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Dual Identity and Trauma in Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*

Comics and comic books have always been in the controversy spotlight. There have been debates ranging from the target audience to the content in comics since the dawn of their creation in the 1920s and 30s. One of the most controversial of those comics revolved around a certain caped crusader who resembled a bat. Making his debut appearance in 1939 in *Action Comics #27* Batman was a figure shrouded in mystery but, despite having no origin story until ????, Batman quickly became one of the most famous superheroes. Someone reading the old Batman comics today would have a hard time relating to his early character, however, because the Batman comics originally included more violence; the beloved dark avenger had no problem shooting and killing his enemies. In fact, it was not until the appearance of Robin, Batman’s trusty kid sidekick, that there was any talk of Batman not killing or using a gun to stop his enemies (Hatfield Feb. 16). An in-house decree was sent down by the publishers at Detective Comics (DC) that there would be no more guns and no more killing for Batman (Hatfield Feb. 16).

Yet, Batman has remained a staple character in DC comics for over 70 years. That is because the character himself, his duel personality and tragic origin, have remained constant. There are those, fans and critics alike, who argue that the duality of Bruce Wayne and Batman is the result of two personalities residing in one body. However, there is substantial evidence to argue against this, presented in Frank Miller’s graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*. Focusing on this text and using the theories of trauma and Sigmund Freud’s doppelgänger, I argue that the traumatic past of Bruce Wayne resulted in the manifestation of his inner demons in the form of Batman.

The trauma of the past triggers the latent binary between Bruce and Batman. Eric Meyer conducted a study on the effects of trauma in war veterans, focusing on their personalities before going to war, and found that the degree of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that a veteran suffers depends on the amount of anger, avoidance of feelings, and depression a veteran had before fighting lead to a higher risk of PTSD. Bruce/Batman is not the traditional war veteran, like soldiers from World War 2 or Vietnam, but Bruce grew up in Gotham, where a war against crime and corruption was constantly being fought. While his childhood innocence was not stripped of him until the death of his parents, Bruce had previous trauma from falling down a well and encountering a hissing “damned thing” (1.11). His parents being killed by a robber in an alley was the trigger moment for Bruce’s PTSD.

In Book One of the text, Bruce states that Batman emerged because of the death of his parents, to deal with the trauma and the nonsensical aspect of why his parents had to die (??). Alfred saw Bruce’s need for justice when he read Poe's "The Purloined Letter" to Bruce as a child (4.37). Before drifting off to sleep, Bruce "so frightfully FORMAL, his dark eyes FLASHING, asked---no, DEMANDED 'the killer was CAUGHT and PUNISHED'. Alfred assured him that the villain had met justice" (4.37). Any anger he felt at his parent’s death, any depression or sadness, magnified his PTSD. Arguing that the ego is fractured by “suddenness and unexpectedness”, Michael Brody reveals how the child Bruce needed to find a way to heal and cope with his trauma; in this case, Brody shows how Anna Freud’s theory on external trauma becoming internal resulted in the identity of Batman (172).

This goes back to the beginning of Miller's work, when he has Bruce talk about the past. Bruce has kept Batman buried inside for ten years, saying he will never let him out again in remembrance of Jason Todd, the previous Robin. The comparison between Batman and himself is a meta-textual reference to Robert Louis Stevenson's novel and how the two men, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, constantly fought over dominance. This struggle is seen within the first five pages of the graphic novel. Bruce talks about Batman as if he were a separate entity living inside him, making comments about how "it's been forty years since he was born...born here. Once again he's brought me back- to show me how little has changed" (1.5) and how 'he' must not be allowed to surface again.

When Batman makes his first appearance in the graphic novel it is an unleashing of the self. After the bat crashed through the window in Book One Bruce says “I am reborn”, not “I am taken over” or “I lost to Batman”. Jekyll loses to Hyde. He had to destroy himself in order to keep Hyde submissive because he was trying to control a separate person, not his own self. . Batman becomes what Sigmund Freud refers to as the doppelgänger. The doppelgänger is “???” (Freud). The fact that Bruce’s doppelgänger is a bat is because of the trauma in his past. The bat is the “connection [between] ‘evil—devil—vampire—bat’” (Reichstein 345). Just as Jekyll though he was fighting the evil of Hyde for dominance, so too did Bruce think he was fighting this demon. But, the so-called demon is Bruce’s way of coping with his PTSD. His trauma led to the creation of Batman; he took the form that put fear into himself as a child, a form that for centuries has been referred to as a devil, a demon, and used it to continue the fight his parents could not finish. Yet, Bruce also refers to the bat as “the fiercest survivor- the purest warrior” (1.11). Not only is this symbol of duality meant to strike fear into the hearts of the people but Bruce, as a child of six, recognized that this creature was a survivor. He drew on this knowledge when creating his alter ego. Brody reveals how “Batman’s symptoms, personality fragmenting, and recovery, are all consistent with psychiatric trauma literature” (177). Therefore, Batman and Bruce are parts of one whole person. This also means that Bruce can never escape from needing Batman, or vice versa.   
     This duality can be seen when Bruce finally puts the Batman suit back on, 'freeing' Batman from his 'cage'. Bruce's inner thoughts appear to readers in blue, revealing how he feels younger and stronger. He has no aches from old age and can fight like a younger person, which Bruce attributed to the fact that Batman is 'younger' than himself. When he takes off the costume, however, he returns to that old man, with even Alfred making comments on how Bruce would be the new wheelchair hero. Bruce maintained control for so long but going back to Gotham, to Crime Alley, and seeing the corruption that made him want to fight in the first place gives Batman more power- it is his time to take control and 'shine' in the darkness of Gotham. Batman being the physical manifestation of Bruce's inner demons creates a connection between the two figures; a connection that is more than just 'I am one. You are the other'.

In their essay “Under the Mask: How Any Person Can Become Batman” Sarah K. Donovan and Nicholas P. Richardson use Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault to argue that everything known about identity and the self is a social construction. They disagree with the idea that Bruce and Batman are one person on the basis that each is performing a separate identity- rich heir and dark caped crusader. They “reject the idea that there is some true self underneath Wayne or Batman that connects them” (129). However, they negate their own arguments in their paper. Bruce is a performance, so it is argued, because he conforms to the ideology of his society and hides his 'true' self. But what he hides is his inner demons- just as Jekyll hid all of his inner demons from his high society world. To argue that identity is a performance Donovan and Richardson use Louis Althusser’s concept of the ideology, which is defined by the majority of people being unaware they are following the rules placed on them by society (131). However, in order to understand that another form was needed to fight crime, Bruce had to be aware of the ideologies of Gotham. Donovan and Richardson even state, on the very next page, that “Batman lost faith in the rules of society. As an adult Wayne decided to stop being afraid and create his own order” (132). By being aware of social constructs Bruce knew he needed another identity that could put fear into the corrupt and could fight in all levels of social class. He knew he had to embrace his darker side in order to pass as a shadow in the night and keep his promise to his parents; Bruce had to separate his self. Brue Wayne, the heir to the Wayne fortune, could not and did not strike fear into the corrupt Gotham citizens; Batman could frighten the immoral inhabitants and remain anonymous.

The intrinsic bond between these two seemingly separate characters is further reinforced through the inclusion of Harvey Dent in the text. Bruce/Batman also constantly compares himself to Harvey Dent, who is released from Arkham Asylum with a clean bill of health. Dr. Bartholomew Wolper, Dent’s psychiatrist, claims that Dent is the "ideological doppelgänger" to Batman (2.10). There is a connection between the darkness in the men, which plays off the "reflection" statement that Batman makes at the end of Book One. Bruce defends the release of Dent, saying "we must believe that our private demons can be defeated" (1.9). This Jekyll and Hyde mentality plays with Dent too, in more obvious ways since his face is literally two different representations of his self. The news reports on Dent describe him as "believ[ing] his disfiguration revealed a hidden, evil side to his nature" (1.8). Dent already accepts that he is more than just the good Harvey Dent or the bad Two-Face. It is Bruce who fights against his own identity. Bruce wants to believe in Dent to prove to himself that he can conquer 'Batman'. One of the last lines in Book One is Batman telling Dent "I see a reflection" when asked if he can see Dent's true nature (1.47).

By the end of the novel Bruce comes to understand that Batman is not a demon to be exorcised from his body but a piece of his own soul that must be accepted in order for him to make good on his promise to his parents. On the very last page of the very last book in Miller’s work one can see the acceptance Bruce has given to Batman. He is no longer plagued demon dreams. He is his whole self. Understanding that Batman is part of who he is Bruce leads a group of young kids to the Batcave: “We have years—as many as we need…years—to train and study and plan…here, in the endless cave, far past the burnt remains of a crimefighter whose time has passed…it begins here—an army—to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers” (4.47). He understands that the world he knew no longer needs Batman to fight for it. But it does still need heroes.

Bruce dealt with the past trauma by dividing his self: the rich Wayne heir who conformed the ideology of Gotham society and the dark vigilante who fought against its corruption. He took the bat, a figure of fear and strength, and transformed his self to fit into the necessary ideology for fighting the depravity in Gotham. For ten years he tried to deny that part of his self that needed to be embraced and almost went mad. But there is a difference between the duality of Bruce/Batman and the others. Dr. Jekyll could not live if Mr. Hyde gained control over the body they both resided in. Harvey Dent embraced his darker side, giving it more control rather than finding the balance to live in Gotham’s world. By accepting his whole self Bruce is able to concentrate on his purpose- keeping a young boy’s promise to his beloved parents.

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