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Rationale for The Dark Knight Returns

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The Dark Knight Returns

By Frank Miller

Published by DC Comics (1986)

Review & Rationale by Chris Snellgrove, Auburn University

Grade Level and Audience

The Dark Knight Returns is recommended for advanced high school senior classes as well as freshman college classes.

Plot Summary

The story of *The Dark Knight Returns* takes place in Gotham City's future, where Batman has retired his superhero persona and lives restlessly as Bruce Wayne. This retirement has lasted ten years by the beginning of the comic, and as a result, Gotham City has been overrun by a violent gang known only as the Mutants. Wayne dons the cape and cowl again in response to the horrors of gang violence, and soon intervenes when Harvey Dent (the criminal formerly known as Two-Face), his face finally healed through complicated surgeries funded by Wayne, returns to his criminal ways.

The returned Batman then attempts to end the threat of The Mutants by fighting their leader in open combat. However, the 56-year old Batman is nearly killed, and only escapes with his life thanks to a 13-year old girl named Carrie Kelley. She soon becomes the new Robin, and with her help (along with a final favor from soon-to-be retired Police Commissioner James Gordon) he frees the Mutant leader from prison, breaking many of his bones in a public rematch that is witnessed by the violent gang.

The gang (now calling themselves The Sons of Batman) uses their violent and often lethal methods to fight crime within Gotham City. Meanwhile, the new police commissioner issues an arrest warrant for Batman, even as the Joker murders a TV audiencemember during an interview intended to prove his sanity. He escapes to a circus where he is defeated by Batman and Robin; the former breaks the Joker's neck, but is unable to kill him. The Joker, however, twists his own neck, killing himself and framing Batman as a murderer.

Meanwhile, Superman (the last officially-sanctioned superhero, since he is willing to serve as a tool of the American government) stops a nuclear warhead from Russia intended for America. The blast weakens Superman, and its electromagnetic pulse blacks out most of America, including Gotham. Leading the Sons of Batman on horseback, Batman keeps the city safe. However, the president claims that Batman is out of control, and sends Superman to stop him.

With the help of governmental fugitive Green Arrow (complete with a synthetic Kryptonite arrow), Batman defeats Superman, but soon succumbs to a heart attack. However, it is revealed that Batman faked his own death so that he could begin training the Sons of Batman into a crime fighting army in an underground cave. This army is intended to eventually carry on the self-styled war on crime that Batman had begun.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

The Dark Knight Returns is rife with political commentary and satire, going so far as to include a president highly resembling Ronald Reagan in a dystopian future. It analyzes well the central theme that there is not a perfect overlap between legality and justice: as Batman reminds Superman, “sure, we’re criminals... we’ve always been criminals. We have to be criminals” (Miller 135). In this sense, Miller offers a controversial defense of fascism, an expansion of Batman’s earlier implication that the rights afforded to criminals do not serve to protect society: “You’ve got rights. Lots of rights. Sometimes I count them just to make myself feel crazy” (Miller 45).

All of this provides fodder for critical discussion, of course, ranging from what distinction remains (if any) between Batman and the criminals he battles, and to the dangers of a figure such as Superman rather literally following “the American way” (regardless of its direction). Miller broaches ethical conundrums as well, explicating that many criminals such as The Joker would either not exist or not perpetuate crime in the absence of a figure such as Batman. Miller challenges the reader to determine whether, morally speaking, Batman has saved more lives than he has inadvertently injured and/or killed.

Possible Objections

Perhaps the most common objection to this text is its arguably glorification of violence. In embracing the fascistic tropes underlying the texts, Miller explicitly argues that the violence of individuals such as Batman has more of an impact on reducing criminal activity than more peaceful, legal means. The targets of the violence may cause objection as well: in addition to fighting the “superstitious and cowardly lot” that comprise his foes, Batman injures police officers, endangers a 13-year old child, and is willing to kill a defenseless Joker (whom he has already mutilated with a batarang).

Of course, the violence is not limited to Batman. The Mutants cause much mayhem, including murdering the mayor, placing a grenade into a woman’s purse, cutting a taxi passenger’s face, and so on. Before Batman actively tries to reform them, the Sons of Batman are also responsible for extremist violence, including cutting the hands from would-be robbers. It should be noted that most of the more gruesome violence is implied, rather than shown. However, it may still prove disturbing to some readers.

Ironically, political objections to *The Dark Knight Returns* are likely to come from both sides of the aisle: while liberals will be horrified (perhaps rightly so) by the outright embrace of fascism and violence on the part of the titular hero, conservatives will likely be taken aback at the naked blame placed on Ronald Reagan (and, by extension, Republicans) on American expansionism, warmongering, and the repurposing of superheroes in order to support a national agenda.

There are also brief implications of sex/sexuality, as with Selena Kyle (formerly Catwoman) running an escort service that the Joker exploits to gain control of an Army general. There is also mild profanity throughout the work, mostly limited to words such as “damn,” “hell,” and “shit.” All told, the language is not worse than a standard PG-13 film.

Deleted:

Ideas for Implementation

One of the obvious gateways into Batman for many students will be Christopher Nolan’s recent Batman movies—Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, and the upcoming The Dark Knight Rises. It would be helpful to begin with a discussion regarding these movies, and the political issues surrounding them. For instance, Batman’s decision to spy on half of Gotham’s citizens in The Dark Knight clearly paralleled concerns about surveillance on private citizens through programs such as The Patriot Act, and this broached larger issues of justice versus ethics concerning the heroism of Batman. And while the plotline for The Dark Knight Rises has been kept well hidden, recent trailers show that the antagonists (Tom Hardy’s Bane and Anne Hathaway’s Catwoman) echo many of the sentiments from the Occupy Wall Street protests, complete with a battle against Batman on Wall Street itself. This, too, broaches larger philosophical concerns regarding the nature of justice, implying that while Batman may have strived to fight for everyone, he has effectively created a city optimized for wealthy white people—a city for those few like him, rather than everyone else.

While that may seem like a large sidebar discussion to the comic itself, it helps to highlight the relevance of comic characters in general (and comics in particular) as tools to illuminate politics and social issues. It also helps to highlight some of the malleable irony of Batman’s character as a reflection of changing politics: while Miller firmly claims that the vigilante ethos of Batman requires a kind of ultra-right wing fascism, he is poised as a clear counterpoint to a Reagan-esque president whose concerns over foreign affairs (primarily with Russia) has kept him from handling domestic issues such as gang violence. Nolan’s The Dark Knight goes on to explicate that the domestic surveillance Batman engages in (again, undeniably echoing the Bush-era politics) is morally wrong, and something that may corrupt Batman. This notion of corruption is intriguing, however, because it would not make him like his enemies—like the chaotic forces of Two Face and the Joker. Rather, it would make him like his allies, which would go against the ethos of the antihero vigilante.

The Dark Knight Returns, then, provides an excellent opportunity to explore the allure of the vigilante hero, as well as the notion of the antihero. While Batman has always been a vigilante character, his image was often softened over time: he is portrayed as a friend to the police, and later having a teenage sidekick in the form of the colorful Robin. This reached its apex with the classic Batman and Robin TV show, starring Adam West and Burt Ward. While undeniably entertaining, this show reduced the character (originally conceived as frightening enough to intimidate the “cowardly and superstitious lot” of the criminal underworld) into pure camp, a reputation that many credit Miller with dispelling. This was done by bringing Batman back into the antihero fold, one that was more to the tastes of the 80’s popular culture consumer. Batman struggles against the police, battles Superman, and crosses lines with violence (he uses a gun to subdue one gang member, unnecessarily breaks many of the Mutant Leader’s bones, and throws a batarang into the Joker’s eye). Even the inevitable new Robin is present in part because the old one died. All in all, Miller’s work is a masterstroke of returning Batman to his grim, vigilante/antihero state. Why, though, is this appealing?

This can form the crux of many great discussions with your class. One of the often-unspoken conceits of vigilante characters is that they simply would not be necessary if conventional forms, arbiters, and organizations of justice worked better. Miller portrays Batman in opposition to police, presidents, and superheroes in order to articulate (with admittedly little subtlety) that the codified and quantified forms of justice eventually bear little resemblance to what they are built around. Batman posits that he is the necessary force that is able to circumvent a legal system that coddles felons. Of course, his ultimate conceit is that he knows what justice is—and that our system of checks and balances concerning the law has created an environment of corruption, cronyism, and criminality. This is a blunt take on Batman (and vigilantes in general) that many students may not have consciously thought about previously: Batman and other vigilante figures are diametrically opposed to the American justice system, in so far as they find it impotent and unable to protect citizens and punish criminals.

Miller uses Superman as an example of illustrating that there is not much choice for the so-called superhero. Superman, ever-striving to fight for “the American way,” becomes a tool used to fight America’s foreign wars, a tool whose actions nearly precipitate nuclear war within the comic. If one wishes to avoid that corruption, one must be opposed to the country itself. Students should be encouraged to puzzle out the seeming paradox of Miller’s Batman—he essentially fights against America in order to save its citizens from their own country. However, the text is unclear if he is simply a reactionary force (a fascist counterbalance to what he perceives as a soft approach to criminals) or able to generate alternatives to his country’s corruption...short of getting young men and women to enlist in his army, of course.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

If the class is focusing on either graphic novels, *Dark Knight Returns* serves well alongside Alan Moore's acclaimed *Watchmen*. *Watchmen* shares much of Miller's cynicism of 80's America (including conflict with Russia), but dispenses with the kind of Great Man hero-worship that Miller engages in. Rather, Moore opens the door to the more psychoanalytical view of so-called "superheroes"—that anyone who puts on a mask rather than a badge or other public service uniform is, psychologically speaking, damaged goods. The obvious discussion that flows from this would center on 1) whether Miller's Batman is truly deranged and 2) whether his effectiveness at restoring order to a chaotic city implies a deeper critique of society...that its madness can only be understood (and ultimately cured) by a madman.

In a World Literature class, *Dark Knight Returns* would best be situated as part of a larger curriculum and discussion of America's fascination with the vigilante. I would recommend beginning with James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, focusing on how Natty Bumppo represented America's fascination (soon to expand and evolve) with the outsider hero, later transformed into the more familiar archetype of the cowboy. World War I, however, began an interesting schism between literature and culture: war propaganda (particularly through film) focused on the national hero being a patriotic, self-sacrificial soldier, even as American writers (perhaps most notably Ernest Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*) wrote of the horror and banality of war. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* helps illustrate the intersection of culture and literature: the masses are made very aware of the horror and futility of war, even as 60's counterculture paints returning American soldiers as enemies to those at home and abroad. Only then do we have the arrival of the modern antihero, one who is often situated against failed systems of authority.

Miller's Batman is very much part of this: the character speaks to our collective desire to force the world into making sense. However, in that attempt, vigilantes (and readers, through our tacit support of their actions) take on the same authoritarian role that they are nominally rebelling against, which brings students back to the natural discussion of where the vigilante's authority derives from, and why it has a more credible ethos than the authority of others (if, in fact, that is truly the case). Thus, Batman encapsulates the perfect paradox of vigilante justice: just as Batman's vigilantism never truly satisfied his compulsive need to bring criminals to justice, the act of vigilantism cannot satisfy those seeking to escape the trappings of authority because it involves becoming an authority. Batman attempts to rhetorically sidestep this paradox by noting that "we've always been criminals," but this admission has certainly not shaken his belief that he has the right to impose his will upon other criminals.