

‘Because He’s My Father, You Idiot’: Batman as Literal and Figurative Father Figure to the Dark Age of Comics.

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The introduction of Superman in 1938 birthed the Superhero genre of Comic Books. A genre that has endured and evolved over its 80 plus years, spawning generations of stories, and legendary heroes.

Due to the genres 80-year history, different eras have been defined and given names. These can be broken down to,

- The Golden Age (1938 – 1955)
- The Silver Age (1955 – 1970)
- The Bronze Age (1970 – 1986)
- The Dark Age (1986 – 1998)
- The Modern Age (1998 – Present)

Each of these ages has a definitive event or set of stories that pushes the medium into a new direction. The Golden Age is what we classify as the earliest days of the Superhero comics, beginning with the introduction of Superman and encompasses the Second World War. The shift towards the Silver Age was defined by a key event and a shift in focus caused by it. The Senate Hearings for Juvenile Delinquency and Comic Books saw comics coming under attack for corrupting America’s Youth. Dr Wertham, who is considered the architect of this attack, stated to the Senate that ‘Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry. They get the children much younger. They teach them race hatred at the age of 4 before they can read’. While this was an attack largely lobbied towards horror comics, superhero books were not immune to this criticism. In Wertham’s book *Seduction of the Innocent* (Wertham.1954) he accuses Supermen of being a poor influence on children due to how he undermines adult authority in their minds (Wertham.1954:98), while also condemning the relationship of Batman and Robin as ‘like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together’ (Wertham.1954:190).

The outcome of these Senate Hearings resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority; a self-regulated body that ensured all publicly sold comic books abided by the rules agreed upon. This resulted in a drastic change for many books, making them much more child friendly. This is the act that led to the Silver Age of comics, as superhero comics began to focus on science-based stories, largely marked by the introduction of the second Flash, Barry Allen in 1956’s *Showcase #4* (Kanigher & Infantino.1956).

The Bronze Age of comics can be marked as a period of social responsibility. This is largely as a response to the 60s *Batman* (Dozier.1966-1968) television series, and the overly camp tone comics took due to *Batman* ‘66s popularity. This is most prominently seen in the work of Neal Adams and Denny O’Neil. Including the Green Arrow story *Snowbirds Don’t Fly* (O’Neil & Adams.1971) which dealt with the reality of teen drug abuse, and particularly the Batman story *Daughter of the Demon* (O’Neil & Adams.1971) which introduced the eco-terrorist, Ra’s Al Ghul.

This leads us to 1986 and the beginning of the Dark Age. The Dark Age is looked on as when comics became ‘Grim and Gritty’ and entered an age of attempted realism. This is led by two key titles that are both considered classics even 35 years later. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen* (Moore

& Gibbons.1986) and Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* (Miller.1986). With *Watchmen*, you have a story that asks what would happen if heroes really existed. However, the main characters are inspired by DC heroes, and only features one actual superhero. Dr Manhattan. At the time of its creation, *Watchmen* was completely out of continuity and could be read on its own. With *Dark Knight Returns* however, Batman is the central focus, with the DC Universe as the backdrop. While the story is considered out of continuity, there is pre-existing knowledge of the characters and universe, making the change in tone and direction more impactful. Both stories led to a shift in tone within comics, especially in terms of violence. This is encapsulated with the battle between Batman and Superman at the end of *Dark Knight Returns*. An armour clad Batman fighting Superman, stating that he wants Clark to remember one thing, the one man who beat him. That is before Batman suffers a heart attack and fakes his own death. In essence, Frank Miller's Batman birthed the Dark Age of comics.

While some comics after used the focus on violence to great effect, such as *Marshal Law* (Mills & O'Neil.1987) by Pat Mills and Kevil O'Neil, other stories instead focused on violence for the sake of violence, as well as exploring more adult situations with scantily clad costumes, child abuse and rape. Thanks to *Watchmen*, and especially *Batman*, comics declared themselves as having grown up. As a 1989 advert from DC states, 'Gritty, Graphic, Grown-Up. You outgrew comics, now they've caught up with you', as they promoted *The Batman Movie Adaptation*, *Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman: The Killing Joke* and *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told*. It's clear from this push, that DC wanted people to see this change during the Dark Age, and used it to hook former readers back in. Especially with the use of *Batman*.

While the Dark Age of comics officially ends in 1998, it is arguable that the real nail in the coffin was the 1993 Speculator Boom and Comic Book Crash. This was caused by the added attention on comics in part thanks to the Dark Age, and the fact that Golden and Silver Age comics were now selling for a lot of money. People began to buy as many different comics as possible, variant covers and special editions in the hope that these comics would appreciate in value and eventually be worth a fortune just like their Golden and Silver Age counterparts. This culminated in 1993 with *The Death and Return of Superman*. Companies had printed more and more comics to keep up with the demand, only to have flooded the market when speculators realised just why older comics were worth so much. The comics industry greatly suffered for this, as revenue sharply dropped, resulting in many books being cancelled. In a sense, this was the death for many titles.

A writer who frequently calls back to *Batman's* importance and history within the development of comics, is Grant Morrison. In 2006, Morrison began their run with *Batman*, heavily leaning into *Batman's* history. Most infamously being Morrison's use of *The Batman of Zur En Arrh*, a reinterpretation of a character appearing in *Batman* #113 from 1958. However, Morrison's most important reference comes in the form of *Damian Wayne*. *Damian*, the son of *Bruce Wayne* and *Talia Al Ghul* acts as both a reference to the story *Son of the Demon* as well as *Batman's* role in fathering the Dark Age of Comics.

Damian is violent, far more than a ten-year-old should be. *Damian* is introduced to both the reader and *Batman* when *Talia Al Ghul* reveals that she had become pregnant after an encounter with *Batman*. The child was raised by her, the *League of Assassins* and *Ra's Al Ghul* until the age of ten. When *Talia* reveals his existence to *Batman* and leaves him in *Bruce's* care in order to cause some trouble to his life.

When Batman brings him back to Wayne manor, Damian attempts to prove his superiority to Tim Drake, the then Robin, by murdering several criminals and presenting their heads. Tim is naturally horrified by this, trying to convey that bringing Justice does not mean that people have to die. Damian takes this too far by severely beating Tim, stealing the memorial Robin costume and attempting to replace him. Damian's reason for all this is simply that he wants to. There is no reason behind the violence, beyond fulfilling bloodlust and getting attention.

Morrison's original plan was that Damian would only be around for the six issues of his original arc. Ending in Damian's death. However, Morrison decided to keep the character around, culminating in the New 52 series *Batman and Robin* by Peter J. Tomasi and Patrick Gleason.

While the character of Damian continued to appear in comics between his initial appearance, and the new 52 series, even becoming the Robin to Dick Grayson's Batman. However, the New 52 series begins with a still heavily violent Damian now partnered with his father as the new Batman and Robin team.

The first arc, titled *Born to Kill*, sees not only a past sin of Batman's returning, but pits Damian and Bruce's ideologies against each other. *Born to Kill* sees the appearance of Nobody. The son of Henry Ducard, one of Bruce Wayne's former mentors. Nobody is brutal, violent and despises Bruce Wayne. When Nobody first encounters Batman and Robin, he notices Damian's passion for violence and seeks to take advantage of this. Getting Damian alone and working to convince him that his way of thinking is the right one. That violence is the key to the future. This mirrors the Dark Age of comics, as the rebellious streak of comics seen in characters such as Cable, Deadpool and Grendel, saw themselves as being the new guard of comics and the future of the industry.

Damian gives into Nobody's temptations. Leaving the Robin badge in the Bat cave as he leaves. Following Nobody's lead, Damian begins to consider that Batman is indeed wrong, and that as his son, it is his duty to become a better Batman than Bruce ever could, by putting a permanent end to crime. However, Nobody also embodies this idea. As the son of Henry Ducard, he feels the need to live up to and improve his skills. However, he feels looked down upon as while training, he was always compared to Bruce. This drove Nobody to want revenge of Bruce, and prove himself to be the most powerful of them all. Nobody is a dark reflection of what Damian could become if he gave into his dark instincts. A violent and disturbing figure hellbent on vengeance. Towards the end of the story, Batman finds Robin and Nobody, at this point, Robin has turned from Nobody deeming him to be unhinged, and less because he is clouded by nothing but thoughts of violence. In the final issue, Batman defeats Nobody, and talks with Damian about the consequences of action. However, as they leave, Damian commits an act of pure violence in the name of vengeance. Killing Nobody before looking up at his father and stating 'Forgive me father, for I have sinned'.

Unlike the Damian who appears both at the beginning of Morrison's run, and the beginning of this arc, we have a boy who is still violent and driven by his desires, but one who now understands his actions have consequences, especially as Nobody continues to haunt him in the next few arcs. There is growth, but Damian is still a violent person for the sake of violence.

In 2012 however, Morrison decided to kill Damian Wayne. This happened in *Batman Incorporated #8* when while working with Nightwing, Damian is stabbed by a mutated clone of himself created by his mother. The figure who raised him in his violent ways, has him killed as he tries to protect someone he sees as a brother. While this could logically be seen as the end of the Batman and Robin series, it instead carried on. Tomasi and Gleason mourned Damian's death, Batman now has to figure out what he does next after a sudden and painful crash in his life. The series and Batman himself goes

through a restructuring of his life, pushing some away and driving himself to try to make sense out of the madness.

Later, when Damian's body is stolen, Batman pushes himself to find him, eventually leading to Ra's Al Ghul, who plans to use the Lazarus Pit to restore his grandson's body, in order to take it over. Eventually, Damian's body ends up on Apocalypse in the hands of Darkseid. This leads to one of the most striking and impactful moments within the New 52.

Once again, Batman dons armour very much in the same vain as *The Dark Knight Returns*. However, while the original armour was meant to do battle with Superman, a once close friend. This time, it's purpose is the opposite. Enter the Hellbat armour, partially created with the help of the Justice League, the armour is intended to allow Batman to fight in terrains he would not usually be able to survive. Batman uses the suit to travel across Apocalypse, battling Darkseid in order to rescue and revive his lost son. The Batman and Robin series is one that focuses heavily on father and son dynamics. Especially how disconnected Bruce and Damian truly are, as highlighted by both the *Born to Kill* arc, and the following *Pearl* arc. Just as Damian and Bruce were getting to an understanding, much like how the Dark Age was finding its audience, it's ripped away by an unknown hand.

With the Hellbat armour, you have Bruce accepting the violent life he spawned, and working to protect the future. Wanting to make it better and bond with his son. The suit, despite its hellish appearance, has the soul purpose of protection, specifically protecting ones family for someone who is without powers. The only other appearance of the Hellbat armour backs up this connection to a parental protecting of the future, as the suit later appears in the Superman series, also written by Tomasi and Gleason. In this case, the user is not Batman but Lois Lane. Using it to help Superman in the battle to protect their son from the Eradicator. To fight despite a lack of power, the ray of hope that could be seen after a Dark Age.

To conclude, the rise and fall of the Dark Age, as well as the light from the Modern age, is reflected through the Morrison and New 52 eras of Batman. With armoured suits bookending the journey. The Armour of *Dark Knight Returns*, and it's battle against Superman kicked off the Dark Age, just as Batman fathered the violent youth we know as Damian. The Dark Age grew, with violence taking centre stage, just as Damian's first appearances only strengthened his will to kill. However, just as the Dark Age was gaining momentum and growing into it's own, the industry crashes down upon it. Damian suffers the same. Growing as a person, only to be killed by himself. However, Superheroes endured and pushed through the Crash into the modern age of comics, just as Batman aided by his fellow justice league members pushed through the impossible, to make a brighter future and restore Damian, ending the Batman and Robin series.

DC Comics does not shy away from just how influential Batman is to the industry, despite Superman being the first Superhero. But when his importance is reflected within stories, not by making him a god, but as a person, we can make comic book history both tangible and even more meaningful.