

John Tilden

Rhet 451

10 May 1990

Changing Levels of Darkness in the Batman Mythos and Sexual Attitudes from the Forties to the Eighties

I have had a lifelong interest in the character of Batman. The resurgence of the character in the late 1980s, continuing until the present, is due to a revamped presentation of the character. As a part of the revamping of the character, the book is now drawn with a much darker emphasis--Batman operating in the shadows of the night. Having read reprints of the early Batman stories, I noticed similarities between the forties Batman and the eighties Batman--they both work in the shadows. The sixties and early seventies Batman operates out in the light. I started my research for this paper intending to show that the use of darkness in Batman/Detective Comics corresponded to the changing attitudes towards sex in the United States of America.

Researching this topic meant doing some primary reading of Batman texts from all periods. I then chose some representative stories. In my research of attitudes towards sex, I have not become aware of any sweeping studies of several decades. As a result, I have taken several studies and tried to combine their results into a representative picture.

First, I made a quantitative analysis of the actual "level" of darkness in the Batman strip. In a story entitled "Batman Versus the Vampire," from Detective Comics #31 (1939), there were 20 panels that were darkly colored (depicting night scenes or shadow) of a total of 78 for the story, or 26% darkness (All percentages are approximated). The second part of the story, from Detective #32 (1939), had 8 dark panels out of 78, or 10% darkness. Representative stories from the fifties and sixties were "The First Batman," from Detective #235 (1956), "Robin Dies at Dawn," from Batman #156 (1963), and "The Blockbuster Invasion of Gotham City," from Detective #345 (1966). "The First Batman" had a darkness-to-total panel-ratio of 3/73, or 4%; "Robin Dies at Dawn" had a ratio of 2/75, or 3%; "The Blockbuster Invasion of Gotham City" had a ratio of 7/71, or 10%. A representative story of the seventies was "Death Strikes at Midnight and Three," from DC Special Series #15 (1978). It had a ratio of 12/60, or 20%. The seminal example from the eighties is The Dark Knight Returns (1986). The last book of the story, entitled "The Dark Knight Falls," had a ratio of 86/455, or 19%. Even this percentage is deceiving, for in totalling the number of panels I counted big and small alike. "The Dark Knight Falls" makes use of many "television screen" panels that are considerably smaller than the "main action" panels, which tended to be darker and have more of an impact on the mood of the piece overall.

good
point ✓

An interesting "control" of the levels of darkness in Batman and Detective is the origin story of the Batman; it has been retold many times

during the years that Batman and Detective have been published. Batman's origin was first told in Batman #1 (1940) in a two-page, 13 panel story. Five of these panels are dark (a 38% ratio), showing that from the beginning the Batman was meant to be shown as a dark figure. Later retellings are more refined, but vary in their darkness. All show the young Bruce Wayne's desire for avenging his parents' death, but they vary in presentation. The 1956 retelling ("The First Batman" in Detective #235), re-presents virtually the same two page origin as 1940, but with lighter coloring for the night, darker shades of purple instead of the blacks used in the 1940 story. This lighter version was retold in 1968, with virtually no change in coloring (panels reproduced in Fleischer, 33). The story was again retold as a flashback in Detective #457, presented as a shadowy recollection, with everything presented in shades of blue to black. The shadowy representation is also used in 1988's Batman: Year One, but shades there range from grey to black--a darker mix. The Dark Knight Returns (1987) retells the shooting of Batman's parents by focusing on individual elements--the bullet leaving the gun, Martha Wayne's pearl necklace breaking apart after the gunman has ripped it off her neck, young Bruce's look of terror. All these panels are colored grey to black.

The Batman of today is a character who lives in a dark world. Why the return to a dark character after the "camp" days of the sixties and the grim days of his origins? I feel the answer lies within America's changing attitude towards its biggest hangup: sex.

The only article I found indexed for 1939 under "sexual attitudes" in the Education Index was entitled "Presenting Chastity as a Positive Virtue." The repressive attitude towards sex represented by this article coupled with college students' curiosity about "normal" sexual behavior led researcher Alfred Kinsey to begin his pioneering research on sexual habits (Colp, Jr., 319). Most of the research done on sexual attitudes (including Kinsey's work) involves college students; they are the largest group, as well as the closest, available for university sociologists to research.

It was into this era of suppressed feeling that the character of Batman was born. Prewar anxiety about America's ability to help out the victim (be it of crime or of the threatened European states) led to the creation of a hero who could go around the law to serve the cause of true justice.

The sixties were a time of great change for America; possibly the foremost change was the breaking down of sexual barriers. The advent of the birth control Pill made sex available without the overriding fear of pregnancy. Young people especially were able to conmingle as they never had before. This increase in sexual activity led to a general loosing of the sexual hangup; sex was talked about more openly and frequently, at least by teenagers and college-age students. One example is an article that appeared in the March 1969 issue of Today's Education--NEA Journal discussing teenagers' views about sex and sex education. The article is prefaced by the following quote:

Journal editors are aware that this discussion may be disturbing to some readers. This awareness is reinforced

by the knowledge that sex education programs are meeting strong opposition in a number of areas elsewhere in the nation. However, as with previous controversial articles on such topics as student attitudes, hair styles, and dress, the editors decided to print this symposium because of the insight it offers that may help bridge the generation gap.

(Today's Education--NEA Journal, March 1969, 23)

In the article itself, teenagers voice their opinions on the way sex and sex education is handled. One girl typifies the attitude of students during the sixties: "...many times they teach that sex is a wonderful thing, but only between married couples and only in order to have children. And they often leave out the fact that sex can be enjoyable and that you have sex not only to have children but to satisfy needs and desires" (Koontz, 24). Here students show their changed, open attitude towards sex in the sixties, as opposed to the parental/teacher's view of sex that typified the forties and fifties.

This changing view of sex, i.e., the openness of teenagers to discuss and engage in sex for pleasure, is reflected by the change in the content of the Batman stories. Stories were no longer grim tales of murder, but rather light science-fiction fantasies. Much of the change in the comic was due to the influence of the T.V. series Batman, which helped create but also reflected the period of camp in the late sixties. Batman editor Julius

Schwartz has said about this period, "As long as it was so popular on television, we said, 'Let's do it in comics too!'" (Vaz, 95). Thus the T.V. series, which featured mini-skirted women and a Batman who danced the 'Batusi', was closely related to the sexual revolution that was happening outside of the T.V. screen. This Batman found his way into the comic books due to commercial pressure.

The Batman stories of this period are typically like "Robin Dies at Dawn." In this story, Batman volunteers to help out the U. S. government with their testing of solo-astronaut flight conditions. He hallucinates a trip to another planet where he imagines that a space-creature kills Robin. After being brought back to "reality," Batman then imposes that hallucinatory world in his everyday life, until Robin's life is truly in danger and he must "snap out of it" to save the Boy Wonder's life. Here Batman is not working around the law, he's working for the established authorities, a subversion of the original intent of the series. The story takes place during the day--there is no room for a Dark Knight here. (Recall that this story's "darkness ratio" was 3%.) This brand of story is radically different from "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," Batman's first appearance, where he goes after drug dealers that end up perishing in a burning building (Detective Comics #27 [1939]).

The difference lies in the times; Batman's exploits changed under stress to conform to the successful formula of the times just as "under the stress of their own sexual drives and the permissive dating system of urban

society, young people adopted sexual codes that were considerably more liberal than those of their parents" (Reiss, 113).

During the middle 1960s Batman went through many changes; the stress was on streamlining the character. Perhaps most notably, and felt by some to be the "crowning touch" was changing the black bat image on Batman's chest to one encased in a yellow moon (Vaz, 91). This change epitomized the general streamlining and "modernizing" that took place in Batman and Detective to create the "new look" Batman. When I began reading the Batman stories in the seventies, I wondered why he had that bright thing on his chest if he were supposed to be a creature of the shadows. Questioning readers were finally rewarded in The Dark Knight Returns. In that book, Batman is shot at, revealing body armor covering his chest. Batman thinks, "Why do you think I wear a target on my chest--" reconciling a style difference that has been in place for over two decades, and thwarting the "mods" by 'perverting a perversion' to return to the original mood of the strip.

It's been shown that the rate of sexual activity among college students increased greatly during the 1970s and stayed high in the 1980s; it appears that students, like society in general, have become conservative in their attitudes but not necessarily in their behavior (Spees, 135-36). Many factors have contributed to the return to a conservative attitude towards sex; probably foremost among them is the spread of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

I feel that the emergence of AIDS and the societal realization that it was not a curable disease like gonorrhea has led to the current trend in "conservative" relationships. The possible realization of a future where AIDS has taken its toll leads to the darkness of The Dark Knight Returns, at least in my opinion. The darkness of AIDS impacts on the Sexual Revolution of the sixties and seventies by forcing people to amend their ways and curtail their promiscuity, or at least limit their activity to a single, safe partner. The alternative future (implicit) is the one projected in Dark Knight.

Matthew McAllister has written recently that the comic book "has had the potential to ... legitimate dominant social values ..., though current trends toward conglomeration and licensing encourage more mainstream content" (55). The trend toward conglomeration (i.e. Time acquiring Warner, which owns DC Comics, the publishers of the Batman comic books), in my mind exerts the same pressures as in the sixties when Batman was made campy because of a decision to go with what sells. I see no difference with the Batman of today. If Batman as Dark Knight comes about because the public has visions of doom about itself, then what of it? This "new" vision of Batman has been labelled fascist by some (McAllister, 66). Comics as a business must respond to what the public will buy. Just as Batman in the sixties revitalized the industry by being camp, it has now revitalized comics by being serious and drawing an older, more reflective audience to the world of comics: "the 1980s Batman reflects the changing demographics

Though
why don't
the 1970s
Pre-Aids story
have a
darker content
of 20%?

and tastes of the comic book audience" (Vaz, 180). A generation that produces Bernhard Goetz can identify with, will want to read Dark Knight-- "Robin Dies at Dawn" won't cut it; wake up--Robin died "for real" in Batman #428, and eighties readers demanded it by phoning in votes for his death.

With this paper, I attempted at the start to try and reconcile darkness in Batman stories with sexual attitudes through the eras Batman has been published. With research, I feel that the question I've answered has not been about attitudes, but openness. The era of the sixties was a time when people forgot their inhibitions and their cares (at least, their sexually related cares; I have no wish to involve the question of the anti-war movement in this discussion) and had (sexual) fun openly for the first time. This "good-time" feeling permeated society, filtering down to the campy, lighter-drawn Batman that filled the pages of Batman and Detective Comics during the sixties. Unfortunately, in my opinion, that lighter-drawn Batman was only a perverted image of the original intent of Batman. It is only with the conservative eighties and the call for a more "realistic" vigilante Batman that the character has returned to the fringes of the law and to his rightful place in the shadows.

This is certainly a very original paper. You ~~don't~~ display a unique mind, as well as excellent research skills.

Though your hypothesis (sex attitudes to sex determine darkness/light) is an interesting one I don't feel you really establish it as strongly as you could have.

Two strategies you might have used

- 1) Do an analysis of sexuality in the text.
- 2) Look at another context 30, like 80 to

(A)

380

set if
it's at 60
negative to change views on sex.

WORKS CITED

- Colp, Ralph Jr. "Changes in American Sexual Attitudes During the Past Century" in Sexuality: New Perspectives, Zira DeFries, Richard C. Friedman, and Ruth Corn, eds. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 313-329.
- Fleischer, Michael L. The Encyclopedia of Comic Book Heroes, Volume 1: Batman. (New York: Collier Books, 1976).
- The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told. (Reprints of stories used). (New York: Warner Books, 1988).
- Koontz, Elizabeth. "Teenagers Speak Out About Sex," in Today's Education--NEA Journal, (March 1969) 58: 23-26.
- McAllister, Matthew Paul. "Cultural Argument and Organizational Constraint in the Comic Book Industry," in Journal of Communication, 40 (Winter 1990) 1: 55-71.
- Miller, Frank with Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley. Batman: The Dark Knight Returns. (New York: Warner Books, 1986).
- and David Mazzucchelli with Richmond Lewis. Batman: Year One. (New York: Warner Books, 1988).
- Reiss, Ira L. "Premarital Sexual Standards," in The Individual, Sex, and Society, Carlfred B. Broderick and Jessie Bernard, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 109-118.
- Spees, Emil R. "College Students' Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors, 1974-1985: A Review of the Literature," in Journal of College Student Personnel, (March 1987) 28: 135-40.
- Vaz, Mark Cotta. Tales of the Dark Knight. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989).