An Interrogation of Morality, Power and Plurality as Evidenced in Superhero Comic Books: A Postmodernist Perspective.

By

Janique Herman

200702391

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Supervisor: Dr. Dianne Shober

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Abstract

The desire for heroes is a global and cultural phenomenon that gives a view into society's very heart. There is no better example of this truism than that of the superhero. Typically, Superheroes, with their affiliation to values and morality, and the notion of the grand narratives, should not fit well into postmodernist theory. However, at the very core of the superhero narrative is the ideal of an individual creating his/her own form of morality, and thus dispensing justice as the individual sees fit in resistance to metanarrative's authoritarian and restrictive paradigms. This research will explore Superhero comic books, films, videogames and the characters Superman, Spider-Man and Batman through the postmodernist conceptions of power, plurality, and morality.

Keywords: Superhero, Comic Book, Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Power, Plurality, Morality.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Comparative Literature and Philosophy at the University of Fort Hare. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

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Janique Herman

_____day of _____, 2013.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my amazing husband, Nick Klingelhoeffer, and my terrific family: Dagmar, Davryll, Patricia and Zahvick.

Special Thanks

I need to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Dianne Shober who has given her counsel and expertise in the completion of this project. I am grateful for all your guidance and encouragement throughout this process.

I would like to thank my family, my Mom, Dagmar, my Dad, Davryll, my Oma, Patricia and my brother, Zahvick, you have stood through my many moments of self-doubt and have always encouraged me to persevere. I would like to thank my husband, Nick Klingelhoeffer for all his support and love throughout the writing of this work. I want to thank my four-legged friends, Rocky, Pebbles, Koda and Gimli. You have been my constant companions through every page written and my confidants in moments of despair.

I would like to thank the writers, pencilers, inkers and colourists, the producers and editor-in-chiefs of Marvel Comics and DC Comics. Thank you for creating characters and stories which have continued to inspire generation after generation. Superman, Spider-Man and Batman have forever changed the world with their internal fight for truth and justice.

Sincerely,

Janique Herman

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Introduction

Throughout the comic book universe, battles rage between good and evil, and the eternal question of 'doing the right thing' is always present. Superheroes are left to make their own decision of what is right and what is wrong based on their own moral code. As such, selected comic books, largely from the comic book publishers DC Comics and Marvel Comics, will be used in this investigation of this ever-present theme as evidenced in the actions and attitudes of such Superheroes as Superman, Spider-Man and Batman.

All Superheroes are essentially saviour figures, and unlike religious saviours, Superheroes offer salvation as a "tangible, unambiguous event" (Knowles 111). These individuals exist to save people from physical dangers as opposed to spiritual ones; in this lies their enduring appeal. Stories of these saviours' exploits satisfy humanity's deep-seated longing for safety and security.

These storylines of the battle between good and evil feed off the ideal that as long as there are individuals willing to commit acts of evil, there will always be saviour figures willing to stand against these evils, those who use god-like strength, speed and agility to accomplish their task of redemption. However, their power and their choice in how they use this power often goes against what some might consider moral. As a result, Superheroes become vigilantes, exhibiting morally defiant and uncontrollable behaviour as they battle to save humanity.

The desire for heroes is a global phenomenon that gives a view into society's very heart. Certainly Matthew Costello would agree about the validity of the Superhero comic book in viewing society, stating that it is: "an avenue through which one can access the core values of a society, the ideas that give that society an identity, and the 'other' that society fears" (15). There is no better example of this truism than that of the superhero. The superhero was introduced into an American society that was on the brink of World War II, and that desperately needed someone with the strength and power who could save them from evil. Superheroes represent an expression of society and as the society has changed since 1938, so too has its comic book superheroes, thus giving its readers a unique way of dealing with the psychological challenges present in a postmodernist society.

Every society in history has sought or created a hero who would fulfil their needs; this is seen from the ancient Greek myth of Hercules, to the legends of King Arthur, to the ancient tales of Beowulf and Gilgamesh. Whilst the idea and need for a hero is not new, the prevalence of a masked hero is. The pulps of the 1800s and early 1900s where filled with heroes who wore a disguise whilst battling evil. At the turn of the twentieth century, pulp magazines were beginning to replace dime novels as a form of cheap entertainment for the middle class and lower educated class. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith note that "beneath their often lurid covers, pulp magazines contained rough-edged wood-pulp pages filled with crude but powerful storytelling" (27). One such example is *The Scarlet Pimpernel* published in 1903. The popularity of the pulps gave rise to the comic strip in the 1930s, and thus to the first comic book, *Action Comics* #1, and the introduction of the first superhero, Superman.

Culture differs across the globe, and with it, so does our societies; however, no matter the cultural background, what is certain is the need for a hero. The desire for superheroes is a cultural phenomenon which presents a vision of the heart of society, even, on occasion, giving the audience an understanding of history through narrative. Chris Murray believes that one of the reasons that Superheroes have such strong bonds with culture and politics, and to issues of legitimacy and power is because of relationship between ideology and myth which can be found within the Superhero narrative (145). Humans have always needed heroes, whether real or imagined, to not only model behaviour, but also inspire hope. Whether Paul Bunyan of the United States of America, Bharatavarsha of Hindu mythology, or Beowulf of the Old English historic poem, almost all cultures have a hero myth; what is similar among them all is that they are both structurally and culturally alike (Campbell and Moyers 166). The superhero myth is no different.

The superhero model is the culmination of centuries of storytelling, history, and heroism (Garrett 10). Furthermore, it is the culmination of tradition and religion that marries popular culture to the hero myth, allowing the superhero myth to act as a means of transferring myth to people for the past century. The narratives of various superheroes have permeated into the Global sub-conscious. Even without having ever picked up a comic book, many people have been exposed to and are aware of most

superheroes' basic back story, or of one of their catch phrases. What makes superheroes akin to characters from classic literature, myth and legend is that they all fit into Joseph Campbell's archetypal hero myth, the idea that all heroes' journeys are essentially the same, whether Jason and the Argonauts or Batman. It is for this reason that superhero characters, such as, Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man are so appealing; they all fit into a cross-cultural story-telling archetype.

Joseph Campbell believes that most hero myths contain a culture hero; that is someone who fights to save or preserve a particular culture, and on return to that culture has gained some knowledge and wisdom (49). What is important to note is that in this mythic model, power is not enough to be a hero. In order to be a hero, one must be doing a service to the community, and self-sacrifice must be made. The hero narrative is fairly straight forward as it begins with an individual living an ordinary life, in an ordinary world. This individual is then presented with some form of challenge, and after finally accepting, the individual must cross a line between the ordinary world and that which is extraordinary. Through successfully enduring trials the hero ultimately elevates the courage within and confronts the evil-doer. The hero then battles the villain, which may lead to the hero's literal or figurative death. After going through some form of resurrection, the hero shall conquer evil, and return to the community. When explained in such simplicity, it is easy to identify similar patterns in other narratives, whether fictive or imagined. For example, Beowulf, hero of the Geats, crosses the seas to help King Hrothgar, who is besieged by the monster. Through marvellous feats of bravery, Beowulf slays Grendel and his mother.

In terms of literature, a myth uses a universal value in order to reveal an idea. Unlike religious myths, which idealize characters in terms of their divine status, literary myths expose "paradigms basic to a metaphysical grasp of existence in a religion-orientated culture" by focusing on the relationship between humanity and the divine, and how the divine continues to pervade the individual's life (Gabilliet 205-206). These narratives are firmly structured, and can be characterized by a limited number of elements interacting with the protagonist. For example, in Christopher Marlowe's sixteenth century play, *Dr. Faustus*, the elements are the devil and the contract. In literary myths, the protagonist is at the centre of the narrative, and without the presence

of this individual, the narrative would become meaningless. Likewise, if this significance did not exist, then the character's very essence would be changed by the lack of meaning.

The superhero genre deals with universal themes which transcend cultural barriers; such as life and death, good and evil. The common themes which appeal to humanity in narratives such as *Superman*, *Spider-Man* and *Batman*, among others, is the search for significance, and the guidance of a parent. These themes give the audience something to trust in, a way to interpret and deal with the realities of everyday-life. In the Western world particularly, the absent parent is well-known, and with current economic uncertainties, losing a loved one or having economic instability, is always a possibility, and with this carries emotions that would otherwise not be experienced. Depending on the region of the world, and the economic status, families are shattered for various reasons, whether by divorce or abandonment, or by war, disease, or disaster. What emerges from all of these is a longing that is often only resolved through fantasy. In the new millennium, where all seems uncertain, as wars rage and terrorism seems imminent, humanity seeks to make sense of the chaos. In a world where everything seems possible, even the rise of a real-life super-villain who might set off a nuclear weapon, the audience of this unstable post-9/11 world wants some hero to believe in, someone they can trust. Ralph Winter, producer of the first *X-Men* film notes:

> The strong hero is certainly a paradigm in our… culture. We idolize our movie hero, from Indiana Jones, James Kirk, to Luke Skywalker. Those mythic heroes take on a status that is compelling. They have flaws. They're not perfect. But somehow they get thrust into these extraordinary circumstances, and do the right thing. And it's those values… To me it's what draws me in. I want to go live in that world. The best [heroes] are the ones that teach us a little bit how to live. How do we get through this life? How do we negotiate through this life? (qtd. in Partible 251).

Superheroes have become cultural mythology, much like the mythology of the ancient Greeks or Romans. Like the ancient heroes of myth, Superman, Batman and

Spider-Man represent the model citizens that all citizens should look to as an example of how to behave and act. Superheroes such as Superman, Spider-Man, and Batman have seeped into the global collective consciousness. These characters have given hope for decades, inspiring all who come across them to be greater individuals. They have become universal symbols of truth, justice, and live in a manner that is beneficial to all. Even a child in China can recognize Superman, and know what he promotes. No matter who they are, or what their origin may be, superheroes stand for essentially the same thing: truth, justice, and the prevailing of good over evil.

As comic narratives have steadily grown darker and more menacing over recent years, it can be argued that this is largely due to the success of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns.* As Alan Moore notes on his and Frank Miller's influential work:

> Obviously, we've to some degree doomed mainstream comic medium to a parade of violent, depressing postmodern superheroes. (qtd. In Reynolds 117)

Since Moore and Miller's success in creating darker Superheroes, they have become more alienated from society, and as such, their morality is no longer a projection of social norms, rather it is the heroes' own interpretation. Ultimately, superhero comic books, and all their heroes and villains seek to tell a story that is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago, the everlasting battle between good and evil. These storylines feed off the ideal that as long as there are individuals willing to commit acts of evil, there will always be someone willing to stand against these evils, making use of god-like strength, speed and agility, and supernatural powers to fight these forces of darkness. However, their greatest battle will always be within themselves as they create their own moral code, and control and resist the powerfully malevolent forces within.

Perhaps an example of such an act of evil is the terror attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City, on September 11th 2001. Since this tragedy the position of heroes in society has been elevated, most notably human heroes; such as rescue

workers, fire fighters, and emergency medical technicians (Boon 302). Until the terror attacks, the collective American psyche had never experienced such a high level of insecurity. This insecurity forced the American people to reconstruct their ideals about real-life heroes, and in doing so, affected comic book superheroes. Kading describes this effect of the collective American psyche, stating:

> The events of September 11, 2001, so violent and so violently thrust upon us, profoundly altered our sense of security as the images were played multiple times through the media. Within a matter of hours we were compelled to form a new conversation and understanding on a novel and terrifying phenomena. The post 9/11 period has been marked by an attempt to comprehend these events, and re-establish a context of individual and collective security. (207)

The "alteration of our security", is an awareness of vulnerability not only as people, or as a culture, or as the American nation, but on a global scale of awareness as to the sudden attacks from a "cultural outsider". This "otherness" allowed people to begin a new discourse on "who we were and who we were not"; humanity was forced to claim identity. As it has been throughout history, comic books have responded to real-life problems and events, and soon after the attacks, began to reflect this "new discourse" which 9/11 thrust upon the American people. However, comic book creators have been exploring the humanness of their characters since the beginning of the Silver Age of comic books in the early 1960s. Many superhero narratives depict the manner in which an ordinary individual can achieve vengeance and personal redemption. Comic books not only reflected worries of their fictional world, but also reflected the challenges and events of reality with real human emotion. Comic books have always taken into consideration reality, with its ideological function being able to explain the confusion of our individual and collective identity.

While this appears to be interesting, why study Superheroes? Thierry Groensten has also questioned why, after seven decades, Superhero comic books are still seeking

legitimization (3). Yet, despite the increase in academic work written regarding Superhero comic books, especially in the last two decades, the study of Superheroes often needs to be justified. It is an aim of this dissertation to answer this question. Through an analysis of Superhero comic books and their 'spin-offs' through the lens of postmodernist theory, a fresh and alternative perspective of these texts, and their heroic characters and protagonists will be presented. This analysis will enable the reader to broaden their knowledge, and understanding of the postmodernist themes present in Superhero comic books.

A thorough text based literary study will be conducted, exploring the characters and themes in selected Superhero comic books, films and television, and videogames in order to reflect the postmodernist themes of power, plurality and morality. With regard to the use of film, television and video games, the script will be analysed to aid in the discussion of Postmodernism with Superhero comic books. Therefore, the research method which will be applied in the analysis of these texts will be postmodernism with an interrogation of the theory based upon the works of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche, amongst others.

When examining postmodernist literature, it is evident that the West's promises of freedom and prosperity are empty, and continue to leave unmet humanity's need for security; nationalism builds walls and makes enemies, capitalism creates a 'have and have not' society, and religion causes moral friction and division among people. Furthermore, humanity believes now that truth is relative; as such it is the responsibility of each individual to determine his/her own truth (Sim x). Postmodernism does not make judgement on what is right and what is wrong, or what is good and what is evil. No absolute truths exist, and as such, postmodernists view the world beyond themselves as being in error. A close examination of the postmodernist era in which these selected Superhero comic books were written will provide the method of interrogating power, plurality and morality in these Superhero comic books.

The marriage of high and low culture within the postmodernist paradigm makes the interrogation of Superhero comic books an ideal genre for study. Furthermore, as the classic hero myth has taken a new twist within postmodern society, this study will allow for a fresh postmodernist interrogation of the Superhero as evidenced in popular

comic books. Finally, the apparent lack of research done on this topic, particularly within the realms of postmodernist theory, enables this study to significantly contribute to a greater understanding of postmodernism and its application to the conceptions of power, plurality and morality evidenced in Superhero comic books.

Postmodernism is seen to emphasize the role of language, the struggle for power and motivation, whilst also attacking the limitations of binary oppositions such as male and female, heterosexual versus homosexual, black versus white, imperial versus colonial. Indeed, it holds to the realities of the plural, and this is perhaps why Bennett and Royle believe that postmodernism welcomes and embraces a "thinking of itself in terms of plurality" (279).

Typically, Superheroes, with their affiliation to values and morality, and the notion of the grand narratives, should not fit well into the postmodernist theory. However, at the very core of the superhero narrative is the ideal of an individual creating his/her own form of morality, and thus dispensing justice as the individual sees fit in resistance to the metanarrative's authoritarian and restrictive paradigms (Sim 270). Within the postmodernist condition, the concept of the vigilante hero is at the basis of every superhero narrative, and it is perhaps for this reason that the postmodernist theory is applicable for an interrogation of the Superhero found in popular comic books. As this paper will reveal, characters such as Superman are initially seen to be anti-postmodernist as he represents the universal grand narrative, but he has grown with society to become postmodernist. Characters such as Spider-Man and Batman are easily identifiable as postmodernist characters. Many modern vigilantes represent the postmodern rejection of traditional values, and the search for individual identity and value. One might argue that the increasing popularity of vigilante superheroes is due to their recognition that humanity is not imperfect; in fact it is quite frail, unlike the well-known American archetypes of the cowboy or the noble warrior who are projected as being strong and invincible. This perceived flawed existence of the Superhero makes these characters appear more accessible to readers as they seem to be more akin to the reader. In the postmodernist era, traditional heroic qualities, such as the "knight in shining armour" is quickly giving way to the "gritty truth" of life, and as such, traditional authority is being questioned (Lwall 19). Characters such as Batman or the Punisher

appear to fall into the brooding vigilante or "noble criminal" category; these characters are slowly becoming a part of the popular conception of what might be considered heroic valour. However, these characters are becoming less heroic in the classical sense, and more the culturally accepted norm.

To interpret the multi-layered nature of the contemporary Superhero comic book, postmodernism is a useful paradigm. According to Bennett and Royle, all periodizing terms resist definition, but there is something more "resistant, peculiar and… maddening about postmodernism" (279). To define postmodernism would be to violate that which postmodernism stands for, since it exists under the premise that there are no definite terms, boundaries, or absolute truths. Postmodernism is a movement away or beyond the modernist viewpoint. The move from the modern to the postmodern is to embrace scepticism about what culture stands and strives for (Sim vii). Postmodernism is regarded as a rejection of most cultural certainties on which Western life has been structured.

At its core, postmodernism is a state of thinking and/or behaving where traditional boundaries and definitions do not exist, it is a state of self-consciousness and confusion, most notably concerning moral and ethical standards. Where superheroes are concerned, they are also immersed in this confusion or moral ambiguity. It only seems natural that violence would be inherent in a morally chaotic and ambiguous world. The postmodern destabilization of superheroes and villains, both in body and mind, is typical of the cultural uncertainty and anxiety seen in postmodernism. Paula Budra argues that a "specifically postmodern unease is generated, not by encroaching threats, but by the perception that the world is increasingly one in which borders have collapsed, in which preconceptions, hierarchies, absolutes, and perhaps reason itself are being abandoned" (qtd. in McEnteggart 184). McEnteggart argues that superhero comic books involves superpowers; similarly postmodernism uses the body and mind, and the erosion of tradition notions of life and death, and in doing so reflects the unrest seen in contemporary ideology (184).

The concept of a society in moral chaos fits well into the postmodern guise. Steven Connor explains the place of the law, and the will of the individual in a postmodern society, stating:

The dissolution of the norms shared by communities, or

imposed absolutely upon them, [is] replaced on the one hand by

the sovereign individual, conceived as the ground of knowledge

and rational truth, and on the other the State, conceived

abstractly as the mechanism for governing the relations between

sovereign individuals and poetically as the sovereign individual

at large, the embodiment of the rational, self-knowing will of

the nation or people. (61)

The law attempts to make an "ethically neutral mechanism" which is supposedly driven by the "abstract imperatives of logic and reason rather than particular political interests and purposes" (Connor 62). However, postmodernists believe that no absolute truth exists, and, therefore, would be doubtful of transcendental truth, and as such would perceive the law as arbitrary. Stanley Fish reasons that:

There are no objective, transhistorical truths or bottom lines

which might serve to stabilize the interpretations of the particular

historical purposes of groups and individuals... all is contingency,

rhetoric and historicity... [and since] no one will be in a situation

that is universal or general, and therefore no one's perspective

can lay claim to privilege... Because we live in a world bereft of

transcendent truths... [individuals can only have] temporary, and

always revisable conclusions. (qtd. in Connor 67)

While all of this is true, what is the purpose of Superheroes? They serve the purpose of upholding the societal status quo, and allowing for citizens to achieve self-actualization through the achievement and maintenance of their moral code. The only circumstance that these ideals would be under threat would be if there was an evil-doer. However, there are very few evil-doers who do evil just for the simple fact that they can, although this is true of the Joker. Stan Lee states:

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"We hate to have a villain doing evil just for the sake of being naughty. We try to indicate why he does the things he does, what   made him the way he is. And, wherever possible, we may even let him exhibit some decent, likable traits. In the magic world of [superhero comic books] not even supervillains need to be all bad, just as our superheroes are rarely all good; they usually display some natural human failings even as you and I – granted, of course, that   you and I are human." (*Bring on the Bad Guys* 7)

Perhaps this is part of the enduring success of Superhero comic books, the need for villains. If there were no evil-doers then there would be no need for Superheroes. Superhero comic books would not sell if it were page after page of our hero flying or slinging through cities where everyone is happy, and no one is in any danger. Superhero comics need villains; they need someone for audiences to hate. The binary opposition of good and evil is a theme that has been noted throughout history. The same binary opposition can be seen in the ideal of plurality. All Superheroes have dual identities, and even at times plural identities. There is the original being, and the alter-ego, with in almost all cases, the alter-ego being the Superhero form. However, questions have arisen from this plurality. How does the idea of a disguise fit into popular culture? Furthermore, why has it become a staple, if not the basis of the Superhero mythos? Why does one wear a mask? Traditionally one might wear a mask to hide his or her identity as he or she was committing a crime. Why then would a Superhero wear a mask? While it is important to analyse Superhero comic books from a postmodernist perspective, it is also significant that the history of Superhero comic books are taken into consideration.

The core objectives of this study are, firstly, to examine the themes of power, plurality and morality as interrogated by postmodernist theory. Secondly, to identify how power, plurality and morality are represented in Superhero comic books. Finally, to deepen an understanding of the postmodern condition as evidenced in the hero myth present in Superhero comic books. These three aims shall be achieved by

comprehensively dividing this thesis into five distinct sections. The first section is a brief history of the American Superhero. It is important to note that while Superhero comic books predates the start of postmodernism it is of significance that the origin of Superheroes be mentioned, as Batman and Superman were both created in the late 1930s. The second section is the Theoretical Framework of the dissertation. The final three sections are concerned with three selected Superheroes. The analysis of each Superhero will be done by using postmodernist theory, as well as making use of interdisciplinary approaches. The Superheroes Superman, Spider-Man and Batman have been selected from two of the most famous comic book publishing houses in the United States of America; Marvel Comics and DC (Detective Comics). It is important to comprehend the necessity of the villain, because, if there is no evil, then there is no need to have powerful figures who can ensure that this evil is stopped. Therefore, the inclusion of villains into this discussion will be paramount in the analysis of how the Superhero's identity is constructed through the existence of the evil-doer. As this dissertation is making use of interdisciplinary approaches, it is important to note that just as Superhero comic books is seen to be a hybrid of text and graphics, so too is this dissertation a hybrid of postmodernist theory, literary theory, as well as philosophical understandings which go hand-in-hand with the parameters of this study. Previously, academic research completed on Superheroes has often focused on gender studies, structuralism or cultural studies. As such it to approach Superheroes from a postmodernist perspective opens a new avenue of investigation. It is not the intention of this dissertation create a singular approach to this subject matter. Rather it is the intentions of the author to create an interdisciplinary research which falls under the wide scope of Comparative Literature and Philosophy.

Chapter 1:
A Brief History of the American Superhero Comic Book

The comic book originated in the early 1930's as a way to bind the Sunday funnies into a magazine-like format (Rhoades 2). Comic strips had been appearing in newspapers as early as the late nineteenth century (Duncan & Smith 24). These sequential panels of cartoon drawings tended to be humorous, and thus the term "comic" was born. The term "comic book" evolved from comic strip, and has caused some confusion over the years as the stories have become darker in mood, because "comic" refers to the medium and not the content (Makey 548). Even the use of the colloquial description of "funny book" implies a sense of mirth that is often missing in modern superhero battles between good and evil.

Scott McCloud describes comic books as "visual piece(s) of art in sequence", and goes on to say that, comic books are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (70). More simply, a comic book is a magazine made up of narrative artwork in the form of separate 'panels' that represent individual scenes of a storyline, and are often accompanied by dialogue, usually in word balloons, as well as including a brief descriptive prose. Comic books are typically a 6 5/8-by-10 3/16-inch stapled magazine that consists of a cover, and thirty-two pages of sequential panels of four-colour art, and written dialogue that tells an original story for the purpose of entertainment (Rhoades 2).

Northrop Frye identified five types of fictive heroes, with each being determined by the "hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same" (33). For the sake of this research, only Frye's first three types of fictive heroes are applicable. The first type of fictive hero is defined as: "If superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be myth in the common sense of a story about a god" (Frye 33). The second type of fictive hero is defined as: "If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero… whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being" (Frye 33).The third type of fictive hero is defined as: "If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a

leader… [He] is subject to social criticism and to the order of nature" (Frye 33-34). All of these heroes are larger than life characters although some are merely physically larger than others. However, whatever the hero is and does in terms of objective reality is less important than what he represents to the individual's own reality. The local man who saves a child from drowning is of less enduring interest to society than our fictive or historical heroes. The former wants symbolism, and unless local mythopoeia provides him with it, society tends to displace him in society's consciousness with the more value-charged heroes that humanity seems to need (Rollin 434).

Using Frye's types of fictive heroes, one could reason that the composition of the superhero is seen to follow one of several common "threads." Firstly, most superheroes have superpowers although characters such as Batman, Rorschach, and the Punisher are important exceptions as they do not possess any superpowers. Secondly, many superheroes have received their powers by chance or accident, and in most cases, through a failed science experiment, such as Spider-Man or Dr. Manhattan. Thirdly, most superheroes have a secret identity, and will transform or don a costume so that they can become this alter –ego, such as Superman and Spider-Man. Fourthly, many superheroes are either orphaned, or their parents are not present, such as Batman or Superman. Fifthly, many superheroes experience some tragedy, which in many cases causes the individual to take action and become a hero such as Batman, Spider-Man and Ironman. Sixthly, many superheroes do not have an easy relationship with the law; nevertheless, they are seen to uphold it, such as Wolverine and Spider-Man. Finally, many superheroes mimic the language of the "man-god", which presents traits of noble origins, god-like powers, and saviour-like abilities, such as Wonder Woman and the Silver Surfer.

Despite various earlier claims abroad, there is no dispute that it was the Americans who nurtured and developed the comic book medium into something uniquely their own (Rhoades 2). In 1934, the comic book format was introduced with the publication of the *Famous Funnies*. The United States comic book industry markets the majority of its titles towards young adult readers although it does produce comics for children and adults.

Cultural historians have divided the career of the comic book in the United States into four eras, namely, the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, and the Modern Age although comic book historians continue to debate the exact boundaries of these eras (Goulart 43). Don Marstein notes in "The Adventures of Obidiah Oldbuck" that as a printed medium, comic books have existed within the United States since the printing of *The Adventures of Obidiah Oldbuck* in 1842, making it not only the first known American comic book, but also the first American graphic novel.

People have a tendency to identify with heroes, such as Batman and Superman, not only because they are clean living, upright, and reverent, what one might term as an adult "Boy Scout". Yet they are undeniably good, which is something that all people should be, but also good because they are handsome, athletic, intelligent, and in Batman's case, rich, which is all things people wish to be. Superheroes fulfil people's fantasies, as well as their moral sense of justice. Freudian psychology may lead one to expect the former as being more crucial, but this does not appear to be the case (Rollin 433). Whatever the values being stressed in different heroes, they tend to share common global values; therefore, their repeated triumphs over evil, whether conscious of it or not, can help to reinforce the comic book reader's confidence in their value system, thus encouraging their conformity to it.

1.1. The Golden Age of Comic Books

Comic books first became popular in the 1930's, and from its inception have influenced "our fears, our desires, and our attitudes" (Krensky 6). The Great Depression was a difficult time in the United States. In October 1929, investors panicked as the value of their stocks began to fall, resulting in a crash in the United States' stock markets; an economic crisis followed. Investors lost their fortunes, and banks were forced to close. People could no longer afford to keep their businesses and factories open, and many owners had no choice but to fire their employees. The unemployed could not afford to buy goods or services, resulting in more businesses having to close, and more employees losing their jobs. By 1933, one in four American workers were unemployed (Krensky 7).

The economic depression brought with it an emotional depression. Even those who had managed to keep their jobs lived in constant fear of their uncertain future. Americans sought to forget their troubles, and did so by immersing themselves in entertainment found in books, music, and movies. Novels such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and songs such as "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" urged society to treat ordinary, hardworking people with respect. Other forms of media were pure entertainment; for fifteen cents a ticket, movies such as *Duck Soup* and *My Man Godfrey* provided fast-paced comedy, while *Gunga Din* and *Footlight Parade* thrilled audiences with their exciting adventures and flashy dancing (Krensky 7).

The character of the superhero seemed to appeal to the readers of the Great Depression. The years following the Great Depression was a time in which criminals, such as John Dillinger, enjoyed a kind of folk-lore-hero status, as individuals who made something of themselves, despite the circumstances. Yet their murderous rampages alienated them from society and furthered them into paragons of evil. However, soon the heroes became those catching the criminals, rather than those committing the crime, as law enforcement began to tackle criminal activities more effectively. During this time, Dick Tracy became a popular crime fighter in comic books, and such characters gained popularity because they seemed pure and incorruptible, and because they would do whatever it took to catch the bad guy. This rise in popularity allowed for other characters, such as Doc Savage, and the Shadow. Jim Steranko, in Monica Haffer's "Postmodernism and the Batman Phenomenon" reasons that these comics were "all plot. Characterization was almost non-existent. It would have slowed down the juggernaut velocity of the script... Dialogue was to the point. Every single word kept the story moving". This type of dialogue and action affected early comic books, but were later replaced as character issues became of greater importance. However, it was not until the publication of Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster's *Superman* in 1938, that comic books catapulted into a major industry (Goulart 43). Superman emerged as the "Man of Steel faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound" (Siegel, "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed" n.p.). Superman's creation made comics into an art form, and introduced the world to the Golden Age of the Comic Book (Goulart 43). However, in his early adventures

Superman did not fight aliens or robots; he battled evils that terrified people at the time: gangsters, corrupt politicians, war profiteers, and fascists.

In 1939, the likes of *The Sub-Mariner* and the *Human Torch* under Timely Comics, joined the ranks of *Batman* and *Superman*. By the end of the 1930's, the whole world was in a need of a hero. By this time, the hardships caused by the Great Depression were beginning to ease, but a greater threat loomed; Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party and dictator of Germany sought to dominate Europe. Along with Italy and Japan, the Axis powers were formed, and attempted to invade and dominate countries in Europe and Asia. Soon the Allied powers were formed to fight against the Axis powers, comprising of Great Britain, France, and several smaller countries. By the end of 1939, war had broken out in Europe.

The United States chose to remain formally neutral; however, after the bombing of Great Britain, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and many Americans believed that the United States should end its neutrality and join the Allies, while others believed that America should remain neutral. However, whether or not America could remain neutral was a growing question as the Americans had every reason to be fearful of a Japanese attack from the west.

One might question as to why comic books would be of such interest during such a volatile and uncertain time; the answer is escape. This can be defined as a temporary psychological and intellectual disengagement from the tensions and problems of "real" life (Rollin 432). Comic books, as an aspect of popular culture, is often seen to be full of tensions and problems, and are often not far removed from reality. One might argue that the frequent threats and violence found in comic books made the genre escapist by virtue of pure exaggeration. However, one might suggest the escapism of comic books ironically exists in the security that it generates; readers know, intuitively, that The Joker will not destroy Batman. Thus, the escapism provided by comic books involves not only "emotional catharsis, the purgation of pity and fear" but also what might be termed "value satisfaction"; that is the confirmation or reaffirmation of our value system which results from the individual's value system being threatened, but ultimately triumphing (Rollin 432). For the reader, one of the things that occurs when a hero like Batman wins, is that the reader experiences, on some level, the defeat of evil, as it is envisioned, by

the good, as it has been accepted. Even though the reader is conscious that such a victory does not always occur in reality, there is a part of the reader who wants such victories to occur.

By this time, more superheroes had joined the comic book world, with new additions such as *Captain Marvel*, the *Destroyer*, the *Green Lantern*, and the *Spectre*. In the early 1940's, the *Green Lantern*'s storylines often dealt with corporate corruption, which reflected key elements of Roosevelt's New Deal. Despite the success of characters such as Captain Marvel, and Superman in encouraging children to read, not everyone was in support of the superhero comic. In 1940, the *Chicago Daily News* published an editorial by book reviewer Sterling North who criticized comic books as:

> Pulp-paper nightmares... badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed – a strain on the young eyes and young nervous systems... Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic' magazine. (qtd. in Krensky 27)

Despite such criticisms, superheroes were more popular than ever; however, their battles with gangsters and other worldly monsters seemed irrelevant in the shadow of the war. Superheroes declared war on Germany and Japan long before the United States government did. As early as 1939, the Sub-Mariner, Marvel Boy, and the Human Torch were taking on the Nazis. Unlike the complex and controversial issues surrounding the Great Depression, World War II united the American people against a common enemy. Comic book publishers used this new patriotic mood to create superheroes who would reflect this mentality (Rhoades 37). Superheroes were no longer fighting gangsters, but the evils of the Nazi fascists.

In the "German Propaganda Archive" Goebbels is quoted responding by calling Superman creator Jerry Siegel, who was Jewish, an "intellectually and physically circumcised chap" who had invented "a colourful figure with an impressive appearance, a powerful body, and a red swimsuit who enjoys the ability to fly through the ether". The

attack concluded with the warning "woe to the American youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don't even notice the poison they swallow daily".

For some time, Superman and his various counterparts won every battle against the Nazis and their evil forces, but in December 1941, the war became a reality for all Americans. On the 7th of December 1941, Japanese warplanes bombed Pearl Harbour, a naval base in Hawaii, in a surprise attack. The United States declared war on Japan the next day, and Germany and Italy came to Japan's defence, and declared war on America. This resulted in hundreds of thousands of American soldiers being shipped off to war, to fight in Europe, and in the Pacific theatre.

As men were shipped off to war, women's lives were greatly altered; many had to work in wartime factories, replacing the men who had gone to fight. Rosie the Riveter, a fictional female character who worked at a military factory, became a popular cartoon and poster image, projecting the notion that women were strong and important to the war effort (Krensky 30). Other women ran family businesses, and took responsibility for their families. In many ways, women became their own superheroes, taking up jobs that had belonged to men, and which had been previously deemed impossible and unreasonable for a woman to do.

Women have been among their male crime-fighting counterparts since the early comic books. Don Marstein in "Fantoma" notes that in 1941, female cartoonist, Tarpé Mills created the tough Miss Fury. Fiction House featured several progressive female superheroes, such as the jungle queen, Sheena. In *The Great Women Superheroes*, Trina Robbins wrote:

> Most of Fiction House's pulp-style action stories either starred or featured strong, beautiful, competent heroines. They were war nurses, aviatrixes, girl detectives, counter-spies, and animal-clad jungle queens, and they were in command. Guns blazing, daggers unsheathed, sword in hand, they leaped across the pages, ready to take on any villain. And they did not need rescuing. (3)

Fletcher Hank created the first known female superhero, Fantomah, who featured in a February 1940 issue of *Jungle Comics* #2; she was an ageless Egyptian woman in the modern day, who could transform into a skull-faced creature, and used her powers to fight evil (Eisner & Powell n.p.).

During World War II, women assumed jobs that had been formerly occupied by men; they became truck drivers, stevedores, and welders. After the war, many women refused to give up their newfound freedom; this created a massive crisis within the previously naturalized definitions of masculinity and femininity. The femme fatale, who featured in *The Spirit*, exemplified this crisis. She was a strong, sexually attractive woman, who refused her traditional, "proper" role. Women have been portrayed within comic books since their inception; however, their portrayal has often been the subject of much controversy, particularly with their predominately male audience. Sociologists have noted that the roles of women within the superhero genre have been depicted as being in supporting roles and as having the potential to lead, but also struggling to be accepted as equals. Younger fans tend to not be interested in female characters, and older fans tend to objectify them as sex objects. As in other forms of popular culture, the body types of the women portrayed within comic books is unrealistic; they were seen to have small hips and waists, and large breasts (Cord 328). The most successful female characters have been as part of a team, for example, Jean Grey, Rogue and Storm from *The X-Men*, and Scarlet Witch and Wasp in *The Avengers*. Other female characters have been in the form of sidekicks of popular male superheroes, such as Superwoman, Hawkgirl, Black Widow, and the Black Canary.

World War II had a significant impact on the superhero comic book; comics were inexpensive, portable and easy-to-read stories of good triumphing over evil. During this time of uncertainty, people needed "that kind of inspirational archetype" (Rhoades 39). The Shield, Uncle Sam, and Captain Battle all enlisted in the war effort, as the war continued. Clark Kent failed the eye exam, but Superman still pitched in; in the comic books most superheroes were not officially part of the war, but their assistance was welcomed by the military (Cord 332). One might reason that this was done to prevent children putting too much faith into their favourite superheroes to defeat evil, end the war, and send their fathers and brothers home from the war.

Allied heroes and Axis villains were depicted in black-and-white terms; comic book publishers chose to showcase their superheroes' battling the Axis Powers, with covers featuring superheroes punching Adolf Hitler, or fighting buck-toothed or fanged Japanese soldiers (Peterson & Gerstein 891). The enemy was often savagely parodied. Shirrel Rhoades explains: "Germans were square-jawed *dumbkoffs*. Japanese were yellow-skinned devils with slanty eyes and buckteeth. But they were no match for Captain America" (40).

Popular stories included: "The Terror of the Slimy Japs", "The Slant Eye of Satan", and the "Funeral for Yellow Dogs". Terms such as "Japs" and "Krauts" seem very politically incorrect by today's standards; however, during World War II, it was a rallying cry of patriotism uniting the people against a specific enemy. Comic book covers of the time made the message clear. On *Action Comics* #58, Superman is seen to be at a printing press, with the headline reading "You can slap a Jap... with war bonds!" (Siegel, "The Face of Adonis" n.p.). In *World's Finest Comics* #9, Batman, with the help of some of his super-friends, "Knock Out the Axis with Bonds and Stamps!" (Finger, "One Second to Live!" n.p.).

These wartime comics had two purposes; firstly to entertain, but secondly, and most importantly, as a piece of patriotic persuasion. Everyone knew that the fictional characters they read about could not end the war, but as Matthew J. Pustz points out:

> Comics represented one way in which young readers could feel involved in the war effort... Readers could... imagine themselves as their heroes, fighting the Nazis and the Japanese in the same way that their neighbours, older brothers, uncles, and fathers might have   been doing. (29).

These superhero comics made their way overseas, and became very popular with active-duty soldiers; they helped raise the hopes and morale of the troops (Krensky 33). The books were cheap, entertaining, portable, and could be replaced easily; soldiers read and swapped them, whether they were resting in camp or being transported for long hours. The comic book was a key weapon in America's propaganda arsenal during

the war. Ethan Roberts states that "a lot of GI's went to war with a comic book rolled up in their back pants pocket" (qtd. in Rhoades 40). Wherever the comics were, either on the home-front or with the soldiers themselves, the comic book was doing its part in making a victory seem possible.

Comic books were everywhere in the 1940's; according to surveys, more than half of the U.S. population read comics (Knowles 135). Comics were outselling the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Reader's Digest*, and on military newsstands, they were outselling ten to one (Wright 14) Superheroes and their comics were used as propaganda for governmental and non-governmental programs, including war bonds, scrap metal, paper collection, the American Red Cross, and other patriotic efforts.

1.2.   The Silver Age of Comic Books

In 1945, the Allied forces emerged victorious; the war ended, and soldiers began to return home. To force the end of the war, nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; this had a profound effect on the content of comic books. The appearance of superheroes created by nuclear explosions and similar events began to reflect this major event, they reflected America's image of victory and contentment within this atomic age. Characters such as the *Atomic Thunderbolt*, and *Atoman* began to appear. In the TV series, *The Adventures of Superman*, Superman fought a villain named Atom-Man and Superman's weakness is kryptonite which recalled the dangers of atomic radiation (Sabin 74).

However, with world annihilation over for the moment, superhero sales began to decline. Many soldiers left for war as teenagers, but returned in time to attend college, while others left already married or planning on marrying soon, and came back and purchased new homes. The economy was strengthened by the war, and so, returning soldiers did not battle to find jobs. With the security of money in the bank, a new home, and a job, many young American couples felt that it was time to start a family. With war over, and the world safe once more, the need for a hero began to fade. Children and young adults no longer needed a hero draped in patriotic colours, to fly in and save-the-day; they had become their own heroes, good had triumphed. The superhero comic books that had reigned supreme during the 1930s and 1940s were to be replaced by

funny animals, teen humour and the new romance comics; but they would never deliver sales in the way that the superhero comics did, and the comic industry suffered for it (Knowles 135).

The 1950's saw the first of the baby-boomers becoming teenagers, and unlike their parents' generation, they were not concerned with economic hardships. They "created a youth culture with its own clothes and lingo"; they danced to a new kind of music, rock 'n' roll, which was loud and wild (Krensky 45). The youth watched movies that were created with them in mind, movies that featured rebellious and independent teenagers, movies such as *Rebel Without a Cause* featuring James Dean, or Elvis Presley's *King Creole*. However, more serious things were happening in the United States during the 1950's. Firstly, African Americans were fighting against segregation in education, housing and unemployment. Secondly, women were seeking equality of education and employment, and finally, many European immigrants displaced by the war were attempting to start a new life in America.

Although not all Americans were fearful of the Communist threat, many were concerned about other serious problems. "Violent street crime and juvenile delinquency... were on the rise in the United States", and many Americans began to wonder what the origins of these crimes were (Krensky 47, 48). Fredric Wertham, a well-known psychiatrist, believed that violence seen in movies, radio programs, and in popular literature was to blame for juvenile crime and anti-social behaviour; he turned his attention to comic books in particular. In 1954, Wertham published *The Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he articulated his pronouncements. He stated:

> All comic books with their words and expletives in balloons are bad for reading... but not every comic book is bad for children's minds and emotions. The trouble is that the 'good' comic books are snowed under by those which glorify violence [and] crime (Wertham 10).

Wertham felt that comic books were not simply a waste of time, but encouraged children to take part in violent and destructive behaviours. Other experts disagreed; they thought that comic books could not drive "normal, well-adjusted kids to commit violent

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crimes", and that violent images were more likely to only affect children who were from bad backgrounds, and were already troubled (Krensky 49).

Yet *The Seduction of the Innocent* raised anxieties about comic books by "obsessing over sadistic and homosexual undertones in superhero comics" (Rhoades 58). *The Encyclopaedia of Gay Histories and Culture* notes that gay subtext can be found in DC Comics' publications as early as the Golden Age of Comic Books (Haggerty 325). Readers have inferred homosexuality between superheroes and their same-sex sidekicks, and on the women-only Paradise Island seen in the *Wonder Woman* comic books (Haggerty 325).

Wertham's assertions about hidden sexual themes, such as images of female nudity secreted in drawings, or Batman and Robin as homosexual lovers were met with scepticism by the comic book industry; but the public took these accusations very seriously (Rhoades 58). Wertham went as far as to claim that Wonder Woman was a lesbian as she was strong and independent. After this accusation, DC stripped Wonder Woman of her superpowers. She became a glorified secretary, and fought crime by more conventional methods. However, the most notorious accusation was aimed at *Batman*, with Wertham including a four-page attack, claiming that Batman and his sidekick Robin were gay lovers.

It seemed as if many Americans, and even influential politicians, agreed with Wertham, and as a result, some communities began to protest against and even ban certain comic books. Politicians and moral crusaders blamed the comic book industry for crime, juvenile delinquency, drug use, and poor grades, without any evidence (Rhoades 61). This growing trend was alarming to comic book companies, and they reacted by forming their own editorial boards, in an effort to control any depictions of violence, sex, or promiscuity. Several industry leaders created the Association of Comic Magazine Publishers (ACMP), to set standards and to improve the tarnished image of the comic book industry.

Large companies, such as Dell and DC, chose to not join the ACMP, preferring to rely on their own in-house regulations. Some publishers did not agree with the code at all, claiming that crime and horror comics were meant for adults, and that it was the responsibility of the parents, and not the publishers, to keep such comic books out of

the hands of children. Some publishers simply paid attention to the success or failure of their various series'; if a comic with socially unacceptable themes and content was selling it was kept on the market.

Unfortunately, Wertham had done his damage. Many parents, teachers, and religious leaders began to push for a change in comic book regulations, and when the uproar grew loud enough, politicians took note. This resulted in the United States Senate holding investigative committee hearings, and invited several publishers to defend their comic books (Peterson & Gerstein 889).

According to the United States constitution, under the right of freedom of speech, comic book publishers could publish whatever they wanted, but what was the point of publishing material that would not be bought. They were after all in the business of turning a profit. In late 1954, in searching for a way to gain the trust and support of the public, comic book publishers formed the Comic Magazine Association of America (CMAA) (Rhoades 58). This resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which was a seal of approval, and its logo ensured that the comic had been approved for public entertainment.

For a comic book to gain the approval of the CCA it had to follow a long list of guidelines; these guidelines limited the tone and direction that a story could follow. Among these guidelines were firstly, crimes could not be presented in a way that sympathy could be felt for the criminal, secondly, people in positions of authority, such as policemen and judges, shall not be shown in a disrespectful light, and thirdly, in every instance, good shall triumph over evil, and evil shall be punished ("Comics Magazine Association of America: Facts about Code-Approved Comics Magazines"). An unintended consequence of the Code was to force creators to dig deep into their imaginations to capture the attention of the readers by using stories that did not have sex, gore, or excessive violence. Daniel Goulart believed that "the Comics Code was not an impediment to the further development of the artists and art, it was merely a detour" (90).

This challenge to the industry brought about a great reduction in sales; before 1955, about five hundred thousand comic books had been published. However, after the Wertham controversy and the Senate hearings, DC Comics reported that in 1955,

they were selling 10.5 million copies, but by 1957, they were selling less than half of that (Goulart 81). Some publishers went out of business, while others tried to replace the crime and horror genres which had been criticized as being overtly violent. The Comics Code challenged the comic industry; it sapped the energy from creative people or drove them away from the industry. By this time, television had grabbed the attention of the public, with people preferring to watch adventure and comedy on a small black-and-white screen, than to read it on the coloured pages of a comic book.

In 1962, when radiation and the effects of nuclear testing were constantly in the news, Stan Lee took inspiration and created *Spider-Man*. Lee was criticized for choosing a spider as the subject of his character. After all, who liked or admired spiders? Additionally, Marvel's editor-in-chief, Martin Goodman, disliked Spider-Man's alter ego, Peter Parker, who was a teenager. Teenagers were sidekicks, not heroes. It was also felt that Peter Parker had too many personal and family problems. Stan Lee was advised to forget about *Spider-Man*. However, Lee took a chance, and featured Spider-Man in the final issue of a dying series. The issue containing the web-slinging, Spider-Man, was a best-seller, and months later, he had his own series. The success of Spider-Man shocked not only Goodman, but Lee as well. Stan Lee is quoted as saying, in Allison Kugel's "Stan Lee: From Marvel Comics Genius to Purveyor of Wonder with POW!": "I never thought that Spider-Man would become the worldwide icon that he is. I just hoped the books would sell and I'd keep my job".

As with the *Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk*, Lee and Marvel Comics were breaking ground with Spider-Man and Peter Parker. Traditional superheroes like Superman always did the right thing, and the pressures of everyday life did not seem to affect them. Clark Kent was an ordinary man, making a decent living as a reporter, yet he never worried about paying the bills or saving for his first car. Superman was an orphan, who had been ripped away from his parents and planet, but he took this emotional upheaval in his stride. Peter Parker was the opposite of Superman; his adolescent struggles were a part of each and every *Spider-Man* issue. With the inception of characters that were more real, the superheroes seemed to have bridged new ground in becoming upstanding members of society.

The superheroes had done it; they had championed high-minded and progressive American values, and were always victorious in their battles. Superheroes were unequivocally decent role models for children; they stood for justice and truth, and when not in costume, most of them held respected positions in society, such as policemen or members of the scientific community. DC's characters stressed the importance of the individual's obligation to his or her community, even if it was at the expense of individuality. Most of their heroes spoke and behaved in similar manners, they were in control of their emotions, and were seemingly unaffected by the "usual failings of the human condition. These characters lived in controlled environments, either modern cities with glistening skyscrapers, or clean, white-picket-fenced suburban homes. The DC superheroes of the Silver Age were the essence of American affluence and confidence.

Perhaps this was DC's misfortune; their lack of individuality. DC's 'squeaky-clean' superheroes proved to be vulnerable against the 'flawed' heroes and antiheroes of Marvel Comics. During the 1960's, Marvel introduced characters such as Spider-Man, and the Incredible Hulk, who were anti-establishment. These characters, and others, seemed to connect with the growing contemporary youth culture. Alex Ness in "The Ultimate Universe ala the Original Marvel Universe" notes how "previous comic book heroes were icons, perfect in motive, unquestioned in society", but while Marvel's heroes were moral, they were also filled with internal turmoil, confusion and angst. DC woke up too late, and in the late 1960's introduced a host of characters who were ambiguous and filled with anguish. Their lack of contemporary knowledge led to their downfall, and in the mid 1970's, Marvel had surpassed DC as the industry's leading publisher (S. Pendergast & T. Pendergast 229).

1.3.   The Bronze Age of Comic Books

The late 1960's and early 1970's was a time of great unrest in the United States. The children of the generation who had survived the Great Depression, and World War II, felt that their parents were out of touch with the great social changes that were occurring in the United States. The younger generation believed that the older

generation were stuck in their ways, boring and traditional, and too willing to blindly follow authority.

In November 1955, the Vietnam War, a war that raged between the Communist North and the non-Communist South, began. Being Communist driven, the Vietnam War was a hot topic in the United States. The older generation seemed to accept the argument of the U.S. government, that intervention was necessary to prevent the spread of Communism, but much of the younger generation felt that the government was sending soldiers to die in a war that was not their own.

It was during this time that any authority figure or governing power became suspicious in the eyes of the youth and; "Don't trust anyone over thirty!" became a rallying cry. The suspicion was so extreme, that it even extended to Superman and Batman; these characters never aged on the printed page, even though they had been in print for decades, and even their storylines appeared to be old-fashioned (Krensky 69). Even though superheroes were portrayed as having human problems, many young readers felt that they were still part of the established power (Krensky 69, 70).

Young adults and students in the 1970's were concerned with, or were involved in, a number of issues in the United States. Many were concerned with or actually engaged in preventing racial inequality. Some fought in the Vietnam War, while others fought going there. Some students and young adults were involved in protests against police brutality or college administrators. Some were involved in politics or social work. They criticized their education's lack of relevance. They were a generation who were unwilling to stand by and watch wrong doing. As a result many comic book creators were reluctant to touch certain topics. Most of the major comic book publishers chose to avoid the topic of the Vietnam War, with the lack of sales being the reason for avoidance. However, as the Vietnam War continued to consume the energies of students, comic book characters were brought into the aftermath of the post-war angst.

In 1970, in an issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Spider-Man's alter-ego, Peter Parker's friend Flash Thompson leaves for a tour of duty in Vietnam. Parker wonders to himself: "Which is worse? Staying behind while other guys are doing the fighting… or fighting in a war that nobody wants… against an enemy you don't even hate" (Lee, "The Schemer" n.p.). Iron Man's military-industrial background made his storylines somewhat

of a commentary on the politics of the Vietnam War and the changing Cold War assumptions (Wright 241).

It was also fear of lack of sales that prevented the tackling of other serious social issues; African Americans, gays and lesbians, and women were all fighting for equality in some form or another. They fought against the stereotypes that portrayed them as weak, unintelligent, or untrustworthy; for much of the American population, these civil rights battles were unnerving and threatened the status quo, but also enlightening and creating an awareness that had been blinkered by the persuasive white heterosexual rhetoric (Krensky 70). Mainstream comic book companies responded by abandoning any offensive racial and sexual material, in the hopes of not offending their readers, but never truly dealt with the real issues at hand.

However, it was a dangerous new subculture that comic books could not portray that was becoming a huge problem. The Comics Code Authority prevented the representation of any crime related storylines as being glamorous or favourable. Drug users had always been portrayed as sad individuals who existed on the fringes of society, but as the 1960's continued, young Americans, even those from educated, middle-class backgrounds, began to experiment with drugs. They believed that drug use would intensify their senses, memories and emotions, that it would expand their consciousness, and loosen their inhibitions (Krensky 71). Psychedelia, which referred to the vivid swirling or fractured patterns of colour, was seen in everything of the youth culture's, from their clothes to their music. But the Comics Code Authority forbade comic books from depicting drug use in any other way other than in the traditional, law-and-order manner.

By the late 1960's and early 1970's, comic book publishers were more willing to take risks. Yet the pretext for revising the comics' code did not come from one of the young liberal comic book creators; in 1971, Stan Lee was approached by the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, to write a comic book featuring a storyline about drug abuse (Sabin 68). Stan Lee and Marvel proposed a three-part *The Amazing Spider-Man* series, in which the story would depict that despite being the "in-thing", drugs were dangerous and harmful.

In one of the opening scenes, a young African American man who is "stoned right out of his mind" walks off of a rooftop believing that he can fly (Lee, "... And Now the Goblin" n.p.). Spider-Man rescues the young man and leaves him in the care of sympathetic policemen. As Spider-Man leaves the scene he thinks to himself: "Any drug strong enough to give you that kind of trip – can damage your brain – but bad!" (Lee, "... And Now the Goblin" n.p.). Another African American man who witnesses the event thinks, whilst clenching his fists:

> Man, this drug scene really bugs me!... Everyone figures it's the black man's bag – but it ain't! We're the ones who hate it the most! It hurts us more than anyone else… 'cause too many of us got no hope – so we're easier pickins for the pushers! But it ain't just our problem… it's yours too! (Lee, "... And Now the Goblin" n.p.)

The storylines presented a clearly anti-drug message. It was an effective, exciting story without being preachy or judgmental. At the time, any portrayal of drug use in comic books was banned outright by the Comics Code Authority regardless of its context. Despite its good intentions, the Comics Code Authority refused to approve the issues. However, Lee was confident in the moral tone of the series, and the strong sales of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and chose to publish the issues without the Code's seal of approval. The strong sales proved that the seal of approval from the Comics Code Authority was not what it used to be. The positive reception of the comic books by the public led the Comics Code Authority to revise its code, allowing drug portrayal only when it is portrayed in a negative light (Raphael 167). This revision of the Comics Code also led to the relaxing of the rules surrounding vampires, ghouls, and werewolves in comic books, which led to comic books such as *Swamp Thing* and *Ghost Rider.*

1.4.   The Modern Age of Comic Books

During this period, a number of changes occurred; firstly, comic book characters became darker, and psychologically more complex; secondly, creators became better known, and they could actively change the industry more than ever before; and thirdly,

independent publishers flourished, while larger publishers became more commercialized (Rhoades 124).

In the mid 1970s, Marvel's anti-heroes such as the *X-Men*'s Wolverine, the *Punisher*, and Frank Miller's darker version of *Daredevil* challenged previously conceived ideas about superheroes being cheerful humanitarians. Miller redefined the concept of the comic book Amazons, with the creation of the assassin Elektra. In doing so, he changed the role of female action heroes; there had never been such a ruthless female character in a comic book, let alone as the protagonist.

During his 1980 electoral campaign, Ronald Reagan, campaigned the ideal that he was the kind of hero that could restore the American people's faith in themselves, and in their country. The majority of voters who elected him, agreed. However, as the decade continued, it became clear that there were cracks in Reagan's hero façade. Soon the true nature of this new American hero became increasingly questionable (Dubose 916). Many Americans began to question whether or not a hero could truly exist in the eighties. The result was the creation of a new kind of hero, a vigilante. The 1980s was rife with vigilante characters throughout popular culture, no more so than in the comic book industry. Vigilantes can be defined as individuals who defend the established order by resorting to means that violate these formal boundaries of that order. More simply, vigilantes are individuals who take the law into their own hands.

The 1980s were "tough times for comic book sales" (Krensky 79). Before 1986, most people in America thought that comic books were "bad entertainment… People thought comic books only appealed, and could only appeal, to children, entertaining adults secretly, if at all" (Rhoades 124). Pop culture was expanding at an alarming rate; arcade video games enabled an interactive element to fantasy stories. The question then became, why read about blowing up a space-ship when you could do it yourself? With improvements in special effects, movies such as *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* became cult classics. MTV, a channel dedicated completely to music videos, drew in the rock and pop fans. However, in 1986, the mainstream media announced the existence of adult comic books and fans. Some news stories chose to focus on the collectors who were investing in comic books hoping for a future fortune, while others focused on the content of the comics. People were surprised by the new adult content:

sex, violence, and strong political opinions, stories about holocaust victims and psychopathic superheroes all suddenly appeared in the media (Rhoades 124). The comics were "presented [as] complicated topics using complex narrative forms that [were] open to multiple interpretations", the media declared it the year the comic book grew up (Rhoades 124). However, comic books were "words and pictures, pretty tame in the exploding world of the new media" (Krensky 79). Comic book publishers responded by including gimmicks, such as holograms and glow-in-the-dark covers, in hopes of maintaining readership.

DC further stretched its *repertoire* with Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, a twelve-part series published in 1986. Like *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the backdrop of the story is the impending nuclear war with the Union Soviet Socialist Republics. A mentally unstable vigilante, named Rorschach, investigates the death of the Comedian, a costumed hero working as a government agent, as independent costumed heroes have been outlawed by the anti-vigilante legislation. Rorschach questions his own motives in his investigation stating: "Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished" (Moore, *Watchmen* 24). Rorschach discovers that the Comedian was murdered by Ozymandias, a retired hero turned entrepreneur. After teaming up with Nite Owl, the Silk Spectre, and Dr. Manhattan, the only hero in the novel who has superhuman powers, Rorschach confronts Ozymandias. They soon learn that Ozymandias plans to unite the United States and the Union Soviet Socialist Republics against a common enemy, by staging a fake alien invasion. All the heroes, except Rorschach agree to keep the plan a secret, despite the fact that half of the population of New York will be lost in the "invasion".

Watchmen was meant to be read on a number of levels. Alan Moore claimed that "to a certain degree all interpretations are true… All of these different little threads of continuity are effectively telling the same story from different angles" (qtd. in Rhoades 125). Critics and readers hailed the series for its stunning visuals and dramatic close-ups (Krensky 84). The creation of storylines seen in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and the *Watchmen*, were of impressive psychological depth, and starred characters that were deeply troubled and flawed. Claude Lalumiére notes in "A Short History of American Comic Books" that these stories "so thoroughly deconstructed the superhero

genre that for several years all superhero comics seemed like bad parodies of themselves".

The novel, yet intriguing world of punk spawned the creation, in the 1990s, of *Tank Girl* which was a popular feminist comic book; the title character wore punk-influenced clothing, and had a shaved head; as with other popular comics, her popularity was such that a movie was made. She was a representative of the modern woman, one who no longer had to fulfil the traditional roles of beauty and behaviour.

The widespread popularity of the comic book industry has led many readers to feel that they are directly or indirectly involved in a social practice (Brown 12). By adopting the unique properties of the comic book, a relationship develops for the reader; this relationship allows the representation of women to have various effects on its readers. The Modern Age has produced strong, female characters, with their own titles; however their portrayal is often put to the test, as sex is used as a ploy to sell comics.

The roles of women have changed greatly in the 21st century; roles and choices such as single-parenting, same-sex relationships, and positions of power in the workplace have come to define many women in the modern society. These new roles have found their way into the comic books of the time. Lesbianism has become increasingly common in modern comic books. In 2006, DC Comics drew widespread media attention when they announced that the new incarnation of Batwoman would be a lesbian (Ferber 51).

In 1999, a website entitled *Women in Refrigerators* was launched. It featured a list of female comic book characters who had been injured, killed, or depowered. The website aimed to analyse why these plot devices had been used so disproportionately on female characters. However, as the new millennium dawned, a new threat loomed, and everyone, including superheroes, would have greater concerns than the objectification of women.

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, with the catastrophic Twin Tower attack, television programming allowed for the constant streaming of immediate images and speculation. One wondered what should be said. What could be done to help assuage the feelings of anger and fear? Politicians and experts alike responded to the 9/11 tragedy with a series of statements and actions that seemed to be taken straight from a

comic book. The comic book industry responded almost immediately, and released a series of commemorative comics, with some of their top superheroes responding to the tragedy. The first to react was Spider-Man who in *The Amazing Spider-Man #36* could not deal with the event and could not deal with his inability to prevent the tragedy. "God…" is all that Spider-Man can utter as he holds his head, and stares in disbelief, at the smoking ruins that were, moments before, the World Trade Centre (Straczynski, "Stand Tall" n.p.). Bystanders approach the costumed hero with questions that have no answers: "Where were you?! How could you let this happen?" (Straczynski, "Stand Tall" n.p.). These questions could have been asked to any superhero, or to anyone who had pledged to protect the American people. The narrator explains: "We could not see it coming. We could not be here before it happened. We could not stop it. But we are here now" (Straczynski, "Stand Tall" n.p.). It was the first comic book that dealt with the emotions of the 9/11 attacks (Cord 326). Superheroes had responded to disasters before, such as the Great Depression and the threat of nuclear war, but nothing had ever hit so close to home for the comic book heroes. Such an outrage demanded action, and soon characters that had been around for several decades were given a new direction toward the war on terrorism.

One had to question if superheroes, who had blurred fantasy and reality for so long, could handle the challenge this time. In the months following the attacks, costumed heroes appeared in benefit books as metaphors who acknowledged their own limitations. In the second volume of "Unreal", Superman laments:

> I can defy the laws of gravity. I can ignore the principles of physics… I can fly in the face of probability. I can bring smiles of relief to a thankful populace. But unfortunately… the one thing that I cannot do… is break free from the fictional pages where I live and breathe…become real in times of crisis… and right the wrongs of an unjust world. A world fortunately protected by heroes of its own. (Gaiman *et al* 15-16).

Chapter 2:
Postmodern Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism is not a single or cohesive theory; rather it is a series of tenets which arose as a reaction to modernism. The "post" of postmodernism means after, and "modernism" refers to the dominant cultural movement of the last part of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century; however this is too simplistic to define postmodernism. "After" implies that there is a relationship that is difficult to define. David Coughlan in his *Literary Encyclopaedia* article would go as far as to define "after " as "an effect of natural evolution out of a reaction against a form of dependency on, an antagonism, a failure, an anti-climax, a new hope, or simply that which comes next". The "modernism" part of post modernism is equally difficult to define; this is especially true as modernism has been identified throughout various forms, such as art, film, literature, and architecture. "There are many different forms of postmodernism as there were high modernisms in place, since the former are at least initially specific and local reactions against those models" (Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 112). To define postmodernism would be to go against the postmodernist foundation that there is no definite terms, boundaries or absolute truths. Gary Aylesworth in "Postmodernism" argues that reality is merely social constructs and is therefore, subject to change. It claims that no absolute truth exists, as the world is perceived by people and their own subjectivity.

This dissertation will make use of postmodern theory as a tool for analysing Superhero comic books using the conceptions of power, plurality and morality. Any research concerning postmodern analysis must include Jean-Francois Lyotard who was the founder of postmodernism. Lyotard's "Postmodern Condition", along with his discussions on the "subject" and power will be used in this discussion. Fredric Jameson, a literary critic and Marxist theorist, will be used in the discussion of pastiche and fragmentation when dealing with the plurality of Superhero identities. Although not a postmodernist theorist, Friedrich Nietzsche and his beliefs are considered as precursors to postmodernism. His views on the self and the fragmented self, evil, and morality are necessary in this discussion to strengthen the argument to be discussed. Postmodernism and power cannot be discussed without making mention to Michel

Foucault. Michel Foucault focused upon the moment of transition, as the modern reasoning began to take shape, and converge the concepts of institutions and practises, or as he would later say, knowledge and power. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault utilizes historical research in order to experiment with subjectivity; in doing so, he was able to demonstrate how subjectivation is a formative power of the self, and surpasses the structures of knowledge and power. Jean Baudrillard and his ideas of the self and identity, as well as power and signs of power will be discussed.

Postmodern theory has been under-utilized in the discussion of Superheroes within academia. Too often Superheroes have been studied from the perspective of feminism or political historical criticism. Although the origins of Superheroes predates the start of postmodernism, postmodernism is one of the few theories which has expanded the longstanding legacy of Superhero comic books. With its wealth of theories within a theory, postmodernist theory is broad enough to deal with the expansive themes which are evident within Superhero comic books. It seems to be a natural fit between postmodernism and Superheroes. The fragmented and powerful, and morally charged Superheroes fit well within postmodern theory.

Louis Hoffman in "What is Postmodern Psychology? " reasons that postmodern reality is not what people believe it to be, but rather it is based on the individual's own perception and understanding of reality. Therefore, postmodernism does not hold faith in any explanations which claim to be true for all groups, whether racial, cultural, traditional, or other. Instead, postmodernism prefers that reality is defined by the relative truth of each person. Postmodernism believes that people's ideas and beliefs are formed by language, motivations and power relations.

Mark Fortier states that "to live in the postmodern condition... is to live without a grand and deep sense of abiding truth" (176). Postmodernism is anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist; it questions absolute and universal truths or an absolute and true reality. It questions the notion of reasoning that is not gendered, historic or ethnocentric, while also rejecting the conception of an autonomous and rational subject. Postmodernism rejects clear-cut binary oppositions, instead favouring reality as being multiple, plural and relative as defined by the individuals concerned. David Wade in "Duality: A Union of Opposites" notes that postmodernism believes in that which is

different; heterogeneity, fragmentation, and indeterminacy are considered without scepticism, with an emphasis on "plurality and pastiche, combined with technical novelty and the spectacle; postmodernism has inherited the success that Modernity lost".

Postmodernists believe that reality is inaccessible by human investigation, knowledge is nothing more than a social construction, and no absolute truth exists, and, as Lyotard believes, that there are always competing versions of the truth (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge 365*). However, one truth cannot be replaced with another; all versions of the truth must be treated with suspicion, as who can dictate which truth is correct. Postmodernism challenges the notion of truth and argues the idea that one should live one's life by adhering to widely perceived ideas of the truth. Furthermore, the meaning of words is to be determined by the reader, and not by the author. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* states: "Postmodernism with its commitment to dissent, pluralism, cultural difference, and scepticism towards authority, finds itself in direct conflict with such systems, which substitute the authoritarian collective for the individual" (Sim xi).

Fredric Jameson notes two features of Postmodernism; "schizophrenia" and "pastiche" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 54). Postmodern artist expression encompasses a remarkable variety of styles, which often blurs the lines between high and mass cultures, including murder mysteries, b-movies, pulp fiction, comic books, *manga*, *anime*, TV series and fantasy. Jameson believes that popular culture has responded by embracing the "fashionable postmodernism craze" (qtd. in Connor vii). Pastiche is a work composed of other parts of other works or even imitates a style, while differing from parody. Jameson links pastiche to the idea that postmodern literature expresses a kind of exhaustion, the feeling that all has already been said and done before, and "all that is left is to imitate dead styles" ("Simulacra and Simulation" 15). Pastiche, or nostalgia, can be argued to be the act of referencing without reason. Where modern art might make reference to an earlier work of art in a comparative manner, postmodern art alludes to earlier work without intention. David Wade expands on this point in "Duality: A Union of Opposites", stating: "the modernist reference relies on the stature of the referent to define a separation between both works, whereas the postmodernist reference does not require contextual knowledge of works to establish its

connection between them". While it might initially appear that Fredric Jameson was not in concurrence with the concept of pastiche, he did also state that:

> The imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech is dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 114)

Jameson characterizes Postmodernism as being schizophrenic; David Coughlan in "Postmodernism" expands on this, stating:

> In the sense of someone existing adrift in a world of words (signifiers) loosed from their meanings (signifieds) or the real (referents), and who, unable to grasp even a sentence as it unrolls in time, loses any hold on a constant identity, on a "me", and exists instead in a perpetual present of profoundly material signifiers.

Superheroes, by their very nature are seen to contradict the rationality of modernity. This concept reached its peak during the Silver Age of Comic Books, when superheroes began to challenge the rationality of science. Many superheroes where going beyond the limitations set before them by reality. Jason Bainbridge argues that with "subterranean kingdoms, negative zones and microverses, parallel Earths, alien Gods and divergent streams of humanity like Mutants, Eternals, and Deviants" superheroes began their full on attack on the reality of nature (81).

Therefore, they challenge, much like Nietzsche, notions of truth and status quo. For example, in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, the superhero fights against a totalitarian government. Furthermore, superheroes challenge the rationality of modernity by presenting an irrational world, whether by the superhero himself, in the case of Superman, a man that can fly, or by the places he might visit, such as Krypton or

enemies he must fight such as Lex Luthor. Such an interrogation of modernism suggests two things; firstly what Jean-Francios Lyotard would term "grand narratives" and how they are limiting to an individual in a postmodern world, and secondly, that postmodernism is an attack on absolute truths. In many ways, Superhero comic books both reject postmodernism and embrace it. Firstly, if to live within the postmodern condition is to live without a sense of truth, the Superhero comic books are anti-postmodernism as they express a unified understanding of the world. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, the 'post' of 'postmodernism' signifies a procedure of analysis, anamnesis (the remembering of things from a supposed previous existence), anagogy (a mystical or allegorical interpretation), and anamorphosis (a distorted projection or drawing that appears normal when viewed from a particular point or with a suitable mirror or lens) ("Note on the Meaning of 'Post'" 50). Although many Superhero comic books reflect this definition, many also reject it; however, at the very core narrative is the theme of a confused society, a society in moral chaos, which can be seen in the "relativism, irrationalism and nihilism" housed within the postmodernist theory (Kellner and Best 4). This starting point allows for a restoration of faith in an individual greater than the fallen society, a saviour figure. Postmodernist literature contradicts the comforting metanarratives, universally applicable theories and systems of the past, claiming that no universal truth exists, and this allows for smaller, contesting discourses to emerge (Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition" 358). Lyotard reasons that perhaps the spread of capitalism, or arguably the fall of communism, has allowed for greater prosperity, and thus, greater individualism, resulting in metanarratives being undermined ("The Postmodern Condition" 38). Many Superhero comic books are written and drawn from a Western, and sometimes Christian, view point in order to relate to the reader's own perspectives and ideals. Nonetheless, readers are posed with the same moralistic dilemmas as the superheroes seen in the four-colour pages of the comic book. Superhero comic books often contain social commentary, in some cases the criticism is aimed directly through its narrative, while others are far more discrete with their criticisms (Stevens 5). As it is with many forms of postmodern media which reject metanarratives, postmodern Superhero comic books make use of a critique of metanarratives. Furthermore, Superhero comic books merge genres, such as fantasy,

science fiction and action, which often contain juxtaposition which serves to depict or to explore the metanarratives that were previously observed within Superhero comic books.

Detective Comics (DC) and Marvel have two differing ideas about heroes and heroism. For DC, Superman and Batman use a kind of transcendent and interventionalist justice, whereas for Marvel, Spider-Man invokes the attitude that one must work through the trauma in order restore the virtue that was once lost (Bainbridge 81). Whatever their heroic differences, what is clear is that these superheroes provide a serious social critique of the world.

With their affiliation to values and grand narratives, it does not seem as if superheroes could be defined as postmodernist. Lyotard once noted the "failure of master narratives... which might allow for a total and unified understanding of the world" (qtd. in Fortier 176). This coupled with Fortier's statements that to live in the postmodernist condition is to live without a sense of grand truths, would mean that superheroes are always anti-postmodernist. However, if truth is absent then one could argue that society would sink into a state of moral relativism where "anything goes". Perhaps, this is where superheroes fit into postmodernism. To believe in superheroes and all that they represent is to believe in a value beyond oneself, to believe in a saviour value. The concepts of justice and doing the 'right thing' are considered to be grand truths. These concepts must exist, as people put their faith in superheroes to fight for them. The hero sets an example for all, as she/he always knows what the right thing to do is (Fingeroth 17). However, as will be argued in this thesis in the postmodern superhero, justice and right is relative within an ever-changing society and subjective world. This too can be said for power and how power is perceived within the postmodern society.

2.1.   Power

All Superheroes possess some form of power, often referred to as a superpower. However, the term "power" within the realms of Superhero comic books does not necessarily refer to their actual superpowers. Yet, the discussion of power is necessary when making use of postmodernist theory. Power is often seen in conjunction with

power structures within the fictional world of the Superhero, as well as in the forming of identity.

Michel Foucault reasoned that this was the power of thought, which is the ability for humans to problematize the conditions in which they live. Foucault believed that this meant the "endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known" (*The Use of Pleasure*, 9). Like Lyotard, Foucault encouraged creative experimentation as a leading power of thought, and believed that this power could surpass reason.

With regard to his work, Foucault states that he aims to "create a history of the different modes by which… human beings are made subjects" (*The Essential Foucault* 126). Discourses, such as language, are seen to be engrossed in power and form relationships of power, and in doing so create "subjects" (individuals). Superhero comic books often display power relationships which are problematic. On the surface, many of these power relations seem simple, as the vast majority are concerned with the Superhero and the people he saves, his contemporaries or the antagonists with the narrative. However, many of the power relationships which the Superhero has with other characters in the narrative are far more complex. For example, the relationship between Batman and Joker is psychologically complex, as the Joker is always attempting to defuse Batman's influence in the community through his abuse of power. Therefore, power is about power relationships, rather than the preconceived ideas about what it means to have power or to be powerful.

Investigating Superhero comic books is an ideal way in which to explore the use and abuse of power by individuals. Michel Foucault, a key theorist who investigated the changing power dynamics within society, believed that power was a way in which certain actions could structure further possible actions (Raceviski 140). Foucault reasoned that freedom from the abuse of power was possible, stating: "we must dare to refuse to be led, to refuse to let ourselves be completely governed by others" (qtd. in Raceviski 140). However, not all power differentials are negative, and society appears to desire a powerful individual who will provide them with security. Furthermore, one never truly escapes power; everyone is part of the structure of power. This research will investigate Foucault's beliefs and reasoning behind the concept of power, and how it

can be applied to Superheroes. In "The Subject and Power, Foucault states that power is "a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon action, on possible or actual future or present actions" (137). Therefore, power does not necessarily involve action. Rather it is an action on a possible action. Thus an action occurs only when an action has already been done. While interesting, how does this relate to Superhero comic books? If Foucault's definition is applied to Superheroes then it can be assumed that the mere existence of Superheroes should be enough to ensure that no villain commits a crime. This power relies on fear of retaliation by the Superhero. This view suggests that the Superheroes have power not through violence, but rather their potential for violence. Yet as the stories attest, the villains continue to create havoc and pain in communities and their fear of the Superheroes does not prevent their malicious actions. Thus, in those cases the Superhero acts for justice when those transgressions occur.

In describing the nature of discourse as it relates to power, Foucault reasoned:

> Discourse, is part of the network of knowledge and power, shaped by disciplines and institutions with their complex interactions and motivations. Authority to speak about certain kinds of knowledge (ethos) comes from institutional certification; reasoning is a function of accepted modes of reference and discipline-specific processes of validation. (qtd. in Bizzel 15)

If this is true, then discourse is not confined between the writer and the reader, or in the case of superhero comic books, between the publisher, such as DC Comics or Marvel Comics, and the buyer. Instead, discourse is part of a larger "network of knowledge and power", which involves other institutions, and the value which they assign whether directly or indirectly to the discourse. Within the realms of Superhero comic books, they are meant not solely for entertainment, but for instruction as well, and as a result, qualify to evaluate social forces; therefore giving an idea as to the rhetoric produced and the power attached to the comic book. The resounding success and popularity of graphic novels such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or Frank Millers *Batman:*

The Dark Knight Returns, has resulted in much having been written academically on the subject of superhero comic books.

While Lyotard and Foucault spoke of institutionalized power and by proxy the usefulness of Superhero comic books in moral instruction, Jean Baudrillard related power within postmodernism to signs of power. Jean Baudrillard believes that in Postmodernism, true power has been replaced by signs of power (*The Mirror of Production* 4). Furthermore, when unhinged from reality, one seeks that which is real; however, reality then relies on an opposition in order to remain convincing. This is applicable to comic book Superheroes, as society has no purpose for Superheroes if there is no evil to be fought. Conversely, David Coughlan in "Postmodernism" suggests that signs of opposition rely on those of power, so that, in "logic of simulation, all oppositions, all dichotomies and antipathies, implode'" and "every act is terminated at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and having been scattered in all directions" (Baudrillard, "The Mirror Production" 16). In the case of Superheroes, an evil-doer transgresses against the moral code of the societal context; Superheroes are obligated to prevent this transgression so that the moral code of the society can continue to be actualized, and so the cycle continues. A villain does evil, and a Superhero tries to prevent it or prevent it from continuing.

While Superheroes' morality can be used as means of moral instruction, their power is more than theoretical; it is actual superpowers, and they use them to save people in need. A characteristic shared by all Superheroes is the desire to help others, even when doing so involves great personal risk. J. Dik Bryan states that "typically, Superheroes are acutely aware of the pervasive social needs that exist in the community in which they live and sometimes in the global community" (100). Superman came into existence, initially to stop gangsters and lynch mobs, corrupt politicians and abusive husbands and that was when he wasn't battling the supervillain, Lex Luthor. For many superheroes, knowing that it is only their superpower that stands between evil-doers and innocent lives is more than enough motivation for them to do the heroic. They recognize that there is an overwhelming societal need for protection, and Superheroes will do everything in their power to meet this need. However, if a Superhero is able to maintain his or her humanity, having superpowers brings about a certain amount of

responsibility. For example, in *Superman II*, Lois is trapped in a car during an earthquake which leads to her death (Film). Superman is devastated and in his distraught state of mind, flies at super-speed around the earth to reverse time and save her. However, many might consider this to be a selfish act, to save only the one he loves. What about all the other innocent victims who lost their lives in the tragedy? Does not Superman then have a moral obligation to save those other people as well, if he is capable of doing so? Would this also mean that our hero would be morally obligated to save others in the past? Regardless of the ability to time travel, the Superhero needs to make choices in the present. Who will he save, and who will he let die? For Superheroes, even if they have the power to do so does not mean that they should. Thus, the question can be considered: "Who or what should determine their use of power?"

2.2. **Plurality**

Postmodernism is seen to be concerned with a range of multiplicities such as found in the explication of culture, gender, sexuality, identity, amongst others and how they are actualized. What is essential to this conception is that no type is seen to be superior to another; all parts are fundamentally equal. Postmodernism, in its rejection of hierarchies, purposefully seeks equal representation for class, gender, sexuality, race and culture. This is seen to fit well with Foucault's theories on institutionalized power.

The concept of plurality of the postmodern mind is seen throughout Superhero comic books. In Superhero comic books, the splitting of the identity of the character is not merely so that one can don a costume and fight crime; rather it is a manifestation of often multiple identities, which are separate, and often autonomous. All Superheroes have an alter-ego: Superman has Clark Kent, Peter Parker has Spider-Man, Bruce Wayne has Batman, and Wonder Woman has Dianna Prince. With these characters, their multiple personalities are of equal importance to their psyches, and in most cases are necessary in accepting the two mutually exclusive existences. As such, Monica Haffer in "Postmodernism and the Batman Phenomenon" notes the external occurrences cannot be changed or recreated into clearly uniformed opposites; this

results in a split of the psyche as the mind tries to accept the dichotomies that are at play.

David Wade in "Duality: A Union of Opposites" reasons, as plurality denotes a variety of interpretations within an expanded area, plurality could "denote the number of interpretations associated with the combination of two distinctly opposite elements"; two binary opposite signified that combined into a single signifier. This means that because the signification is unlimited that it produces an infinite and indistinct range of interpretations.

In order to understand plurality one must first comprehend the self. There are many questions which arise in the pursuit of finding oneself: Who am I? Am I who I think I am? Am I a combination of who I think I am and who others think I am? Perhaps it is not what you think you are, but what you are. Philosopher David Hume claimed that the self was nothing more than a product of two imaginations (Hume 14) and language (qtd. in Holder 38). Hume spoke about the self in terms of composites, smaller parts which came together to form the whole. They concurred that what was considered to be the self was in reality a collection of factors, which included, thoughts, feelings and sensations, which made up the self. Kenneth Allan reasons that the postmodern self: "consists solely of fragmented, situational images that result in an emotional flatness or depthlessness" (3). Erving Goffman's work has been seen as the precursor to postmodern sociology, theorizing the situated self (Battershill 43). Goffman's situated self was based on the idea that the self was created from an encounter: "the self... is a dramatic effect arising from a scene that is presented" (252-253). Goffman further argues that the self awaits individuals in every situation, as every situation is seen to be multi-situated (qtd. Allan 6). If one only viewed a situation as only having one meaning then the individual would be missing all the possibilities that exist as a consequence of the situation. Certainly, Goffman's theory plays well into the original stories of many Superheroes. When Batman's parents were murdered he could have easily used his anger to become a murderous vigilante; instead he chose to protect those who may be affected by a similar situation. Likewise, Peter Parker could have used his powers for selfish reasons, but he chose not to. Randall Collins has expanded on Goffman's theory of the situated self, to reason that people play multiple roles and "may be played in

double fashion, simultaneously enacting and distancing one's self from the role" (qtd. in Allan 6-7). Collins' expansion of the situated self seems to encompass the multiple natures of Superheroes; while the situation that created them has led them to who they are, they are simultaneously able to play multiple roles in society. Nietzsche and Foucault both reasoned that "neither biology nor genetics properly explains or determines what you will call your identity... or self... Who you are is both a product of your environment and how you understand and create yourself within your environment" (qtd. Donovan & Richardson 130). In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault demonstrates that identities, bodies and knowledge do not exist in a pure state outside of history and power relationships (58). Foucault reasoned that identity was a product of power or power relationships (*The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* 58). Frida Kristinsdottir believes that there are numerous characters in popular fiction that lead schizophrenic lives; furthermore the Superhero comic book genre is based on the idea of plurality (26). Linda Dryden believes that many fictional characters, most notably, Superheroes, "owe a great deal to Stevenson's vision of respectable citizens leading double lives" (15)

Scott Bukatman reasons that: "The crisis of the [individual] in postmodern[ism]… is a crisis frequently represented in terms of an ambiguous and shifting vision, which may or may not be subjective" (*Matters of Gravity* 27). Bukatman continues this train of thought in *Terminal Identity* in which he states that one assumption of the postmodern condition is that the "terminal culture" is "too new, its impact too freshly felt, for any final judgments" (109). Given these statements, it appears that fragmentation is indeed an inevitable part of postmodernism. This fragmentation of identity is common in postmodernism, as postmodernists observe that the world is fragmented, and even at times, meaningless. In the case of Superheroes, plurality allows for multiple perceptions of the world. David Wade in "Duality: A Union of Opposites" states that to live within the postmodern condition is to live within plurality. The idea of plurality or compartmentalization is a known feature of the psychological realm; however, all superheroes show some form of compartmentalization, which leads to a perception of plurality of not only reality, but also to an actual splitting of the identity into two or more separate personalities.

Compartmentalization can be defined as "To separate into distinct parts, categories, or compartments" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*). More simply, it can be considered as a defence mechanism which allows the mind to shut off certain information and/or ideas from the rest of the mind, to allow for the individual to function "normally" within society. Compartmentalization allows for a disassociation of one idea from another. Claudia Strauss expands on this idea, stating: "In this case the competing ideas are internalized in separate, unconnected schemas, so that expressions of one are unrelated expressions of the other" (214). Frederic Jameson reasoned that fragmentation as seen in postmodernism is far more than the breaking of "totality", rather it is "the emergence of the multiple in new and unexpected ways, unrelated strings of events, types of discourses, modes of classification, and compartments of reality" (*The Cultural Logic of Late* Capitalism 370-371). To be able to live within the postmodern condition, one must be able to compartmentalize him/herself. Where this might be accepted in the day-to-day dealings of the postmodern condition, examples exist where this compartmentalization is a necessity to functioning at all. This is seen most notably with individuals who have suffered great traumas, such as abuse survivors, or returning soldiers of war. In these extreme cases, the mind compartmentalizes itself in order to protect the individual, and allow this individual to function daily. In severe cases, compartmentalization becomes part of the memory blocking of a traumatic experience, causing a multiple personality disorder.

How does this relate to Superheroes? Perhaps the most obvious way is with regards to the Superhero's alter-ego. Bennet and Royle reason that "the Western philosophical tradition of aesthetics has relied heavily on a distinction between the real and its copy" (252). Plato went as far as to argue that painters, actors and dramatists were merely reproducing or imitating the "real" world. How is this applicable to Superheroes? In all cases, there exists the original and then the alter-ego. For example, Superman is the original, while Clark Kent is his alter-ego. Clark Kent is who he pretends to be. It is, however, important to note that when mentioning alter-egos that it is not limited to two identities. As it will be discussed in later chapters, the Superhero is more than two identities. The Superheroes can battle multiple identities within one guise. On a physical level, Superman is Superman, Clark Kent and Kal-El. On a more

psychological level, each identity must battle with its own identity crisis. While Batman is also Bruce Wayne he must fight to balance between different wants and desires. No Superhero is completely good or completely bad. Certainly, within postmodernism morality is not black or white, rather it is a spectrum of grey. It is only natural, given this course of thought, that it is necessary to debate the hierarchy of these identities; which is the real and which is the copy, or which is the original and which is the alter-ego? However, postmodernism challenges the necessity of hierarchies and demonstrates how values can be associated with these conflicting oppositions; and therefore, can be better interrogated and integrated. This seemingly fits well into compartmentalization.

By definition, the language of comic books is that of plurality; this is true because as much is said in the printed pictures as is said in the printed words in the balloons. Superhero comic books can be read as a sum of signs which need to be analysed. Another way of considering this conception is "simulation" or "simulacrum", as theorized by Jean Baudrillard. Simulation is not to be confused with Ferdinand de Saussure's "representation", which is based on the signifier and the signified, or more simply, the word or word- image and the mental concept that it is associated with (qtd. in Bennet *et al* 252). Essentially, there is a difference between the word, and what the word represents. Common sense dictates that this is correct and distinct. Conversely, simulation does not deem the necessity of such distinctions; perhaps for the simple reason that Postmodernism dismisses the need for distinct boundaries. Baudrillard explains it as "no longer that of a territory, a referential being or substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" ("Simulacra and Simulations"166). If this is applicable to Superheroes, then there is no distinction between the original and the alter-ego. Batman and Bruce Wayne are the same entity, which is obvious, but Baudrillard is suggesting that so are their identities.

The concept of simulation can be extended when one takes into consideration depthlessness. If oppositions exist between the original and the copy, and between the natural and the fake, then one needs to also take into consideration difference between surface and depth. The concept of depth is applicable to the idea of the self, and what it means to be human. Bennet and Royle reason that "the subject or self is constituted as a relation between surface and depth, inside and outside" (253). Often the need for

plurality or of multiple identities is the result of a moral need; whether for the need to protect one's identity or the identity of those loved by the hero. Morality is an ever-present dilemma for a Superhero.

2.3.   **Morality**

When one is marginalised from society, the definition of justice is often altered, along with his/her sense of right and wrong; he/she develop relative values and a self-stylized morality. This hero now has new questions to battle: does the hero kill the villain, or does the hero encumber the evil-doer and then deliver him or her to the accepted authorities. On many occasions, Batman has completed the assigned superhero task, captured and delivered the Joker to Arkham Asylum, only to have the murderous mastermind escape and resume killing the innocent citizens of Gotham City. Thus the question is raised: how many lives could have been spared if Batman had just killed the Joker on their first encounter? If superheroes are living by the ideal that they will not kill their enemies because they are morally superior, is this, therefore, a viable and utopian, rational ideal, given the often tragic consequences.

After Nietzsche theorised the *übermensch*, or "overman", later to be commonly referred to as superman, the postmodernist age began to idealize its own superman, the superhero. As the modern shifted to the postmodern, the classic hero broadened to allow for other forms of literature and artistic expression. The superheroes that developed in the early postmodernist age were created to battle the new challenges presented by the twentieth century. Superheroes have come to represent American society, and these heroes have changed as society has. The superhero has given its followers a way of dealing with the challenges of postmodernism.

Nietzsche was a philosopher who resisted the fundamentalist structures of his day. He believed that the opinions of his day were restrictive on human experience, and as such, he attacked these conventions. He did not believe in social reform or universal suffrage, nor did he have any regard for liberals, conservatives, communists or socialists. He condemned Christian morality, and ridiculed those who believed humanity to be inherently good (Brobjer 84). What he did believe was that humanity was, by its very nature, cruel, unjust, uncertain and absurd. Furthermore, he reasoned that there

were no standards of good and evil; a concept akin to postmodernism. He believed that man was alone in a godless world, and it was up to every individual to achieve his full potential, stating: "Du sollst werden, der du bist", "You must become who you are" (qtd. in Nehamas 387). Furthermore, in order to insure that full potential is realized one must sever dependence on reason and intellect, instead opting to develop one's instinct, will and drive.

Nietzsche believed that "God was dead", and as such, morality was dead; there was no morality derived from God or nature (*The Gay Science* 108). The old values and truths had been lost, and from this nihilism emerged. However, Nietzsche believed that man could rise above nihilism. This, he believed, could be done by accepting that nihilism was produced from everyday life, and so one must become a nihilist in order to understand it; from this point, one could rise and surpass nihilism by creating new values: man could become his own master and become true to himself, and no other. Steven Kreis in "Nietzsche, Freud, and the Thrust Towards Modernism" notes that Nietzsche did have faith in the *übermensch*, a new type of man who would not be held back by the "modern-mediocre- industrial-scientific-bourgeois-Christian civilization". The *übermensch* creates his own morality based on his own instincts, drive and will. This new man is unafraid to be himself. For him, traditional, Christian ideals of good and evil have no meaning. His "will to power" means that he has gone beyond good and evil. The *übermensch* creates his own values; he is free of all restraints, rules, and codes of accepted behaviours imposed by society. He takes life as it is given to him, creating his own meaning within it. He is able to live to his full potential, without restriction. Hence, Nietzsche would suggest that one must accept that the world is filled with evil. Accept that evil lies within. From there, once humanity has recognized this, they can find within themselves the strength to adopt a personally defined moral code of behaviour.

Likewise postmodernists believe that morality is personal, relative, and subject to personal opinion. Within the postmodernist paradigm, morality is defined as each person's private code, and there is no need to follow traditional values and rules (Fuminobu 39). Within postmodernism, there are no universal truths, nor are there any universal criteria. As such, there are no universal principals of good or evil. Within this concept one can see the link with vigilante heroes. When there is no universal truth,

then there is no societal ideal of morality, and so it is that an individual can create his or her own morality, and stand for his or her own form of justice.

What is often embedded in many Superhero comic books is the ideology which explores the idea of individual choice and will. In many Superhero comic books, events are frequently beyond the control of the superhero; however, a choice is given. The world of superheroes is habitually bizarre and terrible, and there is repeatedly no right or wrong, the difference between right and good is present, but the superhero, and often other integral characters, are given a choice which will dictate what part they will play within the framework of the narrative. Robert Louis Stevenson is quoted as saying "In each of us, [multiple] natures are at war – the good and the evil. All our lives the fight goes on between them, and one of them must conquer. But in our hands lies the power to choose - what we want most to be we are". Even in reality, the world seems senseless and chaotic, and one might wonder how belief can be maintained that good will prevail over the forces of evil. Superhero narratives meet humanity's expectations regarding how the world works, while also making it perceivable that a peaceful world might be possible. When superheroes make a choice to provide safety and protection, it makes readers hopeful for the same outcome in their own world.

Where this might be true, the choice of the superhero is often not, in the long term, for the greater good. In fact, when superheroes choose to be heroes rather than vigilantes, they can make a choice that may harm society. For example, Batman chooses to capture the Joker and place him into the hands of traditional authority, namely the Gotham Police. However, the Joker inevitably escapes, only to murder and maim once more. So why does Batman not just kill the Joker? Would not killing the Joker save the lives of future Joker victims? How many lives could have been saved, had Batman killed the Clown Prince many decades ago? The argument for killing the Joker seems fairly straight-forward. This argument is seen throughout superhero comic book narratives. Why does Spider-Man not kill the Green Goblin? Why does Superman not kill Lex Luthor? This argument for the killing of the evil-doer is typical of an utilitarian approach; a system of ethics that requires the individual to maximise the total happiness and well-being that results from this individual's actions (Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* 1781). Saving many lives at the cost of one life would increase

the well-being of many. Although a tragic choice, it would be one supported by many; consider the families of the victims who would feel that justice has been served. That is not to say that superheroes do not enjoy happiness and well-being as ordinary individuals do; rather there are certain things they will not do to stop a villain, namely, to kill. Superheroes, like police officers, will not risk harming innocent lives to capture a criminal, even if it means preventing the criminal from harming more people later.

However, Zygmunt Bauman is concerned that the Postmodern era may also mean a post-ethical era, which he calls "a social life absolved from moral worries" (3). Bauman reasons that rules may be contradictory to morals, since rules tell an individual when they have done enough. However, one will question, "no matter what good I may have done, I could have done more" (Casmir 146). Bauman states: "the moral self is always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough" (80). Bauman believes that postmodern morality is a journey that each person must take alone. After all, postmodernism is about the self, rather than the mass. Where morals are concerned, it would appear that the postmodernist moment is an opportunity for the individual to instil ethical aspects into everyday life. Each person is capable of moral choice, and the intersubjectivity of moral choice adds up to a moral code, as Bauman states: "personal morality ... makes ethical negotiation and consensus possible" (34). Postmodern morality is constructed on the belief that there is only one Other, that we are all Others, and that the most basic measure of morality is the extent to which we are for that Other. Bauman states: "I am for the Other whether the Other is for me or not; his [or her] being for me is, so to speak, his [or her] problem, and whether or how he [or she] handles that problem does not in the least affect my being-for-him [or her]" (50). Bauman's statement seems to explain the postmodernist superhero quite well, as the Superhero chooses to help the other regardless of their willing reciprocity. Postmodernism is about the individual in a morally chaotic world, and it is up to the individual to create their own morality. However, in the case of Bauman's "Other", the postmodernist individual is able to make their own morality, and be able to have relationships with Others, irrespective of the others' choices. Superheroes protect others based on their morality, irrespective of the choices of the Other. Jean-Francios Lyotard believed that without the formal unity of the subject, the faculties, that is understanding, imagination and reason, are set free

to operate on their own (*The Differed: Phrases in Dispute 95*). However, because one is faced with the complexness of the judgements and "phrase regimes", the "faculty" of moral judgement is brought into awareness (Lyotard, *The Differed: Phrases in Dispute 132*).

In 1887, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in which he asked that fundamental moral structures should be questioned, and how they are applied to everyday life. Nietzsche challenged the foundations upon which moral codes are built. What is apparent is that his arguments on human morality are as relevant today as they were over a hundred years ago. What is deduced from his work is that at its core, human morality is largely arbitrary. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* various moral codes are outlined; Nietzsche reasons that these moral codes exist as part of larger world views with which all of humanity should be fairly familiar. Nietzsche argues that one cannot destroy nor fully fulfil society's moral codes. As this is contradictory, a fragmented identity is created, from the conflicting moral codes. As the fragmented individual wanders between various societal contexts, in which moral codes may change, the individual will only receive a fragmented validation; this results in one being only partially actualized, as full self-actualization cannot be achieved with a fragmented identity.

Superheroes are constantly facing moral dilemmas. For example, an innocent bystander is harmed by a criminal; does the superhero aid the injured bystander, or does he pursue the criminal? If ultimately more lives are saved by pursuing the criminal, but the bystander will die, what does the superhero do? This relates well to the "trolley problem". Introduced by Phillipa Foot and Judy Jarvis Thomson, the "trolley problem" is one of the classic moral dilemmas debated by philosophers (19-32). Imagine that a trolley car going down a track, further down the track are five people who have not heard the approaching trolley. There is not enough time to stop the trolley. However, there is a switch which will switch the trolley from its current track onto another track. Seems simple; however, on the other track is just one person. So what does one do? Stand by and let five people be killed by your inaction, or do you switch the track and directly kill a person, but save five? Is the person by the switch morally allowed to pull the switch? If he or she is allowed, is it then required of them? Thomson argues that this

individual is permitted but not required to pull the switch. While both must be taken into consideration, one must also consider how this individual would feel about causing a death. How does Batman's situation compare to the "trolley problem"? Superheroes deal with within-group conflict, as opposed to between-group conflict which is typically seen in war heroes. As such, superheroes attempt to respond to evil with socially promoted moral behaviour which they may use as a weapon. Superheroes embody three core features of morality; firstly, third-party judgement, secondly, moralistic punishment, and thirdly, moral impartiality (DeScioli & Kurzan 246).

Impartiality can be argued to be a tenet of human morality. Superheroes, as moralists, are expected to enforce the ambiguous moral code of society that under postmodernism fluctuates, regardless of who is saved or who is harmed in the process. This often requires that Superheroes ignore their families, friends, and loved ones, while also showing restraint where personal enemies are concerned. Impartiality is demonstrated when a Superhero must turn on a loved one when they violate the moral code of society. For example, in *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne trains in martial arts for seven years with Ra's al Ghul's League of Shadows. In his final test, in order to demonstrate his commitment to justice, he is required to execute a man accused of murder (*Batman Begins* Film). Bruce Wayne refuses to kill the helpless prisoner, instead turning on his teacher. The epic battle ends with the League of Shadows' headquarters burning down. In one of the final scenes, Ra's al Ghul, his teacher, returns to Gotham and states: "When I found you in that jail, you were lost. But I believed in you. I took away your fear, and showed you a path. You were my greatest student. It should be you standing by my side" (*Batman Begins* Film). Again, Bruce Wayne declines, stating: "I'll be standing where I belong, between you and the people of Gotham" (*Batman Begins* Film). Superheroes rarely kill, instead they do the societally accepted thing, and hand the criminal over to the authorities. They will not kill evil-doers, even when they know the villain will escape, and more innocent lives will be lost in the recapturing of the villain. Nevertheless, society still admires Superhero's restraint, despite the obvious endangerment of human lives, by allowing evil-doers like Lex Luthor and Green Goblin to live.

Superheroes might fall into what might be termed "third-party punishment". One person is harmed by another, and a Superhero comes to the rescue. It is important to note that third-party punishment differs from second-party revenge in that it is based on morality rather than personal vengeance. It is because of their third-party status that Superheroes need to have a secret identity; criminals would not take punishment well, and as such would retaliate, in order to achieve revenge. It is for this reason that Superheroes wear masks and costumes, to protect not only their identity, but the identity of their loved ones. In war, enemies are separated by geographic confines; however, crime-fighters live amongst their enemies. This means that villains are in a position to harm superheroes and their loved ones. Superheroes need to hide behind masks to protect themselves and their loved ones; among war heroes, such an act would be perceived as cowardly, and counterproductive, when the aim is personal glory. A thin-line exists for Superheroes between moralistic punishment and vigilante revenge. This is in contrast with war heroes, who are praised for their aggression and vengeance. For example, Cuchulainn of Irish mythology was known for his fits of uncontrollable rage, which led to the violent deaths of both his enemies and his friends. Another example is that of Achilles and his legendary rage, one instance in particular stands out; when he dragged Hector's dead body behind his chariot for thirteen days. However, for Superheroes, such a display of vengeful, hateful emotion would be unacceptable to the reader who is seeking protection from a mindlessly violent world. In *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne plans to seek revenge on his parents' murderer, Mr Chill, unfortunately another gangster gets to him before Bruce Wayne can (Film). When his love interest, Rachel, learns of his intent to seek revenge, she states: "You're not talking about justice. You're talking about revenge". Bruce replies: "Sometimes, they're the same". Rachel insists: "No, they're never the same. Justice is about harmony. Revenge is about making yourself feel better. It's why we have an impartial system". Bruce Wayne's martial arts teacher, Ra's al Ghul, echoes the point: "A vigilante is just a man lost in the scramble for his own gratification. He can be destroyed or locked up. But if you make yourself more than just a man, if you devote yourself to an ideal, and if they can't stop you, then you become something else entirely...(a) legend, Mr Wayne" (*Batman Begins* Film). By the end of the film, Batman agrees: "Justice is about more than revenge".

The fundamental differences between within-group conflict and between-group conflict, is the uncertainty about who is on which side of the conflict. In war, the opposing sides are clear-cut, usually involving geography and culture or race; whereas within-group conflict these lines are less distinct. Tactically speaking, morality is largely unimportant. This is seen in countless examples where morality is seen to be irrelevant. For example, in the Bible, Moses orders his army to rape and slaughter women and children (*New International Version*, Numbers 31:17). Romulus murders his brother Remus over an argument (Bannon 172). Lancelot sleeps with King Arthur's wife, despite being trusted by the King (Peterson & Dunworth 90). This attitude is seen to be consistent with real war heroes, such as the Finnish sniper, Simo Hayha, during World War II, who is accredited with five-hundred kills in one-hundred days (Firth n.p.). Whether in reality or in fiction, war heroes are not known for their morality, but rather for their bravery and ability to kill their enemy.

The lines drawn on either side of within-conflict are seen to be blurred, and often volatile. This fits well with both postmodernism and superheroes. At its core, postmodernism is a state of thinking and/or behaving where traditional boundaries and definitions do not exist; it is a state of self-consciousness and confusion, most notably concerning moral and ethical standards. In these instances, the lines between enemy and friend are not always clear. Caesar's last iconic line, "Et tu, Brute?" distinctly symbolizes this blurred line.

Superheroes excel in within-group conflicts, as they are able to maintain their moral high ground. Superman stands for truth, justice, and the American way. The "friendly neighbourhood" Spider-Man takes to heart Uncle Ben's motto: "with great power comes great responsibility" (*Spiderman* Film). Batman follows in the steps of his philanthropist billionaire father, as he explains to his butler, Alfred: "I'm using this monster to help other people, just like my father did" (*Batman Begins* Film). It is clear that their moral character is flawless as seen in the endless good deeds they perform. It is clear that there is both a difference and a relationship between the action hero who engages in war versus the Superhero that engages in crime fighting. This is further correlated with the type of hero that is admired: the virtuous fighter not the furious killer.

However, this leads to a number of questions. If postmodernism dictates that there is no absolute truth, and that all individuals must create their own morality, and thus moral code, how does one select a moral code? With fundamental ideas having been dismissed, what dictates one's morality? How does one decide what is moral and what is not? Nietzsche encourages the engagement in the "critique of moral values" (*On the Genealogy of Morality* i). What can be deduced is that social context determines moral judgements, and therefore makes finding an original morality problematic.

Perhaps best known for his steadfast morality is Superman, the original Superhero. As such, it seems fitting that Superman is the first Superhero which will be discussed in this dissertation.

Chapter 3:
Superman: From Modernity to Postmodernist

Superman was created in 1938, a time when America desperately needed a hero. During this time, Americans were barely out of the Great Depression, and their future seemed uncertain. It was then that Superman came to the rescue, even if only figuratively. Initially he did not battle aliens or giant robots; he fought corrupt businessmen and politicians, war profiteers, and slum lords. Superman was the epitome of truth, justice, and the American way (See Illustration 1). By 1941, Superman was a much beloved superhero, as he continued to inspire hope. However, his sense of morality would soon be called upon, as in reality, World War II had been raging since 1939 and with the bombing of the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, on December 7th 1941, the United States of America soon joined the war. With this, the *Superman* narrative changed as the world needed a hero with distinct ideals about right and wrong. Superman now fought a greater evil, the Axis powers. Superman was depicted destroying German war machines, and fighting "Japanazis" (Morrison & Loeb, "Superman: Cover to Cover" 92-93). To boost the morale and provide entertainment *Superman* comics were even distributed to troops. Comic books were "entertaining, portable and easily replaced", they could be read and swapped as the soldiers rested or rode for long hours in transport vehicles (Krensky 33). Superhero comic books reminded the troops of what they used to do in free moments back home; it helped to remind them what they were fighting for. Jenette Kahn, Editor-in-chief of D.C. Comics, believes that World War II elevated Superman's supremacy as a cultural icon, as it brought America's supremacy to the world (Morrison *et al*, "Superman: Cover to Cover" 117). As America's power grew, so did Superman's.

Since his inception, Superman has embodied the ideal of a superhero. Unlike Batman, Superman is not fuelled by personal vengeance, but by his responsibility to use his powers for the greater good of humanity. In a 2003 issue of *Wizard* Magazine, Grant Morrison notes Superman's importance and uniqueness:

> After years of cowboys, soldiers, tough private eyes and
> gangsters at a time in the late 1930s when America's self-image

was built around the use of guns as [a] means to tame a young

and restless country … [Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster] came

up with their brilliant notion: an All-American icon hero with a

code against killing. Here we have a willing flag, who always

uses his immense strength and super-intelligence to solve

problems without leaving a trail of bodies in his wake. What a

forward thinking, utopian idea that is! Superman as the new

world testament! (52)

When Superman was created, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster essentially repackaged a powerful archetype, a character that stood for truth, justice and the American way. Mark Millar explains that "Superman resonates with everyone because he's an amalgamation of the legends we've loved for 5000 years. He's Moses, Hercules, Icarus, and Jesus Christ all rolled up inside one American flag. He's the greatest fictional character of our time" (131). The creation of Superman changed American popular culture. Although heroes already existed in the comic strips and pulp fiction of the time, they were all too human, and lacked any real advantage over the bad-guy. "Villains by their simple appointment to the role were miles ahead. It was not to be believed that any ordinary human could combat them. More was required. Someone with a call" (Feiffer 8-9). Superman was generally more popular during times when people were not able to face the dark side of their world and were looking for an escape through an alien being with superpowers which would banish all darkness. A common visual still found in *Superman* comics today is a crowd of waiting, helpless people who are looking up to see Superman overhead, and it looks almost as if he is radiating divine light upon their faces. The postmodern mind appreciates the compelling nature of darkness and realizes it as much closer to their own state. In noting this it appears that with his radiant light, Superman does not fall into the postmodernist guise, and this is true of the early conceptions of Superman.

Superman was initially a superhero based in modernity. Superman operated within binary oppositions, most notably, right and wrong, good and evil. This works well with the black-and-white nature of modernity. Within the *Superman* narrative, the audience

always knew who the villain was, and it was always clear that this individual was evil. In postmodernist culture, one has a greater understanding of the world as it is no longer accepted in terms of black-and-white; rather it accepts a greater spectrum of grey. Mystery has been embraced as postmodernists have accepted that one cannot know or be able to figure out all of life's uncertainties. Furthermore, postmodernists have accepted that they are conflicted individuals, and the postmodernist chooses to dialogue about this rather than suppress it, as the modernists did, believing that they were bad people at heart. Postmodernists accept that they are not invincible, that they are flawed, and are aware of it. What is clear is that Superman did not seem to fit well into the postmodernist concepts just discussed. However, Superheroes should reflect the values of the society they serve. In an ever-changing society, where moral codes are altered as the society's needs change, Superheroes should also evolve so as to better serve their community, and achieve self-actualization. Superman is one such hero who seems to have been fighting this notion. While remaining in his traditional, modern form, he has not changed and evolved with society, until quite recently. One can only then question whether or not Superman is relevant? Can a modern Superhero with strict binary ideals of good and evil still stand for, and protect a society which is largely postmodernist, where the lines are ever blurred?

Superman was created by a modern culture, a culture that needed a hero to inspire their hopes and dreams during the Great Depression. As with any mythic hero, Superman embodies the goals and ideals of a modern society; he stands for truth and honesty. His purpose is to help those in need to reach a moral self-actualization, and allow for society to grow into a utopia. Superman was created as the model citizen that all citizens should look to as an example of how to behave and act. Superman possesses the values of honesty and civility, and even his motto of fighting for truth, justice and the American way, represents a modern society. DC Comics seemed to emulate this more than Marvel Comics ever did. DC Comic's Superheroes always appeared to be more clear cut, whereas Marvel seemed to have a far more "grittier" view of their Superheroes.

3.1.   <u>Power</u>

Former Editor-in-chief of DC, Jenette Kahn, believes that Superman's fictional involvement in World War II made him a cultural icon, similarly America's involvement in World War II brought its supremacy to the world (Morrison *et al*, "Superman: Cover to Cover" 117). *Superman* was born in the final years of the Great Depression and rose in power, as America did. As the power of America grew throughout the twentieth century, Superman's powers became increasingly amazing. Superheroes like Wolverine and the Punisher inhabit worlds that are chaotic and dangerous. In contrast, Superman's metropolis seems ordered and controlled, with an uncorrupted government and a newspaper filled with unbiased non-sensationalist journalists. In such an utopian world, it appears that Superman's purpose solely concerns the maintenance of this order. Where Batman is likened to a beat cop in a hardened neighbourhood, Superman seems more of a boy scout on patrol, coming to the rescue, often from a dam wall about to break or an impending earthquake, or even a non-conformist who just will not fit in, than an actual villainous threat. This role seemed the most appropriate for him during his early days, when the enemy was the "Other" (Peterson & Park 178). Yet certainly a young Clark Kent must have known what it was like to be different.

One must question what it would have been like for a teenage Clark Kent to know he is invulnerable? Many *Superman* origin stories agree that Superman's powers manifested during puberty. What would it have been like to know that he was stronger, faster and smarter than anyone else? Although Clark Kent is an extreme case, being a gifted teenager and knowing that you are gifted comes at a price, the risk of being ostracized and rejected for his or her difference. M.U.M. Gross reasons that as children and teenagers value conformity, they are likely to hide the extent of their abilities in order to fit in better ("The 'Me' Behind the Mask" n.p.). Children and teenagers might even hold themselves back so that they cannot be recognized for their ability, and wear a "mask" that makes them appear less able (Swiatek n.p.). In many cases, the mask works, but the success of the mask makes the gifted individual less likely to reveal their abilities for fear of rejection. Like Superheroes, wearing a mask allows for a certain amount of protection. Klaus Theweleit has termed this "armoured body", and believes that the wearing of a mask, no matter the size of it to be a sign of rebirth for the

individual (99). Clark Kent's powers grew with age: "By the time young Clark is a grown boy, he has learned that he is different from others", able to leap over tall buildings and run faster than any animal, and "a thousand other startling feats" (Siegel, "The Origin of Sueprboy" n.p.). When contemplating his powers, Clark realizes: "I can't let people know how different I am! I'll just have to hold myself in check and go along like all the other kids" (Siegel, "The Origins of Superboy" n.p.). Clark later reflects: "Super-strength! It's a little frightening... my powers give me a chance to do a lot of good – but I can't let people know that Clark Kent can do these things... the knowledge might be dangerous" (Siegel, "The Origins of Superboy" n.p.). His "mask" continues into adulthood as Clark, now a college student, watches the college football team practising, he laments: "I could be the world's greatest football player... but I can't join the team and reveal my super-powers! Besides, it would be unfair to win that way! I'll have to pretend I'm 'meek' and 'unathletic' all my life!" (Binder, "The Complete Story of Superman's Life" n.p.). In this statement it is evident that Clark is also aware of the moral issues that accompany his powers. It would not be fair for Clark to win, as his powers are far superior than those of any human.

Having grown-up as being unique among his peers, and having superior abilities even in adulthood, Clark Kent believes that even as Superman he can never be fully accepted. In *Superman Returns* Superman states, as he watches his son sleep: "You will be different, sometimes you'll feel like an outcast" (*Superman Returns* Film). Rosenberg argues that although humans are grateful for his assistance, they might become envious of his abilities (37). Clark Kent plays a role, and his true self is often hidden from the world. As much as he wishes to be, Clark Kent is not human; and yet he wishes to feel connected to them, and wants to be one of them. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Superman is a humble Superhero. In an issue of *Batman & Superman: World's Finest*, in response to Batman as to why he did not join the Justice League, Superman reasons: "Sometimes I wish I had joined. To have people to talk to... to share my problems and worries with... someone who would understand them. Colleagues. Friends" (Kolins, "Our World's at War!" n.p.). In a later issue, Superman admits: "Not because I was too busy... but because if I joined, they'd be too powerful. I work... so hard to make sure people trust me" (Levitz, "Resurrection" n.p.). Superman's moral

simplicity and predictability is perhaps why humans trust him and his inherent goodness.

Superman is arguably one of the best known symbols of heroics in the world. Ironically, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster's superhero is nothing like Nietzsche's *übermensch*, whose name he carried. Perhaps for one very important reason: Superman was not human. Neil Cole in "The Adventures of Superman" states of Superman that he is a "strange visitor from another world, with power and abilities that go far beyond those of mortal man". In recent years, Superman's alter-ego has been argued to be nothing more than a disguise. Superman is a flying, invulnerable hero from another planet, a "celestial saviour wrapped in the American flag" (Robertson 52). Superman is clearly an exercise in wish-fulfilment; starting with his creators, two Jewish-American teenagers. Superman's fans have often felt akin to the man of steel; many feeling that they could relate to Clark Kent, as they attempted to gain the affections of their real-life Lois Lanes. However, it is not possible for anyone to become Superman, because he is not human. Nietzsche's *übermensch* was completely attainable, and human; he believed that every person was capable of achieving an *übermensch*-like state of being within their lifetime. Superman was not Nietzsche's *übermensch*.

Unlike Nietzsche's *übermensch*, Superman's power does not elevate him above humanity. Despite his superhuman powers, Superman considers himself to be very human. In many ways, Superman represents the culmination of human achievement. He is a model to all humanity, not of strength and power, but of decency and morality. For many superheroes, the costume they don is their alter-ego; for Peter Parker it is Spider-Man, and for Bruce Wayne it is Batman.

In the Fall of 1992, DC made a radical move, by deciding to kill-off one of its oldest, and best-loved characters; Superman would die. Ultimately this decision would change the *Superman* narrative irrevocably. As predicted, the announcement drew wide media attention and editorial speculation as to the possible cultural implications. A *New York Times* editorial drew convenient parallels between the recent electoral defeat of President George Bush Sr., and the failed Republican campaign of that same year. According to the article, Americans had rejected the Bush-Quayle version of "family values" for Bill Clinton, who "in-spite of, or because of, his apparent personal failings,

appealed to voters looking for new ideas, a younger version, and a president more in touch with people more like themselves" (Wright 282). In many ways Clinton was Spider-Man to Bush's Superman. It thus seemed appropriate that both of these respected, yet seemingly out-of-touch, heroes from the World War II generation be retired in the same year.

In January 1993, in issue #75 of *Superman*, Superman was killed by a monster named Doomsday (Jurgens, "Doomsday" n.p.). Superheroes had been killed before, but none of the stature of Superman. Some fans chose to avoid the issue, and not read it (Pustz 133). Stephen Krensky states: "He was so woven into the fabric of American life that announcing his death was like announcing the death of apple pie" (88). No one had anticipated the reaction, least of all, DC. But once it had begun, the company took full advantage, and even released special editions, and gave lavish details of Superman's funeral, which was attended by all the DC superheroes.

True comic book fans knew that DC would never kill-off their signature character, and finally realized that they had been "ripped-off". While momentarily profitable, a dead superhero who remains dead is not. It was later discovered that Superman's coffin was empty; but DC was in no hurry to bring him back to life, it was not until the Fall of 1993 that Superman was resurrected.

With this, the Superman narrative was reinvented. Previous to issue #75, Superman was considered to be immortal and unable to be harmed. However, his death proved this to be untrue. The question became not that he died, but why had he? What would his death and resurrection mean to the Superman narrative? As the modern perspective persisted, Superman was immortal. This represented the hope that a utopian society and state of being was possible, and within reach. In a postmodern society, the concept of Superman being immortal must be rejected. Therefore, one must question what the resurrection of Superman means to a postmodern society? One conclusion may be that the death of Superman was the death of the previous decades of narrative, a finite way to ensure that a postmodernist Superhero could be reinvented.

Superman, like many of his superhero colleagues, has followed a strict moralistic code. While evil-doers must be stopped, superheroes must not use excessive force or be killed. When a superhero does use excessive force, or kill, which is seen in

characters such as the Punisher and Wolverine, it is usually the result of some "consternation to the rest of the heroic community" (Garrett 69). Superhero comic books have always followed the mantra that justice must be achieved with minimal amount of violence, as it is believed that to indulge in such excessive violence only sinks the hero to the level of the villain. So why then does this resurrected Superman kill? Since his return to life, Superman has become more self-involved and does not represent the morals and values that he stood for before his death. It would, therefore, appear that Superman's death represented the death of the traditional Superman, and Superman narrative. This rejection of morals is most evident when Superman murders the alien villain, Rokk. Although he is murdering villains, and not innocents, these incidences jar the commonly accepted conceptions of Superman. The act of murder is against the laws of the United States of America, and in performing this violent act, Superman contradicts that which he first stood for in 1938, to stand for truth, justice, and the American way.

Traditionally, Superman would capture the evil-doer and place them in the hands of traditional law enforcement. In doing so, Superman would have provided a service to the public and the law, rather than taking the law into his own hands like some vigilantes might do. Now, Superman has done just the opposite, by taking the law into his own hands; by establishing his own sense of justice, he is able to act as judge, jury and executioner. By committing murder, Superman has rejected the values which he has stood for six decades. This new Superman seems to reflect the postmodernist conception of plurality. It can be argued that Superman had no choice but to kill the villain, so that others might be spared. Superman still stands for justice; however, his methods and mind-set have altered.

The latest instalment in the *Superman* movie series is *Superman Returns*, the movie consciously enacts a movement from postmodern loss of faith to a restoration of faith. The film depicts Superman's return to Earth, having disappeared for five years to the remains of his home planet, Krypton. It appears that in his absence even Lois Lane has moved on, winning a Pulitzer Prize for her article entitled, "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman". However, Superman does return, saving Lois from an airplane disaster, and foiling the plans of Lex Luthor. Having saved the day, the film ends with

Lois Lane typing out the heading, "Why the World Needs Superman". While *Superman Returns* appeared to fulfil the needs of a superhero film, it was not as popular as many had thought it would be. This is argued to be the cause of the positioning of Superman within the film. While it is normal for Superhero films, series, and comics to be reinvented, the Superhero genre is successful because the audience is presented with something known, but with a new addition; be it side-kick or story-line. Sequels allow for the audience to revisit those characters who the audience admires, while also allowing the narrative to grow. *Superman Returns* failed at this, as there appeared to be too much "new" information for the audience to endure. The Superman presented in the film seemed a poor reflection of the Superman millions of people had come to love and respect. As stated earlier, superheroes need to represent the values of their society that produces them (Fingeroth 17). Many audience members felt that the Superman of *Superman Returns* was un-American, and not masculine enough; it seemed that this version of *Superman* did not represent the values of society. Robert Warshow reasons that originality, while welcomed by audiences, will only be accepted if the new concepts do not alter the original conceptions of the Superhero (qtd. in Murnane n.p.). Certainly, Warshow is correct to a certain extent. While audiences seeks the new, humanity is typically wary of the unknown.

Superman is not human; he is an alien. However, Superman loves like a human, feels compassion, and even has weaknesses. At one point in *Superman Returns*, Superman nearly kisses Lois Lane, even though she is engaged to another man; yet he is constantly reminded that he is not human. Within a moment the audience sees the plurality of Superman's existence, whilst spying on Lois Lane at her home, he hears her tell her fiancé that she never loved Superman, feeling emotionally hurt, a very human emotion, he flies away. As he does so, Kal-El hears the words of his father, originally heard in *Superman: The Movie*:

> Even though you have been raised as a human being, you are not one of them. They can be a great people, Kal-El, if they wish to be. They only lack the light to show them the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you, my only son.

These words are followed by the image of Superman floating in the mesosphere; a god sent to earth, not a man. Conversely, in the scene when Superman attempts to save people, including Lois Lane, from an airplane disaster, he strains as the plane plummets to earth. One can only question why he strains? Does Superman have limits? Would a larger plane be too much for him? Is he more human, less superhuman than one has been led to believe?

In *A Superman for All Seasons*, Lana Lang, Superman's childhood friend and lover of Clark Kent, notes that Superman is the man he is because of his time as a human on Earth, and because of his ultimate destiny as an alien being; he is more than a superhuman force stopping evil, he is loving and compassionate even while wielding his powers: "People wondered why anyone with those powers and abilities – if it were true – would use them to help others and not for their own benefit… to understand that man in the cape who could fly – all I needed to know was Clark" (Loeb, "A Superman for All Seasons" 189,195). Clark's upbringing greatly affected the type of hero he would become. Clark could have easily become a villain but chose to emulate his adoptive parents. This passage perhaps explains how this move from modernism to postmodernism has been achieved within the character of *Superman*. While he is not human, his time on Earth and involvement with human society has perhaps altered his sense of right and wrong. While he still stands for truth, justice and the American way, Superman and his alter-ego, Clark Kent, have a somewhat less rigid view since Superman's death and resurrection. While modernist in the understanding that his resurrection claims his immortality, the new improved, self-actualized Superman harkens more towards a postmodernist perspective. Perhaps this is one point where Superman is akin to Friedrich Nietzsche's *übermensch*, a term he coined in 1883 for an individual who has transcended the limitations of humanity. While Superman has clearly transcended the limitations of humanity, he is seen to be vulnerable. Superman is all powerful until he is exposed to Kryptonite, and then he is as weak as a human. Superman is not perfect, but he has achieved self-actualization in being the very best version of himself. Nietzsche believed that one must rise above and become more than human; people should become their own hero; Superman does just this.

While *Superman Returns* does resemble some of the main *Superman* inspiration, the film clearly demonstrates the shift from a postmodern loss of belief in heroes to postmodernist ideals. *Superman Returns* depicts restoration of faith by re-writing, re-working, and re-interpreting previously held ideals. This harks back to Jean-Francios Lyotard's belief that the "post" of postmodernism signifies a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis ("The Postmodern Condition" 50). In the original *Superman* movie, an exchange between Lex Luthor, and his assistant, Eve Teschmacher, states:

> Luthor: Miss Teschmacher, when I was six years old my father said to me.

> Teschmacher: Get out.

> Luthor: [Laughs] Before that. He said, son, stocks may rise and fall, utilities and transportation systems may collapse, people are no damn good, but they will always need land and they will pay through the nose to get it.

In *Superman Returns*, between Luthor and his assistant Kitty Kowalski:

> Luthor: Kitty, what did my father used to say to me?

> Kowalski: You're losing your hair.

> Luthor: Before that.

> Kowalski: Get out.

> Luthor: He said, you can print money, manufacture diamonds and people are a dime a dozen, but they'll always need land. It's the one thing they're not making any more of.

The similarity between the lines and care with which they have been recreated suggests a postmodernist reimagining. In this *Superman Returns* depicts a Lyotardian postmodern paradigm of *bricolage*: "the multiple quotation of elements taken from earlier styles or periods"; what Fredric Jameson might term pastiche ("The Postmodern Condition" 47). As the film has built upon the story it has given it a sense of pastiche, as it has created and added to the narrative, while also rewriting the myth to allow for the accommodation of postmodern audiences. Jameson defines pastiche as "'blank' parody in which there is no single model followed, no single impulse such as ridicule and no sense of a distance from any norm" ("Postmodern Culture" 166-167). Within these two dialogues there is seen to be more postmodern demerits at play, such as humour, political issues, psychodynamics, human venality and frailty, and materialism. Certainly, the humorous manner in which Luthor brushes off Kowalski's understanding of his relationship with his father, the clearly damaging relationship between Luthor and his father, and the obvious inclusion of talking of business and profits. It is important to note that there is more to these dialogues that merely bricolage.

This section of Superman's power included a significant point about Superman, the idea that he is not simply Superman, but Clark Kent who grew up and learned from his adoptive human parents. Likewise, Superman is also Kal-El the last son of the doomed planet Krypton. While Superman's powers come from his alien origins, it can be argued that his human identity informs his morality. This significantly links to the next section of discussion, that of plurality.

3.2. <u>Plurality</u>

Superman's popularity is due to his representation of every person's wish-fulfilment. To follow the old cliché, men want to be him, women want to be with him, and children want to grow up to be him. The power he exudes and the protection he can give makes him a very appealing individual. This sentiment originates with Superman's creators. Jerry Siegel states: "if you're interested in what made Superman what he is, here's one of the keys to what made it universally acceptable. Joe and I had inhibitions… which led to wish-fulfilment which we expressed through our interest in

science fiction and our comic strip. That's where the [plural] identity concept came from" (qtd. in Peterson & Park 176).

Created in the Great Depression, Superman is the embodiment of visible invisibility; he is both human and inhuman. Superman's multiple identities are a necessary part of his superheroism, and his ability to be uniquely American; he is half where he came from and half where he is now. Superman, like many Americans, is an immigrant. He is aware of his origins, he has a longing and affinity for his root, sadness for his destroyed alien home planet, while being aware of his purpose in his new surroundings. He is an ultimate American, donning red and blue, and being at heart, an immigrant. It is important to note that his public persona, that of Clark Kent, is the more American of his identities, while, conversely the red and blue wearing defender of the United States of America is the alien Kryptonian. Thus Superman's immigrant identity is the better expressed identity, exposing both humanity's propensity for kindness and compassion along with their physical limitations.

While his superpowers certainly came from his birth parents, it is difficult to justify that his choice to stand for good is not biological. It can be argued that Superman's personality developed as a result of social closeness, that is, the desire for intimacy with others. The manner in which one relates to someone with whom one is close is developed from infancy through to adulthood, and is termed attachment style (Rosenberg 33). Attachment style guides the child, and later the adult in how he or she views and makes sense of the world. This stems largely from the relationship that children have with their parents; for example if the parent is responsive, it is likely that the child will view the world from a responsive perspective. How does this apply to Clark Kent? It can be assumed that Kal-El was attached to his birth mother, Lara; this is because had he not been, he would not have formed such a close relationship with his adoptive parents. Clark, being a well-behaved and affectionate child, would have been easy to love. This indicates that there is a secure attachment between Clark and his adoptive parents. This is also seen in adulthood as Clark does not shy away from social interaction and closeness with friends, and desires an emotional and sexual relationship with Lois Lane.

During his teenage years, the Kents gave Clark two important pieces of advice. Firstly, "You must uphold law and order, and those in need, and save lives!" (Binder, "The Complete Story of Superman's Life" n.p.), or more simply, by Martha Kent: "assist humanity" (Siegel, "The Complete Story of the Exploits of the One and Only Superman" n.p.). Thus, he is being told to project social responsibility. Secondly, Clark must "Hide his strengths from others so they won't be afraid of him" (Siegel, "The Complete Story of the Exploits of the One and Only Superman" n.p.). Other versions of this warning state that Clark needs an alternate identity when he is doing good and preventing evil from succeeding, so that villains cannot abuse his family as a means of manipulating him. Secret identities help to protect friends and families. Superman's father, Jor-El, insists that: "You must keep your secret identity" (*Superman* Film). When Superman asks why, his father replies: "Your enemies will discover their only way to hurt you – by hurting the people you care for" (*Superman* Film). Superman is proud of his multiple heritages; this is seen in the fact that he has held onto the life lessons passed down to him by both his birth parents and adoptive parents.

The concept of the secret identity is deeply rooted within the American immigrant experience. Superman is perhaps one of America's most famous immigrants. Gary Engle, in "What Makes Superman so Darned American?" points out how Superman is one of the most direct manifestations of the concept of multiple identities. Engle continues on this line and points out that what makes Superman so successful as a character is the fact that he has multiple identities. Superman needs his mild-mannered alter-ego, Clark Kent, for the storyline to be effective. For most of his Superhero colleagues, with the exception of Wonder Woman, the civilian is real, and the heroic identity is only created with the addition of superpowers, skills, magic or technology. Clark Kent is the facade, while Superman is the true identity. Clark Kent is Superman's critique of humanity. Kal-El and Superman are seen to be the true form, whereas Clark Kent is the alter-ego. Danny Fingeroth reasons that by "adopting the white bread image of a wimp is first and foremost a moral act for the Man of Steel" (53). The necessity of the alter-ego Clark Kent is largely for the protection of his parents. Furthermore, as it has already been argued; Clark Kent's upbringing in Smallville may have had a major effect on his moral conscience. One can only guess what the consequences might have

been had he been raised by someone like Lex Luthor, a man renowned for his obsession to take over the world. Clark's small-town morality is perhaps one of the reasons his powers are kept in check, as Gary Engle, in "What makes Superman so darned American?" relates:

> Though a disguise, Kent is necessary for the (Superman) myth to work. This uniquely American hero has two identities, one based on where he comes from, one on where he's going. One is real, one an illusion, and both are necessary for the myth of balance in the assimilation process to be complete. Superman's powers make the hero capable of saving humanity; Kent's total immersion in the American heartland makes him want to do it. The result is... an optimistic myth of assimilation.

Superman is a unique Superhero in that he does not wear a mask. Superman does not disguise his face, and thus his identity. Clark Kent is the ultimate visible invisibility. Superman, as Clark Kent, wears glasses, which he believes can fool the world into believing that Clark Kent and Superman are two entirely different people. The power of Clark Kent's guise lies in the absolute ordinariness that allows him to disappear amongst the crowds. Batman was the first in a long line of Superheroes with a masked alter ego. One can only question if there is a difference between the two types of secret identities? If you adopt an identity so as to disguise who you really are, and are then able to have a "normal" life, that is free of the unasked-for responsibility that comes with such superpowers; this may be understandable. However, what of the majority of Superheroes whose civilian identity is the true identity? Are these Superheroes then more noble because they have a choice? Superman was born super; it is in his genetics, and there is no choice. Does this then mean that Superman is ignoble for not choosing this life? Perhaps not.

Clark Kent's hometown of Smallville is seen to be a town in fragmentation. Kal-El's alien arrival on Earth, or more accurately, his crash-landing into a cornfield, was the catalyst of change for the small town. Kal-El 's escape pod, along with fragments of his

destroyed home planet crash into Smallville and its surrounding farmlands. While this disastrous event is necessary for facilitating Superman's arrival on Earth, the manner of his arrival leads to a fracturing of the town, both physically and metaphorically. A young Lex Luthor's hair falls out as a result of the meteor strike, and Lana Lang's parents are killed. Both incidents leave the young characters fragmented from society, as Lex is isolated by his appearance, and Lana is orphaned by the loss of both her parents. The meteor disaster, and subsequent isolation, illustrates the fragmentation seen in a postmodern society. In the television series, *Smallville*, a teenage Clark Kent is seen to be using his powers for personal reasons, such as using his super speed and strength on the football field, rather than using them to save the world. The modern Clark Kent would strive to uphold the American way, but this postmodernist Clark Kent uses his powers to pacify his own guilt and loneliness. Clark's awareness of guilt is based in that his coming to Earth led to much destruction and physical and emotional loss, while acknowledging that his obvious difference from his classmates makes him lonely. Even Clark's loneliness demonstrates a move away from modernity, as the original Clark Kent and Superman of the early comic books did not depict feelings of loneliness; a very human characteristic. One cannot be wholly evil or wholly good. Superman's loneliness is a depiction of a postmodernist being where one is able to show a wide range of emotion.

In comparison to other superheroes, Superman seems to do battle against some rather uninspiring supervillians; notably the balding Lex Luthor and Braniac. However, perhaps the greatest and most underestimated evil-doer in the *Superman* narrative is Superman himself. Superman's other alter-ego, and arguably his truest self, is Bizarro Superman, who seems to embody the "negative potential inherent in anyone so far removed from the ordinary human realm" (Peterson & Park 180). Bizarro is a *doppelgänger* of Superman. Much like Joker in the Batman comic books, Bizarro's origin is often unclear, as throughout the decades of Superman comic books, the reinvention and recreations of Bizarro have varied. Created in 1958, one could argue that while Superman is "representative" of America, Bizarro is "representative" of the Soviet Union, given the world's Cold War mentality of the time. Beyond the obvious physical differences, in that Bizarro is often portrayed to have cracked, pasty skin, he

has a warped sense of logic. On a basic level, he is Superman's opposite, he lacks Superman's perfection. Although there have been instances in which Bizarro fulfils an anti-hero role, he is usually pitted against Superman as an enemy.

In 1897, in an article of *Atlantic Monthly*, W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term "double consciousness" (204). In 1903, he expanded this term, explaining that double consciousness is how the one understands the self through the perspective of another (Du Bois, "Double Consciousness and the Veil" 204). Double conscious is how the self perceives itself, as well as how the self is perceived by others. Du Bois reasoned that the danger of double consciousness was that one might wish to conform to what others perceived of the self, and thus would change to fit the perception of the other ("Double Consciousness and the Veil" 204). In 1899, just two years after Du Bois coined the term double consciousness, Sigmund Freud published his *Interpretation of Dreams*; in which he introduces the concept of the ego in which he argued, in his theory of the unconscious that often the "self" is in conflict with itself (227). Freud had great insight into the concept of the divided self, as well as how one's motives are not always clear to oneself. These two theorists are two examples of the body of work devoted to the concept of plurality. *Superman* was created after these theories were published, and it might be argued that he was created against this backdrop (Nafiay 183). It is in this understanding that one can view Bizarro as the other side, or rather the darker side, of Superman's identity (See Illustration 2). Where Clark Kent was considered to be the alter-ego of Superman, it appears that Bizarro is better suited to this role. Bizarro is the id to Superman's superego. Plurality depicts the contradiction between Superman and Bizarro is endless. Neil Cole in "Bizarro" notes an example when Bizarro speaks an odd but predictable form of English. Some of Bizarro's most notable linguistic characteristics were, firstly, his lack of nominative case. For example, he might state, "Me am Bizarro" rather than "I am Bizarro". Secondly, his lack of the correct verb conjugation, as he only uses the first person conjugation. For example, Bizarro conjugates the verb to be as "am", which leads to sentences, such as, "this am great". In later appearances of Bizarro, he seems to further negate verbs, nouns and adjectives. Conversely, Superman speaks in perfectly articulated sentences, which is expected of an English speaking person. Superman is depicted as being tanned, while Bizarro is pale with

black hair, stereotypical of Eastern European people, which is euphemistic, and considering Superman's creators are Jewish descendants, it might seem obvious that a character is created in reflection of their heritage. That is not to say that Bizarro is representative of Jewish immigrants. Superman and his arrival on Earth has long been compared to the immigration of Jewish people to the United States of America, perhaps most notably by Danny Fingeroth in *Superman on the Couch* (54) or Jesse Kavadlo in his essay "X-istential X-Men" (41). What is perhaps being implied is that Superman is seen to be the immigrant who has been assimilated into American culture and ideology, whereas Bizarro is still in his immigrant form, his English is broken and his ideals and behaviour are not considered to conform to American ways, and certainly not the "American way" exemplified by Superman.

Bizarro's most obvious characteristic must be his backwardness. One can assume that his backward sensibility is the result of coming from the planet Htrae, or Earth spelt in reverse. On this planet everyone behaves backwards; people are congratulated for being unattractive, children are praised for their bad behaviour, and popular films and music are seen to be boring. However, there is one instance where Bizarro has succeeded where his alter-ego, Superman, has not. Bizarro has consummated his relationship with Bizarro Lois. Bizarro Lois was created when Bizarro kidnapped the real Lois for himself. In a twist, the real Lois shot herself with a replicator gun, thus creating the Bizarro Lois for Bizarro. In comparison, Superman remains a virgin, having never consummated his love for Lois. Superman remains ultimately pure; until the latest Hollywood version, *Superman Returns*, where he is shown to have fathered an illegitimate son with Lois Lane.

The character of Superman is seen to be multi-faceted. Superman is Kal-El and Clark Kent. Superman is both the modern Superhero and the postmodernist Superhero. He is the clear-cut American and Bizarro is seen to be his opposition. The plurality of the Superman character is seen to fit well into the postmodern guise, which favours pluralism rather than the confined nature of modern.

3.3. <u>Morality</u>

Throughout his seventy-four year career, the Man of Steel has represented and embodied the changing values and morals of a nation. Ian Gordon believes that "the characters' [superheroes'] dimensions are set by the prevailing social order" (180). At his inception, during the Great Depression and Roosevelt's New Deal, Superman fought corrupt politicians, and tore down slums, so that the government could build better housing (Gordon 181). With World War II, Superman was seen on covers destroying German tanks and submarines, and defeating "Japanazis" (Morrison & Loeb 92-93). *Superman* comic books were distributed to troops on the frontline. He was a symbol of all they were fighting for. With the release of the second *Superman* film, Superman became a child of the sexual revolution, as the audience sees Superman making love to Lois Lane out of wedlock, and thus become a sexually liberated man (Morrison & Loeb117).

As discussed earlier, Clark Kent was a gifted child, for lack of a better description. Gross argues that children who are intellectually gifted have a far more developed sense of morality (*Exceptionally Gifted Children* 166). These children are able to empathize and feel compassionate towards others, while being concerned with moral and ethical issues. Besides his amazing superpowers, one of Superman's greatest characteristics is his two dimensional view of the world where morality is concerned: good and evil. Superman rarely seems to battle with the implications of crime-fighting. It can be argued that this simplistic view of morality is the result of his upbringing in Kansas; he was able to see complexity in moral situations when his friends could not. As such, it can be assumed that in adulthood he places the situation within a context that others will better understand; in black and white terms. In *Superman*, his first interview with Lois Lane leaves no doubt as to his absolute view of morality;

> Lois: Let's just say your average Joe can't deliver an airmail without putting a stamp on it.
>
> Superman: I wouldn't do that. It's against the law.

Lois: I don't believe this.

Superman: I never lie. (*Superman* Film).

Perhaps, because of his experience as a boy, where his peers did not understand the moral complexity that he saw, Superman does not believe human adults to be capable of complex moral reasoning. Alternatively, Superman is leading by example, demonstrating to the masses that morality can be straightforward, as if he is guiding them along the easiest path. In the Fortress of Solitude, Superman's only link to his home planet, his father, Jor-El states: "They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you... my only son" (*Superman* Film). Is this Superman's only purpose? Is his simplistic morality just a disguise? His actions are always predictable, he will always do the right thing. One can question if Superman is only emulating the way humanity should be, rather than actually being himself a good example. In an episode of *Lois and Clark*, as Superman is about to leave Earth for an indefinite amount of time, he says: "Emerson said 'self-trust is the essence of heroism'. Inside each of you is a hero. And so, I leave knowing that a world full of heroes has nothing to fear" ("Big Girls Don't Fly" Film). Perhaps if his morality was more complex it would be too difficult for humans to follow. Conceivably, Superman with his superior intellect has been able to observe human nature, and therefore, come to the understanding that he "serves" the will of humans. Humans fear that which they do not understand; Superman is predictable and always does the right thing. He has nothing to fear. They are not concerned that he will become a vengeful vigilante; if they were, he might become an alien specimen in a lab although a similar situation did occur in "Secret Identity" (Busiek n.p.).

In August 2001, in "Superman's Sacrifice", Superman is placed in such a predicament. Two powerful aliens from the planet Ventura, Rokk and Sorban, bet on whether or not they can get Superman to kill someone. Rokk states that he can kill an entire planet with his mind, and gives Superman an ultimatum: "Either you kill someone

or Earth will be destroyed! You have twenty-four hours to make your decision" (Dorfman & Plastino n.p.). Superman reflects: "What a ghastly choice! Throughout my career I have always protected life. Killing someone is against everything I stand for! Yet, if I don't, those vicious aliens will blast the Earth and kill billions of people!" (Dorfman *et al* n.p.).Superman cannot make a decision, does he kill one, but break his moral code, while saving billions? Superman's agony leads to him attempting suicide by kryptonite boulder. The evil aliens intervene, believing that Superman's solution to their problem is uninteresting. In anger, Superman grabs Rokk by the throat, while Sorban encourages Superman to kill him, Superman states: "Your conscience doesn't bother you about forcing me to kill someone! All right! I'll kill you!" (Dorfman *et al* n.p.). Superman eventually comes to his senses, and laments: "What am I doing? You upset me so much, I lost my temper and I nearly violated my code. I couldn't kill you, Rokk, even though you deserve death a thousand times!" (Dorfman *et al* n.p.). What is relevant is that Superman is unwilling to kill a single person, even if that person is an evil alien, to save billions of people. Immanuel Kant proposes that moral action is based on duty and actions not deemed right or wrong by consequences, but motives of people completing the action (Kant, "The Moral Law" 11). One may harm in order to save many if, and only if, the harm is an effect of the greater good itself. This differs from Superman's actions in not killing Rokk. This brings up an interesting argument regarding duty and moral action. Immanuel Kant's first proposition on duty states; "a human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination – still less because it is done from self-interest – but because it is done for the sake of duty" ("The Moral Law" 10). Kant reasoned that if one does an action based on duty and it is right to do so, it is not necessarily good if it is done in self-interest. Furthermore, an action which is done because of sympathy may be right and even praiseworthy, but might not be worth much where morality is concerned. Similarly, an action done out of duty is also not morally worthy.

Where does this leave Superman? While it is his duty to kill Rokk he does not, which leads one to question Superman and his motives. Why would Superman risk the lives of billions because it is morally wrong to kill one? This is where one can argue the difference between right and good. While it would not be morally good to kill Rokk, it is

right to kill him as he poses a threat to many. While "Superman's Sacrifice" has a happy ending, it is Lois Lane who saves the day and not Superman, by using a laser to make herself appear crystallized and thus "dead" at the hands of Superman. However, what if Lois was not so clever? How would Superman resolve the dilemma? Perhaps Superman gives the best answer to this question. "My parents taught me to side with justice… I'm known as a hero, an inspiration, a champion" (Loeb, "Superman/Batman" 52). Heroes who provide the best examples are those who have a definite moral code, something to which ordinary humans can aspire. Doing what is right is more than doing what is practical in a given situation, or else morality does not really exist or matter. Ultimately, Superman would choose what is right and not what is good.

In *Superman Returns*, one development sets the film apart from any other *Superman* narrative; during the course of the film the audience discovers that Superman has fathered a child with Lois Lane, who is engaged to another man, who believes that the child is his own. Ian Gordon states that Superman "acts as an instructive tool for what passes as virtue in society", this story-line changes Superman forever (180). Neal Bailey in "Superman Returns: Critical Analysis" continues this sentiment:

> These characters are moral arbiters... Singer obviously knows these characters so well with the dialogue and story he's made, but knows them not at all because of the wrinkles he's added... Families like that exist. They're the norm, not the exception. Mommies cheat on daddies with other lovers and still love another person when they're with another all the time. And the reverse for daddies too... It's always a result of someone's critical moral failing.

While Bailey is largely correct in this statement, this cannot be true for Superman, or at least for the true, traditional Superman. Superman cannot be with Lois now that she is engaged to another. If he were to be, he would no longer be a moral arbiter, and therefore, not Superman. The new Superman which Singer has created has altered the *Superman* moral universe. By including a story-line which includes a secret love child,

Singer has gone against Fingeroth's 'no-change rule'. For Fingeroth, for mainstream success to be achieved the core values of the superheroes and the relationships they have must be maintained and adhered to (35). In *Superman: The Movie*, Superman changes the direction of the Earth's rotation to turn back time and bring Lois back to life, and in *Superman II* Lois and Superman's momentary relationship is erased with a magic kiss (Film). In both cases, the "no-change rule" is observed. By including an illegitimate child, Singer has changed the *Superman* narrative, and thus Superman's relationship with the world; this would mean that in sequels still to come the illegitimate child would have to be incorporated. Yet, all these aspects help to make Superman a postmodernist Superhero, as he is not perfect. Modernists believed that all people were either good or bad, there was no inbetween when someone could have a bad day, but still be inherently good. This is why Superman is increasingly becoming more postmodern, he is now fulfilling the grey area between good and bad. Although he cannot be considered a complete moral arbitrator, because of the storyline including an illegitimate child, he is not perfect; yet he is still a Superhero as he battles Lex Luthor to keep the planet safe. Superman is now able to be a Superhero in the grey spectrum of morality. The Superman of *Superman Returns* is less masculine, less American, and not in keeping with traditional *Superman* narratives. Even Lois Lane's fiancé, Perry White, asks: "Does he still stand for truth, justice, and all that stuff?" (*Superman Returns* Film). From being a very American hero, it appears as if there is a shift away from this. By not specifically stating the "American way", it leads the audience to believe that Superman has become more global. During one scene in the movie, a child in Germany is seen watching a news broadcast where Superman is saving people from an airplane crash.

It appears that even music written with reference to Superman is making a move away from the modern towards the postmodern. In a song entitled "Superman" by the band Five for Fighting, a line in the songs says: "Find a way to lie about a home I'll never see". In 1978, in *Superman: The Movie* in an interview between Lois Lane and Superman, Superman states: "Lois, I never tell a lie" (Film). This statement is in direct contrast to the Five for Fighting song. The lyrics of the song depict a more multiplistic desire, which is seen in postmodernism. Even if the lie is small, the lie itself stands in direct opposition to Superman's modernist honesty. For Superman to lie, it means that

all aspects of him, his ideals and values, are reduced or flawed within the modern context. Early *Superman* storylines were based on the principle that Superman strove to create a utopia by standing for truth, justice and the American way; honesty was at the basis of creating such a utopia. Does this now mean that Superman no longer wishes to stand for a utopian society? Has postmodernism created a Superman who sees society in moral chaos? Furthermore, the song lyrics state: "looking for special things inside of me", which depicts a character who is fragmented within society and unsure of himself, a characteristic of a postmodern society. Moreover, another lyric presents itself in a similar manner as being pro-postmodernism: "Men weren't meant to ride with clouds between their knees". In this lyric it appears that Superman is questioning his identity. While Superman is not human, the lyric seems to evoke the longing that Superman wishes to be human. This questioning of identity arises from a fragmented society, rather than a stable, predictable one.

 Superman has undergone many changes since his inception, allowing him to become relevant to the postmodern world. The *Superman* narrative has changed greatly in seventy-four years, with new authors purposefully writing storylines that differ from the original, and thus making Superman relevant and in tune with a postmodern society. The Superhero comic book genre has grown and extended, while the postmodernist influence has not only affected comic books themselves, but music, film, and television series based on Superheroes.

Chapter 4:
Spider-Man: The Postmodernist

Spider-Man was created in the early postmodernist era, and in many ways represents the conflict and mystery of the theory. Conflict replaced assuredness and certainty. Grey areas replaced distinct lines between what was right and what was wrong. Even Spider-Man's villains often evoked pity and understanding from audiences, as the villains became less comedic and far more real. The audience not only identified with the hero, but with the villain as well, as often these characters were very human as they expressed believable, albeit base human qualities. In Geoff Boucher's "'Spider-Man' star Andrew Garfield on fame", Andrew Garfield notes that Peter Parker is "a human hero (who) goes through all of the same struggles that we all have gone through, especially the skinny ones (who) want more power than they have"; he represents "a very inspiring, aspirational character that symbolizes the goodness – and how difficult it is to be good – but how worth it is".

With the help of illustrator Steve Ditko, Lee set about creating a character who was complex and who would connect with the current youthful comic book readers. As Peter is a shy teenager, who is insecure with kids his own age, real-life youth across the country can identify with Peter's fears and humiliation, and his lowly stature makes his triumphs all the more satisfying. Having been orphaned at a young age, he lives a simple life with his Aunt May and Uncle Ben until one day Peter is bitten by a radio-active spider in a laboratory. He soon discovers that he has enormous strength, can leap great distances, cling to walls, and maintain an extraordinary sense of balance, but most importantly, has a spider sense, which is a tingling sensation that warns him of danger.

The latest instalment in the *Spider-Man* film franchise is a re-boot of the original story line, entitled *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and is arguably the most true to the comic book series. Director Marc Webb, and Andrew Garfield, in "An Exclusive Interview with *The Amazing Spider-Man*'s Marc Webb" agree that Peter Parker is an outsider and someone hard to get close to. Geoff Boucher in "'Spider-Man' director Marc Webb feels a 'responsibility to reinvent' the hero" notes that Parker is portrayed as he was in the early comic books, as:

A science whiz. If you look back to the early Stan Lee and Steve Ditko comics, he's a nerd with big glasses... the idea of what a nerd is has changed in forty or fifty years. Nerds are running the world... What was important in those early comics was the notion that Peter Parker is an outsider and how we define that in a contemporary context.

Initially, Peter wants to use his powers to make money by entering into a wrestling match, albeit to aid his elderly Aunt and Uncle financially, but at one point he has the opportunity to stop a burglar, but he lets him go, hoping to take the burglar's stolen money. As the burglar gets away, he shoots Peter's Uncle Ben on the street, fatally injuring him. Peter realizes that his greed has led to a terrible tragedy. As Ben dies in Peter's arms, Peter remembers something his Uncle once said: "With great power there must also come great responsibility" (Lee, "Spider-Man" n.p.). Uncle Ben's death serves as Peter Parker's awakening to what he already knows: that he should direct his gifts toward helping the world, and not just helping himself and those he loves. This realization leads Peter to accept his fate, and become a crime-fighting superhero. One can only ask: how great is the responsibility? Is the responsibility unlimited? Does this mean that Peter Parker must help whoever crosses his path, irrespective of their attitude towards him (Kukkonen 27). Peter Parker has very human and very teenage flaws. Placed within the life lessons is a horrible family tragedy, making Peter Parker a more emotionally relatable character. These unique and contemporary storylines made *Spider-Man* an instant hit. Sam Raimi, the director of the first *Spider-Man* film, says of Spider-Man:

Any story of a hero, shows us the good that we are capable of – the value of these types of tales. I knew… that millions of kids would come see this movie, I just knew it, and they would look up to *Spider-Man*… Therefore I thought it was very important that I put a morally responsible character up there. Someone that would be worthy of that admiration… Someone who went from someone selfish to someone who used their

abilities to help others. It's more than beating up the   bad guys. ("Sam Raimi's Heroes" 41).

4.1.   <u>Power</u>

Spider-Man possesses powers associated with a spider, having been bitten by a radioactive Common House Spider. The enzymes contained in the spider's bite were mutagenic in nature, which triggered a number of mutant-like changes in Peter Parker. He gained superhuman speed, strength, agility, and a number of spider related powers.

Spider-Man's physical transformation does not make him a superhero. Similarly, Norman Osbourne, Spider-Man's nemesis, gaining new strengths does not in itself make him evil. For both Peter and Norman, their transformation is not simply a matter of organic changes, but involves choices, reasons and new abilities. This coupled with the circumstances and the characteristics of the individual before the transformation allow for the new identity to form and develop to its full potential. If Peter is to completely adopt his new identity, he must make a habit of his new abilities and the responsibilities that comes with them. Peter Parker is seen to use his abilities in various situations so that he can develop them into virtues, as opposed to vices. Thomas Aquinas defines virtues as "the perfection of power" (qtd. in Loughlin 205). Mark Spencer argues that humans have several natural powers, namely, "emotions and desires... our senses and ability to move; our intellectual abilities to know things in various ways; and our volitional abilities to deliberate and choose" (134). All of these powers can be orientated towards goals in the world, and it takes practise to form these abilities so that they reach their full potential. Throughout life it is often difficult to discover what one's true goals are. Furthermore, one must perform certain actions repeatedly in order to ensure that this true goal is obtained. Virtue is seen to shape and strengthen desire so that one remains motivated in the pursuit of achieving one's goals. Spider-Man, or rather, Peter Parker, struggles with finding that which will give him ultimate fulfilment, and thus choosing the right thing to do. With every choice he makes, Peter is further modified by his new identity and abilities. This affirmation of his new identity allows for a more complete perception of the world, as well as allowing for the growth and development of his values and virtues.

Yet, how does Peter Parker know that he is doing good when he is acting as Spider-Man? Green Goblin, Osbourne's super other, believes that those with more advanced bodily abilities should rule the weaker members of society. Osborne states:

> There are eight million people in this city. And those teeming masses exist for the sole purpose of lifting the few exceptional people onto their shoulders. You and me, we're exceptional. (*Spiderman* Film).

Perhaps Norman Osbourne has a point, as in early history tribes were ruled by the greatest warrior, rather than the most morally sound leader. It can be argued that those with greater bodily abilities are able to experience more of the world, as they are faced with fewer obstacles. Furthermore, if great responsibility comes with great power, then perhaps the responsibility is to oneself, that is, to further one's own abilities, so that ultimate goals, whether personal or universal, can be fulfilled. Surely this would mean that Spider-Man must prevent evil. However, Spider-Man rejects this ideal. He believes that he has a responsibility to others, not simply because it makes him feel good. This is seen in *Spider-Man 3*, when Spider-Man uses his powers for his own selfish needs it inevitably leads to his misery as he acknowledges that he has a responsibility to the powers he has to save humanity (Film). In the film, the audiences witnesses Parker's obvious distress as he ignores the cries for help as an innocent person is mugged. For Superheroes, the call to goodness is experienced physically, whereas some villains, such as Green Goblin, believe that their abilities and powers should be used to have control over others. Mark Spencer argues that: "Our bodily interaction with the world involves a feeling of being alive, of sensing our own vitality, and this is a matter of enjoyment or suffering" (137). When Spider-Man swings through New York, or climbs walls, the audience is able to see his unique experience and bodily abilities, as well as witness as he experiences pleasure and pain. This points to the uniquely human aspect of Superhero comic books, that is, the distinctive bodily aspect of how humans are able to experience life through their bodily experiences within an environment (Levinas 2).

However, one of the least acknowledged, and most underestimated powers is that of hope and optimism. Given Spider-Man's reluctance as a hero, he would not get up in

the morning and face supervillains such as Hobgoblin and Venom if he were not optimistic. If Spider-Man was not hopeful of a positive outcome against his adversaries he could not face them, he would most likely run. One must question what makes Peter Parker, and thus Spider-Man, this super-positive? One might argue that as a teenager, he is naturally foolish and would seek dangerous past-times. Or is he simply arrogant in his new abilities? This may be true, but Peter Parker has his life under control; he is able to assess risk and take intelligent courses of action. Spider-Man is well-founded in hope, and this can be seen in his many victories despite initial difficulties.

Psychologist Rich Snyder spent most of his career studying hope and trying to understand what makes some people more hopeful than others (qtd. in Biswas-Diener 72). Snyder came to the conclusion that hope was not so much a feeling, but the manner in which one perceives their goals. He identified two components of hopeful thinking: agency and pathway thinking (qtd. in Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 166). Agency refers to one's feelings of self-efficacy and competence (qtd. in Cox *et al* 166). Snyder believed that the more confident an individual felt in his or her ability to achieve the goal set before him or her, the more hopeful he or she would be that it could be achieved. Spider-Man, because of his past successes fighting evil-doers, is able to display a level of self-confidence, and thus this allows for and promotes hopeful thinking. After many successes, including defeating the Vulture, saving an astronaut from an out-of-control rocket ship, and beating an alien invasion, it would only seem natural that Spider-Man would be confident in himself and his abilities. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* #3, Peter Parker states: "The only problem is my jobs are too easy. I'd welcome a little competition once in a while" (Lee, "Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus" n.p.). Although the statement seems conceited, one can identify how such an attitude could allow for such optimism and hopefulness despite the risks equated with the tasks presented. Snyder believed that pathway thinking was an individual's ability to be able to find multiple routes to achieving a goal; more commonly this idea can be termed "thinking creatively" or "thinking out-of-the-box" (Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti 58). Snyder meant that the more solutions one could come up with to achieve a goal, the more hopeful, and thus optimistic that individual would be. This is seen in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #2, when the Vulture traps Spider-Man inside a water tank (Lee, "Duel to

the Death with the Vulture!" n.p.). At first Spider-Man tries all the usual escape routes, and as fate would have it, he has run out of web, and the walls are too wet for him to cling to. Growing tired, he can no longer tread water. How will Spider-Man escape? As a pathway thinker, the ever-resourceful Spider-Man dives to the bottom of the tank, and using his amazing strength, propels himself from the bottom and breaks through the hatch at the top of the tank. Rather than giving up, Spider-Man finds an alternate solution. Spider-Man's attitude is proof that self-confidence and the ability to problem-solve allows for hope. Is hope one of Spider-Man's superpowers? Spider-Man seems to constantly have hope that he will succeed, and this is arguably why he is always successful in his endeavours. However, Peter Parker is also quite cynical, sarcastic and humorous. This is seen to temper the "hope" and "optimism" and it becomes its own kind of power.

4.2.   Plurality

There is much to be said about identity in all hero stories, super and classical alike. According to Stan Lee, Spider-Man was created to fulfil the teenage niche in the market, that is, the identity of the superteen. Erikson noted how teenagers are in a space in their development when they are not only trying to figure out who they are and what they should do with their lives, they are also "primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are" (73). For the dual minds of Peter Parker and Spider-Man, the contradictions of each one's moral code will only lead to a further fracturing of identity. This fractured identity is the result of extreme moral repression; as one moral code is fulfilled, the other is repressed, allowing for an eventual fracturing of identity. An example of this occurs in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, when Peter Parker/ Spider-Man captures his uncle's murderer, he faces such a conflict (Lee, "Spider-Man" n.p.). Peter Parker recognizes that because of his own choices and moral code, he is indirectly responsible for his uncle's death. It is at this point that one can see the splitting of the Peter Parker/Spider-Man moral identity; as he realizes that Uncle Ben is Peter Parker's loved one, but also a victim of a violent crime.

Wearing a mask allows for a certain degree of mystery, which gives people the freedom to do and say things that are either socially accepted or not, without fear of

consequence. Andrew Garfield states, in Geoff Boucher, "'Spider-Man' star Andrew Garfield on fame: 'It terrifies me'", that "You feel power in it, the power of not being seen, the power of the mask. Peter Parker becomes witty when he's got that protective layer... it's like he can say whatever the hell he likes and get away with anything".

Spider-Man is the result of a genetic modification caused by a spider bite. Superman was born with his abilities, and Batman chose to become a Superhero; Peter Parker did not choose his fate. Peter Parker lives with the memory of his life before he became Spider-Man; rather than rejecting this new form, he has accepted his new and true identity. That is not to say that he did not battle to come to this acceptance. In the first Spider-Man film he struggles with keeping a balance with his new life as a Superhero and his new life as a college student (*Spider-Man* Film). Peter Parker seems to be pulled in every direction as he attempts to be a good nephew to his ailing aunt, as he tries to fulfil the requirements of his university classes, and as a new Superhero. In the famous kissing scene from Sam Raimi's *Spiderman*, Mary-Jane further aids in the depiction of Spider-Man's multiple identities (Film). While Peter Parker, as Spider-Man, kisses Mary-Jane whom he loves, Mary-Jane kisses Spider-Man not knowing his true identity. Furthermore, to facilitate the kiss, Mary-Jane draws back Spider-Man's mask slightly. Spider-Man's mask is the only security he has in concealing his identity. While her hands rest on the bare skin of her hero's face, she unknowingly touches Peter Parker's face. The intimate moment fulfils Peter Parker's moral code, but it is a violation of Spider-Man's. Spider-man does not want or seek the affection of those he rescues; as a superhero he must remain selfless. However, because Peter Parker receives his moral code fulfilment in the guise of Spider-Man it is not true fulfilment.

However, it is not until the second film that the audience is aware of how much Peter Parker battles with his new identity (*Spider-Man 2* Film). During the film, Peter Parker is seen to battle to accept his identity, as he is unsure which is his true self; the Peter Parker before or after the radioactive spider bite. Peter decides that he cannot accept his new identity, and so rejects it, along with his powers. Peter Parker returns to a relatively normal existence; however, he feels responsible for those who need saving from evil-doers. While acknowledging that accepting his modified self he will be sacrificing his personal life, he feels obligated to help those in need with the "genetic

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gifts" that accompany his modified self (Kirby & Gaither 279). Superman was always "super"; he does not know what it is like to be invulnerable. Peter Parker, however, is able to make a legitimate choice. Although he had no choice in becoming modified, he is able to make a choice as to how he uses his abilities. Ultimately, Peter Parker decides that he has the power to decide his own identity although his choice is based largely on guilt and feelings of responsibility. It can even be argued that it is the heroic that is exemplified by his sacrifice. Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee's research can be used to explain Peter Parker's response to his new genetic identity. In their research, Nelkin and Lindee noted how popular culture perceived the "gene as an essential entity that defines the individual" (193). Furthermore, they reasoned that the search to better understand one's genetics was a search for "personal identity" (69). This is true for Peter Parker who comes to terms with his identity when he comes to terms with the origins of this new identity, and by recognizing that his identity is bound to his genetics. What is clear is that Peter Parker chooses to accept his identity as Spider-Man. This is seen in *Spider-Man 2*, where Peter Parker comes to the realization that while Spider-Man is part of his identity, it does not need to be his only identity (Film). Peter Parker can be his unmodified self and modified self. Therein lies the plurality of this Superhero; Spider-Man is not merely Peter Parker's alter-ego, but a complete, separate identity. Peter Parker can choose to either ignore his abilities or embrace them for good; this is true for all people who can choose the type of person they want to become. The film suggests that while genetic modification does not necessarily mean the establishing of a new identity, it does imply that one has a choice. In the opening lines of *Spider-Man 2*, Peter Parker makes this statement clear, when he makes reference to his love, Mary-Jane, and the choices he made regarding her:

> She looks at me every day. Mary-Jane Watson. Oh boy! If she only knew how I felt about her. But she can never know. I made a choice once to live a life of responsibility. A life she can never be a part of. Who am I? I'm Spider-Man, given a job to do. (*Spiderman 2* Film)

As Meaghan Godwin notes, Peter Parker has been portrayed as "a high schooler, a college student, a scientist, a geek, a photographer, a good kid, a smart-alec, a boy next door, an idealist, a romantic, a comic, and a moral hero" (119). However, Peter Parker's greatest change in identity occurs when Spider-Man encounters an alien symbiote, a parasitic entity seeking a host to transform. Peter Parker experiences changes inside and out as his sense of self is altered by the interaction with the alien entity. Peter's confidence turns to arrogance, romance changes to womanizing, rising to the fight becomes murderous rage. Yet, even with his new found power, something of the real Peter Parker remains, and he acknowledges that the new changes are not for the better: "This suit, where'd it come from? The power, feels good... But you lose yourself in it." (*Spider-Man 3* Film). In *Spider-Man 3*, having awoken hanging upside down from a building, Spider-Man realizes that his normal suit, the red and blue, is gone, and is replaced with a completely black suit; however it is not just the suit that is different, having superpowers is nothing unusual, but he feels stronger, more angry, more violent (Film). Peter Parker's new perspective, although alien, is still palpable; the symbiote has its own agenda. It becomes abundantly clear that the alien is not passive; the symbiote is an active agent, as it feeds on and manipulates the negative aspects of Peter's personality, traits which exist in all humans; his anger, his jealousy, his vengefulness, are all amplified.

In Spider-Man 3, Peter warns Eddie Brock, the alien symbiote's true mate, about it (See Illustration 3)(Film):

> Peter: Eddie, the suit, you've got to take it off.
> Eddie: Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?
> Peter: I know what it feels like. It feels good. The power. Everything.
> But you'll lose yourself. It'll destroy you. Let it go.

If it can be assumed that Reid is correct in his argument, then Peter Parker may also be correct; the self could be lost once the alien symbiote takes over. It is perhaps for this reason that Parker does not give in to the symbiote for fear of losing himself to it. However, if Hume and Gautama are correct then it is not so much a matter of losing

oneself, as if the self was lost then their conception of the self could be re-described to include physical and not merely mental and spiritual standing. The question of self-identity puts Peter Parker's struggle with the symbiote and Eddie Brock's eventual succumbing to it into perspective. How can Peter maintain his sense of self, his sense of who he is, when Eddie seems to lose his? The alien symbiote feeds off anger and frustration, sensations which both young men experience. However, Peter's biopsychosocial self appears to identify with the positive aspects of human nature, rather than the negative. Peter Parker is seen to have good biology on his side, as well as good and positive relationships with people in his life who genuinely care for him in return. Conversely, Eddie seems to be a loner, and of negative attitude towards life in general; these factors might make Eddie more susceptible to the symbiote's evil manipulations. Yet, Eddie does not allow the symbiote to take complete control of his self. In later versions of the Venom storyline, he never loses his hatred for Spider-Man, but refuses to harm innocent people, unlike his cousin, Carnage. Venom sees himself as a protector of innocents, and unlike Spider-Man will kill a criminal without consideration. There have been times when Venom and Spider-Man have called a truce, and Venom becomes an anti-hero who kills those who harm innocent people.

The evil-doers in *Spider-Man* are seen to be postmodern characters. Norman Osbourne is an example of plurality, a conception of postmodernism. When Norman Osbourne volunteers as a test subject for an experiment his company is backing, he becomes the Green Goblin. However, he is unaware of his transformation. Beyond the intentional reaction to the experiment, that of heightened reflexes and strength, Norman Osbourne also develops multiple personalities. This plurality allows him to be able to maintain both his professional life as the head of Oscorp and his personal life as the Green Goblin. However, as Norman Osbourne is completely unaware of his multiple personalities, it is suggested that despite his questionable behaviour as a husband and father, Norman Osbourne is a victim to his neurosis, rather than being a villain. Eventually, Norman Osbourne does realize his condition as he battles his alternate ego in the mirror, as the Green Goblin side of his personality schemes against Spider-Man. As Peter Bramham in "Change, Postmodernism and Postmodernity" states: "There is unremitting anxiety about self-identity". The representation of two personalities with one

mind incorporates the anxiety that is seen in the postmodern condition (McEnteggart 186). Furthermore, it incorporates the same postmodern anxiety as the unpredictability of Norman Osbourne's mental illness inspires fear, suspicion and paranoia (McEnteggart 186). The final scene between Spider-Man and the Green Goblin shows how Norman tries to reconcile with his enemy, by explaining the circumstances he is in (*Spiderman* Film). Yet, the mental illness within Norman evokes distrust, and coupled with the erosion of his mental state, he attempts to kill Spider-Man. However, Norman Osbourne, as the Green Goblin, kills himself, although by accident. It seems that this is the only resolution. Unlike the Batman narrative where Batman continually returns the Joker to Arkham Asylum, Spider-Man by proxy causes the death of the Green Goblin, although not intentionally as Spider-Man jumps out of the way of the Green Goblin's fatal attack (*Spiderman* Film). The removal of the Green Goblin from the Spider-Man universe is a far more permanent solution than putting him away in a guarded psychiatric unit only to escape and cause more mayhem.

The same is seen in Harry Osbourne, Norman's son and Peter Parker's best friend. After his father's death, Harry is so filled with hatred for Spider-Man, believing that he killed his father, and betrayed by the knowledge that Peter Parker is Spider-Man, Harry develops the same mental illness as his father. However, rather than developing a maniacal version of himself, his other personality manifests as his father. This simultaneously continues the same anxieties involved with this mental illness. Furthermore, it reveals that while physically dead, Norman Osbourne will never truly be gone.

In the latest *Spider-Man* film, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Dr. Curtis Connor spent most of his career trying to help injured servicemen who lost limbs, by creating a formula that would allow limbs to regenerate in a similar fashion to how reptiles re-grow their own body parts (Film). However, during an experiment, there is an explosion, and Dr. Connors loses his arm. Dr Connor uses the serum in the hopes that he will be able to re-grow his arm, but instead he is transformed into the Lizard. As the Lizard, Connors grows not only in size but in strength. As the Lizard, he is a complete man, having all his limbs intact. His great strength allows him to leap large distances. It appears as if the Lizard is almost indestructible as he is faster, stronger, and able to heal himself at rapid

rates. During "Face-to-Face With the Lizard" Lizard sends an army of reptiles to conquer the world; however, Spider-Man swings to the rescue, preventing a disaster and tricking Connors into drinking an antidote, changing him back into his human form (Lee n.p.). In spite of this, when under stress, Dr. Connors is able to change back into his Lizard form.

Dr. Curtis Connors is perhaps most akin to Dr. Jekyll, from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Likewise, the Lizard is akin to Mr Hyde. Like his literary counterpart, Dr. Connors is able to unleash a dark creature who will prove to be too powerful for him to control himself. The Lizard is one of Spider-Man's oldest foes, and is considered to be one of the most dangerous, if not the most savage. Yet, he is one of the few villains in the Superhero comic book universe that is able to evoke sympathy from its audience. The Lizard, unlike Green Goblin or Mysterio, is, at his very basis, a good man who is unable to control his dark alter-ego. Before the life altering accident, Dr. Connors was a good husband and father, who worked tirelessly to help wounded war veterans. Therein lies the problem. Just as the audience is aware that Dr. Connors is a good man under his scaly, violent exterior, so does Spider-Man. As a result, Spider-Man often holds back when battling Lizard. Even after Spider-Man gives Lizard the antidote, he is still able to transform into the Lizard, generally whilst under stress. In "Face-to-Face with the Lizard!", while waiting for his wife and son to arrive from their Florida home, Dr. Connors notices that his arm is turning green and scaly. Dr. Connors states: "It's mad – insane! There's no reason for it! No reason!" In an earlier issue, Dr. Connors aided Spider-Man in defeating Rhino, and he wonders if the chemicals used during the attack have triggered his Lizard side. Realizing he is about to transform into his dark side, he flees, exclaiming: "If I don't get out of here in time... nobody will be safe!". While Dr. Connors is aware that he has a darker side, the Lizard is not aware of his good side. Perhaps one of the reasons Lizard is so dangerous is that while he might not look like Dr. Connors, he does share his intellect. Lizard is cunning and calculating, he would be far easier to defeat if he were simply a dumb brute like Rhino.

4.3.   <u>Morality</u>

Spider-Man is the story of a teenager who has his abilities thrust upon him. Peter Parker faces a very human, even adolescent, dilemma as he tries to find his identity; to pursue what he wants, or to help those who are in need. Told from the perspective of Peter Parker, Spider-Man seems simplistic; however as Peter Parker battles to come to terms with his alter-ego, a unified morality is very rarely displayed. On a superficial level, Spider-Man as a hero fulfils the necessary requirements of a superhero; he stands for truth, justice, and battles against evil-doers. Yet, while Spider-Man fulfils the requirements of Superheroism, he is filled with moral contradictions. Spider-Man is a tale of self-discovery as Peter Parker, rather than Spider-man, seeks self-actualization. Superheroes like Superman and Batman, suppress their alter-egos so that a true representation of their moral code is achieved. Conversely, Spider-Man has conflicting moral identities: the morality of Spider-Man and the morality of Peter Parker. *Spider-Man*, like many other superheroes, has a moral code that is largely based on the restoration of social order. Social order is disrupted, and Spider-Man comes to the rescue. The purpose of a superhero is to help those who are in need; therefore, the moral code of the superhero is for the benefit of others and their moral codes. The servitude of the superhero is based on the sacrifice of self; as is the case when forced to choose between a loved one and the one he does not know; the superhero will always choose the unknown individual. It is the duty of a superhero to be selfless. He is a hero to all but himself. Peter Parker's morality serves the purpose of achieving self-actualization. His morality is largely based on his love for others; his respect for his Aunt May, his friendship with Harry Osbourne, and most notably his love for Mary-Jane Watson. This is seen quite clearly in the opening monologue of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*, where Peter Parker states: "this, like any story worth telling is about a girl" (Film). While Peter Parker's morality is based on the love of those closest to him, Spider-Man's morality, like all other superheroes, is based on his commitment to protect society from evil-doers.

This plurality of morality within an individual creates a problem. What if Spider-Man were faced with a choice? What if the Green Goblin captured Mary-Jane Watson and a train filled with law-abiding citizens, and Spider-Man could save only one. Would Spider-

Man save the good citizens of New York, or would the Peter Parker part of his identity want to save Mary-Jane? For a superhero like Batman or Superman, the choice would be simple. Yet, for Spider-Man the situation is difficult as his two identities battle the other's moral code. Interestingly, the very presence of Mary-Jane allows for plurality, as she allows for the self-actualization of Peter Parker's moral code, while also playing the victim, which allows for the self-actualization of Spider-Man's moral code. Perhaps this is where moral judgement comes into play; with multiple identities comes multiple moral codes, and as such, only one identity may have its moral code fulfilled at least in a hypothetically extreme scenario.

In *Spider-Man*, by breaking his promise to Uncle Ben by not painting the kitchen and by failing to stop a criminal, Peter is shown to act in accordance with his own distorted desires, instead of doing what he knows is right (*Spiderman* Film). Peter is seen to be unjust as one should keep promises made, and if someone has the power to stop a criminal, especially when someone is quite capable of doing so, then they should do so. However, as the movie continues, Peter is seen to become more just, in that he chooses to focus on something greater than himself, that is the actualization of justice and responsibility. Norman Osbourne, in the guise of the Green Goblin, asks Peter why he bothers to help people, especially when they will eventually hate him; Peter replies: "Because it is right" (*Spiderman* Film). Green Goblin ridicules Peter for this response, as he denies the existence of universal moral law; ironically, this is seen to be a postmodernist conception. Osbourne sees morality as relative, and claims that the masses exist to lift "the few exceptional people on their shoulders" (*Spiderman* Film). He is driven by dreams of power with which he can achieve his own selfish ends, and thus implicitly rejects the maxim "with great power comes great responsibility" (Barkman 61).

Peter Parker's choice to embrace his new identity as Spider-Man comes at the cost of his uncle's murder. Peter Parker feels responsible for having been selfish, and in doing so indirectly causing his uncle's death. However, one must question how morally responsible Peter is for Ben's death. To argue the point, one will need two subjects; Peter Parker A and Peter Parker B. Peter Parker A allows a thief to escape a crime, even though he is capable of stopping him, later he discovers that the same thief has killed his uncle (Tallon 91). The same scenario can be applied to Peter Parker B, who

also allows the thief to escape, but later learns that the thief was apprehended before anyone was hurt (Tallon 91). While both Peter Parkers are performing the same action, that is, letting the thief escape, Peter Parker A seems to be more to blame for his inaction. Immanuel Kant argues a similar point, stating:

> A good will is not good by what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favour of some inclination and indeed, if you will, by the sum of all inclinations. Even if, by a special disfavour of fortune... this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose – if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good will were left – then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has full worth in itself. ("Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals" 8)

What Kant is suggesting is that what matters most in morality is a good intention or good will. Furthermore, he argued that if by bad fortune your greatest efforts achieved nothing, the moral worth of those intentions would still have full worth within themselves. While it might be argued that Kant is extreme in his views of morality, in many circumstances individuals might "look" into the heart of another in seeking to evaluate their moral standing. Peter Parker seems to do this himself, as he seems to willingly accept responsibility for his uncle's death. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #479, Peter confesses to his Aunt May not only his secret identity but his involvement in his uncle's death: "God help me, Aunt May... I'm the reason that Uncle Ben is dead" (Straczynski, "The Conversation" n.p.). Peter's inaction was wrong, irrespective of the consequences, one should always try to stop wrong doing when it's in one's power to do so. However, is Peter really the reason Uncle Ben is dead? If moral luck were to hold true, then Peter is partially responsible, which is to say guilty, for the death of Uncle Ben. Conversely, if moral luck does not hold true, then Peter is responsible only for letting the thief go, and therefore has been suffering unnecessarily from guilt. Peter claims absolute

responsibility for his uncle's death. However, it can be argued that what Peter is experiencing is the sense of responsibility for his inaction. Peter could not have seen the consequences, nor could he have intended it to happen, as that would not fit into who Spider-Man is as a Superhero. Peter believes that trying to repair the damage is the right thing to do, even when he is only partially responsible for the consequences of his inaction. Peter's pain at the death of his Uncle Ben and his sense of moral self-condemnation seems due to possession of this virtue. Peter is a responsible individual, who in one moment of selfishness, acted against his better nature.

Chapter 5:
Batman: The Postmodern Condition

In 1939, just one short year after the creation of Superman, the man of steel, the caped crusader arrived in the twenty-seventh issue of *Detective Comics*. Batman was created by Bob Kane, and had been intended to complement Superman. Since his inception, Batman has been referred to as the "Caped Crusader", the "Gotham Goliath", "The Masked Manhunter", and more recently, thanks to Frank Miller, "The Dark Knight". Batman's alter-ego is billionaire philanthropist, Bruce Wayne, who is a native of the fictional Gotham City. Bruce Wayne is portrayed as being attractive to the opposite sex, yet throughout the years he has remained largely single. Unlike many superheroes, Batman does not have any superpowers, he relies solely on his skills, intellect and vast range of weaponry. Batman's origin as a superhero is a direct result of witnessing his parent's murder in Gotham's infamous "Crime Alley", when he was a child. Once an adult, Bruce Wayne set out to fulfil his lifelong obsession, not to seek revenge for his parent's murder, but to prevent others from experiencing the same horror that he faced as a child. In *Batman #47*, Batman faces his parent's murderer, but does not kill him; ironically it is the murderous cohorts who destroy the murderer as they discover that it was his transgression that fuelled Batman's crusade to rid Gotham of evil (Kane, "Fashions in Crime" n.p.). *Batman* creator, Bob Kane believes that "vengeance is a great reason for fighting crime... It would take all the violence, the rage, he felt over his parent's murder to fight injustice. It motivated him to take his vengeance out on all the criminal element" (Bundrik 35). The probing question impacts the reader: what could be worse than witnessing the brutal murder of your parents? The act leaves the seven-year-old Bruce alone both physically and psychologically. If Batman's only motivation had been revenge, then his storyline would have ended in June 1948, in that fateful issue. However, because he is motivated by guilt especially, and more importantly, duty, his crusade is able to continue. This is perhaps because if he were solely motivated by revenge then he could hunt down his parents' killer and avenge their death. Yet one must question what future the Dark Knight would have after this vengeful act? Would Bruce Wayne be satisfied to simply go back to his playboy lifestyle? Obviously not, and it is for this reason that he is motivated by guilt more than revenge. Bruce Wayne would

feel guilty. Bruce Wayne carries the guilt of his parents' death within him always, as he indirectly led to their death. He feels guilt that he could not save him, that his actions led to them leaving the opera early. As such Wayne feels morally obligated to not only avenge his parent's death, but also stand for those who cannot protect him or herself.

Batman is one of the most heroic characters ever created within the superhero genre because he is an ordinary man who, despite horrific events experienced as a child, has chosen to do something about the state of his society. Much of Batman's success has stemmed from the fact that he is human; he has no superpowers but he has trained his body to the peak of perfection (See Illustration 4). Therein lies the success, as fans have been encouraged to ask themselves: "What if that were me?" Although it can be argued that Batman's trauma is extreme and that makes him unrelatable, yet, because he has conquered society's worst fear, the pain and anger over the brutal murder of parents, that he is now someone to emulate. However, at times Batman is still driven by rage, and an unquenchable need to avenge his parents. When Superman punches the evil-doer, all he sees is the criminal. Superman is also an orphan, but there was nothing personal about the loss of his parents, humanity was not the cause of his loss. When Batman punches an evil-doer, he sees the face of the man who took his parents from him. For Batman it would not be enough to simply hunt down his parents' murdered, he needs to help those who cannot help him or herself. As such, Batman channels all his fears and emotions, the guilt and the anger he felt after his parents' death, into fighting evil-doers.

By the late 1930s, comic books had replaced pulps. Batman, like many other superheroes, has stood the test of time because he has evolved as society has, and in doing so has become a symbol of heroism. Not only is he one of the longest running comic book superheroes, but he has been one of the most successful in branching into other genres. Batman has been in novels, various comic book story lines, in radio, on television and film. Batman's success has stemmed from the fact that he is humanly relatable to his audience through the moral challenges he faces, and thus offers his readers a way of dealing with the psychological challenges facing the postmodernist.

In 1986, Frank Miller wrote and illustrated *Batman*: The *Dark Knight*, which was a four issue series. Alan Moore in "The Mark of Batman" notes Miller's approach to this

futuristic Batman allowed him to get "beyond the imagery, themes, and essential romance" of the Batman mythos. Miller objected to the humanization of Batman in recent years, and when recreating Batman for *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, he chose to revert Batman to his "god of vengeance roots", whilst also commenting on American society, and its chaos of values (Daniels, *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favourite Comic Book Heroes* 190).

Moore believes that the lack of morality is noted in colourist Lynn Varley's work on the graphic novel, stating: "no longer can the values of the world [be] defined in the clear, bright, primary colours of the conventional comic book" (qtd. in Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* 6). The dark tones, as well as the very dark nature of the graphic novel displays this, as the world of Batman is dark. It is not the sunny Metropolis of *Superman*. It is dark and dangerous, and filled with criminals and evil-doers. The dark nature and narrative of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is seen in the dark colour set used Lynn Varley. Miller seems preoccupied in his mission to link the caped crusader with postmodernism. Miller makes a conscious effort to elevate the cultural standings of comic books through what can only be thought of as a pensive view of the nature of superheroes. Before the publication of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, superheroes were seen as a social and political necessity; however, the Batman of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* does not appear to support this consensus, and even questions the absolutism of this assumption. Unlike many superheroes, Batman is portrayed as being often morally ambiguous, and even at times schizophrenic in his actions.

As discussed in the Superman and Spider-Man sections, it is of great importance to have anonymity whilst being a Superhero. Bruce Wayne realizes the danger to his loved ones when he is threatened by the mob boss, Carmine Falcone: "You think you got nothing to lose. But you haven't thought it through. You haven't thought about your lady friend in the DA's office. You haven't thought about your old butler. Bang!" (*Batman Begins* Film). When Bruce mentions the concept of Batman to Alfred, his elderly butler, he asks: "This symbol is a persona to protect those you care about from reprisals?" Bruce Wayne responds: "You're thinking about Rachel?" Alfred replies: "Actually, sir, I was thinking of myself" (*Batman Begins* Film). In *Batman Begins*, Ra's al Ghul states:

You travelled the world... Now you must journey inwards... to what you really fear... it's inside you... there is no turning back. Your parents' death was not your fault. Your training is nothing. The will is everything. If you make yourself more than just a man, if you devote yourself to an ideal, you become something else entirely. (*Batman Begins* Film)

Perhaps it is for this reason that Bruce Wayne chooses to don a mask. He must make himself into something more than just a mortal man. He must accept his fate and become the Batman. Originally, Batman's costume was for the purpose of instilling fear in evildoers, an idea which was inspired by a bat flying into Bruce Wayne's study window. Part of Batman's identity as Batman is seen in the mask he wears. A mask is able to instil fear, as it reduces the person wearing it to a single element. The person behind the mask becomes the mask, as they become a single living threat that cannot be reasoned with. Batman's expression reveals nothing more than what is intended in the words he says. The use of a mask is seen to not only protect the identity of the wearer, but also to project power. As Batman has changed, so too has his costume. In the early days Batman's suit included items that were needed in his detective trade. Between the fifties and seventies, when the most dangerous thing that Batman would experience was a sword fight, his costume included handcuffs. In the eighties, his costume evolved to resemble armour. Today, in the "information age", Batman's costume is highly sophisticated, state-of-the-art armour, equipped with every conceivable weapon. His suit and cape is fire-resistant, and lined with a light-weight triple-weave Kevlar. His cowl includes night-vision, and has a direct link to the Batcave. His weapons, which are all stored in his utility belt, include Batarangs, decal monofilament cord jumplines and grapnels, gas capsules, and rebreather (Beatty 40).

If Superman's metropolis is a thriving Utopia, Gotham City is a dark, dystopia that reflects every city of the postmodern condition. Roughly modelled after New York City, it can be argued that all cities are Gotham-like, encompassing warrens of evil where the appeals of the lost are an inconvenience, where cries of children are ignored, and where innocents are slain on a whim. One cannot claim that all cities are this bleak, however, elements of Gotham City can be seen in every city. Mark Vaz, in Monica

Haffer's "Postmodernism and the Batman Phenomenon", relates this to our need for a hero, reasoning: "our world is more complex, and often we can only dream for that guardian".

If Gotham is a representation of "every city", it is only natural to assume that its inhabitants represent "every man". In *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Bruce Wayne states that Gotham City is a "city that's given up, like the whole world seems to have" (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* 3). The city is plagued by crime and apathy that allows for crime to flourish. In one episode, a taxi driver is given extra money to ignore a brutal attack in the back of the vehicle, and the only concern the driver has is the state of his car (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* 19-20). Violence and crime are part of everyday living, and the average citizen is either too weak to fight back or simply indifferent. Traditional forms of law enforcement are unable to keep up with the abundance of criminal activities, and are often challenged by criminal rights groups. Citizens are sceptical about the legal systems, as issues of police corruption escalate. R.E Terrill suggests that if Gotham is a depiction of the unbalanced American psyche, then it can be assumed that Batman is a "schizophrenic saviour" who exists to "shield us from the disturbing work of attempted integration" (321). Furthermore, Terrill argues that if Gotham is a dream world, then Batman is the result of its unconscious; therefore each character featured within the realm of Gotham would be a fracture of the whole (321). Batman is a hero with a split psyche, which can already be deduced from his multiple identities. However, what Terrill is implying is that Batman is unbalanced psychologically, but able to remain dedicated to the cause which is the prevention of evil within a chaotic city.

5.1. <u>Power</u>

Although Bob Kane has never admitted to any influence by the philosopher, some have noted the Nietzschean aspects in the *Batman* narrative. Batman was created to be the counter-point of Superman; one might argue that in the attempt to create a character so diverse from the other that Bob Kane unconsciously created a character that was what the other was in name. When one looks at Batman's origins, having been orphaned after the horrific murder of his parents, then it would appear that

the familiar saying "that which does not kill you will only make you stronger", can be applied to young Bruce Wayne. Through his unique response to the tragedy, Bruce Wayne rises above his circumstances, becomes stronger, actuating Nietzsche's *übermensch*. In true Nietzschean fashion, Bruce is left alone in the world without an angel of mercy; it is not until a few years later that readers learn that Bruce was taken in by his parent's elderly butler, Alfred. "As the years pass, Bruce Wayne prepares himself for his career. He becomes a master scientist [and] trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats" (Robertson 55). One might argue that Nietzsche would have appreciated this transformation, as even though he was physically frail, Nietzsche believed that "the right place [to begin] is the body, the gesture, the diet, physiology; the rest follows from that" ("Twilight of the Idols" 47). Beyond Bruce Wayne's health and education, he is also extremely wealthy; it is difficult to argue that Batman is not some form of *übermensch*. Nietzsche's term "the will to power" describes the desire to construct identity to ensure survival and power ("Beyond Good and Evil" 42). A companion concept to this term is "eternal recurrence", which is the ability to encompass both highest and lowest moments and emotions of an individual's life (Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra" 219). Nietzsche believed that life was full of genuine suffering and joy. Nietzsche praised individuals who were able to embrace these emotions, and Batman certainly does. In *Batman*, the symbol of a bat is representative of all fear and suffering. Only Batman is able to confront the meaning behind the symbol in order to embrace it and become it. Other characters in *Batman* have faced the same, but few have followed the path of accepting that which they fear the most, and thus have been corrupted by their fear. Joker is an example of such a circumstance, given the opportunity he chose to become evil.

However, if Bruce Wayne were the "everyman" then he would have chosen the profession of a police officer, or a priest in order to make a difference in the world. Yet, making a difference in the world does not appear to be an immediate goal of Batman. Dick Giordano, a long time *Batman* artist believes that "the Batman does what he does for himself, for his needs. That society gains from his actions is incidental, an added value... but not the primary reasons for his actions" (8). In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche stated: "What is good? All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to

power, power itself in man. What is bad? All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power increases, that a resistance is overcome" (2). And similarly in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "The spirit of revenge, my friends, has so far been the subject of man's best reflection; and where there was suffering, one always wanted punishment too" (20).

For Batman, his only solace is knowing that he is Gotham's ultimate protector. There is no one who can take his place; there is no one who can avenge his parent's death. Batman is a man who is independent, strong, healthy, full of intense passion, operating in the real world, affirming life as much as he understands its suffering and the "eternal recurrence" of his parent's murder (Robertson 56). Another way in which Batman appears like Nietzsche's *übermensch* is his ability to overcome his human weakness and imperfection. Batman is very human, "if you prick him, he [bleeds] - buckets" (Feiffer 26). This is evident as early as Batman's third adventure in "The Batman Meets Doctor Death"; in which "the Batman is hit!" while battling the evil Dr. Death (Fox n.p.). With the "blood still seeping from his wound" Batman administers his own medical treatment, "a pad of cotton on his bared shoulder" before returning to his Bruce Wayne guise so that he can go to his "family doctor" (Fox, "The Batman Meets Doctor Death" n.p.). This would become an ongoing dilemma for the hero as he tries to explain his mysterious injuries. This vision of a vulnerable hero, one "who was able to take punishment and triumph in the end", appealed to readers who had become tired of Superman's complete invincibility (qtd. in Kane, "Batman Archives" 6). From Nietzsche's perspective it can be said that Batman is "one of us"; while also believing that he has "overcom(e) his own dark passions... the irrational savage within" and has set standards for a new kind of human being, an *übermensch* perhaps (Campbell & Moyers xiii).Nietzsche believed that all people should strive to become more than what they were, that they should aspire to being an ideal of their own making. Batman has gone beyond his beginnings; he is no longer a billionaire playboy, nor is he a frightened child, he has embraced the fear and anger, and turned them into his solace. He is Batman, and man who will save Gotham from those who would cause chaos. Miller explained that Batman "has to be a force that in certain ways is beyond good and evil", a moral

force that is "plainly bigger and greater than normal men and perfectly willing to pass judgment and administer punishment" (qtd. Thompson 59, 61).

Batman is a self-made man. Unlike Superman who is born a hero, Batman becomes one. Superman flies down from the heavens, but Batman rises from among the people. The *Batman* narrative has created its own mythology, as it is a story of the strong, the healthy, and the independent. He is not wrapped in patriotic colours, rather he is dressed in grey and black. He has created his destiny, and not waited for it to fall from the sky in a rocket ship. Bruce Wayne, and his alter-ego, Batman, have endured tragedy throughout their lifetime, through the recurrence of memory and pain. Batman has used this pain to become what he is ultimately capable of achieving. The *Batman* narrative is about achieving the height of human perfection, that is, physically, psychologically and mentally, according to the Nietzschean *übermensch*.

Following the success on Marvel's side, DC asked Miller to do the same for them; and in 1986, he created *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. It was a relentlessly brutal look at urban violence, and "seasoned with heavy doses of crypto-fascist propagandizing and sexually transgressive imagery" (Knowles 11). Against the backdrop of impending nuclear war with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Batman "pushing fifty and a near-alcoholic" (Rhoades 125) comes out of retirement to rid Gotham City from an "ultraviolent street gang" called The Mutants (Dubose 919). With the help of his sidekick, the new Robin, Carrie Kelley, he defeats the Mutant leader, which causes the gang to fracture. Some of the ex-Mutants choose to follow Batman, now calling themselves the Sons of Batman. It seems that Batman is being attacked from all angles, when the government sends Superman, who is usually fighting covert wars in Central America, to defeat Batman; the corrupt authority wants Batman to stop taking justice into his own hands. One may think that this is an unevenly matched fight, but a nuclear explosion has blocked the sun, and as a result, Superman does not have his full range of powers.

Batman has returned to his "psychotic vigilante" roots in a fresh new way (Rhoades 125). This new Batman was a "familiar, but paradoxically unprecedented reinterpretation of the Batman mythos that was worlds apart from the bright, colourful, innocuous super-heroic adventures of the Silver Age Batman" (Rhoades 126). In the

graphic novel, many of his supporters are tired of the crime which runs rampant, believing that the police are powerless. One supporter states: "Frankly, I'm not surprised there aren't a hundred like him out there – thousands of people are fed up with terror – with stupid laws and social cowardice. He's only taking back what's ours" (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* 65).

5.2.   **Plurality**

The concept of plurality is seen not only in Batman, but throughout the *Batman* narrative. In the *Batman* comic books, the idea of plurality is not limited to Bruce Wayne donning a fear-inspiring costume so that he can fight crime; rather it is an actual manifestation of multiple identities which are separate, and even completely independent. Most of the characters in the *Batman* series have more than one identity; each identity is of equal importance to the individual's psyche. In some instances, this splitting of self is the direct result of the mind accepting the two exclusive existences of the individual. Monica Haffer in "Postmodernism and the Batman Phenomenon" that the external occurrences cannot be changed or recreated into clearly uniformed opposites; this results in a split of the psyche as the mind tries to accept the dichotomies that are at play. While Superman and Spiderman turn this plurality into a force for good, Batman explores the darker side of human nature by engaging in vigilante activities.

Batman's venture into plurality began with his parents' murder; the helpless child dealt with this trauma by splitting himself into two parts. Firstly, by continuing to exist as a functioning individual in society, and secondly, as a child that would one day grow to be a man who is neither frightened nor helpless. To further depict Batman's plurality, one only needs to look at his counterpart, Bruce Wayne, who is a billionaire philanthropist playboy, who is excessive in his means. Batman is quite the opposite of this frivolous lifestyle, his only motivation in life is to fight crime and rid the world of evil-doers. Batman and Bruce Wayne are two sides of the same coin; they are one entity with two very different faces. Bruce Wayne struggles to fit into his fractured society, whereas Batman attempts to protect his society from the evil elements that would tear it apart.

As mentioned previously, the symbol of the bat is synonymous with feelings of fear and suffering. The vision of the bat has had a different effect on Bruce Wayne than others who have faced similar symbols. While Batman's sanity has only been questioned in *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, for doubting the distinction between his actions and those of villains like the Joker, Bruce Wayne has battled to come to terms with the concept of the bat and his identity as Batman (Morrison n.p.). Friedrich Nietzsche believed that to struggle with madness and suffering was part of life (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 110). Ultimately, Batman comes to terms with his identity as the bat, meaning suffering and fear. Bruce Wayne has had four major encounters with bats, which have led him to embrace and overcome the fear of them. Firstly, in *The Dark Knight Returns*, Bruce dreams about a childhood experience where he is chasing a rabbit and falls down a rabbit hole (Miller n.p.). This rabbit hole will later become the Batcave. In this cave he encounters what he refers to as "ancient bat"; stating:

> Something shuffles out of sight... something sucks the stale air... and hisses... gliding with ancient grace... unwilling to retreat like his brothers did... eyes gleaming, untouched by love or joy or sorrow... breath hot with the taste of fallen foes... the stench of dead things, damned things... surely the fiercest survivor – the purest warrior... glaring, hating... claiming me as his own. (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* n.p.)

Upon awakening, Bruce Wayne reasons that the childhood experience helped to guild his life, even though he would not fully comprehend the significance of the bat for a number of years. Secondly, in *Batman: Year One*, a bat crashes through the window of his study at Wayne Manor, this prompts him to become Batman (Miller n.p.), years later a similar event encourages Wayne to come out of retirement, in *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller n.p.). In *The Dark Knight Returns*, having seen the bat again as he did as a young man, Bruce Wayne dons his Batman costume, and proclaims: "I am born again" (Miller n.p.). Thirdly, in *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*,

Batman is depicted as a shadowy figure, often not even revealing his face (Morrison n.p.). In this instance, Batman embodies the vision of a bat. Finally, in *The Dark Knight Returns*, when looking at Two-Face, Batman recounts the image of a bat which he drew as a child (Miller n.p.). This reinforces the idea that Bruce's exposure to the bat, and subsequent acceptance of it allowed him to become a Superhero.

As mentioned in the Theoretical Framework, the dividing of an identity into many parts is common in the postmodern modality. Postmodernism doubts reality and perceives the world as being fragmented, and at times, meaningless. For Batman and the world he inhabits, all aspects show some form of compartmentalization, which leads to multiple perceptions of the world, and which can lead to the development of many separate personalities. In *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Bruce Wayne is fighting his own will to stay in retirement, which is largely due to a promise he made a former colleague, Robin; however, his need to take action against the moral chaos of Gotham seems overwhelming (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* n.p.). He says of his alter-ego: "He tricks me... when the night is long and my will is weak. He struggles, relentlessly, hatefully, to be free" (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* 4). Later, Bruce is addressed directly by Batman, who says: "You are nothing – a hollow shell, a rusty trap that cannot hold me – smouldering, I burn you, I flare, hot and bright and beautiful – you cannot stop me – not with wine or vows or the weight of age – you cannot stop me but still you try – still you run" (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* 16). These two quotes illustrate how Bruce Wayne and Batman are seen to be two separate beings, who happen to inhabit the same individual. Despite Bruce trying to deny and further separate himself from his alter-ego, it continually becomes evident that each half is exerting a negative force upon the other, and in doing so is only driving the two halves further apart. However, no matter how far apart they may be psychically they still remain two parts of one physical entity.

Bruce Wayne is only complete when both halves of his personality are firmly connected, that is, when he is still Batman, as well as Bruce Wayne. Eventually, Bruce Wayne concedes and comes out of retirement, to don the bat suit once more. He says, "I'm a man of thirty – of twenty again. The rain on my chest is baptism – I'm born again" (Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* n.p.). It is in this passage that the rejuvenating

power of the role of hero on Bruce Wayne is seen; the audience is fully aware of Bruce Wayne's euphoria at his rebirth into the role of Batman. However, Bruce Wayne is human, and unlike superheroes like Superman and Wonder Woman, he ages, and therefore has to deal with the challenges of age; yet he is reborn a hero by allowing Batman to re-emerge. This depicts the amalgamation of his twin identity. His identity as a hero seems to counteract the physical, mental, and metaphysical elements of age. This concept resonates with audiences as it is a pragmatic human event, and by Bruce Wayne conceding and becoming Batman once more, so does it release the audience from the chains of aging, if only empathically, suggesting the rejuvenation of finding one's life purpose, the efforts to save society.

Batman is not the only character in his fictional world that has a secret identity. Throughout Batman's seventy-years of success, many characters, both hero and villain, have been created with multiple personalities in mind. It would appear that *Batman* creator, Bob Kane, was far more aware of the concepts of postmodernism that some of his contemporaries. In "Jeph Loeb: Brown" it is noted that many of the villains that Batman has encountered over the years not only represent a plurality of the mind, but also exemplify the "most perverse possibilities lurking in the dark side of human nature". However, within the postmodern society, heroes and villains are affected by fate, and most battle to deal with their multiple personalities, as well as their multiple natures. Bruce Wayne is no longer just a man who dons a suit in order to fight crime; he is Batman, one cannot be separated from the other. Just as Batman tries to heal the rift between his psyche in order to become a whole man again, so too do the villains he faces attempt to reconcile their plurality, yet, fail. Two of Batman's more well-known enemies; namely, Harvey Dent and the Joker, represent this fallen nature. Their failure is the crux of their imperfection.

Harvey Dent is a man divided. Abused as a child, his psyche is fragmented, leaving the future District Attorney subconsciously sublimating a darker and more violent side as an adult. This plurality is seen in Dent's good-luck-charm, a "two-headed" silver dollar. Once Batman's ally, all would change when Vincent Maroni, in front of a packed courthouse, hurled acid at the lawyer's handsome face. As the acid dissolves the left-side of Dent's face, so too does the psychic wall dissolve releasing his dark side.

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With good and evil wrestling within him, Dent scars one side of his lucky-coin; and in doing so, becomes a final arbitrator for his new persona. Unlike Bruce Wayne, Dent turns towards his dark side, and becomes a villain rather than a hero. Harvey Dent was first introduced in *Detective Comics #66*, in August 1942; however, he would only become a more regular feature in the 1980s. Harvey Dent assumes his identity as Two-Faced, one side of his face disfigured by the acid, the other remained handsome and untouched. It is not only his appearance which appears to be in "two-minds", but his psyche as well.

Two-Face considers himself to be a pawn of fate and arbitrary destiny. His tool is his previously lucky-coin which he uses to decide not only his fate, but the fate of all those around him: Dent seems to be saying that a choice must be made; it is either good or bad. However, by his standards they are both equal. If the unmarked side came up he would be merciful, but if the scarred side came up, he would do evil. Two-Face believes that justice is arbitrary, and believes himself to be judge, jury, and executioner. Yet, Two-Face is not consistently evil; whenever considering committing a crime he flips his coin first. It is only if his coin comes scratch-side up that he will commit the crime. At no point does he question the outcome of the coin toss. Dent's need to toss the coin to make a decision is seen to be a compulsion from which he cannot break. It appears that the coin is the compromise between his two personalities; the disfigured Two-Face or the law-abiding, District Attorney Harvey Dent. While Dent relies on his coin in varying degrees, it seems as if he uses it to make all matter of choices; whether to commit a crime or not or whether to do good or not. This is perhaps what makes Dent's psyche so unique; if the coin dictates that he must do good, then he will go out of his way to do good, at times even saving someone.

In *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, the doctors of Arkham attempt to wean Dent from his compulsive behaviour (Morrison n.p.). Yet, Dent cannot cope, his coin is substituted for a die and then a pack of tarot cards. While the coin gave him two options, the die gives him six, and the tarot cards give him seventy-eight. Dent is unable to make an independent decision. He has become so dependent on this external source of choice, that even the simple act of going to the bathroom is left to fate. Dent is seen to wet himself, as he chooses and re-chooses a card from his pack. It

is difficult to agree on whether or not Harvey Dent is actually evil, or simply mentally ill. While a normal person could not allow something as trivial as a coin to decide if someone lives or dies, Dent never questions the outcome of the coin. During *Countdown: Arena*, while being deported to the Hell Planet with other criminals, Dent is given the opportunity to escape (Champagne n.p.). Having flipped his coin, the coin comes up on the unscratched-side, and he declines the offer. Two-Face now waits patiently for guards to come and arrest him.

Jung explains this juxtaposed morality of plurality:

> Anyone who perceives his shadow and his light simultaneously sees himself from two sides and thus gets in the middle... He knows that the world consists of darkness and light. I can master their polarity only by freeing myself from them by contemplating both, and so searching a middle position. Only then am I no longer at the mercy of the opposites. (qtd. in Merrill 122)

In this quote, Jung clearly highlights the two parts, the light and the dark, or the good and bad, while suggesting that by releasing the polarity of their oppositions, one is able to better comprehend each part. Harvey Dent's split face simultaneously depicts the altered evil and untouched hero. The concept of plurality is powerfully seen in Dent's what is and what was, and thus contains both the hero and the monster. Harvey Dent and Two-Face seem most akin to Robert Louis Stevenson's story, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which was written in 1886. However, there is a significant distinction. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Dr. Jekyll is initially unaware of his villainous side, at no time do the two sides meet, or are seen simultaneously. This means that the one half that is presented initially is unaware of its other side, making it an unconscious presence. For Dent, both halves of his identity are fully displayed, the good and the bad, without transformation or integration. This implies that Dent is not just good or just bad at any given time, unlike Dr. Jekyll who is good until he is Mr Hyde and becomes evil. Furthermore, the implication is that Dent is both sides of the same coin, which is clearly depicted in the coin he carries to decide the fate of his victims.

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In *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the severity of Dent's plurality is clearly seen. The reader learns that Harvey Dent has undergone reconstructive surgery to try to rectify the deforming effects of the acid, while at the same time undergoing psychotherapy to try and save his mind from insanity. However, once released, Dent begins a course of action which will lead to Batman capturing him. When Batman confronts Dent, it is evident that while the surgery has made him handsome once more, and whole physically, he has slipped further into insanity. While Harvey Dent might look like himself once more, he is more than ever, Two-Face. It appears that only when in a plural states of existence is Dent's psyche stable. The fragmented state of Dent's mind is seen to fit well into plurality and thus postmodernism. It is only when his mind is fragmented that Dent feels wholly himself.

The Joker is undeniably Batman's most dangerous and unpredictable enemy. While safely confined within the walls of Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, the Joker has told various investigating psychiatrists "threads" of his origins. While most of his tales are easily dismissible, a few facts can be claimed from this madman. The Joker's origins are traumatic; again it can be noted that the Joker chose to take the path of evil. The Joker was originally Jack, who after losing his job as a comedian turned to crime to support his pregnant wife. Unfortunately, his wife dies tragically of electrocution while testing a baby bottle warmer. The senseless nature of her death leaves Jack emotionally desolate. Jack continues a life of crime with a group of petty thugs known as the Red Hood, until one day Batman stops the criminal and his cohorts. During a struggle between Jack and Batman, Batman knocks Jack into a vat of chemicals at the Ace Chemical Plant in Gotham City; disfiguring him. The chemicals bleach his skin white, his hair green, and a "ruby red, malignant rictus for a smile" (Beatty, Greenberger, Jiminez & Wallace 178). In later issues Joker's appearance would become more maniacal. Instead of being chemically enhanced it seems as if Jokers' appearance is purposeful. His hair is long and greasy and his skin caked in a messy make-up. Long scars extend from both sides of his mouth. The make-up does not hide his scars, but rather it morbidly exaggerates them. Mervi Miettinen in "Superhero Comics and the Popular Geopolitics of American Identity" notes how Joker's multiple pasts has become a reverberating trope in itself, and can be argued as forming "textual

anarchy" (111). In *The Dark Knight*, Joker takes great satisfaction in telling contradictory stories to various characters as to how he acquired the scars; the audience does not receive a truthful conclusion. In the film, the Joker tells ambiguous stories as to how he received his scars. However, the chaotic manner in which he tells his stories does not allow for a linear narrative to be developed, and in doing so further develops the audiences belief in the unstable nature of Joker. Joker's lack of cohesive character is further developed in *Arkham Asylum* where Joker's therapist notes his ever-changing identity:

> Some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He
> has no real personality. He creates himself each day. He sees himself
> as the lord of mirule, and the world as a theatre of the absurd. (28)

It appears as if the only stable quality of Joker's personality is chaos. As he "creates himself each day" he embodies the postmodern subject, he is free of the restraints of society (Morrison, *Arkham Asylum* 28). Steven Shaviro agrees with this sentiment, stating: "he lives and enjoys the postmodern condition, this mutation of our sensibility into non-linear, non-Euclidean forms" (67). The ideal of multiplicity is further demonstrated in Joker's seemingly schizophrenic state of mind in *The Killing Joke*. Joker, in a confrontation with Batman, asks Batman:

> I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend
> killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some mugger?
> Something like that, I bet. Something like that… Something like that
> happened to me, you know. I… I'm not exactly sure what it was.
> Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another… If I'm going to
> have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! (Moore 39).

Joker's choice to refer to his past as "multiple choice" demonstrates his lack of cohesiveness with regards to his past, as well as his identity. However, this multiplicity is not limited to comic books; the ever-changing origin story of the Joker has appeared

in films, animation and television series. This allows for Joker to be continually reinterpreted. This creates problems, as the lack of stability in Joker's past produces a kind of instability within the narrative. Whereas Batman's stable, linear origins story restores the unbalance made by Joker, very often in multiple circumstances.

The loss of Jack's wife and unborn child, coupled with the events leading to his disfigurement turn Jack to madness, and into the hideous grinning menace seen in comic books and movies. However, the plurality maintained by the Joker is interesting as he fully accepts his insane state. The Joker is fully aware of sanity as an alternative, while also acknowledging how the "real world" works. Yet, the Joker chooses to be insane, as he believes this is his only way of dealing with his tragedy and coping with the "real world". The Joker reasons that the only difference between him, and anyone else in society, is one bad day (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.).

In *The Killing Joke*, the Joker sets out to prove his theory, and captures Commissioner Gordon and his daughter, Barbara. The Joker strips the young woman and then shoots her in the back; he then takes photographs of her while she bleeds to death. The Joker hopes that by putting Gordon into a situation similar to his own, that he will go mad. Gordon is taken to an abandoned amusement park, where he is stripped and exhibited in front of the circus freaks which the Joker keeps in his company, whilst watching a series of photographs of his daughter in various stages of undress; it is here that the Joker explains to not only Gordon, but to the reader as well, his reasoning. The Joker states that madness is an "emergency exit" through which one can escape in order to avoid the uncontrollable events of one's life (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). At this point the Joker seems to be addressing the reader more than Gordon, as he urges the reader to understand the reality of the situation. Joker goes on to explain that the problem is memories, stating:

> Remembering's dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place. "The Past Tense," I suppose you'd call it. Memory's so treacherous. One moment you're lost in a carnival of delights, with poignant childhood aromas, the flashing neon of puberty, all that sentimental candy-floss... the next, it leads you somewhere you don't

want to go. Somewhere dark and cold, filled with the damp ambiguous shapes of things you'd hoped were forgotten. Memories can be vile, repulsive little brutes. Like children I suppose. But can we live without them? Memories are what our reason is based upon. If we can't face them, we deny reason itself! (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.).

The Joker then gives examples of madness in the everyday, explaining how close the world has come to having another world war, because of a flock of geese on a radar, or how the last world war started over an argument as to how many telegraph poles Germany owed its war creditors. It appears as if Joker is attempting to explain his motives, or perhaps he is trying to make it seem that all the world is mad, and not accepting this truth is the real madness. Arguably Joker is trying to justify why he commits the evils that he does.

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, raises another point of plurality; namely, the idea that good and evil needs the other for their existence. The narratives explain that the need for superheroes is only because there are villains which need to be stopped. Conversely, arch-villains, such as the Joker, exist solely to stand against the ultimate good force. During *The Dark Knight Returns*, journalists comment that had Batman remained "retired" then many of his arch-enemies would have done so too. However, Gotham City still had crime, as any major city would have, even without Batman being a present force, albeit without the larger-than-life villains. In the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*, the Joker states:

Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and then everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos... I took Gotham's White Knight [Harvey Dent], and brought him down to our level. It wasn't hard. You see, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push.

It is important to note here that Joker is implying that the existence of villains or evil results in a society in chaos. This is what might be termed a postmodern society.

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One must question what this means in terms of evil and evil acts? Is it possible for a hero to be corrupted so easily? Joker's quote also implies that he is directly responsible for the evil acts which are taking place in Gotham. What is clear about the Joker is that he is a mad man without reason; he simply creates chaos because he can, rather than for political or financial gain. Alfred, Bruce Wayne's butler, reiterates this point: "Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn" (*The Dark Knight* Film).

While Alfred is correct in this statement, this is not always the case. A still pure Harvey Dent reasons: "you either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (*The Dark Knight* Film). Is it possible to dedicate oneself so deeply to the cause of avenging evil acts without becoming corrupted? What does this mean in the case of Batman? For Batman, the choice has always been simple, to do evil, even in the name of good, would mean that he would be no better than the villains he fights against. During one of the final scenes of *The Dark Knight* Batman asks Joker why he wants to kill him, the Joker's reply is simple, and explains the dichotomy that exists between these two great foes: "I don't want to kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No, no, you complete me" (*The Dark Knight* Film). It appears as if Joker and Batman are created by each other, in that their purpose lies within the other. While Batman's purpose is to stop evil-doers like Joker, for Joker he acknowledges that Batman is the ultimate adversary. Their conflict is one of good and evil that of unwavering justice against blind chaos.

It would be naive to believe that Joker is an extension of Batman or even a perverse alter-ego. However, there are numerous suggestions that have been made across various media that Batman and Joker cannot exist without the other. One such example is evident in *Batman: Arkham City*, a video game, which follows Batman trying to find a cure for the Titan virus as Joker has injected him with his own infected blood. In the first scene, the gamer as Catwoman, sees a painting of Cain and Abel, and is entitled *The Duality of Man* (Video Game). In the Bible, Cain and Abel were two sons of Adam and Eve. Cain is described as being a farmer, and his younger brother, Abel, as a shepherd (*New International Version*, Genesis. 4.2). Having had his offerings rejected

by God, and his brother's accepted, Cain murders his brother (Genesis. 4.1-3). The painting depicts Cain carrying his slain brother (See Illustration 5). When the gamer initially sees the painting, there seems to be no significance. However, in the closing scene of the game, having battled with Joker leading to his death, Batman carries his fallen foe's lifeless body out of Arkham City. The image is starkly similar to that of the painting of Cain and Abel (See Illustration 6). One can only question what the designers of the game were implying? While it can be argued that since Joker injected his own blood into Batman, that that made them brothers, if only for a while. The Joker has stated on numerous occasions that Batman completed him, or that he was the only one who truly understood him. One can assume that for the Joker, Batman was a kind of brother. Although, if one views this event from the perspective of the Joker, then his death, whether directly or indirectly caused by Batman, is a betrayal of their relationship. In the Bible, Cain is seen to be sinful, having murdered his brother. Does this mean that Batman is evil; that having allowed the Joker to die makes him akin to Cain? This seems to be contradiction as it is obvious that Joker is the monster. However, this does relate well to plurality; that two identities exist within one individual. Harvey Dent's reasoning appears to concur this concept; "you either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (*The Dark Knight* Film).

Jessica Collett and Christopher Morrissey in "The Social Psychology of Sociology" notes that psychology notes that altruism is lacking within society. People do not seem to be willing to help others, as they fear that they will be harmed for it. However, Jessica Collett and Christopher Morrissey continue on noting, it has also been noted that if an individual is able to view another with empathy, then altruism increases naturally. In *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman's empathy towards others, including Two-Face, causes him to act in a way that is beneficial to society, and perhaps even himself. Batman's empathy for villains, for example, Two-Face in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and the Joker in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, causes him to make decisions which are necessary for the situation while still remaining law bound. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* depicts a clear desire for altruism in society; therefore, assuming a lack thereof within current societal standings. However, that is not to say that evil can be eliminated without the presence of good. Good must fight evil in order to maintain the

balance between good and evil, whilst also acknowledging that altruism can only exist if there is evil in the world. Yet, the postmodernist would argue that a situation cannot exist where only good exists. Postmodernists believe this to be an impossibility as they view the world in a very cynical, realistic way. Yet, it is important to note that it is the purpose of the hero, and thus the reader, to understand the nature of evil, and to understand that the lines between good and evil are often blurred. However, in order to maintain this delicate balance, lines still need to be drawn.

5.3.   Morality

The Joker believes that insanity is the only rational way of dealing with such a horrific reality, that is, the unfortunate death of his wife. He is unable to compartmentalize the traumatic event of his wife's unfortunate death, to allow his psyche to function normally. The Joker states: "I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everyone else. All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day" (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). The Joker then states: "You had a bad day too, once, didn't you?" (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). The Joker notes that Batman has just chosen to fight for the other side. Although this is an accurate analysis, Batman does not answer the Joker. The Joker continues by saying: "You have to keep pretending that life makes sense, that there's some point to all this struggling. It's a joke. Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for... it's all a monstrous, demented gag! So why can't you see the funny side?" (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). Batman replies: "Because I've heard it before... and it wasn't funny the first time" (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). Batman does not disagree with the Joker, which may lead one to assume that Batman has more empathy for the Joker than what is actually insinuated by the text; yet he does not see the humour, as the Joker does, that is comprehended with the acceptance that life is meaningless. It might be argued that Joker uses his maniacal laughter to cope with and cover the pain. Batman has found meaning that has been given to him by the law, and hopes he is doing good for humanity. Batman has faced the evil of the world, and rather than succumb like the Joker, overcomes it to defeat evil.

Despite the Joker's best efforts to turn the Commissioner mad, Gordon does not allow the incident to destroy his sanity. The experiment fails; one bad day has not made him reject the one great meaning of his life: the law. Furthermore, he tells Batman that the Joker must be brought to justice "by the book" (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). As mentioned before, Commissioner Gordon is symbolic of the law. Batman and Gordon do not deny the Joker's claim as to the twisted nature of existence, but they have chosen to dedicate the meaning of their lives to hope, hope that things will get better and each will be a part of that process. They are able to compartmentalize, and in doing so are able to maintain the plurality necessary to maintain their sanity in a mad and meaningless world.

At the end of *Batman: The Killing Joke*, Batman subdues the Joker, and is ready to take him to Arkham Asylum; it is here that Batman takes the opportunity to ask the Joker to help them solve their individual problems together. Batman notes that if they do not help one another it may lead one of them, if not both, to their deaths. The Joker states: "It's too late for that... too late for that"; the Joker seems to be implying that it may also be too late for Batman (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). The Joker illustrates his reasoning by telling a joke:

> See, there were these two guys in a lunatic asylum... and one night... one night they decide they don't like living in an asylum any more. They decide they're going to escape! So like they get up on the roof, and there, just across the narrow gap, they see the rooftops of the town, stretching in the moon light... stretching away to freedom.
> Now the first guy he jumps right across with no problem. But his friend, his friend daren't make the leap. Y'see he's afraid of falling... So then the first guy has an idea. He says "Hey! I have my flash light with me. I will shine it across the gap between the buildings. You can walk across the beam and join me". But the second guy just shakes his head. He says... he says "What do

you think I am crazy? You would turn it off when I was half way across". (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.)

The normally stoic Batman cannot help himself but laugh. Batman's ability to see the humour illustrates the psychological understanding of Batman and the Joker. This psychological understanding is that even though their morals are on complete opposites of the spectrum, they can share a joke, and laugh as if friends. The power relationship which is shared between Batman and Joker has become a character within the narrative within itself. While this moment in their relationship points towards an understanding between these foes it is merely a moment. It is Batman's moral choice that prevents him from becoming like the Joker. Joker does not believe in good or helping people, but Batman does. The choice to be evil is based on what Zelda Knight terms "personal shadows" which is related to the repressed and denied aspects of an individual's psyche; she argues that this is formed from what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable (7). Both Batman and Joker have dark beginnings, and have both formed from a tragic event, yet despite each having a personal shadow, each has become very different characters. Therefore, Batman can be considered to have a morally upright dark shadow, whereas Joker has a menacing dark shadow. This is clearly in relation to what society might deem acceptable or based on the moral code of the society. Knight argues that this repression causes a split. The postmodernist mind is represented in this plurality, the struggle of the mind to remain whole. The use of humour is wise, as it not only denotes the irony of the situation, but also acts as a coping mechanism for the reader who has just witnessed a disturbing event. Foucault believed that power can only be defined when it is defined against something else, an Other (qtd. in Bernauer & Carrette 130). This other would need to be assigned a truth and identity that was based in reason, as this would mean that reason would gain reason from itself. Foucault believed that madness could not speak for itself; furthermore, madness was at the disposal of power, which would therefore dictate its relationship. Foucault states:

What is originative is the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason's subjugation of non-

reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease, derives explicitly from this point. (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, x)

Therefore, the truth of reason would be found where madness had come to replace non-reason; as such their differences would be defined by their opposition. However, this is not seen in the same light as its dominant side. More simply, reason that stands in opposition to madness is not the same as the reason that would inscribe their difference. The Joker is an obvious monster who commits great evils, which include armed robbery, torture, kidnapping and murder. The Joker refers to himself as being an "agent of chaos" who is able manipulate and destroy the lives of anyone he chooses, including Batman (*The Dark Knight* Film). Joker believes that all people are capable of being like he is, repeatedly stating that all it takes is one bad day, "Any man can have one really bad day and end up just like me" (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.). The Joker, having attempted to drive Commissioner Gordon mad, goes as far as to reason that Batman had a bad day as well:

Gordon's been driven mad. I've proved my point. I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everyone else! All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day. You had a bad day once, am I right? I know I am. I can tell. You had a bad day and everything changed. Why else would you dress up as a flying rat? You had a bad day, and it drove you as crazy as everybody else... Only you won't admit it! You have to keep pretending that life makes sense, that there's some point to all this struggling! God you make me want to puke. I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some mugger? Something like that, I bet. Something like that... Something like that happened to me, you know. I... I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I'm

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going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! Ha ha ha! But my

point is... My point is, I went crazy. (Moore, *The Killing Joke* n.p.)

Joker does admit that madness is a necessary part of evil. In the opening scene of the *Dark Knight*, the audience is given a demonstration of the Joker's insanity during a bank robbery (*The Dark Knight* Film). Within minutes, the audience is aware that Joker is not only a criminal mastermind, but a psychopathic killer as well. During this opening scene one gangster states: "I guess the Joker is as crazy as they say" (*The Dark Knight* Film). However, the Joker denies his "craziness" when he is directly asked by the defiant bank manager. The Joker says: "I believe... that whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you stranger" (*The Dark Knight* Film). What the Joker is implying here is that evil has nothing to do with being mad; furthermore, he suggests that being evil and doing evil is the result of a life-threatening experience. Perhaps Joker would agree with this sentiment; "there is no good or evil, only power and those too weak to seek it" (Rowling 291). However, is madness an adequate enough answer for committing evil?

Monica Haffer in "Postmodernism and the Batman Phenomenon" notes that comic book artist Neal Adams believes that "any character that's any good represents the deeper parts of human beings in general". Richard Reynolds states:

What makes Batman so different from Superman is that his character
is formed by confronting a world which refuses to make sense. His
experiences have taught him to be cynical – yet he continues to risk
life and limb in a one-man war against crime... Batman's... madness
is part of (his) special identity, and that the protagonist's obsessive
character links him with his enemies in a more personal way. (67)

Postmodern readers are attracted to Batman and his narratives because of their depth, realism, and reflection of their culture and the plurality of identity and their challenge with morality. In Jim Beckerman's "The Many Faces of Batman", Jules Feiffer agrees with Adams, stating: "Batman, as a feature, was infinitely better plotted, better villained, and better looking than Superman... Batman inhabited a world where no one,

no matter the time of day, cast anything but long shadows – seen from weird perspectives. Batman's world was scary; Superman's never was". In the past, Superman was more popular with audiences when the world was at its darkest, and they needed a form of escape. Superman created a kind of "safety blanket" appeal, as he always defeated evil; and good always prevailed. The nature of darkness is appreciated by the postmodernist, as they note how close this state is to their reality. However, they also acknowledge that Batman is human, and is, at heart, a good person, despite what measures he takes in his efforts to fight evil. Batman's approach of instilling fear in evil-doers through his appearance and willingness to use violence if necessary is effective.

Batman states: "My parents' killer was never brought to justice… I'm known as an urban myth, a frightening creature, the bogeyman. It is not a life I would wish on anyone" (Loeb, "Superman/Batman" 52). If Superman is seen to be light and reason, then Batman is the dark side. Although he stands for justice, he eludes a slightly unwholesome persona. The Batman of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, is a frightening image of retribution. Within Miller's graphic novel, Batman is seen to be a fear-provoking rogue that has no real respect for justice. Batman not only has a fearsome exterior, but truly has a dark side to his personality. Batman's hatred for evil-doers appears to have tainted and corrupted him, and unites him with the villains he hunts. Zygmunt Bauman's statement regarding rules as being contradictory to morals is well suited to Batman. For Batman, he will never have done or saved enough people. It appears as if Batman seeks to prevent the same trauma he experienced as a child happening to any other person. Bauman believes that postmodern morality is a journey that each person must take alone. Certainly Batman is a lone crusader, who occasionally takes on a side-kick only to have them harmed by some villain wishing to take revenge on Batman.

The dark side of Batman's personality is best seen in Jeph Loeb's graphic novel *Hush*. In this narrative, Batman faces his oldest and most malicious foe, the Joker. Having murdered the second Robin, Commissioner Gordon's wife, Sarah, and Bruce Wayne's childhood friend, Tommy Elliot; Batman decides that the Joker must die, and at his hands. As Batman beats the Joker, Loeb inserts images of the Joker's evils. It is

only former police commissioner and friend, Jim Gordon, who is able to prevent Batman from beating the Joker to death. In an appeal to his better judgement, and his true form as a hero, Gordon counsels Batman:

> You and I have seen more than our fair share of tragedies and thirsted for revenge… If Batman wanted to be a killer, he could have started a long time ago. But it's a line. On one side we believe in the law. On the other… sometimes the law fails us. Maybe that's why I've understood you… allowed you to help protect this city. Batman, if you cross that line – if you kill the Joker tonight – I will lead the hunt to bring you to justice. In the eyes of the law… in my eyes you'll be no different from him. (Loeb, "Superman/Batman" 31)

This is perhaps the greatest moral dilemma for Batman, and for all superheroes for that matter. Since his inception, the Joker has transformed himself from the Clown Prince of Crime to a monstrous murderer without rival. Most notoriously he killed Jason Todd, the second Robin, shot and killed Commissioner Gordon's second wife, Sarah Essen, as well as shooting and paralysing his daughter, Barbara, who was previously Batgirl. Yet, every time, Batman captures the Joker and places him into the "capable" hands of the Gotham Police, he inevitably escapes Arkham Asylum, only to go on a murderous rampage once more. So why does Batman not kill the Joker? Consider all the potential lives that will be saved. Commissioner Gordon has contemplated killing the Joker, and typically Batman is the one to stop him. As in *Superman/Batman*, the *Hush* storyline shows Batman wanting to kill the Joker. In a terrifying scene, Batman comes close to killing the Joker, and again, Commissioner Gordon stops him. Batman asks Commissioner Gordon: "How many more lives is he going to ruin?" to which Commissioner Gordon replies, "I don't care. I won't let him ruin yours" (Loeb, "Hush" n.p.).

The argument for Batman killing the Joker is fairly straightforward: kill the Joker and prevent countless future victims. Recently, Jason Todd and Hush asked this of

Batman. Hush asks: "How many lives do you think you've cost, how many families have you ruined, by allowing the Joker to live?... And why? Because of your duty? Your sense of justice?" (Loeb, "Hush" n.p.). Jason Todd, a former Robin, who was killed by the Joker, but who was later resurrected, states:

> Bruce, I forgive you for not saving me. But why... why on God's Earth is he still alive?... Ignoring what he's done in the past. Blindly, stupidly, disregarding the entire graveyards he's filled, the thousands who have suffered... the friends he has crippled,... I thought... I thought killing me – that I'd be the last person you'd ever let him hurt. (Loeb, "Superman/Batman" n.p.)

Batman's standard response has always been that if he were to kill then he would be no better than the villains he fights, or that he would be crossing a line from which he could never get back across. It appears that this cycle will continue; in *The Dark Knight*, Joker reiterates this concept:

> Ugh, you. You just couldn't let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You…truly are…incorruptible, aren't you, huh? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness. And I won't kill you because…you're just too much fun! I think you and I are destined to do this forever. (Film)

It is at this point that the "trolley problem" mentioned in the Theoretical Framework becomes relevant. The first obvious problem between the "trolley problem" and the Batman-Joker dilemma is that in the case of the "trolley problem" we assume that the people on both tracks are morally equivalent; that there is no difference between these people in terms of how they should be treated. This is not the case with the Joker. He is single, like the person on the alternate track, assuming that the five people on the other track are innocents, there seems to be an argument in favour of

killing the Joker. In terms of the "trolley problem", it would be as if the Joker had tied five people to the track and went and stood on the alternate track, to see how Batman would react. The recognition of the Joker's role in creating the situation also casts light on the responsibility of Batman to react. One could say that if Batman does not kill the Joker then he would be responsible for all the deaths that the Joker causes in the future. However, Batman is likely to answer that the Joker is responsible for the deaths he causes, not Batman. When does it become morally acceptable to kill someone? Can one person be held responsible for the choices of another? Postmodernism would deem this as collateral damage, would have one believe that the ability to consider the greater good could easily be dismissed or embraced.

Many people would agree that to purposefully kill one to save many is morally wrong; Batman agrees with this, believing that killing one is morally wrong even if the inaction results in more deaths. This has been termed the "act-omission effect", in which harmful actions are seen to be more wrong than a mission or failure to act (DeScioli *et al* 247). Batman's refusal to kill one to save many is an example of this. The act-omission effect is seen in *Batman Begins*, where Batman gains the upper hand against his nemesis Ra's al Ghul in, ironically, a train which is heading towards a break in the tracks. Ra's al Ghul asks: "Have you finally learned to do what is necessary?" (*Batman Begins* Film). This is a reference to Batman's earlier refusal to kill a man accused of murder. Batman replies: "I won't kill you, but I don't have to save you", just before Batman jumps off the train, leaving the evil-doer to plummet to his death (*Batman Begins* Film). Batman views any action that results in death as being wrong, but not an omission that results in death. It is important to note that the results are the same; this suggests that morality "is disconnected from welfare outcomes" (DeScioli *et al* 247).

During the early 1990s, many other comic books adopted a similar stance, as they aimed to push the darker and more brutal aspect of humanity. These comic books did not have the "ray of light" aspect, and as a result, lost readership, as readers could not bear the hopelessness of the narratives. Batman is far more complex than many of his fellow superheroes, and it is for this reason that so many readers are able to empathize with him. As discussed in the analysis of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the only way for Bruce Wayne to exist, is to accept the two halves of his psyche; the bat

and the man. Batman does not stand as a guide to postmodern readers of how to become whole, this is an impossibility, and even Batman is not whole himself; rather he explains how one can deal with their plurality. One can identify with plurality, as many have experienced the need to compartmentalize on some level, albeit not to the extreme extent that Batman or even the Joker has. Gotham City was modelled on New York City, and as a representative of any metropolitan society, the reader is able to further empathize with the inhabitants of Gotham. The reader is able to identify with Batman and so a kind of empathetic transference occurs. Batman creator, Bob Kane, went as far as to state, "I am Batman", when asked about this concept (qtd. in Daniels, "Batman: The Complete History" 1). Perhaps what Bob Kane is implying is that any man or woman can embody what Batman stands for.

Denny O' Neil believes that the "idea of an essentially moral and compassionate hero is not an outmoded one" (qtd. in Daniels, "Batman: The Complete History" 201). However, comic historian, Les Daniels notes that even O'Neil has stated that Batman was "certainly more... than simple sweetness and light" ("Batman: The Complete History" 201). Furthermore, Daniels believes that:

> There's a sinister side to the character which appeals to
> everyone who grew up, if not as brutally as Bruce Wayne did, to
> realize that the world can be a very dangerous place. For those
> millions, there's a certain satisfaction in imagining what it might
> be like to be Batman, to be alone in the dark and not be afraid,
> because everyone else out there in the dark is even more afraid
> of you. ("Batman: The Complete History" 201)

In assimilating with Batman, one is no longer afraid of the darkness of the world, as they fulfil a deep seated need to feel safe; and in so doing have meaning to their world. Batman fulfils an ego ideal, and urges the reader to choose the path of good and not evil. In accepting Batman as a hero, despite his flaws, he is accepted despite his reader's own conflicted nature; that is, to accept the hero despite the flaws he has, or the flaws the reader can identify with.

The *Batman* narrative has consistently met and extended the expectations of readers and audiences with regard to how the world works, while also allowing for readers and audiences to believe that a better world is possible. That is not to say this world would be free of the plural nature of human morality, but certainly it would accept its nature and believe that by embracing and overcoming the bat, society can strive towards bettering itself.

Conclusion

Comic books are a profoundly intimate form of storytelling. It is something that speaks specifically to the individual reader; there is something magical about comic books, in that they affect the brain in ways that prose does not (Knowles 213). Comic books are also a unique form of storytelling as it makes use of both text and graphics. This allows for a distinctive reading and visual comprehension of the greater meaning of the medium. Comic books are no longer a mass medium, "instead, they have become a highly charged laboratory for pop culture", developing themes and ideas from other forms of pop culture, such as television, movies, and video games (Knowles 215). Whether one realizes it or not, humans are programmed by pop culture. Christopher Knowles goes as far as to reason that "television and film and video games are part of our collective consciousness, perhaps even more so than our dreams" (215).

Many comparisons have been made between Superheroes and mythological and religious figures; however, what is at the very core of any superhero narrative is a story about a system of values. Hero myths were accepted as valid narratives about morality, and this in turn, helps to explain the complexities of life, its tragedies and triumphs. It is the morals of Superheroes which defines them, as they have, from their inception, proclaimed that they would protect humanity and its values. Thus, it is values which define superheroes, as she or he has a "determination to, no matter what, protect those values" (Fingeroth 17). With this in mind, in order to accept Superheroes, and all that they stand for, one must then believe in a value beyond oneself. What might be considered to be a 'saviour value'; that is the ability to have faith in the protective capabilities of another. If this is so, then one must live with truth, justice, and the capacity and desire to do the socially accepted 'right thing'.

The question remains; how does one do the right thing? In the morally ambiguous world of the vigilante, this answer is difficult. However, characters such as Superman, Spider-Man and Batman continue to fight for a justice that is not motivated by personal vengeance. At its very core, might does not make right. "Violence only brings temporary victories; violence, by creating many more social problems than it solves, never brings permanent peace" (King 14). Superheroes, as crime-fighters, devote their lives to preventing and stopping moral violation. They risk revenge against themselves and their

loved ones. They might turn on a loved one, while showing restraint with an enemy. Superheroes are not war heroes, they are moral heroes. It is no accident that Superman cannot kill Rokk, even when it means that billions will die, or that Batman will not kill directly, but will allow Ra's al Ghul to die, or that Spider-Man neglects his personal life to stop Green Goblin. These basic moral themes form the very foundation of what it means to be a Superhero. Much more than entertainment for children, the Superhero myth sees the shift in the hero myth, and thus marking a historical transformation. Perhaps even on a far more basic level, Superheroes allow for a unique view into the moral mind of society.

While this dissertation has argued that the three Superheroes discussed have not been motivated by personal vengeance, it cannot be said that they do not have a preoccupation with their past, and this preoccupation is a tenet of the Superhero narrative. Certainly, Superman, Spider-Man and Batman base their existence as Superheroes on their past trauma. Bruce Wayne witnessed his parents' murder, and as an adult vows to wage war on the criminals of Gotham as Batman. Peter Parker fails to stop a robber who later murders his uncle, and then chooses to fight crime as Spider-Man. For Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker, whenever they don their Superhero costume and fight crime they are symbolically redefining the trauma which created them, seemingly paying penance for their past failures. It is important to note that no matter how long they fight crime, they can never undo the trauma of the past; as such they are compelled to continue to fight the endless battle against evil. Yet Superman, too, has a traumatic past which largely defines his existence as a Superhero; however, he cannot directly address this trauma in the same fashion that Spider-Man and Batman do. Fighting criminals cannot replace the loss of not only his parents, but his birth-planet. While Batman and Spider-Man typically fight individual evil-doers, Superman is often faced with evil-doers who would try to end the world, and so Superman often protects humanity from apocalyptic threats that evoke the memory of a lost Krypton and in a pseudo form he is able to protect his own world. While Superman does fight individual crimes they are typically fought on a scale far greater than what Batman and Spider-Man face. While Batman wishes to rid Gotham of evil, and Spider-Man wishes to stop crime in New York, Superman hopes to fulfil his father's aspirations for a utopian Earth.

Firstly, while the each of the three Superheroes discussed were born in tragic circumstances, each chose the path of good rather than evil. This is arguably because each had a sound moral background or upbringing, and perhaps even an overwhelming sense of duty. Secondly, by choosing the moral path of good there was a need to create an alter-ego. This alter ego creates plurality. For Superman, he was Kal-El the last survivor of the destroyed planet Krypton, as well as Clark Kent, raised on a farm in Kansas and a reporter for the Daily Planet. Spider-Man is Peter Parker, the brainy, orphaned teenager raised by his aunt and uncle in Queens, New York. Batman is Bruce Wayne, a billionaire playboy and the sole heir to his murdered parents' fortune and legacy. While each Superhero has a power which makes them super, they all have the need to mask their superhero status with a secret identity. Finally, the power and choice in how they use their powers is largely based on their traumatic origins. Superman's powers come as a result of his Kryptonian heritage, while his choice to use his powers for good is arguably because of his father's hopes for Earth, as well as the sound values with which he was instilled by his adoptive parents on the Kent's farm. Spider-Man initially used his powers for selfish purposes, and that indirectly led to the death of his uncle. His guilt and sense of right leads him to the choice of becoming a Superhero. Batman has no superpower, but he is blessed with an insurmountable fortune which allows him to facilitate his vigilantism. Batman is not solely driven by vengeance, but by guilt and a sense of duty.

Beyond the plurality of the postmodern mind seen in Superhero comic books is an expression of individual choice. This is best seen in *The Killing Joke*, and is arguably the best example of that although events may happen which are beyond the control of the individual; it is up to the individual as to how he or she deals with the consequences. Today's world is often harsh and at times bizarre even, yet it is up to the individual to decide what part he or she will play within culture. It is this choice that allows readers to engage with the text. In society there are countless examples of events which might lead an individual to believe that evil has a foothold on morality and justice, often individuals struggle to believe that good will prevail. Superhero comic books meet these expectations and doubts, and remind the reader a better world is possible.

Perhaps Superheroes enduring appeal and success is based in the fact that society has an overwhelming need to feel safe and protected from external threats. Peter Parker's Aunt May possibly states it best:

> He knows a hero when he sees one. Too few characters out there, flying around like that, saving old girls like me. And Lord knows, kids like Henry need a hero. Courageous, self-sacrificing people. Setting examples for all of us. Everybody loves a hero. People line up for them, cheer them, scream their names. And years later, they'll tell how they stood in the rain for hours just to get a glimpse of the one who taught them how to hold on a second longer. I believe there's a hero in all of us that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride. (*Spiderman 2* Film)

To believe that superheroes are only an American phenomenon is a narrow-minded concept. The concept of heroes, and indeed, superheroes, is a global desire and fascination. In the film *Superman Returns*, there is a moment of internationalism, as Superman, having returned to Earth, is seen and talked about on the news as he saves people in Germany, Paris, Shanghai, and elsewhere across the globe (Film). There is no scene that relates Superman specifically with American justice, politics, or even values. Therein lies the 'magic' of heroes like Superman; they are globally recognized, respected and loved. Danny Fingeroth argues that what Superheroes "embody [is] too strong to quell" (167). Superheroes by their very nature and purpose represent and embody traditional culture and religious heritage, as they continuously adapt so as to engage with the sociocultural unrest that is seen in a postmodern society. Different cultures are seen to have different ideals of what is right and what is wrong, and demand the repression of aspects which are not favoured by that specific society. Yet what is common to all cultures is that when evil is done someone must stand for those who cannot stand for themselves; whether it is traditional law enforcement or in the imagined heroes from folklore. Perhaps this part of the enduring appeal and success of Superhero comic books; they fit the cultural ideal of a saviour figure. Superheroes could

easily perpetuate the place of any classical hero. Denny O'Neil argues that "the idea of an essentially moral and compassionate hero is not an outmoded one" (qtd in Daniels, "DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favourite Comic Book Heroes" 201).

Superheroes were once either vigilantes fighting crimes, or soldiers fighting in a war against fascism; now they have evolved into something else; they now address a greater anxiety and a universal feeling of powerlessness. With the explosion of the world population and the rapid increase in technology, it is no wonder that people are feeling "marginalized and insignificant", isolated and powerless against the invisible systems that control every aspect of their lives (Knowles 217).To live in a postmodern world is to live in extremely depressing and discouraging times, in which the old values are disappearing, and the world that once was recognized is being systematically dismantled. In these times of economic depression, political uncertainty, and a world at war with terrorism, superheroes and their stories of good triumphing over evil are more relevant and comforting than at any time since the Second World War.

The success of the Superhero over the past seventy-four years suggests that the genre has "put a finger on the pulse" of the cultural *zeitgeist* (Partible 250). Superhero comic books have become an artistic vehicle, as it has they have ventured beyond the four-coloured pages to include art, literature, and popular culture, and in doing so have been able to convey the hopes and dreams of mankind. Superheroes answer questions about life and the human condition, and are often seen to give a more insightful explanation than some narratives which are based in reality. With globalization, largely brought on by the internet phenomenon, humanity has begun to demand stories with universal messages. These stories are seen to be the bridges which connect various cultures, as all cultures can identify with the need to feel safe and protected. All people can look up to Superheroes, if not for their amazing superpowers, then for their identifiable characteristics, such as the good they stand for. Despite the cynical views of postmodernism, and the postmodernist state of today's society, all people look to those who have created a morality greater than him or herself. That is not to suggest that Superhero comic books refute the claims made by postmodernism. Postmodernism is about the individual in a morally chaotic world, and it is up to the individual to create their own morality. Superheroes represent the good that humanity seeks, and certainly

they encompass, even if on a small level, the secret desires of humanity, to stand against evil, to do the right thing. According to Deepak Chopra, quoted in Hilary Goldstein's "Comic-Con 2006", a Superhero is a "symbolic expression of the social subconscious... The superhero is a mythological being" who exists "beyond outer space and inner space, creating a new idea of being". Hilary Goldstein in "Comic-Con 2006" notes that "Superheroes show us the world through x-ray vision", they are more than a reflection of the individual, but a glimpse of the inner workings of humanity.

In Chapter 1, "A Brief History of the American Superhero Comic", the origins, development and appeal of the Superhero was discussed. While this dissertation did not study the external forces in the evolution of Superhero morality, it is important to note that the world has changed over the past seventy-five years. As society has changed it seemed natural that the men and women who wrote and drew Superheroes would have their own moral conceptions change as well. While this dissertation did not discuss these external factors, it was necessary to note that the society changed and so too did its Superheroes.

In Chapter 2, "Postmodern Theoretical Framework", the theoretical progression of this dissertation was laid out. As postmodernism is a broad theory, it was necessary to explain clearly what course this discussion would follow. Using the postmodern conceptions of power, plurality and morality, Superheroes was discussed in depth regarding these three conceptions using a number of postmodern theorists and philosophers. Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and amongst others were used in the discussion of the prevalence of postmodernism with Superhero comic books.

Chapter 3, "Superman: From Modernity to Postmodernism", discussed the world's first Superhero as he transformed from his modern inception to a postmodern Superhero. This chapter discussed Superman's physical powers and how he used them for good, while also being at odds with his super-identity. Superman was born super, and his identity is not simply that of a Superhero, but as the last survivor of a destroyed planet, as Kal-El, and the small town boy, Clark Kent. Superman has grown from a Superhero who saw morality as either good or evil, and now is able to better rationalize

society, and is able to make decisions which not only benefit society but his moral conscience.

In Chapter 4, "Spider-Man: The Postmodernist", Spider-Man was discussed as being a clearly postmodern character. This chapter discussed Spider-Man's use of powers and how he uses them to save society. However, the presence of powers leads into the discussion of Spider-man's plural identity as he battles to deal with his identity as Spider-Man while trying to maintain his life as Peter Parker. Likewise, the moral implications for Spider-Man are often not clear cut, as on many occasions the villain he is fighting as Spider-Man is a friend of Peter Parker.

Chapter 5, "Batman: The Postmodern Condition", unlike the previous chapters on Superman and Spider-Man discussed in depth not only Batman, but the world in which he lives, as well as some of the villains he fights. Batman is often a morally ambiguous character who, although not driven by revenge, is constantly aware of why he became a crime-fighter in the first place. His constant battles to save those who cannot save themselves takes its toll on the Superhero's consciousness; further showing the cracks in his already fragile psyche. Power is largely examined through the power relation shared between Batman and the Joker. Joker's origin story and very character further demonstrate the presence of plurality. The inclusion of other villains further strengthens not only the argument on plurality, but morality as well.

It has been the aim of this dissertation to demonstrate the significance of postmodern theory in relation to Superhero comic books. This dissertation has taken the postmodern conceptions of power, plurality and morality and applied it to the Superhero comic book, and through a careful investigation of these conceptions provided interesting insights into these characters.

However, there is still much that needs to be examined in Superhero comic books. Firstly, postmodernism is a large and continually changing theory, and as such, there is more that can be investigated regarding Superhero comic books within the realm of postmodernist theory. It would be valuable to investigate construction and deconstruction in Superhero comic books as this is a prominent tenet of postmodernism. Certainly, this thesis could be expanded to include safety and comfort, and their contemporaries' danger and excitement. Secondly, through the research of

this dissertation it has become evident that there is an overwhelming gap in academia to fulfil a gender study of Superhero comic books. While there has been a significant amount of research done on feminism and the female in Superhero comic books, little has been done on the gendered position of men and women. Furthermore, there appears to be a need to also look at the sexuality of Superheroes. Moreover, there is a need for a study to be conducted regarding the personal relationships between characters. Hence there are entire fields of exploration waiting to be excavated, with ever-evolving characters and story lines being introduced to analyse. It affords students and academics interesting challenges.

Illustration 1: Superman

http://greaterthanknowledge.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/superman-with-flag.jpg

Illustration 2: Bizarro Superman

http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/ager/news/?a=23427

Illustration 3: Spider-Man versus Venom

http://www.comicvine.com/myvine/vvv/all-images/108-
62548/spiderman_vs_venom/105-556471/

Illustration 4: The Dark Knight

http://www.fark.com/comments/7226450/Colorado-news-reporting-that-police-are-looking-for-a-2nd-person-of-interest-in-Aurora-theater-shootings

Illustration 5: The Duality of Man

http://i.ytimg.com/vi/NN6CN7UpimI/0.jpg

Illustration 6: The Duality of Man – Part 2

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