the fact that a female assumes the Robin mantle is also relatively progressive given superhero conventions. Miller states that his choosing a female Robin was to go against the grain of these conventions, as “it's such a ‘Boys Club’ in superhero land, and the women when they show up are bunnies - they're pale imitations of the heroes, but they're really busty”. (Bogaev) As a young girl Carrie provides an example of a non-objectified female superhero, and she also provides an example of female assertiveness – in *DKR* she is convinced that she should be the next Batman sidekick, and pursues Batman until he acquiesces. *DK2* takes place several years after *DKR*, and it shows that Carrie has come into her own all the more; she has abandoned the Robin

persona and developed her own identity as “Catgirl,” with its own signifiers resulting from her original costume designs (at various points she dons a leopard print, tiger print and panther-like outfits, rather than simply assuming the iconography of the preceding Catwoman). She may still be a sidekick, but she serves as one on her own terms.

The second kind of female superhero is exemplified in Wonder Woman. As stated in Chapter 1, her creator Dr. William Moulton Marston intentionally played on the iconography of superhero attire and weapons to create a figure of blatant sexuality; Wonder Woman’s leather outfit and whips, etc., embody sado-masochistic fantasies. At the same time, however, she is her own independent superhero (as opposed to a mere sidekick) and is quite active (rather than the mere “damsel in distress”). So while she is clearly identified as a sex object, she uses her sexuality in order to achieve her desired ends – namely, to bring criminals to justice via their submission. In addition to her S&M persona, however Wonder Woman is also an Amazon Warrior; as the Amazon is “an archetype[s] of female power and heroism that is known in all cultures and all times, even among the most androcentric and misogynistic ones,” they have been appropriated as feminist icons (Gramstad 352). Yet in *DK2*, this feminist symbol of female authority is inverted. After Superman suffers defeat at the hands of Batman and considers retirement, Wonder Woman attempts to motivate Superman to reassume his superhero role by coaxing, “Where is the man who stole my Amazon heart? Where is the hero who threw me to the ground and took me as his rightful prize?” This passage alludes to the fact that Superman must have faced and defeated Wonder Woman at some point and, in the language of sado-masochism that is so familiar to her, his victory entails his dominance

and her submission. In fact, a few panels later Superman is shown holding Wonder Woman's iconic weapon of dominance – her lasso.

While *DK2* scrambles traditional signifiers by changing both what one would assume to be a submissive sidekick to progressive figure as well as an Amazon icon to one who is conquered by a male hero, the novel presents a third option for the role of the female superhero. Lara is the daughter of Superman and Wonder Woman, and embodies traits of both of her parents. She has the bold assertiveness of her mother's traditional representation (i.e. before succumbing to Superman); when Superman believes the superheroes have been defeated, Lara argues, "This time is ours. This world is ours. The power is ours," and later, "I'm not from Kansas... I'm an Amazon," setting herself apart from her superhero father's reticence to act on his power. Having been kept from world of superheroes, she has an outside perspective that keeps her from simply submitting to the powers that be (in this case, criminals like Lex Luthor). At the same time, she has all the powers of her Kryptonian father, being able to fly and shoot beams from her eyes. This dual nature received from mother and father is illustrated graphically as one page is split into two panels – on the left, Lara wears what (assumedly) is a traditional Amazon garb, while on the right she dons a superhero outfit with the iconic "S" emblem. Thus, while Miller deconstructs one somewhat feminist icon in Wonder Woman, he replaces that icon with one who is more powerful both physically and willfully. Lara's role in the novel, as mentioned above, is that she saves the population of the bottled city of Kandor; usually it is the male hero who ultimately solves the problems, while women either simply aid the male hero (whether as sidekick or simply a less powerful hero) or need to be rescued themselves, but not so here. She serves in the role of a superpowered hero that

is usually fulfilled by a male figure, while at the same time embodying several feminist ideals.

While Miller does propose several models for the female hero, ultimately it is Batman himself who embodies the sort of hero needed to respond to the extreme scenario of the times presented in *DK2*. This work takes the small band which restored order at the end of *DKR* and transforms it into a larger group that is able to cause a revolution and change the political sphere. Despite this book and *DKR*'s consistent critiques of rightist policies (along with Batman's earlier association with The Green Arrow), both books end before any alternative system can be established. Miller seems to side with Batman for most part – he “gets the job done,” vs. the ineffectual superheroes or downright criminal members of government. Mostly, the traditional notion of the superhero suggests that one simply acts in response to the villain: “he is not called upon to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain's plans” (Reynolds 51). In this case, since villain's plans are large-scale (governmental), Batman's response is equally grand; Batman may change his focus from petty criminals (the focus of his early days) to a broader socio-political scale, but ultimately his goal is simply to eliminate the villain's corrupting influence on society.

Yet the novel's solution to the problem is not clearly present. Other than Batman's pronounced opposition to totalitarianism and his choice to not lead a new system of government himself, his personal political ideals are ambiguous; Lara aims to be more assertive than her father, but even she does not seem to know how. As such, the novel seems to suggest that superheroes may take more prominent roles in future political systems, but it is not entirely clear how exactly that will play out. Will this mean oligarchy on the part of the superheroes? Or will democracy simply be enforced by

superheroes, rather than superheroes being the servants of public leaders? Although it is Batman who topples the corrupt system (rather than simply flying in the face of it in *DKR*), politically speaking, the book ends with a question voiced by Superman (though it does seem to speak on behalf of all parties involved), which is aimed at his daughter: “What exactly shall we do with our planet, Lara?” This question, which voices what Howe describes as the political novel’s concern for humanity’s ultimate fate, directly follows the Green Arrow/Question debate; in fact, it occurs on the opposing page, suggesting that the answer might not be as cut-and-dry as either of those parties would have it. Extremes are to be avoided, but, in agreement with Howe’s third criterion for political novels, no further direction is provided.

While there may be no specific political model proposed to establish after Luthor’s downfall, *DKR* does suggest what kind of hero it takes to be able to launch such a large-scale attack on societal corruption. In Vicky Vale’s fictional introduction to the novel, she defines a hero as a “man who makes wrongs right”; if this is the case, a larger scale wrong calls for a larger scale right – this situation does not involve petty criminals, or even normal criminal mastermind activity, but rather a villain who actually controls the face of politics. Thus, the hero needs to assault the political realm itself, rather than the typical crime lords of Gotham’s underbelly; as Aeon J. Skoble writes, “to the extent that any laws on the books protect criminals and impede the pursuit of justice, Batman will be a lawbreaker” (Skoble 31). Such a hero need not be a likeable character, but rather simply needs to accomplish what otherwise could not be; as Miller states, Batman’s role as revolutionary even smacks of terrorism: “I long ago determined that a character like Batman can only be defined as a terrorist if his motto is striking terror... I don’t want you

to like this guy” (Interviews 110). As Batman disregards the authority of institutional structures, he is neither a hero integrated into society (Superman) nor one entirely absent (The Green Lantern), but instead is a leader of an oppositional revolution; at the same time, rather than claiming rule for himself as a fascist might, his revolution simply “resets” the political structure, thereby allowing society to choose its own political model. The final panel’s circular close-up on Batman summarizes the kind of hero it takes to bring change of this magnitude. The ear of his seemingly impenetrable suit is crinkled and he is missing teeth; yet he is rather sickly happy and defiant – he regards his destroyed Batcave without the sentimentality he says he had back “when I was old” (248). This seems to suggest that he has moved beyond normal human limitations to a certain extent; after old age comes death, but for him his age simply another level of human existence – a level that disregards physical suffering that he bears as well as the emotionally suffering of a lost lifestyle, all for the sake of an ideal.

CONCLUSION

Through this project I have responded to the previous available literature on the subject of heroism, which tends to deal with either an isolated work or with genre- and archetype-specific analysis, and by looking at case studies of Frank Miller's various heroic models, I have attempted to provide an overarching characterization of the ideals inherent in such models. With all of these sources as a general background, it is evident that Miller's heroic ideals shift in their active capacity and scope but remain more or less steady in their strong individual sense of ethical duty. In addition, these sources aid in establishing the comparisons Miller actually invites to a traditional, "archetypal" understanding of the hero genre-specific models of heroism, as well as to the particular heroic form of Ayn Rand, which he explicitly references in *DK2*. Miller's response to these previous models bolsters the assertion that the theory of heroic ideals is inherently political as they deal with representations of the kind of person a hero must be, in turn involving issues of gender, ethnicity and class.

As a postmodern author, Miller both participates in and revises the Frye/Campbell/Lévi-Strauss attempt at a universal conception of the hero. Lévi-Strauss qualifies that universal elements of the hero are restricted within individual societies, and hence occur within culturally-specific parameters; in this sense all of Miller's works both "participate" in the archetypal notions but "revise" them in ways unique to his relationship to contemporary culture. However, Miller often does this in a typically postmodern fashion – through pastiche and the collapse between "high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (Jameson). As Fredric Jameson writes, "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask... but it

is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse." Miller does satirize certain characters and ideas in his works (such as the Reagan administration in *DKR*), but he approaches the genres themselves in a manner that is revisionist but not always satirical. The various genres represented in the works I have addressed include at least samurai, superhero, crime and detective fiction, science-fiction, and film noir, with some works employing multiple genres at a time and thus evading easy categorization; Miller approaches each of these genres according to their conventions, but adds his own notions as well, which may or may not accord with the traditional understanding of the given genre (e.g. the traditional superhero ban against killing is frequently ignored by Miller, whether through a reluctant hero such as Daredevil or through changing the hero's persuasions, as Batman cheers on the killing of Lex Luthor in *DK2*). Most of Miller's works tend to employ the "hardboiled" style of gritty narration common to detective fiction, whether in rather straight-forward crime fiction such as *Sin City* or synthesizing such elements with traditional superhero narratives that do not tend to employ that particular style. This latter effect can be jarring to some who are used to straightforward superheroes, but in a sense it does bring superheroes back to their roots (e.g. Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics*). *DK2* is a unique blend of both pastiche and parody: it mocks the traditional, "naïve" notion of the superhero in some ways (particularly as Superman, the first and most sacred of superheroes, is treated by Batman simply as a government lackey); yet it too at times employs Miller's hardboiled narrative approach without parody, leaving the crime fiction/superhero pastiche unquestioned as if it is a rather natural combination.

In the second respect, the collapse between “high culture” and “popular culture” is also apparent. Classical references abound in his works, but through the popular medium of comics (traditionally, and unfortunately, regarded as a very “low-culture” medium largely due to its long association as a children’s medium); these can occur explicitly, as in *300*, or through invoking notions of the archetypal hero through allusions. Frye’s major principle for the archetypal hero is the ordering function; the hero acts as a shepherd of sorts, standing above the masses while protecting them from harm; in some cases, the way to provide order is to actually wreak havoc on a corrupt system so that society can rebuild itself. Each of Miller’s heroes fulfills this function, whether on a grand political scale (e.g. Batman) or simply trying to protect loved ones (e.g. the *Sin City* heroes, *Ronin*). Batman in particular both participates in and reevaluates Frye’s archetypes. As society is in ruin, he attains this level of the shepherd over the masses, rather than a mere vigilante as he generally is portrayed. As such, he provides a kind of “secular apocalypse” that rebuilds the city of Gotham and reestablishes order in the world.

Campbell outlines a common structure of hero narratives, climaxing in the hero’s facing and overcoming a significant obstacle and resolving in the hero presenting a gift to society which resulted from her travels. Once again, this gift to society in Miller’s works tends to be the imposing of order on an otherwise chaotic environment, rather than a concrete gift (such as a treasure of some sort). Even though the work does not fall within DC continuity it assumes the backdrop of Batman’s history; this history participates in much of the monomyth, as Batman leaves his “castle” to protect Gotham, continually has his prize stolen as villains often escape nearly as soon as they’re captured. The

superhero's job never entirely finished, and further action is constantly invoked (via the "Bat Symbol," for example). Miller's *DKR* introduces the resurrection motif, common in Campbell's monomyth, while *DK2* seems to set the stage for restoring the order Batman has aimed at his entire life by destroying the system that has become corrupt (the "dark kingdom" of Gotham). Miller does not need to follow this pattern for any particular reason (it is not the only logical possibility for a heroic story), but he participates in a familiar system that has become deeply engrained in Western culture at least.

Certain ideals (one might even say "virtues") remain consistent despite the variance in the scope of the work of the heroes and their diagnostic of societal disarray (whether immediate, as in *Sin City*, or systemic, as in *DK2*). These virtues are inherently political, as they deal directly with governmental structures and issues of representation. On the governmental side the hero serves to protect the populace from corrupt and totalitarian institutions, even toppling the system if need be (as with Batman and Elektra). Thus, the hero acts on behalf of society and for society's benefit, even if rejected by certain factions. As with Ayn Rand, Miller presents elements of individualism in his hero, often showing how the individual must act on his or her own in order to defy the corrupt system; at the same time, and unlike Rand, he develops heroes who are more nuanced and less "categorically pure," as they embody elements of collectivism if that seems to be the solution to the problem (as with Batman's cooperative revolution). Ultimately it is not sheer individualism that is the goal of Miller's hero, but the order that comes from freedom from corrupt leaders (whether official leaders, such as President Rickard, or crime lords such as Kingpin).

Just as Miller presents a system of governmental politics that resists pure categorization as “leftist” or “rightist” (despite his tendency to focus his parody on Republican administrations), he also presents a complex view of both women and minority ethnicities. His female heroes in general tend to have certain progressive elements (especially in comparison to Rand, since, rather simply, female heroes are virtually absent from her works). The daughter of Wonder Woman and Superman, Lara, is neither mere “sidekick” nor a peripheral woman (as seen in Rand’s work), but rather a powerful and self-sufficient figure who achieves Miller’s criterion of establishing order from corruption. While Elektra is similarly a character that sees societal needs and addresses them, her representation is complicated by the fact that she uses her sexuality and objectification by male characters to manipulate them into achieving her ends; thus, she is simultaneously a “hero” and an “object of the gaze.” Martha Washington has the added complexity of being both female and African American. Miller’s representation of her is largely non-objectified; yet as an African American woman, this suggests that she could be read (particularly by the white adolescent audience associated with comics) as asexual, a common stereotype of black women in the arts and popular culture. Yet at the same time she could be read from an oppositional gaze as a figure who overcomes the obstacles of oppression both via her own inner strength and through the social changes that occur in the graphic novel itself.

“Heroism” is a value that has many different incarnations in the works of Frank Miller. The analyses of this project have attempted to be broad in scope in order to account for these variations, but they are by no means exhaustive – there are both works in the past that I have not addressed (though have I attempted to acknowledge them in

brief where fitting), as well as potentially significant forthcoming works (e.g. in his next Batman graphic novel, Miller portrays Batman taking on Al-Qaeda in what he admits is a propagandistic fashion). As a result, this project leaves room for further study, not only in terms of these absent works, but in thematic terms as well. For example, another project could conduct a broader survey of current culture in general (along the lines of the suggestion that self-sufficient, “hardboiled” heroes of detective fiction responded to the rough times of the depression and World Wars) in order to see to what extent Miller’s ideals, as portrayed in this project, influence or are influenced by cultural expectations of what kind of person a hero is. In our “post-9/11 world,” notions of the hero seem to be more strongly represented in popular consciousness than has been the case previously (with such “low tragic heroes” as Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman* speaking to the times more than the hero who represents the “highest” or “best” of society as in the classical model, or anti-heroes such as Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* or James Dean’s Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause*). Yet, one must ask the question, are heroic conceptions once again becoming jaded due to cultural disappointment with the war in Iraq and the War on Terror?

Even if that is the case, however, the notion of the “hero” has always had room in comics since the 1960s; comics have been the forum for the most visible representation of fantasies of cultural ideals of heroism. Superheroes may have been brought into a new age by artists such as Miller⁴⁷ – the age of superhero revisionism, in which the status quo is no longer indiscriminately accepted and defended – but the presence of superheroes

⁴⁷ And also notably Alan Moore, whose *Watchmen* arguably takes the notion of the superhero to its furthest degree thus far, with the near omnipotent Dr. Manhattan and the near-villainous military agent The Comedian.

remained strong nonetheless. Is this due to the fact that superhero comics have historically been a fan-based medium, suggesting that mass culture has always wanted heroic ideals that have not generally been provided by “high” or “fine” arts? These questions and their relation to understanding of Miller’s heroic ideals must be left to be addressed elsewhere.

Yet despite broad analysis, can there be such a thing as “the Frank Miller hero?” While many of the commonalities mentioned above may be more or less present in any given hero in Miller’s works, two qualities are steadfast: the ability to recognize or diagnose a societal problem (whether on a large scale or small), and the skill (bridled with determination) to act on the diagnosis in order to bring about social change. For Batman, this means raising an army and waiting for time to strike; for others, this could simply mean revenge. There is not necessarily any neat progression from “nascent ideas” in Miller’s early works to a fully developed system, as he opts instead to keep various models of heroism in dialogue. The scale of the issues does not necessarily increase correspondingly with chronology (the mainly “revenge” stories of *Sin City* occur chronologically between the overtly revolutionary yarns of *Elektra* and *DK2*); yet while the scale does fluctuate, the hero’s character and skill are consistent in that hero identifies the problem and fixes it without hesitation. Miller’s popularity, both as a graphic novelist and in relation to his (arguably) budding film career, suggests that his heroic ideals are not entirely isolated; not only do they have historic roots in archetypes and genres, but they appeal to an audience today that in some respect craves the type of heroes (or at least

enjoys the type⁴⁸) he presents. Thus, the case studies in this project which establish this particular model of heroism together suggest that Miller's ideals accord with certain societal notions which can be alternatively progressive or oppressive in relation to non-dominant groups.

⁴⁸ Terry Eagleton's After Theory provides a broad cultural analysis which emphasizes a caveat for applying political theory in the context of contemporary works, stating that today's culture is more interested in titillation than achieving any effective social changes. However, this enjoyment or "titillation" in respect to a particular kind of hero does have political ramifications; while consuming an artwork is not equivalent to upholding its ideals, the cultural presence of such ideals (as stated above) is rooted historically in a culture that created genres or built upon classic types in order to express socio-political values.

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Peer Tutor. Learning Support Center at Taylor University, 2002-2003.

Publications:

Provided annotations on the following for The Works of George Santayana:

Reason in Common Sense (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming)
Reason in Society (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming)

Performed collation on the following for The Works of George Santayana:

Three Philosophical Poets (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming)

Provided research on the following for The Works of George Santayana:

The Letters of George Santayana, Book 8 (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming)