



The Batman
vs.
Superman

And the winner is...



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THESIS:

Batman is a more interesting character than Superman.

OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction
- II. Summary of Characters
- III. Differences in Crime-Fighting Methodology
- IV. Why ~~do~~ these Heroes do what they do?
- V. Vigilantism vs. Godliness
 - A. Bernie Goetz
 - B. God, the gods
- VI. Humanizing Factors
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use small letters as indicated

John - you develop your thesis fully and make Batman and Superman very much alive. Your case for Batman is convincing. P.S. I like them both!

John - It was a pleasure having you in my class. Good luck offer your leave here. You are a good writer.

Comic books are a realm of literature that does not get much respect. However, I have been a lifelong fan of comics and take them just as seriously as Tolstoy or Fitzgerald. In this paper, therefore, I shall show the reader why I believe the Batman is a more interesting character than Superman. I intend to explore such topics as: their origin stories, their powers and abilities, their personal relationships.

Superman's first exploits were published in June, 1938, while Batman's first appearance came in May, 1939. Both origin stories were short, and were later added to or changed dramatically. For the purposes of comparison, I will compare the Superman origin found in The Man of Steel miniseries (1986), with the Batman origin story The Man Who Falls from Secret Origins of the World's Greatest Super-Heroes (1989). These are the most current retellings of how each fictional hero came to be.

Superman is a man from the planet Krypton, sent by his scientist parents to Earth before that planet exploded. Superman has the powers he does ~~due~~ ^{because of} the effect of our sun's solar radiation on his alien body. His body is impervious to any physical challenge, and he has heightened vision powers, such as X-ray vision (to see through things), heat vision (which can burn), and microscopic vision (to enable him to see things down to a molecular level). He also has the power of flight, awesome strength, super-lungs, and a computer-fast intellect with a near-photographic memory. In the power department, Superman is definitely stocked.

The Batman, in contrast, seems like a ninety-pound weakling. While an athlete of superb conditioning, he can be hit by bullets. He is a martial arts

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master, having learned the healing arts as well as fighting techniques from several Asian masters. In addition, he has trained with the world's best detectives and used their knowledge to supplant his experience, becoming the greatest detective of them all. Batman has the advantage of being a millionaire, with the cash to back up his training with the latest and best technology, database information, and influence that money can buy. The Batman was motivated to become a crimefighter after the shooting death of his parents before his eyes. At that point he dedicated his life to bringing criminals to justice.

However, the Batman works outside the system. In his "secret identity" of Bruce Wayne, the Batman had originally intended to be an operative of the FBI, but left training after six weeks of paper-pushing (MWF, 8). He realized he could not operate within the written legal code but within the larger and less defined guidelines of his own sense of good and evil. He adopted the guise of a bat to strike fear in the hearts of criminals, for they "are a cowardly and superstitious lot" (MWF, 13). The Batman works with police, though--specifically one Commissioner Gordon, chief of police. While government does not officially condone Batman's actions, Gordon, acting for the ultimate good, helps out the Batman whenever he can.

Superman, however, is the ultimate symbol of apple-pie Americana. Rather than being feared by the populace, they take to him and his Kansas-bred morality. In one of his first public appearances, he is deputized by the mayor of Metropolis to arrest Lex Luthor (MoS, 4:18). Because of his openness and devotion to the letter of the law, Superman is instantly accepted.

Batman's abilities are plausible. After all, there are many martial arts masters in this world--is it hard to imagine one of them out for vengeance against criminals? But can one easily accept the idea of an extra-powered being that looks exactly like a human? It is quite a stretch.

I find Batman to be more compelling because Batman is the true character. It is through Batman that the man named Bruce Wayne is able to express his true feelings and act on his base desire: to right the wrong that happened to him as an eight-year-old boy. Bruce Wayne, playboy philanthropist, is just a facade, a persona to use in the daylight. But, it is "his Batman identity, and the call of the night, that would rule his being.... It is then that he can drop all pretense, then that he can stalk his prey." (Tales of the Dark Knight, 132)

Superman, on the other hand, is an identity created for Clark Kent to help out without anyone knowing who he is. The idea of Superman is born, simply, out of necessity, not out of any driving force to inspire fear or respect. Superman's Earthly parents help him design and make his costume (MoS 1.27-28)--Batman's parents are taken from him, and drive him to embrace the Batman identity.

An excellent way to underscore the difference between the two heroes is to examine their first meeting. The following text is taken from Man of Steel vol. 3; Batman is speaking to Superman:

You've made quite a name for yourself since you went public, Superman. There's no doubt in anyone's mind that you're the

number one defender of this planet of ours. But defending a planet and cleaning up a city are two very different things. You've got the underworld pretty much cowed in Metropolis, Superman. But Gotham City isn't your turf. It requires a different approach (9).

And later on, when the two capture a mad criminal:

Superman: Strange... I hate to see her break down like that... I...can't help but feel sorry for her.

Batman: You think I don't? She's not a real criminal. Not like the kind of gutter-slime I've dedicated myself to destroying. She's just a frail, human psyche.... Yes, I feel sorry for her, Superman. But I feel more sorry for her victims (20).

The quoted text serves to underscore my point: Batman is driven, indeed, almost obsessed with, bringing criminals to justice. Sure, Superman thinks that he can make a difference, and he goes around saving lives left and right. But Batman is different. A quote^{ation} from his origin story should suffice.

"Some great violence has marked you. It gives you your genius for combat technique. Unless you are very lucky, it will destroy you" (MWE, 20).

Superman lost his biological parents and his planet of origin, yet he had a normal childhood, raised by people who loved him as their own. The separation from his alien parents is not even discovered until he is a mature, emotionally capable adult. Contrast this to Bruce Wayne's loss of parents at age eight, a loss that starts him on a search to make things right,

a loss that creates a Batman who can make things right.

I have established that it is easier to empathize with the character of the Batman. Now, I'd like to take up a fundamental sociological difference between the two characters which I call vigilantism versus godliness.

Batman is, plainly and simply, a vigilante. He operates outside of the law, using intimidation and fear to achieve results, e.g., the capture of criminals. Then, he hands them over to the police to serve a sentence.

Superman, however, won't invade the privacy of an individual, won't touch the ambassador who has diplomatic immunity, won't work against the crooked politician. He follows the system. Just watch out, however, for the criminals speeding away in the getaway car, boat, or plane. Inevitably, that vehicle ends up being stopped in mid-operation while Superman flies it to the steps of the police station and leads the bad guys to their cells, probably reading them their Miranda rights as he goes, basking in the admiration of the police. Batman leaves beaten, unconscious criminals tied in a heap, sometimes with a Bat-symbol attached to the rope. The cops never quite know what to make of Batman's unexpected presents. Due process begins then, after the Batman has shown the criminals what a frustrated man's justice can be like.

You can see this attitude of frustration in our everyday lives. We all deal with it, and we like to see a man, even if he is fictional, be able to best the frustration sometimes. Look at the real-life example of Bernhard Goetz, the so-called "Subway Gunman[★]". This is a simple, plain man, who took his protection into his own hands because he was sick of living in fear. He fired upon several youths who were attempting to mug him with a sharpened

screwdriver. They found a man who was listening to a more basic sense of justice, a man who was protecting his own. It is unfortunate that one of the youths was paralyzed in the incident, but I cannot feel sorry for him. They were doing wrong, and they must accept the consequences. Public opinion bears me out, and the courts also agree. When brought to trial, Bernie Goetz was convicted only on a minor count, that of illegal possession of a weapon. No one doubted that he was acting on the side of self-defense, meting out a punishment to those who tried to infringe on his right to exist peacefully. When you try to take away a man's peace, he can react forcefully, as Bernhard Goetz did.

In a society where a Bernie Goetz exists, the Batman can be understood more readily than a Superman who can change the course of mighty rivers all by himself. Batman is Bernie Goetz in tights and a cape, and I think every one of us can identify with him in that respect.

Contrast that with God in a blue, red, and yellow suit, with an "S" emblazoned on his chest. Superman does not fear bullets, or fists, or knives. He is affected only by the radioactive material kryptonite, deadly pieces of his native planet; these pieces are rare enough on Earth that Superman can be considered virtually unstoppable. In the previously quoted section from Man of Steel, even Batman acknowledges that Superman is the "number one defender of this planet" (9). What fun is it to read about a god? Even the ancients knew this. Greek and Roman mythology is filled with stories of gods, but they are flawed gods--gods with tempers, gods who break rules, gods who make secret deals. Mythological gods even procreate with humans.

Superman seems too perfect, with none of these problems or situations. He does not give in to feelings of desire, nor does he ever lose his temper.

Batman, on the other hand, possesses fully-charged emotions. When Jason Todd, the boy who was Robin, is murdered by the Joker, the reader can see the Batman's restraint as he struggles against his desire to kill the Joker (Batman, 429:6). And yes, Batman has married and even fathered a child, a child he is unaware of but nonetheless responsible for (Son of the Demon, 76). With the Batman, we can read about a hero who still is saddled with the foibles of everyday life, but is primarily driven to avenge the horrible wrong committed against him, even while struggle with the limits of his humanity.

The greatest humanizing factor in the Batman mythos is Robin. Batman needs a Robin. The first Robin was Dick Grayson, a circus performer who Batman takes under his wing when a mob boss murders his parents. Dick is motivated by the same horrible circumstances as the Batman: witnessing the murder of his parents. In time, Dick grows up and strikes out on his own. Batman operated alone for a while, then met a new youth, Jason Todd, from a poor section of Gotham City. It turns out that Jason's father was killed by a super-villain, and Batman trains him as Robin. Jason gets killed by the Joker, while trying to save his biological mother's life. Batman, as mentioned before, is torn by Jason's death. He becomes moody, and begins to act without restraint. He meets Tim Moore, a boy who was present at the original Robin's parents' death, and who has figured out the secret identities of Batman and the Robins. Tim's mother is killed by terrorists, and his father paralyzed and comatose. Tim ends up being taken on as the newest

Robin, but only after Batman is satisfied that he can train him well, and thus avoid another death like Jason's.

This summary is necessary to point out the similarities between the Robins, and also to trace Batman's changing attitude towards his junior partners. With Robin #1, things are carefree and fighting crime is an adventure. When Robin #1 strikes out on his own, Batman pulls in Robin #2, who gets yelled at as much as he gets to fight crime. Robin #2 doesn't listen, and gets killed. Robin #3 appears because he is concerned about Batman's behavior and genuinely cares about the Batman. The Batman realizes he needs another human being with him to temper his obsessive aggression, and agrees to take on Robin #3.

The Batcave is not only the Batman's place of operations, but also a classroom for Robin, a space to be shared with him. Superman, in contrast, has a "Fortress of Solitude," a place to get away from others. Superman has a cast of supporting characters, but none who are necessary for him to do his job. He can do it all--what would he need help for?

I enjoy the character of Superman. The previous pages are not meant to deny the popularity of a character that has endured for fifty-two years. This comparison of the two heroes is meant to show the reader why Batman captivates my imagination. It is fun to read about a man who can fly. When I read the exploits of Batman, however, I'm reading about a man who has suffered enormously and who has never, or will ever recover; I'm reading about a man who could be me.

When the Batman as a character was originally being developed, it was

intended that he be a more "human" Superman (TotDK, 25). Anyone could be the Batman. Any one of us could have our parents taken from us, and we could all work really hard to be great athletes, and we could fight crime with a vengeance. Not everyone could rocket from Krypton as a baby. This unapproachability, this lack of commiseration with Superman makes Batman the more interesting character. I quote ^{ation} from Dick Giordano's introduction to The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told:

We can all understand Bruce's grief, we can all understand his frustration at having to watch helplessly as the lives of the most important people in his young life are taken uselessly, and we all can understand his need to do something to avenge the death of his parents. The origin of the Batman is grounded, therefore, in emotion...

The Batman does what he does for himself, for his needs. We're not sure we wouldn't try to do the same thing as the Batman does, if we watched our parents being murdered (8).

I believe that every one of us has an empathy with that scared little boy who just wants to make things right again. That empathy, quite simply, is why I like the Batman best.

Good for you! Keep liking Batman. I used to - as a boy - watch a comic about the year 2000 - which is not so far off now! → Hash Gordon!
AB

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Comic book classics hold steady against superheroes

By GEORGE BASLER
Staff Writer

After an 18-year absence, *Classics Illustrated*, reappeared in January to try to draw on the past and attract a new generation of readers.

The colorful abridgments of the world's great literature — which sold an estimated 1 billion copies from 1941 to 1972 — came back on the market in book stores in the Southern Tier and across the county, updated with better colors, paper and bindings.

Now, nearly a year later, the new *Classics Illustrated* are holding their own in terms of sales as *Moby Dick* and *Hamlet* fight it out with *X-Men* and other superheroes for comic book buyers, local book sellers said.

The new illustrated books aren't a smash hit, but they're not a flop either, sellers said. "I wouldn't say sales are outstanding, but they're not poor. The books move. If they weren't selling, we would have gotten rid of them," said Michele Baker, manager of Coles bookstore in the Oakdale Mall.

The store carries most of the *Classic Illustrated* titles and sold 12 of the books last week, Baker said.

Walden bookstore in the Oakdale Mall and Fat Cat Books in Johnson City still have the new comic books on their shelves, as well.

"They're a moderate seller, not wildly popu-

UPDATE

A year ago, comic book interpretations of classic literature entered a market filled with superheroes. Update finds that although the comic book classics haven't hit any bestseller lists, they are holding their own.

lar," said Brian Perry, owner of Fat Cat Books, which specializes in comics, games and science fiction. The store, on average, sells 15 to 20 copies of each new *Classic Illustrated* comic a week, compared to 200 copies of its most popular comic books, he said.

On the plus side, sales of *Classic Illustrated* titles are holding steady, and there is some demand for back issues, Perry said. He was concerned their sales would plummet once the hype surrounding the re-introduction disappeared. That hasn't happened, he said.

The re-introduction of *Classics Illustrated* was the joint venture of First Publishing Co. of Chicago and Berkley Publishing Group of New York.

A year into the venture, the companies are satisfied with the project, said Wade Roberts, editorial director of First Publishing Co. Sales are holding steady, with the press run for each book averaging 100,000 copies.

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Sellers rate comics —

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This is miniscule compared to the 25 million a month that the original *Classics Illustrated* sold at the height of their popularity. But, the new publishers are not aiming for that wide a market, Roberts said. Unlike the old books that featured formulaic artwork, the new books are drawn by leading illustrators and artists, and the illustrations' style change from book to book.

The new books also carry a steeper price tag than the *Classics* of yore, \$3.95 per issue, compared to 25 cents in the old days.

"By all indications, I've seen we're doing well," Roberts said. The companies plan to expand production to two titles a month in January, from the present one a month.

"The one complaint we've had from book sellers is that they're not sure

how to display the books," Roberts said. The companies are trying to solve this by shipping special display racks to stores, he said.

First Publishing is also exploring the possibility of producing "study guides" to go with illustrated books, so they can be used in the classroom, Roberts said.

Barry Dutton, a book seller at Walden, said he has collected all of the new *Classics Illustrated* books. Some are good; some are disappointing, he said.

Walden sells the illustrated books mostly to comic books buyers, he said. Perry, at Fat Cat Books, agreed that his store is selling the new comics to the typical comic book buyers, namely teen-age males, not to a new audience.

Hamlet has been the bestseller at Coles books, Baker said. "Kids can't understand the real book so they buy the comic," she said.