

Death of the ‘Criminal’ Bat: Subversion of the Self as Cure in Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*

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Abstract

Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* is one text that breaks away from all the traditional comic book conventions and ideals to bring about a dark world and an even darker hero. The highlight of the text is that it provides a new perspective for the readers to look at the villains and the heroes and thus realize that good and bad are not always what they seem to be. The four antagonists of Batman in the novel – the Mutant Leader, Two-Face, the Joker and Superman – are used as reference points in this discussion. Each of these characters acts as sites of conflict upon which Batman wrestles with his own ‘private demons’. The dissertation traces the failure of Batman as a superhero, which in turn points to the hypocrisy and (covered up) failure of the State the legal authorities. Rather than treating Batman as an anti-hero the paper focuses on the hero as human being who is susceptible to mistakes and failures. By highlighting the different levels at which the character of Batman undergo subversion, the purpose of that subversion is found out to be political rather than being a postmodern literary gimmick.

KEYWORDS: Superhero, Criminality, Subversion, Comics, Ethics.

Introduction:

Centuries of sacred wisdom and spiritual thought has taught us that heroes always come in shining armours and that the villains will always be a shade of the eternal dark forces that haunt human existence. A ‘shining armour’ is a powerful image. An armour shines when exposed to light. Thus, the hero becomes a creature of light, the exact opposite of the kind of beings they engage in conflict with. Bruce Wayne knew this logic with which the world worked. His act of donning the black cape was at once an acceptance of this logic as well as a radical questioning of it. The Bat, the infamous minion of vampires and demons, a creature of darkness, became the insignia of justice in the dystopian streets of Gotham city. Of course, a city gets the hero it deserves. Whether it be Barry Allan of Central city or Clark Kent of Metropolis, heroes of light fight in daylight and inspires those whom they protect. But the Bat never inspires anything but fear. Fear becomes the key principle upon which crime management in Gotham city works. And darkness, being a commonplace entity, becomes the very space upon which it takes place.

Therein lies the importance of the character of Batman. He was born from, and exists in darkness; an existence the sole purpose of which is to undermine the structure of that darkness. His crusade is inherently futile, sometimes too idealistic to be real. He is an informed man; informed with the knowledge that all of us have to deal with our own private demons. His relentless pursuit of the city’s most rotten criminals, and his stubborn reluctance to kill them (however great the threat may be), can be interpreted as an unhealthy obsession with the ideal of justice. The fact that he himself is outside the law, and that his actions to protect the law are in itself a violation of it, doesn’t seem to bother him. He has faith in the law, just not in those

who are employed to enforce it. He is driven by something far more powerful than the law: an image of Gotham that he recalls from his childhood, his father's Gotham, an almost-utopian Gotham (one that never existed but in his memories). It is wrong to assume that his crusade is entirely to ensure that the people of Gotham get the justice his parents never got. In fact, the Bat was invented to safeguard the legacy of Thomas Wayne, to show a way back to the future.

At the age of fifty-five, ten years after the death of Jason Todd, the second Robin, almost ten years after he had given up the cape, Bruce Wayne gets second thoughts about his past actions. This is how Frank Miller wants the readers to see him in the initial pages of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). He realises how insignificant the meaning of the Bat has become in light of the present state of affairs in Gotham. He thinks, "...how little it has changed. It's older, dirtier..." (13). Despite his self-imposed sense of failure, he feels the Bat within him once again wanting to break free and roam the streets. He finds it very hard to contain within him this surge of the masculine, which he interprets as the need of the hour. But Gotham had existed before Batman, and it had learnt to survive without Batman. Therefore, the return of the Bat is merely an existential matter, an assigning of self-purpose. It arises out of Wayne's own thinking that the criminal justice system in Gotham is incomplete without Batman. But Batman, despite his own intentions, doesn't complete Gotham. His existence serves another purpose entirely: a radical reconstruction of the physical reality of order in the city.

In an interview Miller remarks, "I long ago determined that a character like Batman can only be defined as a terrorist if his motto is striking terror" (qtd. in Croci 163). It is this real-world sensibility and the collective fantasies of the society about an authority defying extra-human hero that gets reconciled in *The Dark Knight Returns*. In the work Batman comes face to face with four antagonists: Harvey Dent, the Mutant Leader, the Joker and Superman – all (except the mutant) of whom are part and parcel of the Batman mythos revered by fans all around the globe. Miller's new take on these characters is nothing but revolutionary. Their contest with the hero for survival and power, the hero's response to their actions, and the legal authority's take on these struggles, all of which placed under critical scrutiny will shed more light on the criminal world and the crime management system in our own real world.

Heroes, Villains and Crime Management in Gotham:

Miller's new Gotham, an alternate one that corresponds to the real 1980s America, is far more dystopian than the previous ones. The news reporter, having listened to a distressing weather report, diagnoses the heat wave as the root cause behind rising civil violence. The image of Gotham we see in the backdrop isn't particularly heart-warming. The huge, apocalyptic sun, while going down, casts an ominous shadow over the city in the process. Darkness is imminent, catastrophe is inevitable. These establishing grids "open the horizon to decentralize the narrative world, pointing beyond the city toward a global risk perspective" (Cortiel and Oehme 5-6). Commissioner Gordon, with four more weeks left to his retirement, is hell-bent on catching the new breed of criminals known as 'the mutants' – a group of young street thugs characterised by their specific dress code, slang, mannerisms and their extreme brutality. These off springs of the underbelly of Gotham are but representatives of common class criminality, vibrant and at their best. On the other hand, Commissioner Gordon, wrinkled and pale in the drawings, represents the law enforcement agency whose glorious days are but hearsay today. The city is struggling as usual, even without its master criminals like The Joker or The Penguin still in play.

The mutant gang is in revolt against the system of justice currently in place. The video message their leader sends to the media resonates with an appetite for power and control. He doesn't want to be called a criminal, instead he says, "We are the law, we are the future. Gotham city belongs to the mutants. Soon the world will be ours" (44). They are in direct conflict with the idea of democracy. Miller doesn't talk about the evolution of the gang. But the fact that they are street criminals points to their lower-class origin, and their utter disdain of the status quo prompts the readers to picture them as once-victims of the governing system. Superhero comics were instrumental in creating a false notion of innate criminality. Miller breaks away from this by presenting the mutants as evolving beings. The very group that faces the wrath of the Bat later becomes his followers and the means to keep his crusade alive.

The nature of their crimes helps us define who they really are. The brutal murder of three nuns and the act of stapling a dead cat to the door of the First Church of Christ the Redeemer are the very first things that the readers are told as being committed by the mutants. Their victims are defenceless innocents, mostly women. Their crimes are interpreted by the media to be heat related delirium. The police consider them as nothing but monsters. But Batman diagnoses their real problem, identifies their needs, and comes up with the only possible solution. They've spent their whole lives being underdogs and now that they've mastered violence it has opened for them a chance to bully their bullies, a chance to feel superior to their oppressors. The only way to stop them is to break their pride. "They have to be defeated, humiliated. It's the only way, Jim" (97), says the Bat to Commissioner Gordon, who wanted to arrest them all. This understanding from the part of the Batman and the ability of the mutants to associate themselves with the mission of the Bat later on, sheds light into the conditions that make villains and heroes. Vollum and Adkinson talks about an interesting observation made by E. H. Sutherland, an expert in criminology:

Sutherland would interpret the villains of the superhero world as having "an excess of definitions favourable to violation of the law over definitions unfavourable to violation of the law". Generally, the needs and values of the villains are the same as those of the superhero, but because of this "differential association" of definitions favourable or unfavourable to breaking the law, the villains become criminal while Superman and Batman become superheroes. (104)

Batman tried to cure the mutants of that "excess". But after Batman mercilessly beat their leader, the mutants transferred their allegiance to his cause and transformed themselves into the 'Sons of the Batman'. The very effort to disband the gang put the Bat at its centre.

The rehabilitation of Harvey Dent and his subsequent return to crime forms the first book of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Harvey Dent a.k.a. Two-Face is middle class morality gone bad. Dent, the once champion of the American legal enterprise, went rogue after a terrible personal tragedy. When half his face got scarred by acid, instead of dealing with the mental agony caused by his disfigurement, he let it run wild and forced himself to believe that it had brought to light a dark side of his personality. He adopted a dollar coin (one side of which was defaced/scarred) to represent this split personality. He would flip the coin to find out which side of him needs to make a particular decision. After Batman had apprehended him and committed him to Arkham Asylum, he had been under extensive medical care. While an expert surgeon performed a plastic surgery on him to repair his face, Dr. Bartholomew Wolper was responsible for restoring his mental health. Upon Dr. Wolper's assurance, Dent was allowed to return to normal life. But after having spent

twelve years in an asylum, Dent had actually lost track of all normality. As soon as he hit the streets, his criminal self which lay dormant while in confinement, kicked in.

Two-Face is the next level in the criminal ladder. The two warring sides within him, the righteous man who wants to do good and the ambitious man who seeks profit and betterment at the cost of anything, is but an extreme representation of the typical middle-class sensibility. The disfigurement made things more clear for him. His dreams needn't be stifled behind the hypocritical public face of Harvey Dent anymore. After he had embraced this existence, he felt that a complete face undermined his actual nature, the split nature – the balance between good and evil. Even when his deeds were criminal, he believed that the good in him would keep the evil in control, making it impossible the evil side to cross certain limits. When the doctors restored his face, he had to choose between the two, and he chose evil because it seemed more simple, it seemed more true. Wayne suffers from a similar psychosis. He constantly needs to choose between being Bruce or being the Bat, and his obvious choice is the Bat; not because it is simple (it is not) but because it is more true. This identification with Dent lies deep within Wayne. He wanted Dent to be cured of this misery of double existence.

All the twelve years Dent was in Arkham, Wayne covered his medical expenses. And even when Gordon suspected his rehabilitation Wayne came out in his defence, saying “we must believe that our private demons can be defeated” (17). But the failure of the system to cure Dent and his own failure to contain the Bat within the man taught him that sometimes these private demons can't be kept away. This is probably why he hallucinates and sees a fully scarred face of Harvey Dent after he captures him again. He then mumbles, “I see him. I see... I see... A reflection, Harvey. A reflection” (55). Harvey's face transforms into the face of a giant bat in the grid in between. The book ends there, without offering a proper conclusion, without showing the triumph of the hero. In the final grid, we see a shadowy figure of Batman, bending over and covering Dent with his cape. Beside them, a bat is seen breaking through the glass window and flying into the building, hinting that once again the demon triumphed over the man, leaving him helpless.

Miller pays homage to the popular discourse that any significant Batman story is incomplete without the Joker, that Batman himself is incomplete without the Joker (or is it the other way around?). We first find him in Arkham, as an unresponsive mental patient, as a man who has lost all interest in life. The moment he hears about the return of the Bat on T.V. his face lights up, a menacing smile spreads over and he mutters, “BB... BBBat... Batman. Darling” (41). The return of the Bat restored his life's purpose, it instilled in him a new life. Cortiel and Oehme describe the Joker as “a decadent intellectual gone bad” (12). This image of the Joker is inspired by the usual characterisation that portrays him as the intellectual criminal rival of Batman. But Miller's Joker is not just a brainy deviant, he is overtly sexual. He is perhaps the most sensual being the Bat has had to encounter in the novel. His insistence on wearing make-up, his flirtatious language, and his longing to impress the Bat with his crimes are but surface level indicators of his identification with the caped crusader as his soul mate. His final fight with Batman turns out to be the most physical and bloody combat in the novel. The fact that Miller sets their final beat down inside the “Tunnel of Love” (148) at the county fair speaks volumes about the relationship between these two old acquaintances.

Only after discussing the rationale behind the Joker's actions can we determine whether he is responsible for those actions. This enquiry would lead to a conclusion that there is no such rationale. Perhaps the best explanation of this appears

in the 2008 Christopher Nolan movie *The Dark Knight*: “Some men aren’t looking for anything logical. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn” (qtd. in Robichaud 73). Nicholas Bott understands the rise of the Joker as the result of “acquisitive or rivalrous desire” (242). The very existence of Batman is what makes the Joker want to exist. During the ten years he spent in Arkham, the Joker never once attempted to escape, which seems very odd and surprising without the knowledge that there was no Batman outside for him to return to. His escape and his subsequent return to Batman leads us to the climactic moment where they engage in intimate physical combat. The Joker enjoys being hurt by Batman. When the Joker gets to see the Bat wanting to kill him, trying so hard only to abandon the task at the end (since it violates his moral code), it provides him with a sense of victory, a sort of orgasmic pleasure (hence the psychotic laugh).

The Bat, on the other hand, had been looking for “a good death” (10) right from the beginning. He derives pleasure not out of hurting the Joker, but from being hurt by the Joker. The old man Bruce trying to test the limits of his body is a common sight within the pages of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Thus, the two finally gets down to their death dance. Batman would’ve let the Joker kill him, thereby ending this perpetual struggle between the two, if it wasn’t for his holy crusade. Joker’s final words, after Batman incapacitates him and before he commits suicide, are interesting: “I’m really disappointed with you, my sweet... The moment... was perfect... and you... didn’t have the nerve... Paralysis... Really... Do I hear sirens?... They’ll kill you for this... And they’ll never know... That you didn’t have the nerve...” (150-151). With this the Joker twists his neck by himself, breaks what’s left of his spine, dies instantly, and frames Batman for his murder. The Joker wins; he made the Bat break his sacred code, at least in the eyes of the public whom he is supposed to inspire.

The fourth and last book of the novel, titled “The Dark Knight Falls”, is particularly interesting because it features Superman, as an agent of the State, tasked with bringing down Batman once and for all. Bruce had played vigilante before; he’s been playing it for quite some time now. All these years the central government had ignored the phenomenon of the Bat; up until now, since the State cannot let a better form of governance than itself rise to power. Simply put, Batman humiliated the State, or rather, the State felt threatened by him. It all began with the Soviets deploying a mega nuclear warhead on the South American Island of Corto Maltese (where the American army was aiding a coup to overthrow the Communist government there), in an act of desperation. But the Americans had God on their side, or like President Reagan says (with a naughty wink) in the novel, “...or the next best thing...” (119). Though the Superman successfully diverts its course into a vast empty desert on the American mainland, its detonation causes a massive power outage throughout the country, sets off a nuclear winter and leaves Superman utterly deformed and weak. The whole nation erupts into a state of absolute pandemonium. As the State lost its panoptic eye, people took power into their own hands. Riots began to break out, powerful groups claimed public spaces for themselves, distribution of necessary utilities and resources were compromised, and crime rates soared. The whole nation became a sort of Hobbesian dystopia, except Gotham.

The Sons of the Batman became the Dark Knight’s private Gestapo with which he brought the whole city back to its senses. Even the new Commissioner Ellen Yindel, who had earlier issued an arrest warrant for him, recognises his role, passing this remark to her fellow officer, “He’s... Too big...” (176). But the State couldn’t accept this ‘bigness’ of Batman; after all he’s just one ‘man’. So, the State sends the

Ultimate Man after him. Superman, the quintessential American, the migrant who has been made part and parcel of the land that he now reveres as his Mother, is presented as the “defender of truth, justice and the American way” (Vollum and Adkinson 102). He has utmost respect for governmental structures and the law. Though Bruce is one of his oldest and dearest friends, he is absolutely sure of his choice when it comes down to serving the government. But Bruce’s conception of the State is much different. His understanding of the government as it is now is the direct opposite of the Lincolnian definition. He realises the government to be filled with people who have their own private agendas. His anger with Clark is that he fails to see that.

Of course, the Bat beats Superman to a pulp, thanks to kryptonite. Cortiel and Oehme writes, “Superman’s failure to remain invincible destabilises classic mid-western American masculinity and evokes the failure of democratic institutions” (13). Only the State can use excessive force. Only the State can legitimately use violence. Rather than being a symbol of perfect American masculinity, Superman represents this violent nature of the State, this criminal side of the state. Referring to their old days in the Justice League (when they used to work for the government), Batman had said to Clark, “Sure we’re criminals... we’ve always been criminals” (135). Using violence to stop criminals is in a way stooping down to their level, but everyone understands that there is no other way. What Batman can’t accept is the State claiming monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. He protests, goes against the State, beats Superman, reminds him to stay out his way, but realizes that all his actions don’t set a good example for tomorrow. He might be an exception, but there is always the danger of unprofessional copycats trying to follow his path. Therefore, he fakes his death and makes the world believe that he perished in the fight with Superman. At the last moment he ultimately went against all the things that he has stood for until now. He let the notion of vigilante justice be publicly thrown under the bus. Only to start anew, to re-launch his crusade as an underground leader of the Sons of the Batman. Only one difference this time; there is no ‘him’ in the picture, there is no Batman. The ‘personal’ in his mission had to perish. *Batman* needn’t exist anymore, only his ideals. In a final effort to survive, Batman deconstructs himself, and this time he does it willingly.

Subversion of the Canonical Hero:

When we look at his confrontation with Harvey Dent, Batman fails simply because of his inaction. This episode in the storyline, being the first among the four, was meant to familiarise the new resurrected Batman to the readers. Harvey’s masquerade as Two-Face, to an extent, mirrors Bruce’s struggle with his dual identity. What Ron Novy says about the Bat and the Joker is applicable to this duo too: “... violence overthrew a coherent picture of the world without installing a replacement; they share this realization and are bound together in an effort to make sense of it” (176). But the manner in which both of them respond to this realization is quite different. Harvey seeks revenge upon the society and the law that couldn’t get him justice, while Bruce does the exact opposite. Bruce’s mistake was to judge Harvey as psychologically damaged because of this difference. While it is a crucial difference between the two, it isn’t enough ground to establish Bruce’s own sanity. For example, Batman says while discussing Dent’s deviance with Gordon, “Harvey wrestled long and hard with his other side. To have it devour him now... He’s possessed, Jim. Out of control. I think he wants to die” (46). Gordon, a close friend, retorts by asking him whether they are actually talking about Dent. Bruce’s words were in a way a description of himself. Nobody in the novel wants to die more than

Bruce Wayne. And after more than ten years of keeping ‘the creature within’ (the one that claimed him years ago in that cave) at bay, he let it devour him now. He understands what it is to carry something else inside and act out its impulses. This allows him to identify himself with Dent’s “Hobbesian state of war of all against all” (Spanakos 62).

Bruce also identifies with his split being. He sees the image of the Bat – ‘the creature within’ – in Dent, a criminal. He realises that both of them are but two sides of the same coin, that is, criminality. One scarred, ugly side that is outright criminal, and another dark side that tries to escape criminality by wearing a mask over it. The episode’s abrupt ending after this scene, with the final image being a bat breaking the glass window and soaring into the building, confirms his complete transformation into the Bat. And the man, Bruce, isn’t seen resisting this takeover. This inaction, through which he let it happen, is uncharacteristic of his actual self that keeps repeating the dictum “we must believe our private demons can be defeated” (17). Thus, began the subversion of his self and his subsequent descent into the criminal world.

After Batman tricked thousands of mutants to assemble around the city dump, Gordon thinks that he could move in with the National Guard and arrest them all. But Batman disagrees and says, “You could never hold them all” (97). He isn’t talking about the ability of the system to physically contain them all. His concern is more about the ability of the system to cure them, to convert them into normal citizens. Foucault writes, “Prisons do not diminish the crime rate; they can be extended, multiplied or transformed, the quality of the crimes and criminals remains stable or, worse, increases” (265). The conversation between Batman and the Commissioner is an acceptance of this failure of the criminal justice system. Gordon feels more than relieved to trust his old friend with the solution to this problem. He, being the Commissioner, legitimised the use of violence by the Bat. The solution was to fight brutality with brutality. By breaking the mutant leader in front of his followers, Batman hoped to divest them of their false sense of invincibility.

But before he embarked upon this final ride with the mutant leader, he never thought about its extended ramifications, or what it might mean to the whole business of crime management. His actions that night destroyed the already thin line between a criminal and a crime fighter. During the fight Batman breaks his opponent’s leg, and we read his thoughts while doing so: “Something tells me to stop with the leg. I don’t listen to it” (101). An earlier Batman would not have critically harmed a person (even a criminal) unless it was absolutely necessary. This new version was not hardened like this by brutal reality, but by a strong sense of failure; the inability of his old methods to control crime and criminals prompted him to change them. Therefore, he punished the mutant leader for his crimes publicly. This act can be described in Foucault’s words, where he talks about the nature of punishment as a public spectacle in his *Discipline and Punish* (1975): “It was as if the punishment was thought to equal, if not exceed, in savagery the crime itself, to accustom the spectators to a ferocity from which one wished to divert them, to show them the frequency of crime, to make the executioner resemble a criminal... to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration” (9). It wasn’t mere resemblance, the Bat literary turned into a criminal, worse, the mutants identified with his criminality, made him their imaginary leader and began hunting Gotham’s criminals with the same brutality with which he destroyed the mutant behemoth. The spectacle of the mud hole (where the fight took place) was supposed to have a cathartic effect. It did change them, just not their criminal instincts.

Dr. Wolper's comments are particularly interesting: "...the Batman has infected the youth of Gotham – poisoned them with an insidious excuse for the most violently anti-social behaviour" (102). A priest appears on T. V., saying, "Though surrounded by sinfulness and terror, we must not become so embittered that we take Satan's methods as our own" (102). Batman became a necessary evil and chose not to be a symbol of hope and perseverance. In a desperate attempt to contain the Satan, he became another Satan and the only thing he could inspire was further crime. As Batman was fighting the brute monster, both of them covered in mud, "visual distinctions between the two disappear, they become physically alike... confirming this transfer of power..." (Cortiel and Oehme 13). It isn't just a transfer of power but a transfer of aggressive criminal nature. The one who launched his crusade in order to keep criminality from corrupting more people ended up being an agent of extreme unlawfulness such as physical torture and public battery.

Now back to the Joker-Batman conundrum. Christopher Robichaud contends, "... genuinely insane people aren't morally responsible for what they do, and therefore don't deserve moral blame for their misdeeds" (72). By this definition, the Joker can only be held casually responsible for all those hideous crimes he's committed. Somehow, he eludes the purview of moral responsibility and subsequently the death penalty. Every time the Joker goes on a killing spree, Batman ultimately stops him and puts him back in his permanent cell in Arkham. But what everyone knows, what Batman himself knows is that Joker always breaks out and kills more people than he could the last time. And since he's clinically insane, he can't be killed, nor can he be put in a penitentiary. How many lives have been lost because one madman is clever enough to utilize that loophole in the criminal justice system? How many more will be lost? These are serious questions that leave lawmen baffled. But what about Batman? Since he's not burdened with always keeping to the law, and since it is his mission to ensure justice even when the law can't, he must be able to come up with a more permanent solution to the recurring Joker epidemic. But he doesn't. And in Miller's story, we see yet another encounter between the arch-rivals where Batman, once again, fails to do what was necessary.

Let's consider the option of killing the Joker. Batman won't do this because he's what Mark D. White calls a deontologist. "Deontologists judge the morality of an act based on features intrinsic to the act itself... the end never justifies the means, but rather the means must be justifiable on their own merits" (White 8). In simple terms, the Bat refuses to kill anyone because he believes that by doing so, he would cross a line and that he'll never be able to return from there. He refuses to have blood on his hands. Somehow, he's okay with having more blood spilt at the hands of the Joker because of his decision. This decision can be interpreted as exemplary in moral terms. He won't become the criminal he's fighting (but we have already seen that this is but an ideal this old Batman has chosen to abandon). But it is also downright selfish. A crime fighter's most important job is to protect the people. Only after that comes the part where he should capture the criminal. Here, Batman, knowing that he can't be there every time to stop Joker from killing, refuses protection to his possible victims by not killing the Joker while he has the chance, because he's too concerned about saving his soul. Like emphasized at the beginning of this paper, his crusade only meant giving his life a purpose, and a way to let out his repressed rage. But let's not pronounce anyone guilty here because it is only a hypothetical assessment and the question of pre-punishment demands more ethical dialogue.

But killing the Joker isn't the only thing Batman can do to stop him. As discussed earlier the Joker's existence depends completely on that of the Bat. If there

is no Batman in Gotham, there will be no Joker. Miller's text is testimony to this fact. We see that all the ten years after Batman's retirement, Joker was suffering from depression and became completely morose. It can be argued that, regarding the kind of relationship they share, "it is the Joker who proves more knowledgeable on the subject" (Bott 243) than Batman. But it would be naive to think Batman didn't know that the Joker would return once he's put the cape back on. If he would've stayed in retirement, Joker would never have escaped and those two hundred and twenty-three lives he took would not have been lost. Bruce could've chosen not to become Batman and let Gordon make use of his immense resources to defeat Two-Face and the mutants. The problem was that he couldn't trust anyone else but himself to do the right thing. And the irony of it is that every time he attempts to do the right thing, he fails. In this case, the Joker not only destroys Batman physically, but he also kills the Ideal of Batman that his believers cherished. He died with the satisfaction that the world would see Batman hereafter as his murderer (although it was Batman who paralyzed him without which the Joker wouldn't have been able to commit suicide or frame him for that), and hence the violator of the sacred code that he himself held so high. In the eyes of the citizens of Gotham, Batman's transformation into a criminal became complete that day.

In Thomas Hobbes' view the social order we keep and the system of justice we've implemented are the results of a social contract which we agree to, out of a desire to preserve our own lives. "A sovereign power – 'the Leviathan' - preserves that order and protects those subjects who have willingly submitted to that rule" (qtd. in Patterson 45). The state achieves this through a variety of means, including the legitimate use of violence. But the state isn't the only body that can use force to maintain order. The society must also rise up to the occasion and provide security to its people, and the symbol of the Bat exists to remind us that. But the illegality of vigilante justice puts Batman on the outskirts of the social structure. And the custodians of that structure, out of their desire to stay in power, courts war with him. The Nietzschean Batman, on the other hand, considers the state "as a threat to individual self-expression and self-overcoming" (Spanakos 63). Self-overcoming is a necessary requisite for the acquisition of power. And without power he can't maintain order in Gotham. His war is not with the corrupt and domineering State as such, but with its decision to deny him this power.

Even though we see him in open revolt against the existing order, there is a voice in him that keeps reminding him that he mustn't decentralize this order, especially when the whole nation is suffering the aftermath of a nuclear detonation. Bret C. Patterson talks about a Hobbesian idea that is relevant in this context: "...human beings in their natural state are inclined to war and distrust. When the structures of social order are challenged by large-scale disasters, this "natural state" rears its ugly head again, forcing representatives of that social order to step in and fight to reclaim the social contract" (42). Batman may not agree with the State's monopoly over the use of force but understands it as the only body powerful enough to put the nation back on its feet amidst a calamity as big as this. For once he realises that things are actually bigger than him and his crusade. Maybe his continuous failures might've been instrumental in teaching him that lesson. He let the government claim victory over him. He let Batman die so that people would not lose their faith in the state.

Conclusion: Subversion as Cure:

The act of subversion that the persona of Batman brought upon himself can be seen also as an act of self-acceptance of the ineffectiveness of that persona. True, he

meant well and did many good things. But being human, the inherent inconsistencies within him and his inability to correctly respond to difficult situations resulted in the erosion of the essence of Batman. He betrayed his own self and let criminal impulses gain control over him. He abandoned his ideals and indulged in extreme criminal behaviour, and in doing so inspired more crime. He, in a way, aided and abetted the suicide of Joker, and through inaction met the failure to safeguard the faith of his believers. These setbacks led him ultimately to reboot his crusade, this time by removing that one thing responsible for its early failures – himself. Bruce Wayne took the Sons of the Batman under his wing, withdrew into the underground world, and chose to work as their instructor in fighting crime. There is no more *Batman*, but a legion of the like. There is no more ‘personal’ war to be fought. No more intimate enemies, no more private vendettas to be dealt with. Bruce Wayne, through a willing act of self-subversion, cured himself of the Bat.

Miller’s novel, an outright critique of the crime management in general, ends thus by proposing subversion as the means by which we can cure the system of its flaws. No system is, in any way, perfect. We can only strive towards a model better than the present one. This must be a dynamic process. The only requisite for this is an openness of the mind that enables one to recognize, accept, and correct mistakes. Through the character of Batman, Miller exposes the truth behind crime fighting. Unlike the past comics where the goodness always prevails, *The Dark Knight Returns* captures the real struggle between the good and the bad, without pronouncing a final winner. The only thing that we witness in the text constantly is failure; failure of the law, failure of those who are entrusted with its enforcement, failure of those who try to break it, and failure of the hero who is more occupied with fighting his own private demons rather than actual crimes. This is why subversion needs to happen; so that we can deconstruct the whole, identify the bugs and start a total reconstruction by removing them. The bug in the crusade of the Bat was he himself. Only that he could accept the fact and move on to the next level. Thus, in Miller, subversion is no longer that postmodern literary gimmick by which the author critiques a past narrative or discourse, but a political statement that points towards progress.

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