

LONELY GODS:

*THE PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN AND HOMOSEXUALS
IN AMERICAN SUPERHERO COMIC BOOKS*

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Senior Honors Thesis

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“A hypodermic injection of sex and murder.”
Introduction / Notes on Sources

Adults and academics oftentimes dismiss comic books as worthless "pulp literature". Superhero comics in particular are often characterized as nothing more than slick magazines full of science-fiction themed violence.¹ Writing in 1940, literary critic Sterling North vilified comic books as a “hypodermic injection of sex and murder” and felt parents who allowed their children to read comics were guilty of criminal negligence.² For many years scholars dismissed comic books as having no potential for research whatsoever. The primary and some would argue only purpose of superhero comic books is to entertain. The crux of this argument stems from the lasting perception that comic books are a medium intended solely for children, and therefore should not address current cultural or social issues in any meaningful way. Close examination of the content of superhero comic books, however, reveals a wealth of cultural commentary. Superhero adventures are almost always set in contemporary American society (when they are on Earth. Many superhero adventures take place in outer space, other dimensions, or alternate universes.) Superman protects the American city of Metropolis. Batman and Robin patrol the American city of Gotham. The X-Men's mansion is located in Westchester, New York. With these modern settings, comic books reveal the social standards and gender expectations of the society they were written for. The authors of these comics were all products of their culture, and the comic book medium allowed them to express the values of their time.

Beyond the contemporary settings of many superhero comics, the comics also have begun to discuss social issues. These social issues bring in new minority characters into the comic books. As will be seen in both sections on women and homosexuals, modern portrayals of these characters are introduced alongside other social commentary. These changing depictions demonstrate how the

¹ The phrase "superhero" is actually a trademark owned jointly by the two major American comic publishers, Marvel Entertainment Group and DC Comics Inc. Thus, any discussion of "superheroes" must limit itself to characters created and owned by these two companies.

² Amy Kiste Nyberg, Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 4.

changing social climate of the United States from the 1940s to the current day is reflected in the mass media.

Due to the massive amount of source material written on these characters and comic book series, a discussion of the limitations of this study becomes necessary. The discussion of women in comic books limits itself to studying just Batman. Since every comic book published today includes female characters and heroes, attempting to tackle the entire genre would be a fool's errand at best. This study therefore focuses on how the character Batman interacts with women, and how women are portrayed in the Batman comics. The "Batman comics" refer primarily to the two major Batman series, Detective Comics and Batman, which began publishing in 1937 and 1940 respectively. These are not the only two series where Batman appears. No less than ten ongoing series about the "Batman Family" of characters are in publication, including Detective Comics, Batman, Robin, and Superman/Batman.³ Batman additionally appears in other "team-based" ongoing comic series such as Justice League of America and JLA: Classified. Beyond this, Batman is often featured in several single "one-shot" comic stories and miniseries published each month. Finally, several ongoing series published in the past were subsequently canceled, including World's Finest Comics, The Brave and the Bold, Batman: Shadow of the Bat, Batgirl, and others.⁴ Adding all these series together results in well over 3,000

³ Other current ongoing Batman series include Batman Confidential, which began publishing in December 2006; The Batman Strikes, a series based on the animated television show; Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight, which began publishing in 1989 and has over 200 issues; and All Star Batman and Robin, the Boy Wonder which began publishing in 2005. Several other ongoing series focus on Batman's friends and fellow heroes, including Nightwing about the current adventures of the first Robin; Birds of Prey, about a female group of heroes associated with Batman; and Catwoman, about Batman's primary female antagonist.

⁴ World's Finest Comics began publishing in 1941 as a digest style comic that included several stories about different heroes, including both Batman and Superman. In 1956 the format was reduced to just one story per issue, and this led to Batman and Superman teaming up in issue #71. This concept lasted through 1986 when the series was canceled after publishing a total of 323 comics. The Brave and the Bold was also a digest style comic that did not originally feature Batman when it began in 1955. However, around issue #50 the series implemented a new "team-up" style, resulting in Batman teaming up with a lesser known superhero or villain each issue. This series lasted 200 issues, publishing through 1983. Batman: Shadow of the Bat began in 1992 and ran for 95 issues until its cancellation in 2000. Batgirl focused on the third Batgirl, Cassandra Cain, and ran for 73 issues from 2000 through 2006. Several other canceled Batman series exist: The Joker was intended to be an ongoing series about Batman's arch-villain when it began in 1975, but it only lasted for nine issues. More recent examples include Harley Quinn, a series about the Joker's female sidekick which lasted for 38 issues from 2000 to 2003; and Anarky, a short-lived series about minor Batman villain which only published 8 issues in 1999.

Batman themed comics.⁵

This deluge of stories is only compounded by the rarity of some of these comics. The early appearances of Batman from the 1930s and 1940s are prized collectors items and sell at auctions for thousands of dollars. Batman's publisher DC Comics made some reprints of these comics, but these collections limit themselves to specific issues or eras. Thus, a strange situation occurs where the oldest and rarest Batman comics are reprinted and are readily available for study, but the less-rare comics from the 1950s and 1960s are not.⁶ However, these “silver age” comics are still rare and are prohibitively expensive, which creates gaps in the source material from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These gaps are partially mitigated by the existence of online comic archives. No official digital archive for DC Comics exists and Universities with large comic collections such as the University of Michigan have not digitized them. However, private individuals unaffiliated with DC Comics have put many of the older Batman issues online in digital form. The primary online archive is www.aibq.com, intended as a service for comic collectors to study a specific comic issue before buying. Even though this archive was meant for collectors, the website provides an excellent base for scholarly or historical research into comic books. While this archive is still in its infancy and resides on somewhat shaky legal ground, it nevertheless includes the first 325 issues of Batman and the complete run of World's

⁵ I achieved this total by adding together the number of published issues as of December 2006 from well-known Batman series. They are as follows: Detective Comics: 800; Batman: 660; Brave and the Bold: 140; World's Finest Comics: 323; Legends of the Dark Knight: 204; Batman: Shadow of the Bat: 95; Gotham Knights: 74; Batman Family (1975 series): 20; Azrael: 100; Batgirl: 73; Nightwing: 120; Robin: 157; Catwoman (1st series): 94; Catwoman (2nd series): 55; Gotham Central: 40; Huntress (1st series): 19; and Harley Quinn: 38. This results in 3,012 issues. This does not include any of Batman's appearances in team series such as Justice League, nor any of the other team series such as Outsiders or Teen Titans. It also does not count any of the miniseries or single issues, which are numerous. Thus, the true number of Batman comics is certainly closer to 3,500.

⁶ Many collections of Batman comics exist. There have been several attempts to collect all the early issues of Detective Comics and Batman in printed form. The most successful of these, the DC Archive Editions, published 6 volumes titled the Batman Archives that collected the Batman stories from Detective Comics issues 27 through 135. This series ends in the year 1948, and seems to have permanently halted. More recent attempts to reprint the early comics include the Batman Chronicles which aims to collect every single appearance of Batman in chronological order, but as of early 2007 this series has printed only two slim volumes. Several other collections focusing on the 1950s and 1960s do exist, such as Batman in the Fifties and Batman in the Sixties. These collections are very limited, since they contain only a handful of stories deemed strange or unique enough for inclusion. Other collections with material from this time period are also limited, such as Batman: The Dynamic Duo Archives which only includes comics from 1964 and 1965.

Finest Comics, including advertisements and fan letters. This archive unfortunately does not have the early issues of Detective Comics yet, but this failure is partially mitigated by the existence of several print collections that include the first 120 appearances of Batman in Detective Comics. Although the primary comic book sources are limited, enough issues are available to minimize any chronological gaps in the materials.

The subsequent section on the treatment of homosexuals in comics has the opposite trend. Due to various restrictions placed on the content of comic books ⁷, open portrayals of homosexual characters did not occur until well into the 1980s and these characters are extremely limited in number even today. Thus the characters of both Marvel Comics and DC Comics can be addressed in a concise study. The issues which do feature homosexual characters are well known and in some cases infamous, but are still easily available at a reasonable cost, mainly because they were published fairly recently. As a result, most of the issues that include homosexual characters are easily obtained and create a more complete body of source material than is possible when discussing women. Another valuable resource in these comics are the fan letters. In most modern comics a page is devoted to printing letters written about previous issues. These letters become particularly interesting whenever the topic of homosexuality is discussed and provide an excellent demonstration of the contemporary controversies surrounding gay characters in comic books. These letters are unfortunately not present in many of the earlier Batman issues and those letters which were printed rarely discussed the status of women. ⁸

When all these sources are taken together they present an excellent overview of both women

⁷ Editorial codes regulated the content of comic books during the 1940s and 1950s, and severely limited the content that was allowed in comics. In the mid 1950s a coalition of the major comic book publishers created an industry-wide Comics Code in response to public criticism. These codes were similar to Hays Code of Hollywood, limiting depictions of sex and violence. The roles of women were limited by these codes which stressed the importance of family and marriage. Homosexuals, however, were completely banished by these codes until the late 1980s.

⁸ There are several reasons for the lack of mention of women in early fan letters. One major cause is simply demographics. Superhero comics were marketed to children until the 1980s, and because of this the majority of the fan letters published in the early issues of Batman are written by children who did not comment on social issues, instead writing about how awesome they thought Batman and Robin were. Another cause is that children believed these stereotypical portrayals of women to be normal. Furthermore, fan letters always pass through the hands of the comic editors before they are printed, and these editors could have simply omitted to print any letters that were critical of their female characters.

and homosexuals in American superhero comic books. This body of material is augmented with research into the time periods which the comics were written. From 1940 through the current day, superhero comic books often reflect the social trends of American society. Examination of these comic book characters and stories provides a compelling look into the popular media. Both female and homosexual characters follow similar trends in the comics. Both groups are often stereotyped to cultural views of what they should act like, and in many instances are simply excluded from the comics altogether. The comic books tell stories of superheroic might and moral perfection, where the heroes become living gods to protect the world. In this type of universe, minority groups like women and gays find little acceptance. Isolated and shunted aside, the stories of these lonely gods provide a unique insight into the American culture that created them.



**“No Place For a Girl.”
Women in Batman Comics**

Almost seventy years have passed since the character Bruce Wayne first donned his dark costume and became The Batman in the twenty-seventh issue of Detective Comics. Since then, the character of Batman has gone through numerous changes to make his never-ending quest for justice resonate with each new generation of readers. Many of these alterations are cosmetic; new authors primarily change Batman's costume and update his many gadgets in order to reflect the technology of the time. However, alterations are also made to Batman's character and how he reacts to the social changes occurring within American society. This can specifically be seen within Batman's interactions with women. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, women in the Batman comics were treated in extremely chauvinistic ways and were seen more as objects to be rescued rather than figures of any substance. Society's view of women began to change during the 1960s and 1970s along with the rise of feminist organizations and ideas. Batman comics reflected this with the introduction of new female characters and more modern storylines. This trend came with setbacks, however; as the Batman comics became progressively darker in tone and subject matter through the 1980s, feminine portrayals became darker and more brutal as well. While the comics introduced many inspiring characterizations of women during and after the 1990s, some chauvinistic depictions continue to exist. These changing and occasionally contradictory views of women are not quirks of the comic book authors, but rather indicate the effects which the changing attitudes of American society exert on a comic figure such as Batman.

Although introduced in 1939, the character of Batman really began to develop during the next decade. The year 1940 in particular introduced many of the primary characters which are still around, including The Joker, Robin, and Catwoman.⁹ Batman's early interactions with Catwoman demonstrate

⁹ The characters of Catwoman and the Joker were both introduced in the first issue of the comic series Batman (Spring 1940). Catwoman's first appearance is collected in Catwoman: Nine Lives of a Feline Fatale (New York: DC Comics, 2004), and the Joker's first appearance is in The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told (New York: DC Comics, 1988). The

the attitudes towards women during this period. Batman's very first encounter with "The Cat" was in the first issue of Batman, published in the Spring of 1940.¹⁰ After he foiled her plan to steal a diamond, he tore away her disguise, shouting "Quiet or Papa spank!"¹¹ In addition to Batman's condescending comment, The Cat tried to seduce Batman right there on the spot, saying "Why don't you partner with me! You and I together," as she wrapped her arms around him. This use of her feminine wiles on Batman appeared to be somewhat successful, as in subsequent panels Batman allowed her to escape before finally concluding, "She still has lovely eyes! Maybe I'll bump into her again sometime."¹² Batman clearly viewed Catwoman more as a pretty face than as a serious opponent. This kept with the expected gender roles of the early 1940s. Although the numbers of American women working in professional fields slowly increased throughout the 1920s and 1930s, three quarters of them were employed in female dominated fields such as teaching or nursing.¹³ It was also expected that a woman's place should be at the home, especially if she had a husband. Subsequent appearances of Catwoman play on this perception. While Catwoman was a strong female villain who managed to continuously evade Batman and the law, she was still written foremost as a woman who was always in danger of falling in love with her male nemesis. In the sixth issue of World's Finest Comics, Catwoman listened to Batman giving a speech on the radio. "What a man!" she commented to herself. "Sometimes I want to kiss him ... and sometimes I want to scratch his eyes out!"¹⁴ Female characters like Catwoman channel other ideas prevalent within the 1940s. One popular concept used within film noir of the late 30s and early 40s was the idea of a "femme fatale" or villain seductress, a woman who

first character to go by the name of Robin (Dick Grayson) was introduced in Detective Comics issue 38 (April 1940), and was billed on the cover as "the find of 1940". This issue is collected in Batman Archives vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990).

10 In Catwoman's first appearance, she was referred to only as "The Cat" and had not yet adopted her cat outfit, instead wearing a lengthy green dress. This would change within two issues, and by Batman #2 she is referred to as "Catwoman".

11 "The Cat" in Batman issue 1 (Spring 1940), reprinted in Catwoman: Nine Lives of a Feline Fatale Ed. Anton Kawasaki (DC Comics, 2004), p. 21.

12 Ibid., p. 22.

13 Steven McLaughlin, et al. The Changing Lives of American Women. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 22. TEXT IS COPYRIGHT

14 "The Secret of Bruce Wayne!" in World's Finest Comics issue 6 (DC Comics, Summer 1942), p. 86.

used her beauty and wiles to ensnare heroic men and force them into dangerous situations. This is obvious with Catwoman who attempted to seduce Batman and lead him away from the heroic path into a life of crime. Other, more minor female characters also created dangers for Batman. These included not just villains, but girlfriends of Bruce Wayne.

In 1948 the comics introduced the new character Vicki Vale into Bruce Wayne's life. While Bruce Wayne did have a few girlfriends through the early years of the 1940s, these characters were all rather minor and soon disappeared from the comics. Vicki Vale was very different, however, and this was apparent immediately from her first appearance in Batman #49. Instead of being a movie star or heiress, Vicki was a magazine photographer who wanted a feature of Bruce Wayne for her magazine. Nor did she immediately swoon in his presence, instead only consenting to go on a date with him to get his picture.¹⁵ Vicki Vale was also the first woman to discover Bruce Wayne is really Batman. She arrived at this conclusion not by happening upon the fact by mere chance, but rather through using her own intelligence and detective skills. However, both she and Batman's reactions indicate how women were treated in comics during the 1940s. Instead of openly confronting Bruce Wayne and telling him she knew his secret identity, Vicki Vale transformed into a sinister figure who went to any length to get additional proof so she could expose him in the pages of her news magazine. Likewise, when Batman realized Vicki's intentions he did not trust her with his identity but rather sabotaged her plan and convinced Vicki she was wrong. Any woman, regardless of whether she was not a villain, would only create chaos for Batman's superhero lifestyle. Even Vicki Vale's first appearance in Batman was heralded as "A new menace in Batman's life".¹⁶

While Vicki Vale was not always threatening to expose Bruce Wayne as Batman, she only served as a liability in Batman's fight against crime. In the very next issue of Batman, Vicki joined Batman and Robin in order to take some photos for an article about crime. The three were soon

¹⁵ "The Scoop of the Century!" in Batman issue 49 (DC Comics, October/November 1948), p. 15.

¹⁶ Batman 49, p. 14.

captured by gang members who were searching for a stash of money hidden by another criminal. The gang leader, Stilts Tyler, proceeded to torture Batman into revealing the location of the money, but had little success. Having failed to make Batman talk, Stilts decided to use Vicki as a hostage, locking her in a room filled with deadly gas as Batman watched. Batman refused to give in, and quickly escaped and freed Vicki. “Batman, I hate you!” Vicki yelled as he cut her bonds. “I might have died, but you didn't care!” Batman explained that Vicki was never in any actual danger. “That 'deadly' gas was only air. If there were really deadly gas pouring into that room, that fly buzzing around would have dropped and that plant would have drooped! So stop pouting!”¹⁷ In these early appearances Vicki proved herself to be only a liability for Batman. This reflected cultural ideas that women should not insinuate themselves into the work of men.

In a 1936 Gallup Poll, an overwhelming 82 percent of Americans felt women should not have a job if their husbands were employed.¹⁸ This demographic was due mainly to a depression era sentiment that women took jobs from men who needed them.¹⁹ This belief made the situation for workers even worse. “Separate labor markets ensured that only rarely did women and men compete for the same jobs. The consequence of firing women was not that men gained access to jobs but simply that more households faced destruction.”²⁰ With America's entrance into World War II, the idea of women working rapidly changed in response to the war effort. Although the amount of women working increased during World War II, the idea that women and wives should be subordinate to men still lingered, and working women were paid much less than working men in the same career. “After the war, women in better paying jobs were laid off, and when they returned to the labor force they were hired in traditionally female occupations. The result was that after the war, women were still paid less

17 “Lights – Camera – Crime!” in *Batman* issue 50 (DC Comics, December/January 1948), p. 9.

18 McLaughlin, p. 23.

19 Sara M. Evans, *Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), p. 201.

20 Evans, p. 202.

than men.”²¹ The Batman comics of the 1940s clearly show that women were valued less than men, as Batman dominated over all of the women he met during his adventures. In another story published in World's Finest Comics from 1941, Batman was called to solve the mystery of a man who developed amnesia after nearly being murdered. Recruiting the man's nurse, Batman took her to an abandoned mansion looking for clues. When the nurse finally asked what he is looking for Batman replied: “Just like a woman, always asking questions. Be patient.”²² After the adventure concluded, the nurse was still confused about what happened, leaving Batman to easily explain to her how he solved the case. All of these early interactions with female characters, from Catwoman and Vicki Vale to minor characters such as this nurse, demonstrate a condescending paternalism. Batman was always stronger and smarter than any woman he came across. Even an intelligent, independent career woman like Vicki Vale was never able to outwit Batman in any of her schemes to learn his secret identity.

Through the 1950s the stereotypical view of women as frail and less important than men continued. When Batman was not traveling into outer space or battling monsters,²³ he came across new characters such as Batwoman. Batwoman first appeared in 1956 in Detective Comics issue 233 as the woman Kathy Kane. Kane was a circus performer and motorcycle stunt rider who decided to follow in Batman's footsteps as a costumed crime fighter and began to intrude on his territory. Even though she ended up saving Batman's life twice during the story, she still conformed to feminine stereotypes of the era. Instead of a utility belt like Batman, Batwoman carried a “shoulder-bag utility-case” that was clearly a purse.²⁴ Additionally, her arsenal included feminine things such as a perfume bottle of tear gas, charm bracelet handcuffs, and makeup powder.²⁵ Even though Batwoman initially

²¹ McLaughlin, p. 24-26.

²² “The Man Who Couldn't Remember!” in World's Finest Comics issue 2 (DC Comics, Summer 1941), p. 93.

²³ In the 1950s comics such as Superman introduced science fiction elements in order to add novelty and gain more readers. The sales of Batman comics were flagging at the time, and so Batman gained a science fiction makeover to increase his popularity.

²⁴ “The Batwoman,” in Detective Comics issue 233 (July 1956), reprinted in Batman in the Fifties, eds. Whitney Ellsworth and Jack Schiff (DC Comics, 2002), p. 74.

²⁵ “The Batwoman” in Batman in the Fifties, p. 71-73.

seems a strong character, she clearly was intended only to be a minor player always dominated by Batman. She was never meant to be an empowering character, as demonstrated by a section of the DC Comics Editorial Policy Code dealing with issues of sex. “The inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance, and should be drawn realistically, without exaggeration of feminine physical qualities.”²⁶ Batman himself specifically discouraged Batwoman from helping him. In her first appearance, Batwoman arrived at a criminal hideout before Batman. “Might have known she'd dash into danger!” Batman remarked to himself. Confronting Batwoman, Batman argued that she should immediately leave. “This is no place for a girl – please let me handle it!”²⁷

While Batwoman may have been secondary in importance, she was aggressively promoted as a new rival and potential love interest for Batman. From February 1957 through November 1963 Batwoman appeared in the comics 34 times, sometimes appearing in the same series several months in a row.²⁸ Through all her appearances during the 1950s and 1960s Batwoman was always written as being weaker than Batman both physically and intellectually. In her second appearance in Batman issue 105, Kathy Kane dressed up as Batwoman to attend a masquerade, and discovered Robin about to capture the criminal Curt Briggs. Confronting Robin, Batwoman was immediately convinced that Briggs was really Batman, a supposition aided by Curt Briggs having amnesia. Robin played along, since the real Batman was disabled with a sprained ankle. “If Kathy saw Batman now and Bruce Wayne later – with a bad ankle – she'd be bound to suspect they're the same person!” Robin decided.²⁹ Not only did Batwoman consistently demonstrate faulty logic, but neither Batman nor Robin trusted a mere woman with their secret identities. Batwoman continued to make several blunders through this

²⁶ Batman in the Fifties, p. 5.

²⁷ “The Batwoman” in Batman in the Fifties, p. 76.

²⁸ This number was achieved by adding up the appearances of Batwoman in Batman, Detective Comics, and World's Finest Comics. Within this time period Batwoman appeared in Batman 20 times, Detective Comics 11 times, and World's Finest Comics 3 times. She also appeared several times before and after this period. The total number of her appearances prior to 1965 were 39.^{SHT}

²⁹ “The Challenge of Batwoman” in Batman issue 105 (DC Comics, February 1957), p. 4.

issue, going so far to take the false Batman to her own Batcave and teach him all her crime fighting techniques.³⁰ Briggs soon gained back his memory and decided to exploit Batwoman's error. "Batman and Robin must have some private reason for stringing Batwoman along this way," Briggs thought to himself, "So I'll pretend I've still got amnesia – and lead her and the kid right into a trap!"³¹ After she walked into this trap and the real Batman arrived just in time to capture Briggs, Batwoman realized she was outclassed and decided to retire once more. "It was fun while it lasted." she sighed, putting her costume away. She later visited Bruce Wayne, stuck at home with his sprained ankle. When he quickly explained he sprained it while dancing, Kathy muttered, "I'll bet if Batman ever got an injury, it would be because he was doing something heroic! I wish you could be more like him, Bruce!" In response, Bruce Wayne only smiled towards the reader, amused that Kathy wasn't clever enough to discover the truth.³²

Kathy Kane returned as Batwoman in Batman issue 116, commenting to Batman that "a lady has a right to change her mind" when he mentioned her previous retirement.³³ In this issue Kane did display some intelligence as she infiltrated a criminal enterprise in an elaborate disguise. The criminals, however, soon learned of her disguise and she was once more caught in a trap, forcing Batman to rescue her yet again. After the action subsided, Batman berated her for trying to help him fight crime. "Don't you know crime-fighting is too dangerous for a girl?" he asked. "Sometimes, I wish your secret identity would be exposed so you'd have to quit being Batwoman!"³⁴ The nuisance of Batwoman continued in Batman issue 119, when she and Vicki Vale took part in a contest to see who was more talented, the prize being a date with Batman. "Those jealous girls are sure to get themselves in trouble, trying to out-do each other," Robin commented as both women set out.³⁵ His words proved

30 Batman 105, p. 5.

31 Batman 105, p. 7.

32 Batman 105, p. 10.

33 "Batwoman's New Identity" in Batman issue 116, (DC Comics, June 1958), p. 16.

34 Batman 116, p. 19.

35 "The Arch-Rivals of Gotham City" in Batman issue 119 (DC Comics, October 1958), p. 2.

prophetic for both Vicki Vale and Batwoman were quickly captured by criminals, forcing Batman to rush in and save them. Undeterred, Vicki and Batwoman continued their contest, each hoping to capture the notorious gangster Moose Malloy. Both women ran into each other while infiltrating Malloy's hideout, and they were instantly captured once more. They did manage to help capture the criminal as Batman rescued them, and the contest was declared a tie. Accordingly, Batwoman and Vicki went on a double date with a bewildered Batman, while Robin commented from the sidelines: “Poor Batman! They won – but he lost!”³⁶

Batwoman's status as an inferior woman was most clearly stated in the 1959 story “The Marriage of Batman and Batwoman”. In this tale, Dick Grayson fell asleep and dreamed of a possible future where Bruce Wayne and Kathy Kane married. Soon after their marriage, Bruce Wayne told Kathy he was Batman in an attempt to stop her from interfering in their cases any longer. “Maybe now Kathy will realize Bruce doesn't want his wife to endanger her life, and she'll be content to be just a normal housewife,” Robin thought to himself as he watched the scene.³⁷ This plan failed, and Kathy immediately tried to join Batman and Robin as they set out for their next adventure. “Now look, Kathy – one crime-fighter in the family is enough!” Batman rebuked her attempt to help him. “A wife's place is in the home!” Kathy retorted: “A wife's place is with her husband!”³⁸ Batman forcibly prevented Kathy from joining them as Batwoman by hiding her costume, and set out with Robin. Midway through their adventure, however, the duo were joined by Batwoman wearing one of Batman's costumes. As the three of them fought various criminals, Batwoman's cowl was torn away and revealed her secret identity to the world. Batwoman could only sob helplessly as the criminals immediately connected her to Bruce Wayne, who they quickly realized was Batman. “Kathy, do you know what you've done?” Robin shrieked. “You've wrecked Batman's career! He's finished, Kathy –

³⁶ Batman 119, p. 8.

³⁷ “The Marriage of Batman and Batwoman!” in Batman issue 122 (DC Comics, March 1959), p. 27.

³⁸ Batman 122, p. 27.

and it's all your fault because you wouldn't listen!"³⁹

Nearly all of Batwoman's adventures followed a similar pattern. She was always presented as being inferior to Batman, regardless of her own merits. When Batwoman displayed too much strength such as when she disobeyed an order from Batman, she was forced to stop being a superhero and return to her status as a normal, inferior woman. When she refused to do this and became Batwoman once more, the consequences were immediate and dire. Several times Batwoman was captured by criminals, and in Robin's dream from Batman 122, her disobedience ruined Batman's life. The only time where Batwoman actually captured criminals was when she directly aided Batman and fought by his side. Even then Batman and Robin both tried to prevent her from helping them, always reinforcing the point that she was a helpless woman who could easily be captured or killed.

This view of women as being unimportant and inferior was not limited to just new characters like Batwoman, but also extended to the character Catwoman who had existed as a Batman villain since the early 1940s. Even though Catwoman still made occasional appearances during this decade, she was no longer dangerous and at some points even resembled a damsel in distress. In a story from 1951 entitled "The Secret Life of the Catwoman", Batman rescued Catwoman after she was hit on the head by a falling brick. Back in the Batcave, the heroes learned Catwoman suffered from amnesia for many years and was actually an airline stewardess.⁴⁰ The accident having restored her memory, Catwoman decided she no longer wanted to be a criminal and worked as an undercover agent for Batman. Once the adventure concluded Catwoman quit, saying: "That's that! From now on, I'm plain Selina Kyle! The Catwoman has retired!"⁴¹ Even though she previously acted as a strong female character, Catwoman gave up her dominant role and decided to be just a normal woman who no longer faced off against Batman. After 1954 Catwoman completely disappeared from the comics to make way

³⁹ Batman 122, p. 29.

⁴⁰ "The Secret Life of the Catwoman," in Batman issue 62 (DC Comics, December 1950/January 1951), reprinted in Batman in the Fifties, p. 105-106.

⁴¹ "The Secret Life of the Catwoman," in Batman in the Fifties, p. 113.

for more feminine characters like Batwoman, and did not reappear for thirteen years.

The presentations of Batwoman and Catwoman kept with the traditional idea that women should stay at home in order to be wives, even through this idea began to change during the 1950s. After World War II many women lost the jobs they took over for the absent men, and some of these women began to reenter the workforce during the late 1940s, continuing into the 1950s. “By 1952, 10.4 million wives had jobs, 2 million more than at the peak of World War II.”⁴² Although more married women worked than before, public attitudes still prevailed that a wife should stay at home and raise a family, instead of working, or in Catwoman's case, becoming a dominant villain. During this period, the idea of a strong, self-sufficient woman became almost abhorrent, and the term “feminism” was treated like a dirty word, with many female organizations such as the National League of Women Voters making efforts to distance themselves from that ideology.⁴³ This public view of women as second class citizens remained unchanged in the Batman comics until well into the next decade.

As the 1960s began, the Batman comics continued the lighthearted tones introduced in the 1950s, and Batman still routinely came up against superhuman monsters and creatures from other dimensions. Stereotypical feminine characters such as Batwoman still made appearances for several years into this decade before they were removed.⁴⁴ Batwoman even gained a new partner, her niece Batgirl. Kathy Kane's niece Betty Kane first appeared in April 1961, and quickly discovered her aunt was Batwoman. After her first outing as Batgirl, Kathy Kane forbade Betty from ever doing it again. Betty refused, and a perplexed Batwoman went to Batman for help. Batman suggested stalling Betty

⁴² McLaughlin, p. 24.

⁴³ Kathleen C. Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 13.

⁴⁴ The science fiction elements that permeated the Batman comics of the 1950s and 1960s were cut out of the comics in 1964 by editor Julius Schwartz, in order to return to a more realistic tone. The characters of Batwoman and the first Batgirl were included in these cuts, to make way for more realistic characters such as the second Batgirl, Barbara Gordon. These elements, however, were only removed in the comic series *Batman* and *Detective Comics*. They remained in other series featuring Batman such as *World's Finest Comics* and *The Brave and the Bold* well into the 1980s. This also removed only the science fiction elements. Horror elements, such as ghosts and vampires, remained in the main Batman series through the 1970s.

by having her undergo a lengthy “training” period.⁴⁵ Betty soon tired of this, and decided to sneak out one night to help the three crime fighters track down the crime boss King Cobra. Batgirl discovered King Cobra's hideout and decided to apprehend the heavily armed criminals on her own. As expected, King Cobra and his cohorts immediately captured her.⁴⁶ Managing to attract Batman's attention, Batgirl broke free of the criminals and aided in their arrest. “Not bad – for a girl!” Robin commented to her during the massive fight. Afterwards, Betty admitted her error in trying to be a crime fighter like her aunt. “I learned my lesson! I'll never be so foolish again!” she proclaimed. Batwoman, however, had other plans. “You proved you can be a good crime fighter! Maybe we *will* go out as a team someday!” Betty responded enthusiastically, revealing another interest. “I can hardly wait! And perhaps Robin and I can work on a case together, too! Well, Robin – is that a date?” Robin could only gulp in horror as both Batman and Batwoman smiled in the background.⁴⁷

Betty returned two issues later in Batman issue 141, and quickly captured the crime boss The Moth. Humiliated at being defeated by a young girl, The Moth swore revenge and immediately broke out of prison. Fearing Betty was in danger, Batman and Batwoman decided to distract her by having Robin take her to a dance while they captured The Moth.⁴⁸ The Moth, however, captured both Batman and Batwoman, forcing Robin and Batgirl to rescue them. After the heroes were rescued and the criminals captured, Batman explained why they kept Batgirl away. Realizing they only wanted to keep her out of danger, Batgirl rushed into Robin's arms, kissing him as she proclaimed “Oh, Robin – now I know you really care for me!” Not to be outdone, Batwoman tried a similar tactic. “Perhaps Batgirl's approach is the best way for a gal to get her guy! Come here Batman...” Now it was Batman's turn to stare in horror as Robin and Batgirl laughed in the background.⁴⁹

45 “Bat-Girl!” in Batman issue 139 (DC Comics, April 1961), p. 27.

46 Batman 139, p. 29.

47 Batman 139, p. 31.

48 “Batwoman's Junior Partner” in Batman issue 141 (DC Comics, August 1961), p. 26.

49 Batman 141, p. 30.

Even though views of women began to change during this period, Batwoman and Batgirl still stuck to the stereotypical portrayal of women, and they were more concerned with trying to woo Batman and Robin rather than fight crime. In the story “Bat-Mite meets Bat-Girl” from 1961, the entire plot revolved around Batgirl trying to make Robin fall in love with her. Instead of patrolling the city like they were supposed to, once Batgirl was alone with Robin she immediately embraced him, saying “Working with you is what I've always dreamed of! Oh, Robin, I think you're just adorable!”⁵⁰ This story culminated when Batgirl tried to orchestrate an elaborate plot where she pretended to get abducted by criminals in order to force Robin to save her. The plan backfired when Batgirl actually was abducted by criminals. Once Robin rescued the helpless Bat-girl, she concluded the adventure by saying, “Oh, Robin, then it's all right for me to kiss you now!”, and proceeded to do just that.⁵¹

Batgirl's attempts at wooing Robin were encouraged by her aunt who did the same with Batman. By 1963 however, Batman and Robin began to finally acquiesce to a possible romance with the heroines. In February 1963 the four crime fighters teamed up once again in the story “Prisoner of Three Worlds”. In this adventure they confronted an alien criminal who zapped the four of them with a “fantastic machine”.⁵² Robin and Batgirl were instantly transported to a different dimension, but Batman and Batwoman remained behind. Since they were standing on a steel manhole cover when they were hit by the machine's ray, only their “energy force” was transported to the alien dimension.⁵³ While their energy-being counterparts fought for survival, Batman and Batwoman became too weak to even fight. Realizing that they would soon die if not reunited with their energy force, Batman and Batwoman held each other close as they waited for the end. “Oh, Batman! Everything's over for us!” Batwoman wailed. “Hold me close! If I must die, I want it to be in your arms! Oh Batman, you know

⁵⁰ “Bat-Mite Meets the Bat-Girl”, in Batman issue 144 (DC Comics, December 1961), reprinted in Batman in the Sixties ed. Rick Taylor, (DC Comics, 1999), p. 17.

⁵¹ Batman in the Sixties, p. 24.

⁵² “Prisoner of Three Worlds” in Batman issue 153 (DC Comics, February 1963), p. 7

⁵³ Batman 153, p. 10.

I love you – Dying wouldn't be so bad, if I knew you loved me too.”⁵⁴ Batwoman's words warmed Batman's heart, and he replied: “I ... I do love you! I never wanted to admit it before ...” His confession cut off as Batwoman immediately kissed him.⁵⁵ Likewise Batgirl and Robin kissed each other while trapped in the alien dimension.⁵⁶ After the adventure concluded and Batman and Batwoman were reunited with their energy, Batgirl and Robin walked off to discuss their relationship. This reminded Batwoman of Batman's earlier words. “I did hear you admit that you loved me!” Batwoman confronted Batman. “I've always managed to escape death-traps – all kinds of danger! But how do I get out of this?” Batman thought before quickly coming up with an answer. “Well – er – Batwoman – I thought we were going to die – and I wanted to make your last moment's happy ones!”⁵⁷ Both Batwoman and the reader were left wondering if his earlier declaration of love was sincere or not.

The characters' new relationships did not last very long, and the two women soon returned to their old methods. Later in the same year the four crime fighters teamed up once more to fight the villains Clayface and the Joker. Continuing her old tactics, Batgirl once again needed saving by Robin. After he rescued her halfway through the story, Batgirl ran into Robin's arms, saying “Oh, Robin, I'm afraid you'll just have to hold me! I'm still so shaky after fighting Clayface, and you're so strong!” Instead of reprimanding her niece for being so obsessed with a boy, Batwoman congratulated her. “Smart girl! She knows how to play up to a man! Maybe I should take a tip from her, eh, Batman?”⁵⁸ One high point of this story occurred when Batwoman and Batgirl captured the Joker without any help from their male counterparts.⁵⁹ Although this scene displayed a glimpse of more proactive female characters, Batwoman and Batgirl proved too stereotypical to last much longer and completely disappeared from the comics in 1964. In their place, more realistic characters and plot lines were

54 Batman 153, p. 15.

55 Batman 153, p. 16.

56 Batman 153, p. 20.

57 Batman 153, p. 25.

58 “The Great Clayface-Joker Feud”, in Batman issue 159 (DC Comics, November 1963), p. 8.

59 Batman 159, p. 16.

introduced into the comics to make Batman's story lines more relevant to the current social issues of the day. "Conceptually, the Batman of the fifties would vanish almost overnight in 1964 ... Batman would once again have to evolve to keep pace with the rapidly transforming times and audience."⁶⁰

Attitudes towards women began to dramatically change during the 1960s, and DC Comics had no choice but to change as well. In 1961 John F. Kennedy established the Commission on the Status of Women, and this group "documented the second class position of women."⁶¹ Two years later Betty Friedan wrote her seminal work The Feminine Mystique. This work gave voice to the dissatisfaction many suburban wives and mothers had in their lives. "It is no longer possible to ... dismiss the desperation of so many American women," Friedan wrote. "This is not what being a woman means, no matter what the experts say The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill Women who think it will be solved by more money, a bigger house, a second car, moving to a better suburb, often discover it gets worse."⁶² Friedan attributed the cause of this unhappiness to a "mystique" that equated femininity with domesticity. "The new mystique makes the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women It simply makes ... cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children ... into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live."⁶³ Friedan's work ignited the "second wave" of feminism, and women began to rapidly make gains for themselves. This started in 1963 with the passage of the Equal Pay Act and continued through 1964 with the signing of the Civil Rights Act. Section Seven of this act prohibited the discrimination of race and sex in employment.⁶⁴ In addition to legislation several women's organizations were created during this time, including the Equal Employment Opportunity commission and the National Organization for Women in 1966.⁶⁵ Reflecting this change in attitudes towards

⁶⁰ Batman in the Fifties, pg 9.

⁶¹ Lucille Duberman, Gender and Sex in Society (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), p. 17.

⁶² Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (1963, reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), p. 71.

⁶³ Friedan, p. 92.

⁶⁴ Berkeley, pg xix.

⁶⁵ Evans, p. 276-277.

women, new characters began to be introduced into the Batman comics.

One of the major characters introduced during the 1960s was the second character to take the name Batgirl, first appearing in 1967. This incarnation of Batgirl was a completely new character with no connection to Betty Kane from the early 1960s.⁶⁶ Unlike the previous female heroes, this new Batgirl enjoyed a greater connection to Batman. Barbara Gordon was not a random female who became enamored of Batman like Kathy Kane, but rather was the daughter of Police Commissioner Jim Gordon who worked closely with Batman. Furthermore, this Batgirl rarely needed rescuing, as she was extremely athletic and knew several styles of combat including judo and karate.⁶⁷ This character is a direct result of the women's movement taking place during the mid 1960s. Entering into the year 1967, new portrayals of women forced mainstream American media to change. Batgirl portrayed a modern, liberated American woman and her actions in the comics reflected this. Instead of always staying by the male hero's side, Batgirl patrolled alone on her motorcycle and easily handled any criminals she found. In an early appearance Batgirl managed to capture several gang members, earning compliments from Robin in the process.⁶⁸ In this same issue she teamed up with Robin to save Batman's life after he contracted a disease. Although Batman initially resented their pairing, by the end of the issue he realized their true intentions and accepted Batgirl's help.⁶⁹

This sudden change in the status of Batman's female allies reflected the changing social values of the 1960s, and Batman was not the only comic to radically change. DC made an attempt to introduce several other culturally relevant comic books to augment the changes being made in their superhero line. One outcome of this was the famous Green Lantern/Green Arrow comics which had

⁶⁶ After 1964 Betty Kane stopped appearing in the Batman comics, and her character was never mentioned ever again. Batwoman likewise had no more appearances until the 1970s. She briefly returned in the Batman Family series and even teamed up with Batgirl, but she was killed by assassins in Detective Comics issue 485 in 1979.

⁶⁷ "Batgirl Breaks Up the Dynamic Duo!" in Detective Comics issue 369 (November 1967), reprinted in Batman in the Sixties, p. 127.

⁶⁸ Batman in the Sixties, p. 131.

⁶⁹ Batman in the Sixties, p. 136.

the two titular heroes team up.⁷⁰ While this concept only lasted fourteen issues, the two heroes dealt with contemporary subjects such as overpopulation, racism, and sexism in American society.⁷¹ The author of this series, Dennis O'Neal, defended his inclusion of socially conscious material in a comic book. "I cherished the notion that the stories might be socially useful: I could hope they might awaken youngsters, eight or nine-year-olds, to the world's dilemmas and these children, given such an early start, might be able to find solutions in their maturity. My generation, and my father's, had grown up ignorant; my son's didn't have to."⁷² Other comic publishers such as Marvel continued this trend by creating new series like Fantastic Four, which focused on the family dynamic amongst the team members.⁷³

Additional changes in the portrayal of women occurred within Batman comics during this time. The character of Catwoman who was almost completely absent from the comics of the late 1950s and early 1960s, returned as a villain. She initially returned as a rival to Batgirl, trying to win Batman's affection, and tried to threaten him into marrying her. From an issue in 1967, she says to Batman: "Do I go back to my crime career as Catwoman, or are you going to say the magic words 'Marry Me' and make me the happiest girl in the world?"⁷⁴ Catwoman was presented as a nemesis to Batgirl and, while she is a strong character, does have many flaws. Chief amongst these is her overriding love for Batman, as she pursued him to the exclusion of all other activities. It is clear that her character is not seen as strong or very independent by the writers and editors of this period, from her continued use of many gimmicky plot devices. These include fighting criminals with cat-themed makeup utensils

⁷⁰ The series known today as Green Lantern/Green Arrow was actually not its own series, but rather a creative change implemented on the already-running Green Lantern series. The change occurred when author Denny O'Neil began to write for the series, and decided to introduce the character Green Arrow as a foil to Green Lantern. Green Arrow, a radical socialist, constantly argued with Green Lantern, who was politically and socially conservative. This new setup began in Green Lantern issue 76 and lasted through issue 89 before returning to more conventional "superhero" stories.

⁷¹ Amy Kiste Nyberg, Seal of Approval: the History of the Comics Code, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 139.

⁷² Dennis O'Neal, "Introduction" in Green Lantern/Green Arrow issue 1 (DC Comics, October 1983), p. 2.

⁷³ Nyberg, p. 137.

⁷⁴ "Catwoman Sets Her Claws For Batman!" in Batman issue 197 (December 1967), reprinted in Catwoman: Nine Lives of a Feline Fatale, p. 89.

(remarkably similar to what Batwoman had for her arsenal in the 1950s), as well as her constant use of words beginning with "cat" (such as catabatic, catapult, catacombs, to name but a few). All these gimmicks and flaws were intentional. Catwoman quickly became a direct rival and antithesis to Batgirl, and the two characters were written as opposites. While Batgirl was strong and independent, Catwoman's only goal was forcing Batman into marriage. Catwoman's character suffered under these outdated stereotypes to enhance the appeal of Batgirl and show the readers just how modern and liberated Batgirl was.

This man-crazed portrayal of Catwoman continued through the 1970s and was seen in her character even when Batgirl is not present. During the mid 70s the Batman villain Joker was featured in a short lived series, aptly titled The Joker. This series did not feature Batman at all, and instead pitted the Joker against several other villains. The last issue in this series had him confronting Catwoman. Soon after their initial confrontation, Catwoman pondered a way to lure the Joker to her lair and trap him. She quickly realized her plan might attract the attention of Batman. This was something to be desired, however. "With any luck," Catwoman said to herself, "I'll get that sexy Batman here too!"⁷⁵ The Joker latched onto this weakness of Catwoman's and dressed up like Batman to surprise her. Thinking her enemy to be Batman, Catwoman asked him, "I actually managed to attract your attention this time? Here is your reward!" as she lunged into his arms and kissed him.⁷⁶

Other relationships, however, were presented in a less neurotic light. In 1977, Bruce Wayne became enamored of yet another woman, Silver St. Cloud. Silver proved to be remarkably intelligent and soon deduced that Bruce Wayne was Batman. Soon after their first meeting aboard a cruise ship, Bruce Wayne fought the villain Doctor Phosphorous and had to swim away from the ship to conceal his secret identity. After defeating the villain and returning to the ship, Bruce encountered Silver again.

⁷⁵ "The Cat and the Clown!" in The Joker issue 9 (DC Comics, September/October 1976), p. 7.

⁷⁶ The Joker 9, p. 10.

She noticed his hair was wet and began to wonder.⁷⁷ In subsequent issues their relationship became more intense, and Bruce realized he actually did have feelings for Silver. “This is getting serious!” Bruce thought to himself as he walked arm-in-arm with Silver. “It's beginning to really matter what she thinks of me! And yet – she doesn't really know me – not inside! There's a part of me she can't ever know! Always the same problem ... they love Bruce Wayne – but Bruce Wayne has become a daytime mask for the Batman!”⁷⁸ That same issue Silver discovered Bruce Wayne was Batman, and Batman confronted her in the next issue. “She knows who I am, beneath this mask!” Batman thought to himself as he stared into Silver's eyes. “She called to me – stared like she's staring now! I know her too well to miss the shock running through her – just as she knows me! We've been too close, shared too much, for too long! She knows!”⁷⁹

While Silver refused to admit anything during this conversation, she later ended her relationship with Bruce, each of them tacitly admitting his secret identity. After a battle with the Joker, Batman met with Silver. “Maybe I know what you wanted me to say the other night – about what I've learned of you.” Silver began. “Maybe I came back here – to tell you! Maybe I – I even love you! But just now I saw the Batman in action I saw you - the man inside! The man I love! I saw you fighting with a madman, straddling a girder in the blinding lightning storm! I love you – but I couldn't live with that. Never knowing what each night would bring!” Silver broke off her relationship with Batman, but not before the two of them shared one final kiss.⁸⁰ Silver presented a very different type of relationship than anything from previous Batman comics. In earlier issues Batman always went to great lengths to conceal his secret identity from any woman. Even while Bruce Wayne went on dates with Vicki Vale and Kathy Kane, he constructed extremely elaborate measures to constantly trick them into believing

⁷⁷ Detective Comics issue 470 (DC Comics, June 1977), reprinted in Batman: Strange Apparitions (DC Comics, 1999), p. 39.

⁷⁸ Detective Comics issue 474 (DC Comics, December 1977), reprinted in Batman: Strange Apparitions, p. 98.

⁷⁹ Detective Comics issue 475 (DC Comics, February 1978), reprinted in Batman: Strange Apparitions, p. 109.

⁸⁰ Detective Comics issue 476 (DC Comics, March/April 1978), reprinted in Batman: Strange Apparitions, p. 139.

someone else was Batman. None of that chicanery occurred with Silver St. Cloud. When Silver finally admitted she knew his identity, Batman did not deny it and trusted her with his secret. After the two of them broke up, Bruce Wayne even began to question his role as Batman: “[Silver] walked out on me ... because she couldn't live with what I am and what I do – couldn't resign herself to the night when I would never come home again! The Batman drove an impenetrable wedge between us! The blasted Batman split us apart!” Bruce next directed his anger to his parents. “This is all your fault! You – my dear departed parents! If you hadn't died, there would never have been any need for the Batman! I could have lived a normal life like any other man!”⁸¹

These ultimately uplifting portrayals of women began to change during the next decade. During the 1980s several comics established a newer, darker tone to Batman. This continued the trend from the 1970s of creating a more realistic feel to the comics and doing away with any fantastical elements, only now the atmosphere in the Batman universe became downright grim and gritty. This began in 1985 with the four issue mini-series The Dark Knight Returns by author Frank Miller, and continued into 1988 with the publication of the stand alone graphic novel The Killing Joke by author Alan Moore. These comics radically changed Batman into a figure who was calculating and brooding, with rarely a smile to be seen anywhere. Author Frank Miller later wrote about his portrayal of Batman, “[Batman's] no whiner; there's not a trace of self-pity in his soul ... His passions are grand. Even his unhappiness is not depressing, but a brooding, Wagnerian torment.”⁸² The Dark Knight Returns is not within the normal Batman continuity, but rather tells a story of the future Batman returning to fight crime ten years after he retired from being a superhero. This story is revolutionary in many ways; besides altering the portrayal of Batman for all future comics, many new views of femininity were introduced. The Dark Knight Returns notably introduced the first female version of Robin, a young girl named

81 Detective Comics issue 478 (DC Comics, July/August 1978), reprinted in Batman: Strange Apparitions, p. 149.

82 Frank Miller, The Dark Knight Returns (1986; reprint, DC Comics, 1996), p. 8.

Carrie Kelly who ends up saving Batman's life.⁸³ Instead of being relegated to minor superhero characters, a woman now took the place of Batman's most recognized partner and sidekick.

Coinciding with this strong female version of Robin, other female characters are written in increasingly strong ways. One notable example is with Catwoman, who previously had been portrayed in contradictory ways. Prior to the 1950s she was a rather strong antithesis to Batman, but after the 1950s and 1960s returned only as an obsessed woman who longed to woo Batman. This depiction changed yet again in the 1980s with Catwoman presented as being on equal footing with Batman. In the 1986 story "A Town on the Night", Batman and Catwoman partnered up and their forty year old fledgling romance became more overt. During the process of capturing several criminals, Catwoman also helped another woman and gained Batman's compliments. "You handled that well, Selina," Batman noted after the woman was escorted off in a taxi, "Far better than I could have."⁸⁴ This dynamic interaction between these two characters irrevocably changed their relationship. Instead of Batman treating Catwoman as solely a villain and Catwoman treating Batman only as a love interest, they were now more or less equals. The hints of a romance between them were not harmed by this status change, and instead actually were heightened due to their working on the opposite sides of the law. This interaction continued through the 1980s and remained through the 1990s and even into the most recent Batman comics.

Even though many strong portrayals of women developed, a reversal also occurred. Although new characters such as the Robin from The Dark Knight Returns were present alongside established characters like Catwoman, the stories involving other female characters like Batgirl became more brutal and almost sadistic in tone. The culmination of this trend came with the 1988 publication of The Killing Joke, written by Alan Moore. The story mainly focused on the origins of the Joker and his

⁸³ The Dark Knight Returns, p. 85.

⁸⁴ "A Town on the Night", in Batman issue 392 (DC Comics, February 1986), reprinted in Catwoman: Nine Lives of a Feline Fatale Ed. Anton Kawasaki (DC Comics, 2004), p. 132.

relationship with Batman, but Batgirl made a special appearance. Barbara Gordon relaxed at home with her father when the Joker knocked on the door and shot her through the spine.⁸⁵ In addition to ending the career of Batgirl, the Joker then abducted her father and stripped off Barbara's clothes, taking photos of her naked, bleeding body to torment her father. When Barbara managed to ask why he did it, the Joker only responded: "To prove a point."⁸⁶ Even more shocking than the shooting of Barbara Gordon was how the creators reacted to their decision to cripple Batgirl. In a 2006 Wizard Magazine interview, the author Alan Moore discussed the book at some length and mentioned the editorial reaction to shooting Batgirl. As Moore recalled, "I asked DC if they had any problem with me crippling Barbara Gordon - who was Batgirl at the time - and if I remember, I spoke to Len Wein, who was our editor on the project ... [He] said, 'Yeah, okay, cripple the bitch.' It was probably one of the areas where they should've reined me in, but they didn't."⁸⁷

These feminine portrayals are in many ways contradictory; while some female characters gained prominence and became increasingly empowered, others were treated in brutal ways. Treatment of women in this manner was not relegated to just comics during this time period. Many edgy advertisements of the time featured women depicted in submissive or degrading positions. "Mainstream fashion magazines offered fashion spreads with women in straitjackets, yanked by the neck with choke collars, and packed, nude, into a plastic trash bag. Fashion ads in the same vein proliferated."⁸⁸ In her work *Backlash*, journalist Susan Faludi attributed the cause of these negative portrayals of women to the rise of conservative religious and political movements in the United States during the 1980s. The "New Right", as Faludi described the evangelical religious movement, focused specifically on dismantling feminist ideals. Several women affiliated with conservative religious

⁸⁵ Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (DC Comics, 1988), p. 14.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸⁷ Mike Cotton, "Last Call: Preparing for Retirement, Alan Moore Reflects on His Accomplishments", published online at <http://www.wizarduniverse.com> (May 11th, 2006).

[Available at www.wizarduniverse.com/magazine/wizard/000116187.cfm]

⁸⁸ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991; reprint, New York, Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 205.

groups such as Phyllis Schlafly and Beverly LaHaye even labeled feminism a “philosophy of death.”⁸⁹ These religious groups found staunch allies within the United States government, especially after Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency in 1980. “Reagan was the first president to oppose the [Equal Rights Amendment] since Congress passed it – and the first ever to back a 'Human Life Amendment' banning abortion and even some types of birth control.”⁹⁰ Within a year the number of women in government jobs dropped. The amount of women on the White House staff decreased over fifty percent from the 1981 figure.⁹¹ Several government programs that were considered to be “feminist” were aggressively altered or even eliminated.⁹² When taken altogether, these actions show a rather schizophrenic response to women in the 1980s. While some areas of the culture continued to address women's rights, other powerful interests tried to scale back the gains made for women. The comics reflected this through their contradictory views of female characters.

These contradictions of femininity from the 1980s continued through the 1990s and even into the present decade. After the brutal and negative depictions seen during the previous decade, much of the 1990s was aimed at increasing female demographics and introducing more positive female characters outside of just Batgirl. This led to a wide increase in the female heroes who fought alongside Batman. Chief among these were the characters Oracle and the third woman to take on the mantle of Batgirl. The character of Oracle is extremely interesting, mainly in that she is Barbara Gordon, the previous Batgirl. After being crippled by the Joker in The Killing Joke, a character such as hers would seemingly be relegated to the sidelines. However, while bound to a wheelchair, Barbara nevertheless used her intelligence and vast array of computer knowledge to become an information broker and continued aiding Gotham's heroes.⁹³ With this revitalization of Barbara Gordon as Oracle, a trend

89 Faludi, p. 251.

90 Faludi, p. 248.

91 Faludi, p. 269.

92 Faludi, p. 271. TEXT IS COPYRIGHT

93 Birds of Prey: Old Friends, New Enemies, (DC Comics, 2003), p. 5.

began where heroes were portrayed with some mental hangups or a physical disability. This trend was also seen in the third Batgirl. Cassandra Cain was an extremely strong female superhero, and trained since her birth as an assassin before joining Batman and fighting crime. Introduced in 1999, This new Batgirl quickly gained her own ongoing series that ran for over seventy issues.⁹⁴ Cassandra even defeated the character Lady Shiva, a woman considered to be the greatest martial artist in the DC Universe.⁹⁵

Other characters like Catwoman gained greater prominence during the 1990s. After Catwoman's revitalization as a strong female character in the 1980s, she became more popular. After being featured in the 1993 film *Batman Returns*, Catwoman gained her own ongoing series that lasted for over ninety issues.⁹⁶ Catwoman developed a greater relationship with Batman as well. While the two heroes flirted several times during the 1980s, Batman now willingly began a romantic relationship with Catwoman. Early on in the "Hush" arc of 2003, Batman saved Catwoman from the villain Killer Croc. "You saved my life," Catwoman later greeted Batman on a rooftop. "Through the years, you've done that more than once. I don't think I've ever properly thanked you." Batman tried to stop her, but Catwoman continued on as she pressed herself up against him. "We've done this dance for a long time. Too long. Aren't you at all curious?" This culminated in a kiss sixty years in the making.⁹⁷ Batman himself acknowledged this relationship held great importance to him, and even revealed his secret identity to her. "I know who you are, Selina." he said to her. "Where you live. What you do during the day. Like you, I have two lives. I want you to be part of both of them."⁹⁸

Although some strong female characters became more prominent and developed meaningful relationships with Batman, other females continued to be portrayed much like their 1950s counterparts.

⁹⁴ The *Batgirl* series ran for 73 issues, from April 2000 to April 2006.

⁹⁵ *Batgirl* issue 25 (DC Comics, April 2002), reprinted in *Batgirl: Death Wish* (DC Comics, 2003), p. 170-171. Ironically, Batgirl later learned Lady Shiva was her mother, and killed her in the final issue of *Batgirl*.

⁹⁶ The *Catwoman* series ran for 94 issues, from August 1993 to July 2001. This was followed by a second ongoing series in January 2002 which has published 66 issues as of April 2007.

⁹⁷ *Batman* issue 610 (DC Comics, February 2003), p. 21-22.

⁹⁸ *Batman* issue 615 (DC Comics, July 2003), p. 21.

Both these themes appeared in the 2005 Batman series All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder. Written by Frank Miller of The Dark Knight Returns, this series attempted to create iconic portrayals of Batman and Robin not tied down by the sixty years of continuity. This series, however, has drawn some criticism from fans for its portrayal of women. In one telling instance, the reporter Vicki Vale lounged around her penthouse apartment wearing only scanty lingerie. This was apparently her usual work outfit, for she also dictated a newspaper column where she discussed Bruce Wayne. “At least we’ve got Bruce Wayne here in Gotham. Rich as Howard Hughes – and looks? Excuse me. Do not get me started. The man is as hot as the sun. A woman’s skin melts at the thought of him.”⁹⁹ Although Vicki Vale is supposedly an empowered, highly paid columnist, her words make her sound much more like Batwoman and Batgirl of the 1950s and early 1960s than a liberated, modern female. When Bruce Wayne asked Vicki on a date, she immediately ransacked her wardrobe to try on at least five different outfits, all the time repeating “I’m having a date with Bruce Wayne.”¹⁰⁰ This scene was more stereotypically feminine than the 1940s version of Vicki Vale, who only went on a date with Bruce Wayne to write a magazine story. Yet even this new version of Vicki Vale displayed some strength. Later on in the same issue after Dick Grayson’s parents were murdered, Vicki tried to protect the boy and go up against the corrupt police, getting slapped around by them. This did not stop her and she promptly followed the police to where they are took Dick to record their actions.¹⁰¹ After being injured later in the comic, however, Vicki still managed to swoon into the arms of Bruce Wayne’s butler Alfred.¹⁰² This portrayal of Vicki Vale showed both strength and weakness. Although Vicki proved willing to stand up to authority to protect a child, she was still a highly sexualized and stereotypical character.

And so the current Batman comics include just as many negative portrayals of women that were

99 All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder issue 1 (DC Comics, September 2005), p. 4.

100 All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder 1, p. 6-7.

101 All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder 1, p. 29.

102 All Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder issue 2. (DC Comics, November 2005), p. 8.

present in the 1940s and 1950s. However, these very stereotypical depictions are mitigated in many ways by the strong portrayals of women that were introduced in the late 1960s and which continued to develop through the 1980s and 1990s. While this may seem contradictory, it merely demonstrates the differing views of women in society and popular culture present through the last sixty years of American history. Although the women's movement and later feminist movement forced society to accept the ideas of strong, independent woman, the conservative backlash against the women's liberation movement in the late 1970s and 1980s called these ideas into question, and women were once more seen as inherently different from their male counterparts. "The rise of cultural feminism also disturbed many equal rights feminists who objected to any definition of feminism that promoted the concept of 'innate differences' between women and men."¹⁰³ As a result, contradictions in the portrayals of women continue to exist in the current popular culture.

This contradictory portrayal of women in Batman comics is not anything new, but merely conforms to the current social norms of society. In every decade from 1940 onward, Batman comics always reflected the attitudes about how women should act. These depictions of women demonstrate just how much effect American society and culture can have on the media and popular culture, including comic books and iconic comic book heroes. The Batman comics often reflected the social image of women, even if this was different from the reality. In the 1950s, the comics showed the traditional idea that women should stay at home and be wives and mothers, even when many women were entering the work force. This outdated image was abolished in the late 1960s in response to the rise of a new feminist movement. That began to change once more in the 1980s as a backlash against feminism took hold in religion and the government. This backlash was not entirely successful, and several strong characterizations of women remained. These contradictory portrayals of women continued through the 1990s and into the current decade. These most recent depictions, however,

103 Kathleen C. Berkeley, The Women's Liberation Movement in America, pg 103.

merely demonstrate the contradictory image of women in the 21st century. Women can be strong and successful, and yet are also highly sexualized. Yet in all the portrayals of women, from the earliest comics in 1940 to the current day, reflected the contemporary values that women were irrevocably different and worth less than men. None of these female characters were ever as perfect as Batman. Every single one of them, including the most recent characters, had flaws that prevented them from ever becoming truly equal to the heroic Batman. While women have made considerable gains in the comics, even today many of them are stereotyped and highly sexualized. These current contradictory portrayals of women demonstrate their complexity as characters and show the culture's attempts to address the changing status of women.



**“Your genetic and emotional quirks.”
Homosexuals in Superhero Comics**

Prior to the 1980s, homosexual characters in superhero comics simply did not exist. In many ways this stemmed from the lack of open discussion about homosexuality in printed media of the 1940s and 1950s, resulting in a paranoia about the content of comics marketed to children and adolescents. Psychologist Frederic Wertham wrote the most famous remarks on this in 1954 when he described in his work Seduction of the Innocent that Batman and Robin were living a homosexual lifestyle.

Seduction of the Innocent is not a work about Batman. Rather than focus his efforts on superhero comics, Wertham devoted much of his criticism to the acts of violence in crime comics. Surprisingly, many of his conclusions are still valid. A significant portion of the book discussed the sexist and demeaning portrayals of women in comics, and the negative effects these had on young girls.¹⁰⁴ Wertham also briefly discussed how the racism of jungle comics increased the racial prejudice of young children.¹⁰⁵ In latter sections of the book he described the effects of comic book advertising on the body image of young girls, and finally decried the amount of violence on children's television shows.¹⁰⁶ These arguments make Wertham out to be an extremely rational, progressive figure. This progressive stance, however, faltered when Wertham shifted his discussion to superhero comic books.

Of the four pages where Wertham discussed Batman, most of his criticism focused on the relationship between Batman and his much younger sidekick Robin. “The Batman type of story helps to fixate homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult ... type of love-relationship. In the Batman type of comic book such a relationship is depicted to children before they

¹⁰⁴ Frederic Wertham, Seduction of the Innocent (New York: Rinehart & Co. 1954). Wertham specifically wrote: “The detrimental effect on character is if anything worse on girls than on boys. Their ego-ideal formation is interfered with by the fascination of the sadistic female comic-book heroines.” p. 99.

¹⁰⁵ Wertham, p. 31-32. Wertham discussed how the heroes in jungle comics were always white and attractive, while the oppressed, superstitious black natives were drawn as “fleeting transitions between apes and humans”.

¹⁰⁶ Wertham, p. 196-217, 353. Wertham devoted several pages to each type of advertisement, listing the negative effects of “bosom enhancers” (p.199-202), diet pills (p. 202-204), and acne medication (p. 205-208). He concluded: “These very young girls become entrapped by the sex appeal of comic book pictures and the 'emotional appeal' of their advertisements.” p. 201. COSIMO FELTON

can even read.”¹⁰⁷ Wertham gained more ammunition for his attack by the lack of strong women in Batman stories. “There are practically no decent, attractive, successful women. A typical female character is the Catwoman, who is vicious and uses a whip. The atmosphere is homosexual and anti-feminine. If the girl is good looking, she is undoubtedly the villainess. If she is after Bruce Wayne, she will have no chance against Dick [Robin].”¹⁰⁸ Wertham concluded his analysis of Batman by writing “in many adolescents the homoerotic, anti-feminist trend unconsciously aroused or fostered by these stories is demonstrable”¹⁰⁹ Notably, Wertham did not explicitly state that Batman and Robin were gay. He merely wrote that a homoerotic atmosphere permeated the comics.

Wertham was not alone in his criticism of comic books. During the 1950s the entire American culture became hypersensitive to any supposed portrayal of homosexuality. The root causes of this new awareness were twofold. The demographic changes caused by World War II created growing homosexual communities in large metropolitan areas. In their comprehensive examination of American sexuality, authors John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman attribute great importance to World War II. Many gay men and women who either joined or supported the military during the war began to notice the presence of a larger homosexual community and were usually eager to join it. “[The War] created substantially new erotic opportunities that promoted the articulation of a gay identity and the rapid growth of a gay subculture.”¹¹⁰ This growth did not halt when the war ended, but grew further as many of the men and women who participated in the war moved to major cities. “The changes set in motion by wartime continued after demobilization. Many gay men and lesbians, having experienced so great a transformation in their sexual and emotional lives, did not return to prewar patterns.”¹¹¹

Beyond the war, the Kinsey Reports of 1948 pushed homosexuality into the mainstream

107 Wertham, p. 190.

108 Wertham, p. 191.

109 Wertham, *ibid.*

110 John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), p. 289.

111 D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 290.

consciousness. Alfred Kinsey published a lengthy study entitled Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, and produced some surprising conclusions. “Among males he found that fifty percent acknowledged erotic responses to their own sex, over one-third had had a post-adolescent homosexual experience that resulted in orgasm, four percent were exclusively homosexual as adults, and one out of eight respondents were predominantly homosexual for at least a three year period.”¹¹² This study was met with outrage and disbelief. “Americans at first reacted negatively to the Kinsey report because it pointed up the discrepancies between our stated sexual norms and our actual sexual behavior and therefore thought to threaten the moral fabric of society.”¹¹³ In response to this, the American government took several steps to curbing homosexuality. During Congressional testimony in February 1950, State Department officials revealed several government employees had been dismissed because of homosexual activity. The final report of this committee wrote that homosexuals lacked “emotional stability” and “moral fiber”.¹¹⁴ A panic spread through the government, and civilian dismissals from government jobs “increased twelvefold over the pre-1950 rate.” Likewise, dismissals from the military doubled during this same time. President Eisenhower even issued an Executive Order in 1953 that barred homosexuals from all government jobs.¹¹⁵ These actions created the image that homosexuals were suddenly appearing everywhere in American society. Betty Friedan even noted in her work The Feminine Mystique that “whether or not there has been an increase in homosexuality in America, there has certainly been in recent years an increase in its overt manifestations.”¹¹⁶

When placed alongside this paranoia about homosexuality, Wertham's allegations become more reasonable. His comments on the negative effects of comics were also widely received. Seduction of the Innocent was reviewed by almost every newspaper in the United States, as well as many in Canada

112 D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 291-292.

113 Lucille Duberman, Gender and Sex in Society (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), p. 49.

114 D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 292.

115 D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 293.

116 Friedan, p. 383.

and Britain.¹¹⁷ Most of these publications enthusiastically praised the work. *National Education Association Journal* considered Wertham's work to be the “most important book of 1954”, and *Library Journal* lauded Wertham for his “substantial evidence” on the dangers of comic books.¹¹⁸ While some reviewers disagreed with Wertham's research methods, they nevertheless agreed with his central arguments that comic books were harmful to children.¹¹⁹ One week after *Seduction of the Innocent* was released, Wertham testified for the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency and reprised many of the book's arguments. Representatives of several comic book publishers also testified, but they failed to sway the Senators. “[The comic representatives] put up little defense of the industry generally, and their comments tended to support Wertham's arguments, particularly as they pertained to mass culture.”¹²⁰ Under the threat of government action, the publishers banded together and introduced a new editorial code to regulate the content of comic books.

The resulting 1954 Comics Code, much like Wertham, only addressed homosexuality in passing, as its authors were more concerned with violence and obscenity. Nevertheless, a section titled “Marriage and Sex” listed seven regulations. Following six rules dealing with marriage and respect for parents, the final point stated “sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.”¹²¹ Homosexuality was included since it was viewed as a mental illness.¹²² This clause remained in the Comics Code for over thirty years until the code underwent a third revision in 1989. Likewise, any discussion of homosexuality was absent from comic books for several decades. While independent or “underground” comics touched on this controversial issue¹²³, the major publishers DC and Marvel

117 Bart Beaty, *Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 148.

118 Beaty, p. 148.

119 Beaty, p. 149-150.

120 Beaty, p. 160.

121 Comics Magazine Association of America, “Comics Code: 1954 Revision”, reprinted in Nyberg, p. 168.

122 D'Emilio and Freedman, p. 324.

123 Not restrained by the Comics Code, many independent publishers created comics with a homosexual theme during the 1970s. The lesbian themed *Come Out Comix* appeared in 1974, followed by *Gay Heart Throbs* focusing on gay men in 1976. [<http://www.gayleague.com/gay/timeline/>].

withheld any mention of homosexuality until 1980.

Although Marvel is often conservative in its portrayals of homosexuality, it published one of the first mainstream depictions of gays in 1980. This story “A Very Personal Hell” appeared in the twenty-third issue of The Hulk!,¹²⁴ and was written by Jim Shooter, who was also Editor-In-Chief of Marvel Comics during this time. This story addressed several adult themes, including homelessness, drug abuse, drug addiction, single parenting, domestic violence, suicide, and prostitution. Beyond all of this, the story became infamous due to its depiction of two gay men trying to rape Bruce Banner in the showers of a YMCA. While in Manhattan to find a cure to his occasional transformations, Banner stays overnight at the “Y”. While using the public showers, he is confronted by two other men, Dewey and Luellen. Before Banner can react, they force him to the ground. “You're soft! And all pearly white – and you've got the cutest little cheeks!” Luellen remarks. “Think He'll whine, Dewey?”¹²⁵ As Luellen left, Dewey stood over Banner, taunting him the entire time. “Do you play, sweetums?” he asked as he stripped off his shirt. When Banner answered no, he continued: “Well, then, you won't like it this time ... but I will!”¹²⁶ Horrified by the situation, Bruce Banner managed to escape from the two of them and ran out the building into an alley. “I'm going to throw up!” he commented as he cried. “God, what they were going to do to me! Oh my god ... how can anyone? It, it seemed like a nightmare while it was happening, but, Lord, now...! It was real! They were really going to...!” He cut off, his horror and revulsion too much as he changed into the Hulk who immediately went on a rampage through the city.¹²⁷

Instead of showing homosexuality in a neutral light, this scene made gay men out to be sexual predators. Comic author Peter David later commented on this in an essay from 1992, writing “it was

¹²⁴ There have been several comic book series featuring the character The Hulk. The series The Hulk! (note the exclamation point) was originally titled The Rampaging Hulk when it began in 1977, but changed titles after the ninth issue. This series lasted 27 issues, and should not be confused with other Hulk series such as The Incredible Hulk from 1962 or Hulk from 1999.

¹²⁵ James Shooter, “A Very Personal Hell” in The Hulk! Issue 23 (Marvel Comics, October 1980), p. 8.

¹²⁶ The Hulk! Issue 23, p. 8.

¹²⁷ The Hulk! Issue 23, p. 10.

not a sequence that did much for Marvel, gays, Bruce Banner, or, for that matter, your local 'Y'.”¹²⁸

Political and religious discourse of the late 1970s and early 1980s also held these same stereotypical views. In 1977 anti-gay activist Anita Bryant defended her views by claiming that homosexuals were a threat to her children. “I was standing up for my rights as a mother to protect my children after I realized what the threat the homosexuals were posing.”¹²⁹ In 1983 anti-gay activist Paul Cameron mentioned a connection between homosexuals and criminal acts. “Cameron [wrote] that gays were ten to twenty times more likely to be child molesters than their peers, and five to twenty times more likely to commit bestiality. It was Cameron who claimed that a person was fifteen times more likely to be murdered by a homosexual than a heterosexual.”¹³⁰ Although Cameron based these statistics on hearsay and deceptive research, his views influenced many political and religious activists.

Conservatives such as William Bennett and Pat Buchanan cited a previous study of his indicating the average life span of a gay man was only thirty nine.¹³¹ Other religious figures warned that gays were predators. In a fund raising letter, Jerry Falwell wrote homosexuals were “after my children and your children!”¹³² The rape scene of The Hulk! conformed to these stereotypical views being discussed in politics and the media of the early 1980s.

Sadly, the near-rape of Bruce Banner was typical of Marvel's callous treatment of gay people during this decade. The only other portrayal of homosexuality at Marvel was Alpha Flight's Northstar, a character intended to be gay even though he did not officially "come out" until the early 1990s. This was in part due to the comics code which still contained the “sex perversion” clause even after its 1971 revision. The code updated the treatment of sex in other ways, specifically forbidding the depiction of

¹²⁸ Peter David, “When You Wish Upon Northstar”, Comic Buyer's Guide (February 14th, 1992). Reprinted online at <http://www.peterdavid.net>. Accessed September 1st, 2006. [<http://peterdavid.malibulist.com/archives/002241.html>]

¹²⁹ Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History, eds. Walter Williams and Yolanda Retter. (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2003), p. 143.

¹³⁰ John Gallagher and Chris Bull, Perfect Enemies: The Battle Between the Religious Right and the Gay Movement, (New York: Madison Books, 2001), p. 27.

¹³¹ Gallagher and Bull, p. 26-27.

¹³² Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States, p. 162.

rape.¹³³ This may seem at odds with the inclusion of gay rapists in The Hulk!, but this magazine did not include the comics code seal on it due to its adult themes. More common superhero stories were far more constrained. In addition to the code, Editor-In-Chief Jim Shooter prevented stories focusing on gay heroes in the Marvel Universe during his tenure as Editor.¹³⁴ The creator of Alpha Flight, John Byrne, decided to work around this and create a gay hero when he began the series in 1983. As Byrne later recounted on his website:

I had to find ways to make those characters more three dimensional. One of the things that popped immediately into my head was to make one of them Gay. I had recently read an article in SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN on what was then (the early 80s) fairly radical new thinking on just what processes caused a person to be homosexual, and the evidence was pointing increasingly to it being genetic and not environmental factors. So, I thought, it seemed like it was time for a Gay superhero, and since I was being "forced" to make ALPHA FLIGHT a real series, I might as well make one of them Gay.¹³⁵

The character Byrne selected was Jean-Paul Beaubier, also known as Northstar. Jean-Paul, an Olympic athlete and wealthy celebrity, was gifted with the mutant powers of superhuman speed and flight. He became a reluctant member of Alpha Flight only after discovering he had a twin sister, Jeanne-Marie, who was also on the team. Taking the codename Northstar, Jean-Paul's tenure as a member of Alpha Flight was characterized by his arrogant attitude that frequently led to fights with other members, broken only by his devotion to his sister.

Byrne also noted the difficulties he encountered in creating a gay character. "Of course, the temper of the times, the Powers That Were and, naturally, the Comics Code would not let me come right out and state that Jean-Paul was homosexual, but I managed to 'get the word out' even with those barriers."¹³⁶ A close reading of the early issues of Alpha Flight clearly make Northstar gay, even if presented in a very subtle way. In Northstar's origin tale, included as a back story in Alpha Flight issue

133 Comics Magazine Association of America, "Comics Code: 1971 Revision", reprinted in Nyberg, p. 174.

134 "Interview with Jim Shooter" [retrieved from <http://forum.newsarama.com/showpost.php?p=2936365&postcount=54>]

135 John Byrne, "Questions About Comic Book Projects", published online at <http://www.bynerobotics.com>. (August 24th 2004). [Available at <http://bynerobotics.com/FAQ/categories.asp>]

136 Ibid. 2006-2007 COSIMO FELTON

10, the team founder James Hudson described how Northstar used his mutant powers to become a world champion skier. “You went on using your mutant abilities, growing more and more famous. And, once you turned pro, richer and richer. You had it all – money, fame, women ... although the women don't seem to have interested you.”¹³⁷ To prevent this from being too obvious, Hudson quickly continued on with an easy explanation. “I suppose like a lot of jocks the winning is all that really matters.”¹³⁸ Regardless of the subtlety, fans clearly were aware that Northstar was being written as a gay character, and he garnered fans for this reason. In a letter published in Alpha Flight issue 16, one fan obliquely mentioned this. In a lengthy letter predicting which character would die,¹³⁹ this fan reasoned it would be Northstar. “His powers are redundant, being duplicated by [his twin sister] Aurora. He is mean and shallow. Although I'm sure his death will cause much consternation in certain segments of the populace, he must be the one.”¹⁴⁰ This author was certainly aware of the homosexual “segments of the population” who picked up on the hints about Jean-Paul.

Alpha Flight creator and author John Byrne left the series after issue 28, and new author Bill Mantlo began writing for the comic. Under Mantlo, Northstar's homosexuality became far more open. In issue 41 published at the end of 1986, both Northstar and his sister Aurora attended a round table discussion amongst Alpha Flight members on whether to allow the new character Madison Jeffries to become a member. Aurora voted yes, just as long as she could design his costume. Northstar retorted, “Something impossibly form-fitting, no doubt.” Unfazed, Aurora quipped, “Since when do you object to having attractively dressed men about, my brother?”¹⁴¹ In this same issue, another new character Purple Girl discovered she had the ability to control other people's minds, and immediately decided to

¹³⁷ “Family Ties” in Alpha Flight issue 10 (Marvel Comics, May 1984), p. 21.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Leading up to the twelfth issue and one year anniversary of Alpha Flight, advertisements proclaimed that one character would die in that issue. Many fans believed Northstar would be the one to die, but this was incorrect and the character who died was James Hudson/Guardian, the leader of Alpha Flight. After defeating several enemies and saving the day, Guardian had a 'wardrobe malfunction' when his broken power-suit exploded and he was incinerated in front of his wife.

¹⁴⁰ “Alpha Waves” in Alpha Flight issue 16 (Marvel Comics, November 1984), p. 23.

¹⁴¹ “It's Not Easy Being Purple” in Alpha Flight issue 41 (Marvel, December 1986), p.4.

use them on Northstar. As he recovered during the subsequent issue, Northstar reported, “She used her powers to make me serve her – love her! I felt violated – as if I'd been raped!” Team leader Heather Hudson immediately replied: “And by a woman! No wonder you're so upset!”¹⁴² Although these open characterizations of Jean-Paul's homosexuality seem mildly progressive at first, a dark side to this plot line emerged. Northstar soon contracted a mysterious illness that left him coughing all the time. These coughing fits began in issue 42 and became worse over the next eight issues. In issue 44, the reader learned that Northstar still carried wounds from previous battles that refused to heal.¹⁴³ Alone with his sister in this issue, Northstar asked her, “Why doesn't it heal, Aurora? And my cough! I have always been in excellent health – an athlete – never ill a day in my life! What is wrong with me?” When Aurora questioned why he did not yet consult the team doctor, he replied: “Perhaps – because I was afraid of what he'd find!”¹⁴⁴

When placed into the context of the mid 1980s, the nature of this mysterious illness becomes clear. Beginning in 1981, a new disease began to receive significant media coverage. “Young homosexual men in the prime of life were dying suddenly from a rare pneumonia, pneumocystis carinii, or wasting away from an unusual cancer.”¹⁴⁵ These bizarre symptoms were caused by a new virus labeled Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. This new affliction spread very fast, reaching forty thousand cases by 1985.¹⁴⁶ Since AIDS was concentrated in the male homosexual population, it was soon labeled a “homosexual disease” or even a “gay plague”.¹⁴⁷ Northstar's mysterious new disease, coming in 1987, had symptoms identical to AIDS. “[AIDS] destroyed the body's natural defenses against infection, making the victim susceptible to a host of opportunistic infections which the body seemed incapable of resisting.”¹⁴⁸ Much like other forms of media, Alpha

¹⁴² “Auction” in Alpha Flight issue 42 (Marvel, January 1987), p. 4.

¹⁴³ “Plague!” in Alpha Flight issue 44 (Marvel, March 1987), p. 7.

¹⁴⁴ Alpha Flight 44, p. 9-10.

¹⁴⁵ D'Emilio, p. 354.

¹⁴⁶ D'Emilio, p. 354.

¹⁴⁷ D'Emilio, p. 354-355.

¹⁴⁸ D'Emilio, p. 344.

Flight author Bill Mantlo clearly linked homosexuality to AIDS. From this standpoint, the logical way for Northstar to reveal his homosexuality was to have him die of AIDS.

Intending to do just that in the 50th issue of Alpha Flight, Mantlo continued to have Northstar sicken. The 44th issue revealed that Northstar knew about his disease. Soon after fighting the villain Pestilence, Northstar thought to himself, “Pestilence ... said he was accelerating the decay within me – and hinted that I would soon die of a pre-existing disease!”¹⁴⁹ By the next issue, Northstar could not even speak an entire sentence without coughing. In issue 48, Northstar finally decided to seek out help for his illness by consulting the team doctor Scramble who had the ability to transmute living tissue. Standing outside Scramble's operating theater, Northstar ruminated to himself, “If Scramble either cannot or will not cure me – I will die, a victim of a disease with which I was already infected when my encounter with Pestilence accelerated it. But I have had many good years. Fame. Fun. Fortune. Special friends.” As Northstar mentioned this, the comic panel filled with several images from his past, including one of him having a night on the town with two attractive young men.¹⁵⁰ Northstar's quest for a cure from Scramble failed, as Scramble transformed himself into the creature Omega and immediately attempted to destroy Alpha Flight. By the end of issue 49 the team managed to destroy Omega, but during the fight Northstar finally succumbed to the disease and collapsed.¹⁵¹ This led to issue 50, where Northstar would die of AIDS. This act would also stereotypically reveal his homosexuality.

The editors at Marvel did not allow this to happen, and author Bill Mantlo had to change his story. Instead of Jean-Paul dying, Alpha Flight went on a lengthy quest to a mythological underworld to search for a cure for him and his sister.¹⁵² Trapped in the dark tunnels with his sister, the Marvel Comics villain Loki appeared and explained the “true” nature of Northstar's illness to them. While

149 “Resurrection” in Alpha Flight issue 45 (Marvel, April 1987), p. 4.

150 “Madness” in Alpha Flight issue 48 (Marvel, July 1987), p. 15.

151 “Flesh of My Flesh!” in Alpha Flight issue 49 (Marvel, August 1987), p. 20.

152 Northstar's sister Aurora had multiple personalities and general mental instability.

seeking to prove the existence of elves, Jean-Paul and Jeanne-Marie's father captured one and later married her. After giving birth to the twins, their mother was killed by other elves in retribution for polluting the elvish bloodline. This inhuman parentage gave the twins their powers, but also led to their debilitated states. “The pure blood of Alfheim pulses in your veins!” Loki explained. “Such purity cannot long survive upon midgard! The stress of surviving on an impure earth soon afflicted Northstar physically, and Aurora psychologically! You could both be cured, were you to be infused with the pure light of Alfheim!”¹⁵³ Aurora sacrificed her powers of light by giving them to Northstar, who was instantly cured and restored to perfect health.¹⁵⁴ Once the adventure concluded Northstar left the team and traveled to the realm of Alfheim to be with his people.¹⁵⁵ Author Peter David later cynically wrote, “That's right...he wasn't gay. He was just a fairy. That's muuuuch better.”¹⁵⁶

During this same decade another character change began to take place. The main Batman villain The Joker adopted increasingly feminine and homosexual tones. While this is overtly apparent in the 1986 miniseries The Dark Knight Returns, other Batman comics of this period include these sexual characteristics. In many ways the Joker was given feminine characteristics to make him appear more disturbing and sinister, and he often juxtaposed effeminate language with semi-psychotic rants. In one particularly telling instance the Joker narrated to himself soon before his final confrontation with Batman in The Dark Knight Returns: “They could put me in a helicopter and fly me up into the air and line the bodies head to toe on the ground in delightful geometric patterns like an endless June Taylor dancers routine – and it would never be enough. No, I don't keep count [of my victims]. But you do. And I love you for it.”¹⁵⁷ This characterization is driven home during the many instances in which the Joker described Batman in terms more fitting of a lover than a nemesis. Throughout the entirety of The

153 “This Mortal Coil!” in Alpha Flight issue 50 (Marvel, September 1987), p. 26.

154 Alpha Flight 50, p. 29. Aurora, in contrast, was dragged away by demons and later sent to a monastery.

155 Alpha Flight 50, p. 34.

156 Peter David, “When You Wish Upon Northstar”, Comic Buyer's Guide (February 14th, 1992).

157 The Dark Knight Returns, p. 140.

Dark Knight Returns, the Jokers used a variety of affectionate phrases such as “darling” and “my sweet” when referring to Batman.¹⁵⁸

It is tempting to dismiss this effeminate portrayal of the Joker as just a quirk of Frank Miller's writing and nothing more. However, this characterization was also found in several other Batman comics of the 1980s. A few years earlier in the March 1980 issue of Batman, the Joker attempted to celebrate his birthday by capturing and killing all of Batman's companions. When Batman showed up to stop his plot, he said “You knew I'd be here, Joker.” The Joker replied, “I'd have been heart-broken if you weren't!”¹⁵⁹ The effeminate version of the Joker also appeared in a graphic novel published at the very end of the decade, Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth by Grant Morrison. This graphic novel, although it employed high amounts of surrealistic and symbolic imagery, nevertheless created a disturbingly effeminate and sexual version of the Joker. These homosexual overtones characterized all the dialogue between Batman and Joker in the comic, from their very first meeting in front of Arkham Asylum. As Batman discovered a line of salt around the asylum, the Joker came forward and said “Why don't you sprinkle some on me, honey? Aren't I just good enough to eat?”¹⁶⁰ Later on, the Joker slapped Batman on the behind, causing Batman to react angrily.¹⁶¹

This effeminate version of the Joker is actually very different and toned down from author Grant Morrison's original concept. When the graphic novel was reissued in a new edition for its fifteenth anniversary, it included the original script and some of Morrison's character sketches as supplementary material. These showed what Morrison originally intended with the Joker. This version of the Joker dressed in women's clothing and wore high heels with fishnet stockings. The original script described him as: "dressed as 'Madonna' in a black basque, seamed tights and lace-up stiletto boots

158 The Dark Knight Returns, p. 141, 150.

159 “Dreadful Birthday, Dear Joker!” in Batman issue 321(March 1980), reprinted in The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told, ed Mike Gold (DC Comics, 1988), p. 272.

160 Grant Morrison, Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth (1989; reprint, DC Comics, 2004), p. 19-20.

161 Arkham Asylum, p. 22.

His eyes are heavily made up with kohl eyeliner, mascara and false eyelashes He projects an absolute confidence that confers upon him a bizarre kind of attractiveness and sexuality. It is the attraction of the perverse and the forbidden." ¹⁶² The intention of the Joker's sexual dialogue was not to make him into a gay character. Rather, the authors gave the Joker a very effeminate appearance and mannerisms to better contrast his character with Batman, who was extremely masculine.

Homosexual portrayals of the Joker were not limited to the 1980s but continued through the next decade. This gay characterization became so obvious that other comic book characters in other comic book series separate from Batman talked about it. In one issue of Flash from 1991 written by William Meisner-Loebs, the hero Wally West discussed the Joker with the former villain Pied Piper. Upon hearing that Pied Piper once met the Joker, Wally asked, "You've heard the rumors, after all. How, maybe, [the Joker is] gay? What did he seem like to you?" ¹⁶³ When Pied Piper expressed his disbelief at this notion, Wally pressed him. "Guy's like that, you can always tell...there are signals." ¹⁶⁴ William Meisner-Loebs certainly picked up on the Joker's signals that were present from the early 1980s. He also used the opportunity to create some characterization of his own, having Pied Piper reveal that *he* was gay. This obviously shocked Wally, who found a way to immediately end the conversation and leave. ¹⁶⁵

Notably, the mere inclusion of a gay character could be perceived as a threat to the hero's masculinity. This held true within Flash, for later in the same issue Wally traveled to San Felipe in search of a former dictator. Arriving on the beach with incredible speed, he managed to slow down just enough to ogle the topless women sunbathing there, commenting to himself: "I'm gonna like San Felipe!" ¹⁶⁶ Flash's masculinity and heterosexuality thus reaffirmed, he could now battle the issue's

¹⁶² Arkham Asylum (reprint, 2004), appendix.

¹⁶³ "Fast Friends", in Flash, vol. 2, issue 53 (DC Comics, August 1991), p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Flash issue 53, p. 3.

¹⁶⁵ Flash issue 53, p. 4. *15 COPYRIGHT*

¹⁶⁶ Flash issue 53, p. 11. *BY COSIMO FELTON*

villain and save the day. Despite the inclusion of this scene, this issue ignited a storm of letters to the publisher. In the 57th issue of Flash, an entire two pages were devoted to fan reactions to Piper's coming out. While the series editor Brian Augustyn noted the fan letters were “overwhelmingly positive”,¹⁶⁷ several negative letters also were printed. These letters were generally religious in tone, and several quoted scripture and, in one case, the United States Constitution. One such reader declared: “American comics are created by folks such as [the author William] Loeb who are so out of touch with the righteous mainstream that the values of such a writer run rather radically contrary to those of our culture.”¹⁶⁸ This same author further commented: “Does Loeb so despise the Judeo-Christian values of American culture as to present as a positive moral option the sexual lifestyle of a practitioner of homosexual copulation When will we see a comics character show true friendship to a homo by revealing the Redemptive power available to him?”¹⁶⁹

Several other letters in this issue discussed the interaction between comic books and culture. Those opposed to homosexuality viewed comics only as a form of simple entertainment, such as one writer who dismissed the series as “homosexual propaganda”. “What are comics for? To entertain, right?” this fan reasoned. “Now, if there were no homosexuals in Flash, it would still be entertaining, right? I can only perceive the Piper's revelation, not as a means to entertain, but as a way for Mr. Loeb to preach his view of morality into the consciousness of the populace.”¹⁷⁰

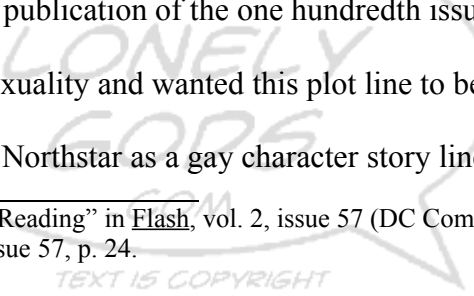
Piper was not the only character to “come out” in the early 1990s. After a full one hundred issues of Alpha Flight, team member Northstar was finally allowed to *say* he was gay. This began in 1991 with publication of the one hundredth issue, where a fan letter mentioned Northstar's early hints of homosexuality and wanted this plot line to be resurrected. “Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could revive the Northstar as a gay character story line again?” this reader asked. “Could it be that comics

167 “Speed Reading” in Flash, vol. 2, issue 57 (DC Comics, December 1991), p. 23.

168 Flash issue 57, p. 24.

169 Ibid.

170 Ibid., p. 23-24.



have grown up to the point in which Marvel could openly discuss gay characters in their comics?”¹⁷¹

Realizing the potential, Marvel did just that in issue 106. While fighting a super villain in downtown Toronto, Northstar was thrown into an alley where he discovered an abandoned baby girl. Taking the child to a hospital, Alpha Flight soon learned the abandoned baby had AIDS. Adopting the baby as his own, Northstar began to promote AIDS awareness. This act enraged the retired superhero Major Mapleleaf, whose gay son died of AIDS the year before. Mapleleaf decided to attack Northstar for this perceived injustice to his son. “My son Michael was a victim of AIDS as well!” Mapleleaf monologued as he traded blows with Northstar. “But he was gay – so people didn't afford him the luxury of being 'innocent'. There were no press conferences, no fund-raisers, no nightly news updates And now you come along! You with your cute and sweet and photogenic little orphaned girl My son wasn't guilty of anything. But because he was gay, he didn't rate!”¹⁷² Northstar responded with a punch, yelling back: “Do not presume to lecture me on the hardships homosexuals must bear. No one knows them better than I. For while I am not inclined to discuss my sexuality with people for whom it is none of their business – I am gay!”¹⁷³ This revelation only enraged Major Mapleleaf further. “As a member of Alpha Flight,” he said to Northstar, “You're one of Canada's most prominent public figures, both here and abroad! Before that, you were a renowned Olympic athlete! Don't you realize the good that you can do?! By not talking about your lifestyle – by closeting yourself – you're as responsible for my son's death as the homophobic politicians who refuse to address the AIDS crisis!”¹⁷⁴ Northstar finally ended the fight with several more blows before coming to an amiable conclusion with Mapleleaf. “We do agree on one thing, sir. It is past time that people started talking about AIDS. About its victims. Those who die ... and those of us left behind.”¹⁷⁵

171 “Alpha Waves” in Alpha Flight issue 100 (Marvel, September 1991), p. 45.

172 “The Walking Wounded” in Alpha Flight issue 106 (Marvel, March 1992), p. 16-17.

173 Alpha Flight 106, p. 20.

174 Alpha Flight 106, p. 22.

175 Alpha Flight 106, p. 23.

LONELY
GODS

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People did start talking, albeit more about Northstar than about AIDS. Northstar's homosexuality received immediate media coverage, with most newspapers praising the issue for its social awareness. A *New York Times* editorial wrote: "The comic audience is made up mainly of teenagers, the group that will benefit most from discussions about sexuality and disease prevention. And the new story lines suggest that gay Americans are gradually being accepted in mainstream popular culture." After comparing Alpha Flight to earlier comics that promoted equality for African Americans and women, the article concluded: "Mainstream culture will one day make its peace with gay Americans. When that time comes, Northstar's revelation will be seen for what it is: a welcome indicator of social change."¹⁷⁶ Renee Graham from the *Boston Globe* quipped "It's a long way from wondering whether Lois Lane would ever figure out Clark Kent's secret identity." She also noted the overwhelmingly positive response from gay rights activists.¹⁷⁷ Comic author Peter David also praised the issue in a lengthy article, but mentioned a few drawbacks such as the limited distribution of Alpha Flight. "Since Alpha Flight is direct-only ... the chances are that Joe Average wouldn't be able to find it. Anyone who's interest is piqued enough to try and seek out a copy would go down to his local 7-11, be told by the guy behind the counter that they'd never heard of Alpha Flight, and perhaps presume the whole thing was a hoax."¹⁷⁸ David also asked a pertinent question about Northstar's revelation. "Northstar's coming out ultimately ... boils down to this: What next?"¹⁷⁹

While David pondered over possible future plot lines that focused on Northstar's homosexuality, Marvel Comics was particularly leery of touching on such a controversial issue again. Northstar's revelation generated a massive amount of fan reaction, and the series editors mentioned the "immense response" when they printed several fan letters in Alpha Flight issue 110. Similar to the fan reaction

176 "The Comics Break New Ground, Again." Editorial. *New York Times*, 24 January 1992, sec. A, p. 22.

177 Renee Graham, "A Comic-Book Hero Comes Out of the Closet," *The Boston Globe*, 24 January 1992, sec. L, p. 25.

178 Peter David, "When You Wish Upon Northstar", *Comic Buyer's Guide* (February 14th, 1992). "Direct" comics are series which are only shipped to subscribers or to specialty comic stores, and as such have a limited distribution.

179 David, *ibid.*

when Pied Piper came out in Flash, the letters page of issue 110 printed several letters which praised and damned Northstar, including opinions from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁸⁰ Fearful of garnering more controversy, Marvel prevented stories about Northstar's sexuality for several years afterwards. Jean-Paul did not discuss his homosexuality at all through the remainder of Alpha Flight¹⁸¹, and it was only once obliquely addressed in issue 114 when the character Walter Lankowski briefly referred to Northstar's "recent announcement".¹⁸² This silence continued through 1994 when Northstar was featured in his own four part miniseries. This miniseries pitted Northstar against a new villain, Carl Kerridge, who hated Northstar because he was gay. However, no character in this series ever actually stated Northstar was gay, and instead used various hints to bring this point across. In the first issue, a minor character described Northstar: "He's arrogant, pig-headed, highly contemptuous of authority, and he's ... well. You've all read the file."¹⁸³ In the third issue, Northstar faced the villain Arcade who also hinted at his homosexuality. "I feel quite sorry for Northstar, admire him really," Arcade said to himself, "The courage to bare his soul and all that." A footnote that explained this comment said only "see Alpha Flight #106."¹⁸⁴ When Northstar finally confronted Kerridge in the fourth and final issue, he continued these hints as he described his reasons for hating the mutant. "You are change, you are disorder." Kerridge explained. "You and your kind typify the malaise that infects the modern world ... the insidious progression towards a society lacking the most basic grasp of morality."¹⁸⁵ As Kerridge attacked Northstar, he continued his rant. "I've watched you flaunt your difference for the whole world to see, delighting in your genetic and emotional quirks."¹⁸⁶

While these open portrayals of homosexuality proved controversial, their existence

¹⁸⁰ "Alpha Waves" in Alpha Flight issue 110 (Marvel, July 1992), p. 31.

¹⁸¹ Alpha Flight ended after issue 130.

¹⁸² Alpha Flight issue 114 (Marvel, November 1992), p. 12.

¹⁸³ Northstar issue 1 (Marvel, April 1994), p. 1.

¹⁸⁴ Northstar issue 3 (Marvel, June 1994), p. 6.

¹⁸⁵ Northstar issue 4 (Marvel, July 1994), p. 15.

¹⁸⁶ Northstar 4, p. 16.

demonstrated the mass media was beginning to adapt to this demographic. In 1989 the Comics Code underwent a revision that expressly allowed mentions of homosexuality. Prior to this the Comics Code forbade any mention of homosexuality, described as “sex perversion”. In 1971 the comic industry updated the Comics Code to allow stories about the dangers of drug use, but this code still included the “sex perversion” clause.¹⁸⁷ The Code changed a third time in 1989, and this revision described homosexuals as a distinct minority group. “Recognizable national, social, political, cultural, ethnic and racial groups ... will be portrayed in a positive light.” This included “social groups identifiable by lifestyle, such as homosexuals.”¹⁸⁸ The new Code mentioned homosexuality again when describing characterizations. “Character portrayals will be carefully crafted to and show sensitivity to national, ethnic, religious, sexual, political and socioeconomic orientations.” This section concluded by stating: “Heroes should be role models and should reflect the prevailing social attitudes.”¹⁸⁹ By mentioning homosexuals in the new Comics Code, the comic creators and editors clearly understood gays were becoming a recognizable part of society. While homosexuals gained more prominence in the media during the early 1990s, they did so through political controversies. Beginning in 1992, conservative political and religious groups began to push for restrictions on gay rights, arguing that since homosexuality was a “choice” gays should not be eligible for equal-rights protections. In the state of Colorado an Amendment passed stating “Homosexual, lesbian or bisexual orientation, conduct, practices or relationships shall [not] ... entitle any person or class of persons to ... any minority status, quota preferences, protected status or claim of discriminations.”¹⁹⁰ Another measure in the state of Oregon in the same year went even further, likening homosexuality to pedophilia. This measure not only did away with any protected status for gays, but also took measures to actively combat the idea of homosexuality. “The State Department of Higher Education and the public schools shall assist in

187 Comics Magazine Association of America, “Comics Code: 1971 Revision”, reprinted in Nyberg, p. 170.

188 Comics Magazine Association of America, “Comics Code: 1989 Revision”, reprinted in Nyberg, p. 175.

189 Comics Magazine Association of America, “Comics Code: 1989 Revision”, reprinted in Nyberg, p. 176.

190 “Colorado Amendment 2” in Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States, p. 207.

setting a standard for Oregon's youth that recognizes homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism and masochism as abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse and that these behaviors are to be discouraged and avoided.”¹⁹¹

The Oregon law did not pass, but it only failed by a small percentage.¹⁹² The Colorado Amendment did pass but sparked national protests by the gay community, including a boycott on traveling to Colorado.¹⁹³ After legal challenges, this Amendment was ultimately overturned by the United States Supreme Court.¹⁹⁴ While gays may have been gaining more prominence in the media, negative views of homosexuality continued unabated, seen in the widespread support for Amendment 2 and Measure 9 in Oregon. This conflict burst into the pages of the comics whenever gay characters were introduced, echoed in the myriad fan letters. This controversy continued into the next decade, even as more gay characters continued to be introduced.

While the current decade did introduce many new gay characters, older characters stayed in the comics. Homosexual portrayals of the Joker continued into the 21st century as well. In a manner similar to the 1980s, he continued to call Batman various pet names whenever they fought. These mannerisms were showcased during the "War Crimes" crossover of 2005. During this event Batman fought the Joker and another villain Black Mask. After a particularly hard punch the Joker commented: "Only one or two ribs broken this time. Getting old, cupcake?"¹⁹⁵ In a later fight the Joker called Batman "Honeycakes" as he shot him in the chest with an acid tipped dart.¹⁹⁶ In a manner similar to the 1990s, Joker's strange relationship with Batman was well known among other characters. In the comic series Outsiders from 2003, The Joker tortured Superman villain Lex Luthor to find the location of some weaponry. Between screams of agony, Luthor managed to ask Joker a question. "Does it

191 "Oregon Measure 9" in Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States, p. 208.

192 Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States, p. 208.

193 Gallagher and Bull, p. 119-120.

194 Gallagher and Bull, p. 123.

195 Batman issue 643 (DC Comics, Early October 2005), reprinted in Batman: War Crimes (DC Comics, 2006), p. 56.

196 Batman issue 644 (DC Comics, Late October 2005), reprinted in Batman: War Crimes, p. 101.

bother you ... bother you at all, really,” he gasped out, “That Batman likes Catwoman better?” Joker stared in shock as Luthor continued, laughing maniacally. “He'll never love you, sweetheart! You can keep screwing with his city, but he's never gonna take you to the prom!”¹⁹⁷ Portrayals such as these are intended primarily for humor rather than adding more facets to The Joker's character and this helps explain why they are so prevalent. Even the Joker's usage of various "pet-names" and affectionate phrases for Batman are done to to give the Joker a more disturbing personality and are allowed by the editors and fans alike because he is a villain. Homosexual characteristics in comic heroes, in contrast, were still limited during this decade.

Even while they were limited in number, comics with gay characters continued to generate controversy. This occurred in the pages of Young Avengers, a 2005 series focusing of teenage superheroes. During a battle in the first issue, two male characters Billy (codename Asgardian, later changed to Wiccan) and Teddy (codename Hulkling), talked with each other. Some readers who noticed this panel assumed the two characters were flirting with each other and the letters pages of Young Avengers immediately erupted into controversy. The first reader to notice a relationship wrote in asking, “did I see some flirt action between [Hulkling] and Asgardian? If so ... that'd be friggin' cool! One of the things that turns me away from titles is I'm tired of seeing heterosexual relationships all the time.”¹⁹⁸ In response to this, author Allan Heinberg wrote: “I couldn't agree with you more about the need for more positive (or at least more diverse and accurate) representations of gays and lesbians in the mainstream media Young Avengers will definitely explore the kids' identities – sexual and otherwise – in some (hopefully) surprising ways.”¹⁹⁹

Heinberg's comment opened the floodgates. Letters filled the next six issues debating whether Billy and Teddy were gay and the ramifications if they were. Similar to the reaction to Pied Piper from

197 The Outsiders issue 3 (DC Comics, October 2003), p. 15.

198 Letters Page in Young Avengers issue 2 (Marvel Comics, May 2005), p. 30.

199 Allan Heinberg, *ibid.*

1991 or to Northstar in 1992, many of these letters discussed the relationship between comic books and American culture. One letter published in the third issue addressed this point. “I'm not some anti-gay bigot,” a fan named James Meeley began. “I have no problem with people being who they are or living how they choose. But I do think a super hero comic is not the platform for exploring 'sexual identities', especially for characters that are teenagers Sexuality issues were never needed in the past to make super hero comics interesting. I don't think they need it now to be so, either.”²⁰⁰ Another letter in the same issue defended the use of sexuality. “It would be really interesting to see a gay relationship between two teenagers in a mainstream comic. If something like that existed when I was 15 (only 6 years ago), it would have helped me understand my sexuality a lot sooner and made me more comfortable with myself.”²⁰¹

In response to James Meeley's letter saying that sexuality had no place in comic books, the entire letters page in issue four was filled with fans decrying this stance and stating that comics did have a role for exploring society and culture. One writer, Rick, discussed the interaction between comic books and culture in great detail:

“Personally, I don't care if Asgardian and Hulkling are gay or not, but if they are, I cannot disagree more with James Meeley. Why should comics not be 'an outlet for changing society's view or forcing sensitive issues to be discussed among the readership'? To accept his argument that comics should entertain in a way that does not raise contentious issues is to accept the argument that the medium is, and should remain, a child's medium I believe it's possible to address potentially incendiary issues without ramming any given message down readers' throats or becoming didactic. It's important to treat the readership with respect ... or you run the risk, by playing it 'safe', of aiming only for the most simplistic and inoffensive storylines. Life is complex and nuanced. Why should fiction be any less so?

Comics are no less valid a medium than books or movies. When I pick up a comic book, I do want to be entertained – to be sucked into that fictional world – but I'm also happy to have my preconceptions challenged.”²⁰²

Other letter writers in this same issue expressed similar remarks. One wrote: “Isn't the purpose

200 Letters Page in Young Avengers issue 3 (Marvel Comics, June 2005), p. 28.

201 Letters Page, *ibid.*

202 Letters Page in Young Avengers issue 4 (Marvel Comics, July 2005), p. 28.

of art to reflect society and/or to inspire it? I happen to think comic books are, in fact, art and should do both.” Another fan commented: “Five years ago I could have been that 16-year-old *Young Avengers* reader who says, 'Wow, these kids are my age, they're openly gay, and they're being accepted. Maybe I don't need to commit suicide.' ”²⁰³ Significantly, all this controversy began over a single image that fueled reader speculation. Nothing was written about either Billy or Teddy's sexuality through the first five issues. Due to the overwhelming reader response author Allan Heinberg quickly realized the secret was out and confirmed both characters' homosexuality in issue seven. Under pressure from Captain America the Young Avengers team members decided to tell their parents they were superheroes. When Billy told his parents, however, they misinterpreted his words. “It's okay, honey.” Billy's mother explained. “We know. We've always known. And what you have to know is, we love you. We're proud of you ... and we're just so happy you boys found each other.”²⁰⁴

While both Marvel and DC ignite controversy when they feature gay characters, Marvel is far more conservative with their characters. The 2003 miniseries Rawhide Kid makes this clear. This series, while not a superhero comic, nevertheless demonstrated Marvel's views on homosexual characters. Rawhide Kid was based on the original 1955 comic series featuring the same cowboy/gunslinger main character, only now the main character was gay. This miniseries was also issued under Marvel's MAX imprint, a line intended for an adult audience. All five issues of this series included a large warning: "Parental Advisory: Explicit Content" on their covers. Examining the content of the series, however, reveals no explicit sex or violence. While the comic does include several gunfights and deaths, they were not particularly violent or gruesome. The only reason why this is a MAX title would be the discussion of the Rawhide Kid's sexuality, and even this is not explicit. There is certainly no sex in this series, and the only mentions of the main character's homosexuality are through various sly comments. In one instance the Rawhide Kid said: “Guess I'm

²⁰³ Letters Page, *ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Young Avengers issue 7 (Marvel, October 2005), p. 10.

not used to sleeping in a houseful of men,” he paused, “...alone.”²⁰⁵ Most of the humor in this series comes from Rawhide Kid making oblique statements about his sexuality, only to have no other character pick up on what he is really saying. The closest these other characters come to realizing something is different about the Rawhide Kid is when they repeatedly discuss what a "sharp dresser" he is.²⁰⁶ This series indicates Marvel does not want to offend any potential reader with gay characters. Instead of publishing this under its own name, Marvel chose to push it into their "adults only" MAX line, deeming mild innuendo to be "explicit". Other open portrayals of gay characters were also pushed into separate lines.

In 2000, Marvel began publishing a new X-Men series, Ultimate X-Men. This series presented an alternate, more modern version of the X-Men that was not tied down by forty years of history. To accomplish this, many well-known characters were given new histories and personalities. One such character was Colossus. This Colossus was very similar to his counterpart in the “real” Marvel universe, except he was gay. This fact was not mentioned during the first few years of Ultimate X-Men, and only became prominent after an alternate version of Northstar was introduced into the series. The two characters soon began dating. Colossus confirmed his sexuality to his teammate Nightcrawler in issue 65, when he told Nightcrawler that Northstar asked him to his school's Homecoming dance.²⁰⁷ When Nightcrawler incredulously asked if he was gay, Colossus confirmed his fears. “If a man as unique as you no longer has to hide in the shadows, I fail to see why someone like me should.”²⁰⁸ This revelation began a plot line where the extremely religious Nightcrawler was unable to accept Colossus' homosexuality. Two issues later the two characters discussed this issue at length. “I know you've been avoiding me since you think you found out what I am.” Colossus began. “Do you think that I am

205 “Slap Leather - Part 3”, in Rawhide Kid issue 3 (Marvel Comics, May 2003), p. 3.

206 “Slap Leather”, in Rawhide Kid issue 1 (Marvel Comics, April 2003), p. 13.

207 Ultimate X-Men issue 65 (Marvel, January 2006), reprinted in Ultimate X-Men Volume 13: Magnetic North (Marvel Comics, 2006), p. 121.

208 Ultimate X-Men Volume 13, p. 122. Colossus viewed Nightcrawler as “unique” because Nightcrawler had blue skin and a tail.

attracted to every man? Why would you think that? I will admit, your skin is cute, but you are not my type. So do not worry, I promise to keep my hands to myself. Can we just go back to the way things were? I am the same friend you knew.” Nightcrawler angrily replied, “I am thinking, now ... that I did no know that friend very well.”²⁰⁹

In contrast to Marvel, DC is far more open about character sexuality, including homosexuality. DC also began to focus more on each character's personal struggle for identity, instead of how they were viewed by others. One of these was Terry Berg in Green Lantern. Terry first appeared in October 2000 as a teenage assistant to the current Green Lantern Kyle Rayner.²¹⁰ Over the next year, Terry developed an attraction to Kyle. This culminated when Kyle proposed to his girlfriend and told Terry about it. Arguing with Kyle over her, Terry stormed out of his apartment, muttering, “I don't want you to be with her.”²¹¹ Kyle later confronted Terry in his house, and straightforwardly asked him if he was gay. “I don't know what I am.” Terry replied.²¹² Kyle quickly launched into a long discussion about homosexuality: “I hear that happens a lot. It's a very confusing time. And I don't really have a lot of insight on this subject. But I do know this – it's perfectly normal to ask these questions about yourself. It's just a part of discovering who you are. And if you are gay, well, that's okay too. And never forget that there is nothing wrong with you.”²¹³ During the next several issues Terry accepted his sexuality, and even began dating another character David. In issue 154, the two characters even kissed, something never shown in any Marvel comic.²¹⁴ Soon after this kiss, however, Terry was the victim of a hate crime that left him in a coma for two issues.²¹⁵

DC also introduced lesbian characters, who are far rarer than their male counterparts. One

²⁰⁹ Ultimate X-Men issue 67 (Marvel, March 2006), reprinted in Ultimate X-Men Volume 14: Phoenix? (Marvel Comics, 2006), p. 41.

²¹⁰ Green Lantern issue 129 (DC Comics, October 2000), p. 15.

²¹¹ Green Lantern issue 137 (DC Comics, June 2001), p. 10.

²¹² Green Lantern 137, p. 18.

²¹³ Green Lantern 137, *ibid.*

²¹⁴ Green Lantern issue 154 (DC Comics, November 2002), p. 2.

²¹⁵ Green Lantern 154, p. 6.

notable example is the detective Renee Montoya, a minor character in the Batman comics. First introduced in 1992 in Batman issue 475, Renee only appeared a handful of times over the next ten years. This changed in 2003 with the beginning of a new series, Gotham Central. Rather than concentrate on Batman, this series focused on the daily lives of the police officers of Gotham city. The sixth issue of this series began the “Half a Life” storyline which pitted Renee against the villain Two-Face who developed an obsession with her. As part of his obsession, Two-Face began to systematically destroy Renee's life, including outing her as a lesbian to her fellow police officers. Arriving at work one morning, Renee discovered a photograph of her kissing another woman pinned to the bulletin board. Another officer taunted her, “I've got to know, Montoya ... is this just an experimental phase or are you the real thing?”²¹⁶ This storyline also focused on Renee's struggle with her sexuality and how it affected her family. After her parents saw the photograph of her and another woman, Renee's brother Benny confronted her. “You made your choice, Renee, made a decision, and if that's what works for you, great. But there's no reason mom and pop have to suffer for it!” Renee immediately responded: “Maybe it wasn't a choice, Ben! Maybe, just maybe, I never had a say in the matter! And maybe I'm glad.”²¹⁷ After Two-Face was finally captured, Renee confronted her parents with her sexuality. “My mother told me I was going to burn in hell, and that her daughter was dead to her, now My father wouldn't say anything”, Renee sobbed to her girlfriend Daria. “They told me not to come back. They told me not to ever come back.”²¹⁸ While this storyline won several awards including the famous Eisner Award,²¹⁹ it too ignited controversy. Author Greg Rucka later described the critical reaction to Renee Montoya. “People got angry at this story. They accused me ... of all sorts of things, almost all of them without basis in fact, and almost all of them revealing more about the

²¹⁶ Gotham Central issue 6 (DC Comics, June 2003), reprinted in Gotham Central: Half a Life (DC Comics, 2005), p. 71.

²¹⁷ Gotham Central issue 7 (DC Comics, July 2003), reprinted in Gotham Central: Half a Life, p. 84.

²¹⁸ Gotham Central issue 10 (DC Comics, October 2003), reprinted in Gotham Central: Half a Life, p. 160.

²¹⁹ The “Eisner Awards” is the name commonly used for the Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards. The awards began in 1987 and include several categories such as “Best New Series”, “Best Single Issue” and “Best Writer”. The nominees for each year are voted on by the comic creators, retailers, and distributors. The Awards are considered the “Oscars” of the comic book industry. Gotham Central won the Eisner Award for “Best Serialized Story” in 2004.

accusers than the accused Most ridiculous to me was the accusation that we 'made' Montoya gay. As far as I'm concerned, we did no such thing. She was always gay. We were simply the first story to actually say so, and to say it in no uncertain terms.” Rucka also noted that this was the first DC comic to ever have a character actually say “I’m a lesbian”.²²⁰

These portrayals of homosexuality in both Marvel and DC comics demonstrate the continued controversy about gay rights. The letters pages of these comics are split almost evenly between those opposed to gay characters and those supportive of them. This split continued all the way from 1991 to the present day, and clearly shows that large segments of the American public still vehemently oppose any discussion of homosexuality. This reflects the political and religious opposition to homosexuality, seen in government laws in Colorado and Oregon during the early 1990s. But opposition to gays is not limited to any single decade. When any superhero comic attempted to introduce gay characters or storylines, they generated an immediate outcry from many readers regardless of when they appeared. The fan reaction to the characters Pied Piper and Northstar are almost identical to the fan reaction to the characters Renee Montoya or Billy and Teddy in Young Avengers. Opposition to homosexuality is still present in American society and will not disappear for some time.



220 Greg Rucka, “Introduction” in Gotham Central: Half a Life, p. 4.

Comparisons and Conclusions

While women in comics and homosexuality in comics may at first seem like two divergent topics, they effectively parallel each other. As with other media outlets, comic books often reflect the dominant ideas of the culture that created them. Comics books, however, suffer from a major limitation: the continual idea that comics should be read only by children. When discussing controversial issues such as the inclusion of homosexual characters, many fans took this position. Most justified their opposition to homosexuality by writing that it was simply an inappropriate topic for children's comics. But this is an invalid argument because comic books are not meant solely for children anymore. Both DC and Marvel have made efforts to cater to an older demographic of readers. Beginning in the late 1980s, DC placed advertisements on their comics stating that “DC comics aren't just for kids!”²²¹ Marvel also created series aimed at older readers with their “Ultimate” series and “MAX” lines, which include more open depictions of sex.

Both the presentations of women and homosexuals in comic books follow a similar pattern. From the first issues of Batman through the 1960s, the female characters presented the idea that women should be wives and mothers and were inferior to male heroes like Batman and Robin. This presented an outdated and even stereotypical view of women that remained in the media since the Depression. In truth, many women gained jobs for themselves, even if they were paid much less than men. After this stereotypical period, the Batman comics changed yet again in response to the social issues of the 1960s. They introduced more realistic female characters such as Batgirl and later Silver St. Cloud. In response to the anti-feminist trend of the 1980s the comics introduced some negative portrayals of women, and this created several contradictions among the female characters. These contradictions continued through the 1990s and remain to the present day.

Homosexuality follows a similar, if shorter, pattern. Beginning in the 1980s homosexuality was

²²¹ Batman issue 442 (DC Comics, December 1989), cover.

stereotyped, and the few open depictions of gay characters presented them in a negative light, such as the two rapists from The Hulk! in 1980. These early ideas of homosexuality heralded back to the 1950s where gay men and women were viewed as having a mental illness or being morally weak. Similar to the early presentations of women in Batman comics, the first gay characters in comics were heavily stereotyped based on earlier ideas about them. In the early 1990s several characters in both Marvel and DC were openly gay and this generated a massive amount of controversy and media attention. During the current decade another influx of gay characters entered the comics, and the stories about them became more introspective about their struggles and relationships. This parallels the Batman comics of the 1960s and 1970s, which introduced modern and realistic portrayals of women in response to the changing social climate. Homosexual characters, however, did not progress to that third step of a concentrated backlash like women did. This is due in part to the constant controversies surrounding gay characters. In a sense, a backlash already exists and is always present whenever a gay character is introduced. Similar to the backlash against women, much of this sentiment has to do with the rise of conservative religious and political groups in the United States. When these groups first came to prominence in the 1980s, independent professional women began to be seen as very negative in the media. These conservative groups also attacked homosexuals amid the increasing AIDS crisis, blaming gays for their behavior.

From these controversies a question arises. To what extent are the comic books reflecting society rather than trying to change society? To answer this it is necessary to examine the fan reactions to the portrayals of both women and homosexuality. The many varied characterizations of women in Batman comics from the 1940s to the present show very little negative fan reaction. In the absence of critical fan letters, most readers apparently accepted these depictions of women as being normal. The Batman comics, however, also clearly changed themselves in response to changes in the culture. This resulted in a general acceptance that their images of women were normal and merely reflected what

was already present in American society. The portrayals of homosexuals in comic books, however, generated great controversy. Many of those who wrote letters to the comics accused the authors of pushing their own pro-gay social agenda. The varied storylines about gay characters, however, accurately show the current contradictory ideas about homosexuality. In some series such as Young Avengers the gay characters are accepted by their teammates and families. Other series focus on the struggle of gay characters to find acceptance, such as Ultimate X-Men and Gotham Central. In these series, the gay characters are not completely accepted by those around them, and friendships and families are broken. These stories accurately show the varied experiences of homosexuals in the United States. The fans who accuse the authors of pushing pro-gay propaganda are unwilling to realize that gays do form a significant minority in America, and in some communities are accepted.

With all forms of media, the dominant ideas of contemporary society are reflected and reproduced. This holds especially true with comic books, as comic often address contemporary issues. The depictions of both women and homosexuals in comics offer excellent evidence on the power of popular culture to speak about contemporary social issues. In the comics, both women and homosexuals are treated as oppressed minorities. In Batman comics women were stereotyped and excluded for several decades until the emergence of the modern women's rights movement in the late 1960s. Homosexuals were excluded completely until 1980, and then were stereotyped as being either sex criminals or dying of AIDS until the 1990s. While some of these issues may be controversial, their inclusion shows the potential for the comic book medium.

