Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

5-2016

The Bat and the Spider: A Folkloristic Analysis of Comic Book Narratives

Wesley Colin Van de Water
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

UtahStateUniversity
MERRILL-CAZIER LIBRARY

THE BAT AND THE SPIDER: A FOKLORISTIC ANALYSIS

OF COMIC BOOK NARRATIVES

by

Wesley Colin Van de Water

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

_____   _____
Dr. Lynne S. McNeill   Dr. Charles Waugh
Major Professor   Committee Member

_____   _____
Dr. Steven B. Shively   Dr. Mark McLellan
Committee Member   Vice President for Research and
                                            Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2016

ABSTRACT

The Bat and the Spider: A Folkloristic

Analysis of Comic Book Narratives

by

Wesley Colin Van de Water, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2016

Major Professor: Dr. Lynne S. McNeill
Department: English

This thesis examines and argues that superhero narratives, beginning with their comic book origins in the early twentieth century, exhibit many of the qualities found in folklore. Furthermore, these narratives not only demonstrate a folkloric evolution across multi-media formats, including printed work, television, and film, but that they fit within classic hero narrative structures posited by various folklore theorists. The hero theories presented by Lord Raglan, Vladimir Propp, and Joseph Campbell, along with traditional folklore patterns of dynamism and conservatism discussed by Barre Toelken, Alan Dundes, and others, support the assertion that folklore can, and does, exist and propagate in the mass media popular culture sphere. What follows is an academic analysis of core folklore elements, as well as a presentation of how these core qualities can be found in superhero narratives, and how the discipline of folklore may benefit from a study of these narratives.

(123 Pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Bat and the Spider: A Folkloristic

Analysis of Comic Book Narratives

Wesley Colin Van de Water

This thesis examines the folkloric evolution of superhero narratives over the past century. Utilizing theories from folklorists such as Lord Raglan, Vladimir Propp, Joseph Campbell, Barre Toelken, and Alan Dundes, it examines the core qualities prized by folklorists, and how these same elements can be found in superhero narratives, despite their mass produced nature and place amidst American popular culture. It examines classic hero tale structures, as well as the folkloric theories of dynamism and conservatism. The main argument is that these narratives are folkloric in nature, and that the discipline of folklore would benefit from their study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

exaggeration to say that Lynne's unfailing support kept from throwing in the towel altogether. "Thank you" feels like such a hollow platitude for her relentless enthusiasm and positive attitude that saw me through this project.

My committee was rounded out by the additions of Dr. Charles Waugh and Dr. Steve Shively. The irony of my personal trajectory through my master's program is that it was Charles, my first literature professor, who pushed me to become a folklorist. Because of Charles' direct involvement with helping me refocus my efforts, as well as his background with literature and narrative, he made an amazing addition to the committee and served as its outside member. Dr. Steve Shively, who I never got the chance to take a course from, was recommended to me due to his work in mythology and visual narratives. Like Dr. McNeill, they both were amazing sources of support for my thesis.

I would like to take a moment to thank the amazing professors that have helped to shape my journey through this degree. A huge thank you to Drs. Lynne McNeill, Charles Waugh, Steven Shively, Jeannie Thomas, Ben Gunsberg, Paul Crumbley, Lisa Gabbert, and Professor Lezlie Park for being there to push and support me along the way. The combination of guidance, encouragement, and instruction you all provided me is one of the main reasons I survived this process at all. Thank you for stimulating my interests and pushing me to new heights and limits.

While I will not take the time to list them all, a massive thank you should go out to my fellow graduate instructors on the fourth floor. The friendships forged in those offices over the past two years have been life-altering, and I am so much better for it. A special thanks should go out to Jesse Betts, Aiya Sakr, Kendall Pack, Deanna Allred, and

Terysa Dyer for putting up with me, being amazing office-mates, and providing their unending support. Likewise, a special thank you to Michael Brown, Tyson Steele, and Brian Bowler for their constant friendship and morale boosting that helped see me through the past two years.

Of course, a man is only as good as those he loves and holds dear. To Jen and Jonathan, my long lost aunt and uncle, you have been one of the most wonderful and unexpected blessings during my time at Utah State. To think that our shared love of video games has sparked a relationship with two of the most kind, selfless, and loving people I have ever met astounds me. Your constant support, late night chats, and unconditional love of a nephew who was a stranger just twelve months ago is a testament to how remarkable you both are. Your care packages that were sent in my final semester simply because I sounded "like I needed a boost" mean more to me than you can imagine. Thank you for letting become part of your lives.

To my sister, Katie, all my love for being one of my oldest and most steadfast friends. Thank you for fostering my nerdiness and always being my movie-going buddy. Years of going to various movies such as: *Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, The Hobbit,* and a slew of superhero films are among some of my most cherished memories. Thank you for always believing in me, and for being the occasional kick in the pants I need to help keep me grounded. I love you, Sis.

To my brother, Rick, thank you for being the one who sparked my initial interest in superheroes. Thank you for introducing me to Batman, Spider-Man, and so many others over the years. More than that, thank you for always challenging me intellectually.

Your relentless pursuit of knowledge, even from a young age, has been an inspiration to me throughout my life. Thank you for always supporting me in my dreams, pushing me in my ambitions, and being there to dust me off after my failures. Love ya, Bro.

Last, but certainly not least, to my mother, Lisa: Mom, you have seen me through nearly three decades of highs and lows. You have supported me at my best, and you have carried me through the darkest parts of my life when all else seemed lost. Thank you for teaching me the strength to fight on even when I am on the verge of collapsing. Your unconditional love and support throughout my life are why I've made it this far. Thank you for always fostering my curiosity, imagination, and nerdiness, especially during the times that you didn't understand it. Thank you for being one of the unfailing constants in a life that has been riddled with chaos, despair, and uncertainty. Most of all, thank you for being the first superhero in my life. I love you, Mom. I owe you everything.

Wesley Colin Van de Water

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

THE BAT AND THE SPIDER:

A FOLKLORISTIC ANALYSIS OF COMIC BOOK NARRATIVES

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The folklorist William Bascom argued that there are three primary forms of prose narratives: myth, legend, and folktale, with the first two being held as sacred (or potentially sacred), and the latter being regarded as works of fiction (Dundes 1984, 9). While superhero narratives, in any of their multi-media forms, do not fit the traditional definition of folklore due to their corporate/top-down production and dissemination, uniform replication and mass production, they nevertheless have evolved over the past eighty years. The resulting evolution, coupled with a staggering number of iterations has resulted in an unexpected manifestation of folkloric qualities in many superhero narratives. To use Bascom's terminology, hero tales (as well as their modern descendants, the superhero tale), would be considered folktales because they are understood to be fictional, while most classic hero tales would fall under the legend umbrella. However, this definition is itself problematic for superhero narratives because they exist as a nebulous fluid that occupies liminal spaces between myth, legend, and folktale. According to Bascom, both legend and myth are told and understood as factual stories set in a remote past. Within their own narratives, both Batman and Spider-Man exist as legends in their own self-contained stories. Despite their existence as fiction, both characters exhibit legendary qualities. Myth, as used by folklorists, is often a sacred or religious narrative, while legends can be either secular or sacred. Of Bascom's three types, folktale is the most applicable because they are understood as fiction, can exist

in any time frame, anywhere (real world or fictional world), are secular in attitude, and feature by human and non-human (in my case superhuman) characters (9). The tricky part stems from the fact that they manifest other attributes found in legend and myth, while simultaneously fitting under the label of a folktale.

Most folklorists understand the term mythology to have a connotation of religious or spiritual applications. While this is certainly true, for my purposes, I will be using "myth" in a much more simplistic sense. To quote Eva Thury and Margaret Devinney, "[First off], myths are stories. In every culture and every country, during every period of time from Ancient Egypt to the modern United States, people have told stories" (Thury and Devinney 2013, 4). Part of my argument here is that while not considered folklore by many in the field, I will endeavor to show how superhero narratives fit and work within traditional hero structures, which are recognized as folklore. While I am aware of the myriad meanings that mythology can take in various academic disciplines, I will keep my definition to simply "stories." So when I refer to American mythology, I am simply acknowledging a story that originated here in the United States.

An examination of folk narratives shows us that heroic folktales, both classic and contemporary, have been a part of traditional culture for thousands of years. They serve a key function in society. In the book *Introduction to Mythology*, the authors state:

> [Stories] also [fit] into this [cultural study] understanding. Historians get a better sense of the motivations and mindset of the people they are studying by considering the stories they told, the heroes they patterned themselves on, and the customs or ceremonies in which they participated. All of these can be learned from a study of mythology. A myth does not have to be old: at this very moment, our own society is full of stories of gods and heroes, and these narratives tell us about ourselves in the same way that the story of the Trojan War characterizes the ancient Greeks (Thury and Devinney 2013, 17).

So why does any of this matter? It is my belief that to understand the hero tales of a culture is to understand the nature of the culture that generated them. This gives additional credence to studying these narratives form a folkloristic perspective because, as I will discuss, folklore concerns itself with the evolution of narratives over time as they constantly adjust to shifting cultural, political, and historic elements of our culture, while simultaneously reflecting the various synchronic moments that surround their creation. Just as we can use tales of Zeus, Hercules and Achilles to understand the ancient Greeks, I believe that studying contemporary heroes like Batman and Spider-Man can yield valuable insights into modern American culture.

Historic Overview and Discussion of Case Studies

In the early half of the twentieth century, a new type of narrative emerged in response to the dire cultural conditions of the time. As the weight of the Great Depression was being felt around the world, Americans sought a new type of escapist fiction that would evolve over the years to be one of the defining aspects of American cultural identity. These narratives first introduced us to the heroes Superman and Batman. They would eventually be known in colloquial terms as "superheroes."

Superhero narratives were unique at their advent because they fused the romantic elements of fantasy and religious myth with a modern world of science and secular knowledge. Superman (who was the first superhero to appear in 1938) was a super-human savior figure who wasn't bound by any human limitations. Batman emerged just one year later in 1939 as an inversion of the classic white knight motif by being a darker and grittier character more attached to the regular bounds of our physical world. He

possessed no supernatural or inhuman powers, but rather a razor sharp mind and peak physical conditioning (although enormous wealth and cutting edge technology helped). Like the heroes of ancient Greece, American superheroes can be gifted with divine supernatural powers, such as Hercules or Spider-Man, Achilles or Superman. These heroes can also be simple mortal men, such as Odysseus and Batman. Though possessing no supernatural abilities, they are still capable of remarkable feats beyond the average man.

While Batman and Superman had other contemporaries, these two survived a surge of copycats and wannabes, as well as managing to stay afloat in the choppy cultural and historic seas of the twentieth century. As these characters evolved with the times, they were eventually joined by new generations of heroes that would form the twin powerhouse pantheons of Detective Comics and Marvel Comics. For years, these narratives held a stigma that they were meant only for children, because, much like fairy tales, that was their initial target demographic. However, just like with fairy tales, there are a wide range of tones and audiences, even with the same narrative. For example, the Disney version of Cinderella is radically different than the Grimm Brothers version which includes chopped off toes and feet. Similarly, there are goofy versions of Batman (think 1960s Adam West) and newer iterations like the Christopher Nolan films where Batman is shot, stabbed, gassed, immolated, and beaten half to death on more than one occasion. In their earliest forms, these were essentially picture books, but as the audience became older, the comics evolved to keep in step with their initial fan base. The original pages and characters were brightly colored, and the art styles were simplistic, yet as years

passed, the stories, and their heroes, would become darker, more complex, and take on a life all their own.

As mentioned earlier, superhero narratives trace their genesis to the Great Depression. However, they rose to greater prominence as the chaos of World War II began spreading throughout Europe and the globe. Grant Morrison, a prolific comic book writer, states that superheroes emerged from the American consciousness as a response to the horrors of World War II, and the unifying terror of the Atom Bomb. Superheroes came into being, according to Morrison, as a result of "a culture starved of optimistic images of its own future [which] has turned to [superheroes] in search of utopian role models" (Morrison 2011, xvii). Morrison's argument stems from the belief that superheroes were created to help people (especially youth in the World War II/Great Depression era) to make sense of a frightening and chaotic world.

Though it may not be apparent on the surface, the history of comics shares several interesting parallels with American history both domestic and abroad. We have Superman and Batman appearing in the 30s as a response to the Great Depression, and they were later joined by the likes of Captain America during World War II. In the 1950s, the Marvel and DC pantheons exploded with new faces as the chaos of World War II came to a close and the threat of the atom bomb continued to loom large across the world. Captain America was revived (quite literally) by Stan Lee in the 70s as a return to old-fashioned American ideals in the wake of Vietnam and the wild behavior of the hippy movement here in the States.

Despite these parallels, superheroes did not land on the radar of the general public until the early 2000s. One of the most interesting components of this dual history is the

events of September 11th, 2001. The wake of these terrorist attacks led to some of the greatest instances of national unity Americans have seen in decades. Matters such as political party affiliations took a back seat to a simple fact: we had all been hurt, and we mourned as a nation. It was around this same time of national tragedy that Sam Raimi had begun production of the first *Spider-Man* film. Set in New York, the film details the life and loves of Peter Parker, a socially awkward teenager who finds himself imbued with supernatural powers.

The timing of these events and film are interesting because Spider-Man is one of the few superheroes to operate in a real city. Batman lives in the fictional city of Gotham, Superman in the fictional city of Metropolis. Spider-Man, however, lives in the Big Apple. While there is no mention of the 9-11 attacks in the film, there are significant patriotic undertones throughout. An early teaser for *Spider-Man* was pulled from circulation because it featured a helicopter full of criminals being trapped in a giant web that spanned between the World Trade Center buildings. The film was a huge success that propelled superhero films from niche cult followings into the mainstream arena. The past twelve years have seen a massive spike in superhero popularity. Much like the 1930s, Americans find themselves living in a world of turmoil and uncertainty. A child born in 2002 would now be a teenager who has never seen an American not embedded in conflict across the globe. This concept of superhero narratives and the hope they symbolize is the focus of chapter three of this thesis, and I will address it later on.

As the world around us becomes more uncertain and violent, American culture has begun to seek out these heroes. They serve as exemplars of the difference one person can make in the world, as well as the embodiment of virtues such as: honor, duty,

sacrifice, love, loyalty, and service. As new storytellers assume control over these superheroes, their narratives continue to grow in both scope and complexity while keeping certain themes and concepts at their core.

Superheroes as we know them today are a product of almost a century of evolution. One of the defining factors of folklore studies is that of evolution for the sake of continued relevance. If a piece of folklore (whether it is a song, story, dance, proverb, legend, or even cooking recipe) ceases to fulfill its purpose, it will die off and fall from practice and circulation. Later in this introduction, I will discuss the concepts of dynamism and conservatism in-depth, but for now, it is worth noting that folklore must evolve in order to stay viable. While the host of superhero characters is massive, the most popular continue on in comics, graphic novels, film, and television. Their enduring presence in American culture is evidence that the various writers and storytellers who have handled these iconic characters over the decades have ensured their continued relevance in American society. Superhero narratives are broken up into four distinct time periods, referred to as ages. Grant Morrison, a popular comic book writer, examines the history of superheroes in each of these distinct ages in his book *Super Gods*. Morrison classifies these as, The Golden Age, The Silver Age, The Dark Age, and The Renaissance (Morrison 2011, xi-xii). Each of these comic book ages spans roughly two decades, and each represents the ever-evolving landscape of superhero tales. Due to their consistency (continued relevance), variation over time, adherence to core narrative elements, and their structural and thematic similarity to classic hero tales, I will endeavor to show that superheroes, with Batman and Spider-Man serving as my case studies, function as folklore in our modern age.

The Golden Age began in the late 1930s with Superman and Batman. It lasted through to the end of World War II. The Silver Age began in the 50s, and began delving into greater character complexity than the basic archetypes that surrounded the creation of Superman and Batman. One of the most notable heroes to emerge from the Silver Age was Spider-Man. The Dark Age (sometimes known as the Bronze Age) spanned from the 70s to the early 90s, which was concerned with complicating and modernizing superhero narratives. The Renaissance started in the 90s, and is still going today. The Renaissance has been the peak of multi-media superhero tales. No longer isolated to comics or niche films and television shows, superhero narratives have exploded in popularity, making their way from marginalized to mainstream. My analysis will focus on the genesis point for these characters (Golden Age for Batman and Silver Age for Spider-Man), and their multi-media iterations in the current Renaissance Age.

My approach to analyzing and discussing superheroes will organize these narratives as they utilize various traditional themes in their stories. This thesis will examine three dominant themes present in both classic hero tales, as well as superhero tales: death, love, and hope, which will be the structural focal points of my analysis. Along with these thematic concerns, my analysis will consider additional folkloric components inherent within these narratives. This thesis will utilize the work of well-known hero theorists Lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, and Vladimir Propp, and will apply Toelken's twin laws of folklore and Bascom's narrative classification methods to identify the folkloric nature of these narratives. While the work of these theorists examines the heroes of classic folk narrative, I have found (and will argue) that the same folkloric elements they identify also apply to modern superheroes. Not only are they related, but

these elements manifest themselves dynamically and with remarkable consistency within comics.

Any attempt to construct a comprehensive analysis of all superheroes would be a monumental feat, even if the discussion were to be limited to heroes created by DC and Marvel comics, which are the two largest comic publishers in the world, although there are hundreds of other comics publishers around the globe. In order to keep my argument contained, I will analyze Batman and Spider-Man, in their varied and widespread forms, as my case studies. I believe it is valuable to examine a hero from both of the comic power houses, as well as one hero with supernatural powers (Spider-Man), and one without (Batman). A thorough examination of the Marvel and DC pantheons would be a massive task in its own right, though it would no doubt be fascinating, but for my purposes would distract from the cultural examination I will present.

Folklorists have been studying hero narratives as myths, legends, and as folktales for centuries, and superheroes are just the newest iteration of this process. Whether it is Batman or Hercules, they share common structural threads. While superheroes were coming off the printing presses here in the States in the 1930s, in Europe an independent British scholar named Lord Raglan was writing an analysis of heroic tale structures. His work outlined a set of twenty-two criteria that he claimed fit within the structures of all hero narratives. Raglan outlines his criteria as follows:

(1)   The hero's mother is a royal virgin;
(2)   His father is a king, and
(3)   Often a near relative of his mother, but
(4)   The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
(5)   He is also reputed to be the son of a god.
(6)   At birth, an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him, but
(7)   He is spirited away, and

(8)   Reared by foster-parents in a far country.
(9)   We are told nothing of his childhood, but
(10)   On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
(11)   After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
(12)   He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
(13)   Becomes king.
(14)   For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
(15)   Prescribes laws, but
(16)   Later he loses favour with the gods and/or his subjects, and
(17)   Is driven from the throne and city, after which
(18)   He meets with a mysterious death,
(19)   Often at the top of a hill.
(20)   His children, if any, do not succeed him.
(21)   His body is not buried, but nevertheless
(22)   He has one or more holy sepulchers.
 (Raglan 2003, 174-5).

Raglan runs multiple characters from mythology through his criteria, awarding a single point for each element that applies to the character, and then scores them.

The initial springboard to my discussion of comic heroes as folklore began when I ran Christopher Nolan's version of Batman through Raglan's filter. My analysis of the Batman/Bruce Wayne narratives finds that he fits the following criteria: 2-Bruce comes from a "royal" family. He is often referred to as the "Prince of Gotham." 5- While not perceived as a God, Bruce is the last living descendant of a great lineage. On the other hand, Batman is often perceived to have god-like/supernatural power, especially at night. 7-Bruce flees Gotham to travel abroad. 8-He is raised by Alfred in Gotham, and mentored by Ra's Al Ghul during his training in Asia. 9-Beyond the death of his parents and his fear of bats, little information is provided about Bruce as a child. 10-After training abroad, he returns to Gotham and Wayne Enterprises. 11- He kills Ra's and defeats the great evil threatening Gotham (his "kingdom"). 13-Becomes CEO (King) of Wayne Enterprises. 14-Things are relatively peaceful until the appearance of the Joker. 15-Batman works with Commissioner Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent to crack

down on crime and maintain peace. 16-Batman is blamed for the city's problems and the Joker's crime wave. 17- Bruce takes the fall for Dent and retires from being Batman. 18-Batman is presumed dead after a battle with Bane and left to die in a pit. 21-Batman "dies" carrying a bomb from the city. Bruce is "buried" next to his parents, despite there being no body. 22-Gotham erects a statue in Batman's honor. Batman/Bruce Wayne scores fifteen out of twenty-two.

It is worth noting that in Raglan's own analysis of various mythic characters, Zeus scores fifteen, Joseph of Egypt scores twelve, Elijah of the Old Testament scores nine, and Robin Hood scores thirteen. While an in-depth comparison of our modern heroes to those of ancient myth is not my primary purpose here, it helped me to establish a precedent that characters like Batman can be analyzed as a cultural phenomenon that fits under the umbrella of myth studies within folklore. These comic book heroes not only share key structural forms with classic folk narratives, but they utilize key thematic elements that have been in circulation for thousands of years. Heroes, both ancient and new, serve as exemplars of the difference one person can make in the world, as well as the embodiment of virtues such as: honor, duty, sacrifice, love, loyalty, and service.

Another critical theorist that I will examine in my work here is Russian hero theorist Vladimir Propp. Like Raglan, Propp organized his criteria (what he refers to as functions) in a list.

a.   Initial situation- The set up of the story
I.   Absentation – A member of the family absents himself from home
II.   Interdiction – An interdiction is addressed to the hero
III.   Violation – The interdiction is violated
IV.   Reconnaissance – The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance
V.   Delivery – The villain receives info about his victim
VI.   Trickery – The villain attempts to deceive victim in order to rob or kidnap him
VII.   Complicity – The victim submits to deception and unwittingly helps his enemy

VIII. Villainy – The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family
     VIIIa. Lack – One member of a family either lacks or desires something
IX. Mediation – Lack or misfortune is made known; hero is approached with a request or command; hero is allowed to go or is dispatched
X. Beginning counteraction – The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction
XI. Departure – The hero leaves home
XII. First function of the donor – The hero is tested, interrogated, or attacked, which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper
XIII. Hero's reaction – The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor
XIV. Receipt of a magical agent – The hero acquires the use of a magical agent
XV. Spatial Transference/Guidance – The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search
XVI. Struggle – The hero and the villain join in direct combat
XVII. Branding – The hero is branded or marked
XVIII. Victory – The villain is defeated
XIX. Lack Liquidated – The original misfortune or lack is liquidated
XX. Return – The hero returns
XXI. Pursuit – The hero is pursued
XXII. Rescue – The rescue of the hero from pursuit
XXIII. Unrecognized arrival – The hero, unrecognized, arrives home (or elsewhere)
XXIV. Unfounded claims – A false hero present unfounded claims
XXV. Difficult task – A difficult task is proposed to the hero
XXVI. Solution – The task is resolved
XXVII. Recognition – The hero is recognized
XXVIII. Exposure – The false hero is given a new appearance
XXIX. Punishment – The villain is punished
XXX. Wedding – The hero is married or ascends the throne
(Propp 1968)

Propp's functions are another analysis/demonstration of conservative components within hero narratives. The structure and functions Propp presents were meant to be used as a guiding framework, rather than these narratives having to fit every function to its exact denotation. Because these functions are a guide, I will endeavor to show the new ways in which superhero narratives present and exhibit these classic functions that Propp outlines. One example is that of the supernatural donor; in the case of Peter Parker, the spider that bites him operates as the donor that bestows Peter's powers.

    Along with Raglan and Propp, the third structural theorist I will pull from is Joseph Campbell, who is most famous for his work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces.*

Unlike Raglan and Propp, Campbell's ideas are not condensed down to an easily labeled list of ideas. For Campbell's theories, I will pull most heavily from his sections regarding the hero's life, which includes: The Adventure of the Hero, Initiation, Return, and Transformation of the Hero (Campbell 2008). For each of these theorists, I will endeavor to show how they relate to, and manifest in, the various superhero narratives I will discuss.

This is a truncated setup that only serves to give a general overview of the subject matter. It is my hope to show that superhero narratives are a compelling part of American folklore that has gone relatively unnoticed by the discipline thus far. One of the major components that need to be defined are what folklorists know as Toelken's twin laws. Establishing Toelken's laws is pivotal to my argument because the ideas of dynamism and conservatism are among the most crucial elements in determining whether something is folklore. Something can be purely dynamic or conservative, but it must fall under both to be considered folklore.

> These two forces, or qualities-the one dynamic, the other conservative are the twin coefficients of the particularized variation that finally does take place again and again in each traditional event— through space (geographical or human) and through time (moments or years). For simple reference, we may refer to these two forces descriptively as the twin laws of folklore process: conservatism and dynamism will probably be the two most prominent characteristics in our perception of (and discussion of) any item tentatively classified as folklore (Toelken 1996, 39).

Simply put, for something to be considered under the umbrella of folklore, it must exhibit the twin qualities of dynamism and conservatism. Conservative elements are those that are static, or consistent, across any iteration of a story. Dynamic elements are where the variations occur.

There are no limits to how drastic or subtle these variations can be. Examples of dynamism and conservatism can be found in cross-cultural creation myths, the myriad versions of the Cinderella story, practical jokes, children's rhymes, making paper airplanes, or urban legends where the story remains the same, but the location changes for the sake of relevance. The reason that mass produced media almost never falls under the scope of folklore is because they are static and unchanging. If I watch the movie *Back to the Future* fifty years from now, it will still be the same film I viewed when it originally released. While a single film will remain the same over time that does not prevent variance from occurring through the reappropriations of themes, motifs, and narrative arcs in other works. One of the ways that comic books (and their multi-media iterations) manifest this concept is through the sheer number of versions of the same character. Take Bruce Wayne, for example. There is Bob Kane's original spandex wearing version, the goofy and campy Adam West version (inspired by Kane's original stories and designs), there is the Michael Keaton version which introduced a darker tone and featured a Batman that wore a bullet resistant suit of armor, the Val Kilmer and George Clooney iterations that featured some of the more outlandish villains from the Batman comics, and the Nolan films that introduced a version of Batman that existed in isolation from other DC heroes (i.e., there are no references to Super Man, Wonder Woman, the Flash, or any of the other characters that Batman often associates with in the comics). Despite their lack of traditional transmission, I believe there is value in examining the dynamic and conservative components found within pop culture media. To clarify, this type of folkloric evolution in popular culture is unique to superhero narratives. As time passes, these characters change hands (contractual disputes and intellectual property rights often

contribute to this), and the result is a new version of the same character. In film alone (this does not include television and comic books), we have almost half a dozen versions of Batman/Bruce Wayne, and there is no "true" or "correct" version. Some are more popular than others, but one is no more or less valid than the others, which is an inherently folkloric trait found in these pop culture elements.

As for how dynamism and conservatism relates to the hero theorists and their structures, Raglan's criteria would be the conservative elements of hero narratives, or the aspects of these stories that remain uniform and consistent, while the variation comes in the limitless ways that these conservative elements are manifested. The twin laws of dynamism and conservatism are accepted amongst folklorists as one of the key tests to determine whether or not something can be considered folklore. As will be illustrated in this thesis, the traditional thematic elements of each superhero's narrative have come to be met by a number of variable plot points, creating an unexpectedly folkloric nature in these mass market narrative forms. Throughout my thesis, I will examine how Toelken's twin laws operate in Batman and Spider-Man narratives, as well as how they fit in the criteria of hero theorists like Raglan, Campbell, and Propp.

Definition of Key Terms and Characters

Because some of the terms in my analysis can be interpreted multiple ways, or are understood to have different meanings in various disciplines, I will be outlining the definitions as they will be used in my analysis. Some terms have broader definitions, but they will be used in specific contexts for my own purposes.

Batman/Bruce Wayne: Often, I will use these interchangeably. Batman is Bruce Wayne's alter ego, and likewise, Bruce Wayne is Batman's secret identity. Though these two are often one in the same, I will occasionally differentiate between the two. For example, in the film *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman as a hero is believed to be dead, even though Bruce Wayne is alive and well.

Spider-Man/Peter Parker: Similar to Batman, the same applies for Spider-Man. Peter Parker is Spider-Man, and I will often refer to both. Usually, if the superhero's real name (Peter or Bruce) is used, I will be referring to them as they exist outside of their superhero identity. Likewise, the use of the superhero name will refer to elements of the character's lives that relate to their heroic identities.

Hero: As defined in the Oxford dictionary- A person, typically a man, who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities, (In mythology and folklore) a person of superhuman qualities and often semi-divine origin, in particular one of those whose exploits and dealings with the gods were the subject of ancient Greek myths and legends.

Superhero: A benevolent fictional character often possessing (but not always) superhuman powers that are used for the betterment and benefit of society and/or the world. A term generally used to describe the hero characters of 1930s comics that began with Superman and Batman. A term that is now widely used to describe virtually any character created by Marvel and DC, or any character that traces their origins back to the comics of the 1900s.

Mythos: The larger narrative structure surrounding a particular character. Focuses on core character and narrative elements that remain consistent across the history of the

character. i.e., Batman was orphaned after the murder of his parents in Crime Alley, Spider-Man being bitten by a radioactive spider that imbued him with supernatural powers, and so on. The mythos of a character is concerned with the stable and non-variant components of the story that includes narrative themes, characters, locations, etc.

Mythology: A set, or sets, of stories focused on specific fictional characters that are held by particular groups, institutions, cultures, or religions. Hercules is an example of a hero in ancient Greek mythology. I will often refer to superheroes as characters in modern mythology (1930s-present).

Comic book: A short visual narrative that is often thirty to forty pages in length. Typically delivers a small portion of an extended story arc. Entire stories are often told throughout multiple issues.

Graphic Novel: A comic, or series of comics, that house an entire self-contained story. May be a collection of several issues gathered together in one publication, or it may be multiple volumes (each volume usually contains several smaller issues). Other graphic novels (such as *Hush* or *The Long Halloween*) *are* written and sold as one complete story without the usual periodical format of traditional comics.

Omnibus: Similar to graphic novels, an omnibus is a collection of novels (in this case graphic novels) that are compiled together and published in one larger publication instead of the separate pieces in which they were originally published. These can also be separated in various ways, there may be an omnibus that contains all stories written by a particular writer, or they may be compiled as every story written under a specific banner, i.e., *The Amazing Spider-Man,* or *Ultimate Spider-Man.*

Batman and Spider-Man rank amongst some of the oldest surviving superheroes in existence. As the characters have evolved, certain elements in their stories have become conservative, and can be found in any iteration of their stories. Batman (aka Bruce Wayne) is always an orphan. As a child, he witnessed the double murder of his parents on a back street called Crime Alley (some of the original comic writers were not known for their subtlety). The identity of the murderer, however, is more of a dynamic element. Most stories utilize the character of Joe Chill, a Gothamite down on his luck and desperate for money in hard times. However, some versions of the story write the Joker (Batman's most infamous super villain) as the culprit. Overall, the character of Chill is favored because he was just one random criminal in the city, which serves as the driving force behind Bruce Wayne's never-ending war on crime. His parents were killed by a symptom of the larger problems plaguing Gotham, rather than one high-profile madman. Beyond being raised by his family's butler, Alfred Pennyworth, the rest of Bruce's story opens up into a wide array of narratives. Other than his identity as Batman, and the involvement of Alfred in his vigilante crusade, Batman narratives exhibit what folklorists refer to as dynamic variation.

The stories become dynamic because they are free to operate within previously established parameters or to move on into entirely new territory. In Batman's original stories, he operated alone, with only Alfred knowing his true identity. Later stories introduced Dick Grayson (aka Robin) as a younger sidekick to make Batman more appealing to young boys who could put themselves in Grayson's shoes as they joined Batman on his adventures. This variance becomes the most pronounced when contrasting the hokey and campy tight-clad Adam West Batman with the dark, gritty, and violent

armor-clad Batman of Christian Bale. These stories both derive from the same core

source material, but beyond that, share almost no similarity to one another. While the

range of these variations may seem unusual, it highlights the nature of these characters as

folklore. The old Adam West Batman is now laughably awkward to watch, and may

require a certain degree of nostalgia to get through by today's standards. This contrast

illustrates the evolution of the character, and serves as a key component to the argument

about how Batman has continued to stay relevant nearly one hundred years after his

creation.

Fig 1.1-1.3. *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Batman & Robin,*

Fig. 1.4-1.5. *Batman Beyond*, The New 52- Batman: The Dark Knight.

Much like Batman, Spider-Man's stories have similar static and dynamic elements. Among the static components of any Spider-Man narrative are Peter's absent biological parents (sometimes explained, sometimes not), he is raised by his aunt and uncle, May and Ben Parker, he is bitten by a radioactive spider that imbues him with supernatural powers, and Uncle Ben is killed by a criminal that Peter could have stopped, had he chosen to intervene. Peter Parker also starts his career/double life as Spider-Man while he is still in high school, though some narratives have this take place at the end of his high school career. In the 2002 *Spider-Man* film, Parker is quickly moved into the adult world where his double life clashes with his day-to-day responsibilities. In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the entire film occurs while Peter is still in high school and then moves him into college in the sequel.

Fig. 1.6-1.9. *Spider-Man* (2002), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012). *Ultimate Spider-Man.*

The Spectacular Spider-Man.

Across most Spider-Man stories, his webbing is a synthetic substance that is fired

from twin devices on his wrists. These are devices of Parker's own making, which are

often used to highlight his intelligence and technical genius. In the Raimi films starring

Tobey Maguire, this once static element was altered to be part of Parker's physiological

evolution after he is bitten by the spider. His webbing became something that his body

produced of its own accord rather than an external component of his superhero persona.

Perhaps the most widely discussed elements of Parker's life amongst fans are his relationships with Gwen Stacy and Mary-Jane Watson. The canon of most Spider-Man stories has Parker marrying Mary-Jane years after he has become Spider-Man. Mary-Jane is aware, and generally supportive, of her husband's alter-ego. One of the defining components of Parker's character is the death of his first love Gwen Stacy. In some stories, like *Spider-Man Blue*, Parker dates Gwen before Mary-Jane, even though Mary-Jane grew up next door to Peter's home. Others, like the Raimi films, forego the existence of Gwen almost entirely (except as a ripple in his relationship with MJ in *Spider-Man 3*) and focus on Mary-Jane. Most narratives strike a balance between the two, showcasing his early relationship with Gwen Stacy (as well as its tragic ending), before he begins a committed relationship with Mary-Jane. Others operate in the liminal space between Gwen's death at the hand of Green Goblin and his later marriage to Mary Jane, highlighting the complexity of Parker's life as he is constantly torn between various relationships and obligations. The dynamic variants of these relationships will be discussed in chapter one.

Over the years, the tapestries of both Batman and Spider-Man have continued to expand in scope and complexity. Crossovers with other superheroes have been popular for decades, resulting in the eventual formation of Marvel's Avengers, and DC's Justice League. These narratives allow for larger stories involving multiple heroes and have produced new narratives featuring enemies that no single superhero could tackle alone. These expanded narratives highlight the shortcomings of various heroes, while simultaneously bringing attention to the strengths of others. In instances where the characters are well-balanced (Joss Whedon's *Avengers*, for example) the heroes become

even further humanized and relatable, because they are reliant upon others for mutual success.

As technology has evolved, Batman and Spider-Man have been featured on an ever-growing range of media. What originated with comic books as serialized publications has now spread to television, film, and larger self-contained narratives in graphic novels. Each format brings its own freedoms and restrictions that allow for a diverse range of stories to be told utilizing the same character. Each of these iterations of Batman and Spider-Man differ in their intended audience, the time of their release, and each is shaped by a wide range of external cultural factors ranging from production and contractual complications to events in the real-world.

Superhero Scholarship

The majority of scholarship surrounding superheroes is written from perspectives analyzing them as functions of socio-economics and/or political propaganda. In my preliminary research, there were almost no sources that based their analyses from the perspective of folklore. This issue is highlighted by folklorist Adam Zolkover, one of the few folklorists to tackle this topic, who observes:

> Historically, there has been little space in the discipline of folkloristics for the study of the American comic book. This was the case in 1980 when Alex Scobie wrote that folklorists 'have not evinced the same degree of interest as has been shown by their colleagues in the social sciences' (70). And it is no less true today when, despite an expansion of folkloristics into the realm of popular culture, discussion of sequential art in print remains conspicuously sparse (Zolkover 2008, 38).

While a library could be filled with all the books that have been written about ancient and classic mythology, few folklorists, if any, have taken the stance that superheroes are

folklore. Given their enduring nature over the past century, their rising prominence in culture, and the wide range of narratives, comprised of both static and dynamic elements, coupled with their structural similarities to classic tales, this thesis will argue that superhero narratives fulfill Toelken's twin laws of dynamism and conservatism, fit within the parameters established by hero theorists, and benefit from a folkloristic analysis.

FORGED IN FIRE: THE ROLE OF DEATH AND LOSS IN CREATING

SUPERHEROES

One of the most potent elements of the human experience is the inevitability of death. Whether it is the loss of a pet, or the passing of a loved one, all of humanity must learn to deal with death at some point in time. Because of its compelling, and potentially life-altering nature, death is often a catalyst used in superhero stories. This section will examine the function that death serves in hero tales, both literal and symbolic, and how it shapes both hero and narrative. While death is a universal theme that can be found in many non-folkloric texts, deaths in both Batman and Spider-Man narratives exhibit traditional motifs and key folkloric qualities of dynamism and conservatism. Many deaths are literal, including Bruce Wayne's parents, as well as Peter Parker's Uncle Ben. However, some deaths are symbolic roads to transformation, such as Peter Parker being bitten by a spider that turns him from an average teenager into a super-powered human. Arnold Van Gennep, in his book *Rites of Passage*, states that "man's life resembles nature, from which neither the individual nor the society stands independent. The universe itself is governed by a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward, and periods of relative inactivity" (Van Gennep 1992, 3). Much like the myriad phases of life, superheroes follow their own transformative paths. They are born as mortals, they are symbolically baptized/reborn through tragedy and happenstance, and follow a winding journey until they attain their superhero state. Whether they are showing a symbolic passage from one phase of life to another, or a literal and tragic loss, superhero tales show us not only how to deal with grief and loss, but also how to change and move forward.

Death and Transformation:

For both Bruce and Peter (Batman and Spider-Man respectively), death appears early in the narrative as a life-altering catalyst. A common motif in hero narratives is that the hero is seldom raised by their biological parents. As Raglan observes, the hero is raised by foster/step-parents (Raglan 2003, 174).Bruce witnesses the murders of his parents at a young age, and Peter Parker watches on in horror as his uncle bleeds to death on the street after being shot by a petty thug. These events serve as emotional and psychological markers that define their core characteristics. To use the terminology of Vladimir Propp, both characters are branded (Function VII). These branding forever mark the heroes, and serve as constant reminders of the evils they fight against. Both of these events serve as the driving force that puts them both on their eventual paths to becoming superheroes. Not only are Bruce and Peter emotionally branded by these harrowing experiences, but the losses suffered create a vacuum, or perpetual lack (VIII-a), which they can never truly reconcile. Bruce's lack stems from his personal inability, only being a boy at the time, to protect his parents. Peter's lack, coupled with his chronic guilt, is a result of his own personal inaction. Had he stopped a petty thug when he had the chance, Uncle Ben would still be alive. These traumas also serve to humanize the heroes. Before they became great, they were mere mortals, plagued by human failings that define and mold them even as they ascend to legends. Yes, they perform extraordinary feats in wild and colorful (sometimes literally) costumes, but these are also men who mourn, grieve, and suffer just like the rest of us. This, in turn, serves to make

their future accomplishments all the more noteworthy as they turn from tragic bystanders to proactive heroes.

This early helplessness is conservative across all iterations of both Batman and Spider-Man. Due to their inability to act (Bruce), or their earlier unwillingness to act (Peter), both are forced to helplessly watch their loved ones die. In any iteration that deals with their heroic origins, these deaths, and the related helplessness are conservative across the board.

The death of Bruce Wayne's parents is a scene that has been handled in various forms more than any other deaths in comic book history. There have been so many iterations of this scene, that even those with little regard for Batman are familiar with the story. Perhaps the most potent version of this scene is in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins.* The conservative thread of this story is Thomas and Martha Wayne being gunned down by a common street thug in a place called Crime Alley. Early superhero narratives, much like fairy tales and folk tales, often utilized generic and overt names to quickly convey the nature of a particular area. Crime Alley, the dark forest, the forbidden forest, the shadow realm, the haunted castle, and other names in a similar vein are common place in folklore settings. They serve to convey key information with simplicity and speed. What they lack in complexity, they make up for in efficacy; these are not places that should be taken lightly. In Nolan's version, there is an added layer to this event that helps solidify Bruce's personal sense of responsibility in the tragedy. At the beginning of the film, it is established that Bruce has a phobia of bats after Bruce falls into an abandoned well on the Wayne estate that opened into a cave filled with bats.

Fig. 2.1-2.3. The Death of the Waynes- *Batman Begins, Batman: Year One, Batman: Hush.*

While attending the theater with his parents, who for unknown reasons took their son to a show that included actors portraying bats, Bruce becomes frightened and requests that they leave. After exiting the theater, the Waynes are accosted by Joe Chill, who shoots both Thomas and Martha in a failed attempt at a mugging. Thomas's final words to Bruce are: "Don't be afraid" (Nolan 2006). Later, when Bruce is speaking to Alfred after their funeral, he confesses: "It was all my fault. If I hadn't been afraid…"

This detail is critical in the formation of Bruce's psychology, because he is not only shaped by witnessing the trauma of his parents being murdered, but he bears a sense of complicity in the tragedy.

This sense of personal responsibility, coupled with the random nature of the shooting, turns a young Bruce Wayne onto a very different path than one of his personal wealth would likely find himself on. As Bruce gets older, he comes to understand that Joe Chill, his parents' killer, is a symptom of the larger problems that plague Gotham City. Rather than exacting revenge against Chill, which is Bruce's original plan, he flees the city seeking to travel the world and understand the minds of criminals. Some versions of Batman, such as the George Clooney and Val Kilmer versions, skip over this phase of Bruce's narrative. When we are introduced, Bruce is already Batman, an accepted fact that is not dwelled on for any extended period of time. Other versions, like *Batman Begins,* focus on the beginning of Bruce's trials. This section of Bruce's journey leads him to the doorstep of Ra's al Ghul, Bruce's mentor and eventual nemesis.

This begins a key portion of Bruce's gradual transformation from Bruce Wayne to Batman. Joseph Campbell, in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* refers to this phase of the hero's journey as the Road of Trials. Here "the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (Campbell 2008, 81). During these trials, Bruce makes the change from a defenseless socialite to a warrior who strikes from the shadows. It is at this point that Bruce is introduced to the League of Shadows (often referred to as the League of Assassins in many DC comics). While training under his mentor, a man named Ducard (later revealed to be the League's leader Ra's al-Ghul) Bruce receives guidance and

wisdom. "The training is nothing. The will, is everything. The will to act" (Nolan 2006).

At this point, Ducard/Ra's functions as Bruce's supernatural aid, a character often

depicted as "a little old crone or old man… who provides the adventurer with [support]

against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 2008, 57). In Propp's functions,

this is an example of the enactment of the donor (XII) where "The hero is tested,

interrogated, or attacked, which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent

or helper" (Propp 1968). After failing, at least in the League's eyes, to pass his final trial,

which required Bruce to execute an unarmed prisoner, Bruce destroys the fortress and

escapes to return home. This fulfills point ten in Raglan's criteria, where "[o]n reaching

manhood, [the hero] returns or goes to his future kingdom" (Raglan 2003, 174).

After spending years abroad and training, Bruce returns to Gotham to begin

waging his war against the criminal underworld that is strangling Gotham City. After

gathering intelligence regarding the criminal elements in the city, Bruce completes his

transformation by choosing the symbol of a bat. When approached by Alfred, the Wayne

family Butler, and asked: "Why bats, Master Bruce?" Bruce replies: "Bats frighten me.

It's time my enemies share my dread" (Nolan 2006). While Bruce's trajectory along his

path to becoming Batman started as a child, the traumas of Peter Parker occur at a

different formative stage in his life.

Peter Parker/Spider-Man

Rather than coming from a life of wealth and privilege, Peter Parker's life is

marked early on by a different misfortune. As a young child, Peter is left in the care of his

Uncle Ben and Aunt May, who raise him. Uncle Ben and Aunt May also function as the

"foster parents" who raise the hero, which is point eight in Raglan's schema (Raglan

2003, 174). This is a canonical element in the Spider-Man mythos, but the exact fate of

Peter's biological parents is subject to dynamic variation. The conservative presentation

of Peter's parents is a mere acknowledgement of their absence, Propp's Function I. At

most there are veiled allusions to his parents' deaths. "I know I'm not your father" (Raimi

2002). Peter's parents are barely spoken of, and it is simply understood that, even though

he calls them aunt and uncle, Ben and May Parker are Peter's de-facto parents. More

recent iterations, such as Marc Webb's *Amazing Spider-Man* films, are a dynamic variant

that examine the nature of Peter's biological parents in depth, as well as their ties to the

menacing company Oscorp. Either way, Peter is raised by two loving parental figures

well into his late teens. The transformative deaths that shape Peter Parker into Spider-

Man are twofold: the fateful bite from a genetically engineered spider that imparts

superhuman powers to Peter, and the tragic death of Uncle Ben.

Unlike Batman, who has no superpowers, Peter acquires his powers through a

freak accident involving a unique spider. While Bruce intentionally sought out the aid of

Ra's, Peter's encounter with the spider is sheer happenstance. The spider's physical

presence in any Spider-Man narrative is brief and violent, but covers functions XII-XIV

and XVII in Propp. "(XII) First function of the donor- *The hero is tested, interrogated, or*

attacked, which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper.

(XIII) Hero's reaction- *The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor.* (XIV) Receipt

of a magical agent- *The hero acquires the use of a magical agent* (XVII) Branding- *The*

hero is branded or marked" (Propp 1968). For Peter, the spider is the unintentional donor

of his supernatural powers. These powers are imparted by means of a single bite (an

attack); Peter's immediate reaction is pain, followed by a hellish night where his body undergoes the metamorphosis to his superhuman state. In Campbell's terms, the spider acts as a supernatural aid to the hero. While this aid is often depicted as an old man or woman, the spider is a catalyst of fate. "What [the spider] represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny" (Campbell 2008, 59). Once bitten, or branded, Peter is able to take his first steps on his hero's journey.

Fig. 2.4-2.6. The Spider- *Spider-Man* (2002), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Ultimate Spider-Man.*

In Stan Lee's original version, the spider that bites Peter Parker is radioactive. In the wake of the Manhattan Project, and the twin bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

radiation of the atomic and nuclear nature was often used in comics as a catch-all excuse for the odd happenings of superhero stories. Because the power of radiation is so wild and seemingly limitless, it was not far-fetched (at least by comic book standards) that being bitten by a radioactive spider could pass on spider-like powers to a human being. In reality, if the spider itself were capable of surviving any form of irradiation process, a bite from such a creature would invariably be lethal to a human. In more recent years, the spider is no longer radioactive, but rather genetically modified.

This change in the nature of the creature is an attempt to reconcile myth with evolving fields of modern science. Robert Segal, in his book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, discusses some of the ways in which myth and science can coexist. Segal states that, "[a] much tamer defense against the challenge of modern science has been to reconcile myth with that science. Here elements at odds with modern science are either removed, or, more cleverly, reinterpreted as in fact modern and scientific" (Segal 1999, 12). Because genetic engineering, gene therapy, cloning, and other scientific forays are among the cutting edge of modern research, the bite changes from a radioactive anomaly to altering some of the base genetic structures of Parker's DNA.

The result is a chaotic and confusing night where Peter attempts to sleep it off, and wakes the next day to fascinating results. His strength has increased to super-human proportions, his eyesight has become 20/20, he can now climb walls and stick to various objects, and he has gained a new perceptive sense that borders on ESP. This extra-sensory ability/early warning system is something Parker refers to as his "spider sense." These physical changes are conservative across all versions of Peter Parker in the Spider-Man mythos.

The encounter with the spider is the first symbolic death in the Spider-Man mythos, while Uncle Ben is the first literal death in Peter's narrative. This symbolism is further reinforced in *The Amazing Spider-Man.* Peter is bitten by the genetically engineered spider at Oscorp, and the next scene shows him lying down asleep (i.e. dead) while riding on a subway train, literally passing through the underworld. Peter awakens after another passenger places a half-empty beer bottle on his head, and springs back to life with his new powers. After surviving the bite and waking the next day, Peter is no longer a mere human, having survived his initiation into a superhuman state (Van Gennep 1992, 65). The gods of fate and science imparted great power to Peter, power that he is yet to fully understand or respect. This phase signifies Parker's death as a regular human, but further tragedies will serve as the driving forces that eventually shape him into Spider-Man the hero. This is all worth noting because, unlike the helpless Bruce Wayne who could only watch in horror as his parents died in front him, the death of Uncle Ben could have been avoided.

In all versions of his story, Parker's initial reaction to these new discoveries is a natural one. Being an awkward and socially marginalized teenager who is often bullied and terrorized by his peers, Peter's first order of business is not to develop these new skills for the good of the general public, but to have fun and even a few scores with his resident bully, Flash Thompson. After a very public post-spider bite encounter with Flash, Peter receives a stern lecture from Uncle Ben. The words vary in some iterations, but the most famous in Spider-Man narratives is used in the original Sam Raimi film: "With greater power comes great responsibility" (Raimi 2002). At this point, Peter is still not willing or ready to listen. This milestone in Parker's narrative matches with what

Joseph Campbell referred to as the Call to Adventure and the Refusal of the Call

(Campbell 2008). Uncle Ben, though unaware of Peter's recent metamorphosis,

unknowingly issues to Peter a call to adventure. However, Peter, still driven by his own

self-interests, refuses to answer the call. According to Campbell, this refusal is a natural

part of the hero's journey, and must be passed through before the greater story can begin.

A side effect of refusing the call is the cosmic repercussions involved. "Whatever

[existence] [the hero] builds, it will be a house of death… All he can do is create new

problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration" (Campbell

2008, 49). Here, Peter separates from Uncle Ben. In several versions of Spider-Man's

origin story, he attempts to use his powers to make some side money as an amateur

wrestler in New York.

After successfully thrashing his opponent in the ring, Peter is paid only a small

portion of what he is owed by the manager of the wrestling event. When Peter complains

that he needs the money, the manager responds with: "I'm missing the part where that's

my problem" (*Spider-Man*). In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Peter is at a convenience store

(in this version he is not wrestling, but merely away from home after an argument with

Uncle Ben) and tries to purchase a bottle of milk, but is just a few cents short. The clerk

mocks Peter and tells him that he cannot take change from a container because it's "store

policy" (Webb 2012). After Peter leaves, a man steals money from the

manager/convenience store and runs out into the street. Peter does nothing to intervene

and lets the criminal go. In the Raimi version, when Peter is asked why he didn't stop the

thief, Peter echoes "I missed the part where that's my problem" before leaving the

building. In the Webb version, the clerk asks for help, and Peter replies: "Not my policy."

This reinterpretation of the same motif in differing contexts is what the folklorist Alan Dundes called an "allomotif" (Dundes 1984, 27), meaning that the same idea can be portrayed (in this case Peter's refusal to intervene), but manifest itself in different ways. The result of this indifference leads to the calamity that Campbell refers to when the hero refuses the call.

As Peter leaves, chaos on the street catches his attention. When he arrives at the site of the commotion, he finds a wounded and dying Uncle Ben lying on the street. Peter watches on in horror as Uncle Ben bleeds to death in his arms, only to later find out that the shooter was the same thief that Peter refused to stop just moments before. Peter's grief over the loss of his uncle is compounded by the misery of knowing that it could have been avoided if he had been willing to act. This realization serves as the catalyst that shifts Peter from a self-absorbed teenager to the selfless Spider-Man. He then begins his double-life as a hero that is determined to do everything in his power to prevent any tragedies from occurring around him.

For both Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker, a symbolic death necessitates their individual transformation from mere mortals to powerful heroes. Along with the deaths of their loved ones, they, too, suffer a metaphorical death that moves them into a new plane of existence. A wealthy child heir dies in the streets with his parents to give rise to a tool of wrath that haunts the criminals of Gotham. For Parker, the acquisition of his powers marks his passage from a weak mortal teenager to something superhuman. The later loss of his uncle changes him from a selfish and passive observer to an active instrument fighting against the dark side of New York City. In both stories, the symbolic deaths that spark the transformation are overshadowed by the visage of true death and

loss, which will continue to haunt the heroes even after their transformation into heroes is complete.

By applying the folkloristic ideas of motifs, allomotifs, rites of passage, structural analyses of classic hero tales, this highlights the folkloric nature of these superhero narratives as well as the ever evolving culture that produces them.

Loss and Grief

Loss in these narratives is a broad and complex theme. In this section I will examine the loss of self-identity, loss of friends, and the loss of romantic partners. For each of these sub-themes, I will first discuss how they appear in Batman narratives, and then look at Spider-Man. As mentioned earlier, both Batman and Spider-Man are no strangers to loss. While the deaths of parents (or parent figures) are key formative experiences for both, it is hardly the end of the loss they experience. Often, various narratives within both heroes' respective mythos will combine varying elements of grief, loss, revenge, and transformation. In this section, I will be mainly concerned with the portions of the narratives that deal with the direct experiences of loss and grief. Some examples of loss will deal with the departure of a loved one, rather than the death of a loved one.

The life of a superhero is seldom rewarding, glamorous, or joyful. They are forged in struggle and suffering, and that is often where they remain, whether they want to or not. With Raglan's criteria, we see that the hero's suffering often begins in his youth. An attempt is made on the hero's life while he is young, he is forced to flee, he is raised by foster parents, eventually loses favor with his people, is driven from his home

(yet again), dies mysteriously, is not succeeded by his children, and does not receive a proper burial (Raglan 2003, 174-5). In a similar fashion, we see miseries outlined in Campbell's evaluation of the hero myth. This includes, the punishments of refusing the call, the trials of crossing the thresholds protected by guardians, the belly of the whale (often referred to in colloquialisms such as: "in the thick of it" or "out of the frying pan and into fire") the road of trials, and the difficulty of returning home (just think of *The Odyssey*).

Loss of Self

In the Batman mythos, one of the most powerful losses that narratives explore is when Bruce reaches a point where he can no longer continue being Batman. This idea is a core component of the animated show *Batman Beyond*, which aired in the late 90s. The show begins with an aging Bruce Wayne operating with a high-tech new batsuit to help offset his deteriorating body. While in the process of trying to save a hostage from armed gunmen, Bruce suffers a heart attack. Unable to physically defend himself, he grasps a gun and aims it at one of the assailants, who then flees the scene. Horrified by what he almost did, and reminded of the senseless killing of his parents, Bruce hangs up the mantle of Batman, stating "Never again" (*Batman Beyond* 1999). Bruce then becomes a recluse, passing out of the public eye for many years, until a young man named Terry McGinnis arrives (quite literally) at Bruce's doorstep with news about corruption in Wayne Enterprises and the murder of Terry's father. After stumbling upon the Batcave underneath Wayne Manor, Terry revives the role of Batman and Bruce takes the position

of Terry's logistics and support from the cave (the role originally occupied by Bruce's butler, Alfred).

A similar, though less severe, version of Bruce Wayne's retirement is the focus of the 2012 film *The Dark Knight Rises*. After taking the public blame for the "murder" of Harvey Dent in the previous film *The Dark Knight*, Bruce escapes from the police and abandons his role as Batman. Now devoid of his role as Batman, and reeling from the death of his lifelong friend Rachel Dawes, Bruce falls out of the public eye. He becomes Gotham's version of Howard Hughes, with many citizens speculating over his condition and sudden removal from the public stage. This depression that Bruce slips into highlights how integral Batman is to Bruce's identity. Without Batman, Bruce loses the drive that brought him back to Gotham in the first place. The depth of his dependency upon his Batman identity is stated by Rachel at the end of *Batman Begins* when she tells Bruce that his face (or appearance as Bruce Wayne) is his mask. "Your real face is the one that criminals now fear" (Nolan 2006). This loss of identity and purpose is not unique to just Batman/Bruce Wayne alone. This is a symbolic interpretation of point eighteen in Raglan, wherein the hero dies mysteriously (Raglan 2003, 175). In these particular examples, it is the heroic identity that is symbolically put to rest, even though it is often brief. While the mantle of the heroic identity is buried, both Bruce and Peter must determine for themselves what sacrifices they are willing to make. This operates as a type of Function XXV, where the hero is assigned (by themselves and loved ones) a difficult task (Propp 1968). In these cases, they must decide how long they will sit idly by while others suffer due to their own inaction.

At the end of Sam Raimi's original *Spider-Man* film, we see Peter Parker choose his duty as Spider-Man over this chance to be with Mary-Jane. Deciding that she is safer kept at a distance, Peter moves away from this chance at happiness out of a sense of responsibility to the citizens of New York. Mary-Jane, unaware of Peter's true feelings and in an attempt to move on with her life, begins to date (and is quickly engaged to) John Jameson, an astronaut and son of the notorious J. Jonah Jameson, Peter's editor at the Daily Bugle. While wrestling with the gravity of his decisions, and realizing that his life as Spider-Man destroys any real chance Peter may have at happiness, Peter's powers begin to go haywire. His body stops producing the webbing he needs to swing through the city, his super strength fades, and his eyesight reverts to what it was before the spider bite. While both Bruce and Peter suffer through these psychological breaks, Bruce's deterioration is natural. As the toll of Batman catches up with him over years of inactivity, Peter's decline is a rapid psychological tailspin that cuts him off from his supernatural powers. As Peter's psyche pushes against the personal toll of Spider-Man, his body rebels in response. "Am I not supposed to have what I want?" (Raimi 2004). This inner turmoil leads to Peter abandoning his life as Spider-Man once he decides that the sacrifice is no longer worth the reward. Between his personal sacrifices and Jameson's constant smear campaign against Spider-Man, Peter throws it in for a shot at a normal life. Of course this furlough is short-lived, and once Mary-Jane's life is in danger, Peter snaps out of his slump and resumes his life as Spider-Man.

While these losses are primarily within the minds of Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker, they both suffer much more tangible and tragic losses as well.

Lost Love and Friends

An interesting component to Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy* was his focus on the psychology of Bruce Wayne becoming Batman. In order to help humanize the character of Bruce and make him more relatable, Nolan created the character of Rachel Dawes to serve as an emotional and moral anchor for Bruce. In the Batman mythos, Rachel is a dynamic element that springs up in the otherwise conservative narrative Nolan creates. What is interesting about Bruce in the larger Batman mythos is despite being surrounded by people, he is perpetually alone. While most of his romantic relationships are superficial covers, he has a few where he gives it the old college try. In the graphic novel *Hush*, he has a brief relationship with Selina Kyle (aka Catwoman), but it ultimately fails because of Bruce's own paranoia and chronic mistrust. There is also the hyper complex on-again-off-again relationship Bruce has with Talia al-Ghul, daughter of his mentor Ra's al-Ghul (more on that in chapter two), but none of them ultimately succeed. Because of Bruce being fated (by his own actions) to a life of perpetual solitude, Rachel's introduction into the Batman mythos (sometimes referred to as the "Nolanverse" films), is an interesting one. Rachel is the embodiment of Bruce's lack (Propp VIIIa), the reminder of the love and life he desires, but can never have. With Bruce, we see an example of the hero who ascends to the throne, but ultimately fails in his efforts. Bruce cannot achieve the marriage aspect of the hero's journey, which is point twelve in Raglan, and Function XXXI of Propp. In this way, Rachel signifies the personal cost that being Batman has for Bruce, but also his inability to give up the fight.

While investigating the Joker, a new criminal element in Gotham and one of Batman's most infamous villains, Batman catches the Joker's attention. In the Batman

mythos, the Joker is his most notorious villain. A manic clown with white makeup, green hair, a purple suit, and red lips, the Joker has been popularized on the big screen by Jack Nicholson in the 1989 film *Batman*, and Heath Ledger in 2008's *The Dark Knight.* In *The Dark Knight*, Batman teams up with Commissioner James Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent to take down the large organized crime elements within Gotham City.

As a point of interest, there is a great deal of intertexuality in superhero comics, especially within the same mythos. Many narratives borrow from one another, and are often reflexive and self-referential to other narratives in the same mythos. A conversation that Dent, Gordon, and Batman have in *The Dark Knight* on the rooftop of the Gotham City Police Department is almost a shot-for-shot reflection of a similar conversation the three characters have in Jeph Loeb's graphic novel *Batman: The Long Halloween.* Upon reaching a consensus on how to deal with the mob, Batman disappears when both Dent and Gordon turn to look at each other. In both versions, upon seeing Dent's confusion, Gordon shrugs and says: "He does that." The Batman/Harvey dynamics explored in Nolan's film borrow a great deal from Loeb's work on *The Long Halloween,* and both deal with Harvey's tragic fall from grace and his descent into madness. One of the many great appeals of superhero narratives is the widespread intertextual references littered throughout differing versions. Even though the references are seldom overt, differing versions of the same narrative will often show an awareness of other existing stories. This can be found in similar scenes, as discussed here, or in the use of names for places and characters (for example, the police commissioner before Gordon is named Loeb, after the writer Jeph Loeb who wrote *Batman: The Long Halloween,* and *Batman: Hush*). Fans of the larger Batman mythos (not just one isolated iteration or set of works) can be in on the

self-referential nature of these stories, which gives them both an added layer of complexity, and shows the ever-expanding folkloric underpinnings found within these narratives.

Fig. 2.7-2.8. Gordon, Batman, and Dent- *The Dark Knight*, *The Long Halloween.*

If the image from *The Dark Knight* were focused the same way (with Batman in the center) the positioning of all three characters would be identical, with Gordon on Batman's left, and Dent on the right.

As their combined efforts to shut down the mob become more aggressive, the mobsters of Gotham turn to the Joker as a solution to their problems. What follows is a multi-faceted iteration of Function XVI, "Struggle- The hero and villain join in direct

combat" (Propp). After interrogating the Joker in lockup, Batman is given the location of

both Rachel and Harvey, and Batman and the police race to their locations. Batman gets

Harvey out of the building moments before it explodes, but the flames from the blast

ignite Harvey, burning the left side of his body. Gordon and the police arrive at Rachel's

location too late, and are on scene just as the building explodes with Rachel inside.

Fig. 2.9. Two-Face in *The Dark Knight*.

Between his extensive injuries, and learning of Rachel's death, Harvey snaps and

becomes the villain known as Two-Face. At the beginning of *The Dark Knight*, Harvey is

introduced as another hero for Gotham, a public face contrasted against Batman's efforts

in the shadows. His words of "you either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself

become the villain" (*The Dark Knight* 2008) foreshadow his fall from grace. Harvey's

accident also brands him (Propp XVII), and marks the fractured nature of his mind. Bruce

not only loses his friend Harvey, but is also devastated by Rachel's death, and unaware

that Harvey blames Batman, which ultimately leads to yet another head-on confrontation

with a new villain. After successfully dealing with the Joker, Batman is forced to

confront Two-Face, who has taken Gordon's family hostage, blaming both Gordon and

Batman for Rachel's death. As the situation escalates, Batman tackles Harvey to protect

Gordon's son, and the result is that Harvey falls several stories to his death.

Rather than let all of their work against the mob be undone by Harvey's string of

murders, Batman tells Gordon to pin the blame on him so that all the people arrested by

Dent's prosecution will remain in prison. After losing Rachel and Dent, Bruce is forced

to lose the trust of the city he fought so hard to protect, which shows points sixteen and

seventeen of Raglan's structure where the hero "loses favour with the gods and/or his

subjects, and is driven from the throne and city" (Raglan 2003, 175), ultimately turning

him into a recluse and forcing him to retire from the role of Batman. As Batman flees the

scene, Gordon's son asks:

> James: "Why's he running, Dad?"
> Gordon: "Because we have to chase him."
> James: "He didn't do anything wrong."
> Gordon: "Because he's the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. So we'll hunt him. Because he can take it. Because he's not our hero. He's a silent guardian, a watchful protector. A dark knight" (*The Dark Knight* 2008).

After everything he loses fighting for the city, Batman vanishes from Gotham and Bruce

withdraws from the public eye, unable to keep fighting as Batman with all the grief and

guilt he feels over the events sparked by the Joker and Two-Face.

Spider-Man: Lost Loved Ones

Perhaps the most prominent, and devastating, deaths in the Spider-Man mythos, outside of Uncle Ben of course, are the deaths of Gwen Stacy and her father. Most early comics had a tendency to be pretty light in their material. They were targeted towards kids and teenagers, and the world was already a scary enough place with The Great Depression and World War II. With the exception of pivotal deaths that were key in the character's origin, loss of life was not a common theme in comics. Similar to Bruce's personal losses, Peter also loses close loved ones that are familial, romantic, and friendly in nature. However, in the 1970s, Stan Lee decided to do something a bit different. During the 70s run of *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic, Peter was plagued with some tragedies that would shake him to his core and come to define the character in new and unexpected ways.

The nature of canon in superhero narratives (including all serial printed, television, and film iterations) is tricky to define. For some, anything published by Marvel or DC in their serial publications is considered to be canon. Canon (at least in the Marvel and DC realms) is broken up by two key components: "Serial continuity, which is diachronic (it develops over time), and hierarchical continuity, which is synchronic (the state of affairs at a given moment), combine to produce structural continuity, which is, in short, the entire contents of the DC or Marvel universes" (Reynolds 1992, 41). In other words, most texts that are considered canon fit within the diachronic aspects of the mythos as it evolves over time. However, each iteration (such as the Nolan films) can be viewed as a synchronic (or snapshot) version that holds its own value as a standalone element. However, even this definition is problematic because of how fluid and inter-

related these texts can be. For example, the "Nolanverse" is Batman canon for the extent of Nolan's films, but they are not necessarily dictated by preceding versions of the character. That being said, Nolan's focus on Bruce Wayne's psyche, and introducing his phobia of bats, have become conservative components in subsequent narratives that address his origin, such as The New 52 Batman comics. Another way to look at what differentiate canonical versus non-canonical iterations is whether they fit into the larger continuity of a character. Some texts are clearly Batman, but are not considered part of the canon. Reynolds goes on to say,

> The discarding of texts that can't be fitted into the continuity can take two different forms. Some texts— such as the 1960s Batman television series— were never intended to form part of the overall Batman DC continuity, and fans have no problem separating them in isolation from the canonical works. Their use of a different medium and their unified, campy tone distance the TV shows sufficiently to permit them to operate in their own continuum (Reynolds 1992, 43).

The short answer is that what constitutes "canon" in the Marvel and DC universes is highly variable. First and foremost, they must be published by Marvel or DC Comics, so that excludes things like fan art, fan faction, and so forth (though that is an interesting folk component to these characters), and it must fit in with the structural continuity established by Marvel and DC. Others, like Bendis's *Ultimate Spider-Man*, are canon within the scope of their project (so they are accepted standalone works) that can be incorporated into the larger continuity or considered a valid synchronic point on their own.

The canonical timeline (in this case referring to Stan Lee's original version) of Peter's life has him dating Gwen Stacy before her tragic death at the hands of the Green Goblin. This relationship usually takes place in high school, or early college years, and

precedes Parker's eventual marriage to Mary-Jane Watson. In Stan Lee's original take on
the character, his ill-fated relationship with Gwen takes place during his college years.
Presumably, the two have been involved for some time, long enough for Gwen's father, a
captain in the New York Police Department, to figure out Parker's true identity. Captain
Stacy's original death occurs while Spider-Man is fighting Doc Ock on a rooftop in the
city.

During the brawl, several large pieces of the building are knocked loose and fall
to the street below. Captain Stacy pushes a young boy out of the way, only to be crushed
himself. Spider-Man pulls him from the rubble, and attempts to get him to a doctor, but
not before Captain Stacy requests to be put down and asks a final favor of Spider-Man.
"After I'm gone, there will be no one left to look after her. No one, Peter, except you! Be
good to her son!" (Lee 2012).
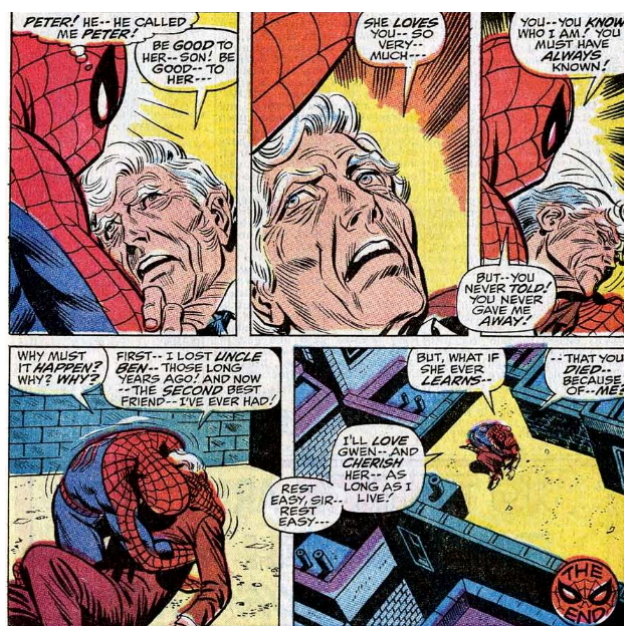
Fig. 2.10. Death of Captain Stacy - *Death of the Stacys*.

Captain Stacy's death rattles Peter, and the guilt he feels over his loss is immense. This

inner conflict is only made worse when Gwen vows to bring Spider-Man to justice,

unaware that Spider-Man is Peter, because she believes that Spider-Man is responsible

for her father's death.

In the 2012 film *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Captain Stacy's death occurs while he

is helping Peter stop the Lizard from unleashing a bio-weapon on New York. In this

version, however, Captain Stacy only just discovered Spider-Man's true identity, and

Gwen is also aware of Peter's secret. After being impaled on the Lizard's claws, Captain

Stacy makes one final request of Peter, though it is very different from Lee's original

version. "I was wrong about you, Peter. The city needs you… You're gonna make

enemies. People will get hurt. Sometimes the people closest to you. So I want you to

promise me something, okay? Leave Gwen out of it. Promise me that, huh? Promise me"

Fig. 2.11. Death of Captain Stacy - *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012)

Still reeling from the loss of Captain Stacy, Peter keeps his word and withdraws from

Gwen. After her father's funeral, which Peter attended by watching from a nearby

rooftop, Gwen confronts Peter about his absence. As she heads down the street away from his house, she turns and asks: "He made you promise, didn't he? To stay away. So that I'd be safe." Ultimately, Peter does not keep his promise (at least the one he made in the *Amazing Spider-Man*), which eventually leads to the tragedy of Gwen's death. The death of Captain Stacy is another example of Dundes's allomotifs, where we see the same idea (the loss of a father figure) demonstrated in two different contexts. This particular story, which started with Lee's version in the 70s, is interesting because it has been done in multiple versions, but also because certain narrative threads have been taken and repurposed.

Even though various elements are used in a wide range of ways, they still center on the loss and misery that Peter suffers (or inadvertently inflicts) in his life as Spider-Man. For example, Gwen's rage against Spider-Man about her father's death is echoed in the 2002 *Spider-Man* film when Harry Osborn blames Spider-Man for his father's death. "I didn't lose him. He was taken from me. Spider-Man will pay. I swear on my father's grave, Spider-Man will pay" (*Spider-Man* 2002). Even Norman Osborn/Green Goblin's death in the original *Death of the Stacys* arc is identical to how he dies in *Spider-Man* (impaled by his own glider while trying to kill Spider-Man with it), even though Gwen doesn't appear in the original Raimi film. In Lee's original story, Gwen dies (presumably from a broken neck due to severe whiplash) after falling from the George Washington Bridge and being caught by Spider-Man's webs. Similarly, Mary-Jane is taken by the Green Goblin and held at the top of a bridge, though Spider-Man manages to save her.

Fig. 2.12-2.13. Death of Green Goblin- *Death of the Stacys*, *Spider-Man* (2002).

While the death of Captain Stacy weighs heavily on Peter's mind, Gwen's has a paralyzing effect on Peter. Certain that his webbing saved her life, he is crushed to discover that Gwen is gone. "I saved you, honey… don't you see? I saved you" (Lee 2012, 125). Because of the visual nature of comic books, there were several visual cues foreshadowing Gwen's death in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. Fans familiar with the source material debated whether or not director Marc Webb would kill off Gwen's character in the 2014 sequel. As the film moved towards its climax, however, there left little doubt that Gwen would not survive the film, and that Webb would stay loyal to the source material.

Gwen's appearance (a light blue jacket, purple skirt, and dark blouse) is almost

identical to the way Gwen is dressed in Lee's original story. Rather than the final

moments taking place on a bridge, Gwen is dropped through the skylight of a clock

tower. Spider-Man manages to catch her and softens the landing, but he is forced to drop

her onto some large gears lower in the tower to keep her away from the Green Goblin (in

this version it is Peter's friend Harry, not Harry's father). As the fight ensues, the web

strand Gwen is hanging from is severed after a gear Peter had been jamming with his foot

slips loose. The thread breaks, and the camera cuts to an outside view of the clock tower,

which rolls to 1:21 and slams to a stop. This is a subtle nod to Lee's version, because in

the original *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic, Gwen dies in issue #121.

Fig. 2.14-15. Death of Gwen Stacy- *Death of the Stacys*, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*

One of the main controversies over Gwen's death in the original story is whether

or not whiplash would be sufficient to have killed her. She is unconscious when she falls,

and Spider-Man's web catches her by the leg, but her momentum causes her head to snap back. In the film, any potential ambiguity is removed. Spider-Man catches her by the stomach just before she hits the ground, but this causes her to bend in an inverted U shape, and her head hits the ground with the sickening thud. After Gwen's funeral, and devastated by her loss, Peter gives up being Spider-Man for the better part of a year. Unable to rid himself of the guilt over both Gwen and her father, Peter shuts down. Even as the news broadcasts speak of escalating crime rates and inquire about the inexplicable absence of Spider-Man, it is not until Peter's Aunt May has a heartfelt conversation and Peter watches a recording of Gwen's graduation speech that he is able to shake himself out of the rut he is in and resume being Spider-Man

.

The Catalyst of Vengeance and the Refusal to Kill

Even though both Batman and Spider-Man operate in a world filled with violence, both heroes, unlike contemporaries such as Wolverine or the Punisher, refuse to kill. Here we see a fusion of the impact that both loss and death have on these characters. Scarred by their own traumas, both Batman and Spider-Man adopt a refusal to kill into their personal creeds. Choosing to rise above and set themselves apart from the filth they fight helps them both maintain their integrity. When scolded by Ra's al-Ghul that his mercy is something his enemies will not share, Bruce responds: "That's why it's so important. It separates us from them" (*Batman Begins* 2006). Part of their individual creeds is that all life, regardless of whether criminal or innocent, deserves the chance to live and change. This clarity, and implied trust of the justice/legal system, is a hard won conviction that stems from both heroes whom are initially driven by vengeance. As mentioned earlier in

the chapter, Bruce Wayne's initial driving force was the twin murder of his parents as a child. After seeking vengeance against their killer, Bruce finds that seeing his parents' killer dead (in Nolan's version Joe Chill is murdered by a mafia thug outside the courthouse) does little to ease his personal pain.

For Peter Parker/Spider-Man, it was tracking down his uncle's killer. In the Raimi film, Peter finds the killer and is indirectly responsible for causing the culprit to fall from a window to his death. In *Ultimate Spider-Man* by Brian Michael Bendis, Peter finds the killer, but leaves him tied up for the police to arrest, and in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Peter never finds his uncle's killer, despite a short vendetta spent tracking down suspects that match the description of Ben's murderer. Regardless of which version is being examined, Peter, too, begins his journey by seeking vengeance, which ultimately leads him to a devout philosophy of non-lethal engagement with criminals.

Despite their personal philosophies of not killing criminals, both Batman and Spider-Man are often pitted against villains who would love nothing more than to kill them. While they do not believe in killing, there are times that their rage almost gets the better of them. The most notable conflicts with straddling the line between killing a criminal and sparing them are the myriad battles that Batman has with the Joker. In the graphic novel *Hush*, Batman nearly beats the Joker to death and is only stopped by Selina Kyle (Catwoman).

Fig. 2.16. Batman almost kills the Joker- *Batman: Hush*.

In other encounters, Batman goes to immense lengths to avoid killing the Joker. This becomes the most pronounced in *The Death of the Family* when the Joker tries to convince Bruce's "family" (Nightwing, Robin, Alfred, and Batgirl) that Bruce cares more about the Joker than his own loved ones because if Bruce would just kill the Joker, they would all be spared a great deal of pain. Batman finally catches the Joker by a waterfall and accidentally drops him when the Joker hits him in the face with a taser.

We also see great restraint when Batman saves the Joker from falling to his death in *The Dark Knight.* After a brutal fight with the Joker, Batman catches the Joker off guard and throws him off and over a railing. As the Joker falls, Batman catches him with his grappling hook and leaves him for the police to find and take into custody. Even though it would have been easier to let the Joker fall to his death, especially considering

the misery he caused for the city, Batman decides to let him live and trust the system to punish him accordingly.

Of course, sometimes these lines become more blurred. An example of straddling this line is when Bruce confronts Ra's al-Ghul at the end of *Batman Begins.* Throughout his time as Ra's al-Ghul's apprentice, Bruce was constantly asked if he had "the will to do what is necessary" (*Batman Begins* 2006). In the first act of the film, Bruce refuses to execute a man accused of killing his neighbor for his land. This execution would be Bruce's final test before gaining full membership within the League. Bruce refuses, and instead ignites a powder reserve within the League's fortress, allowing Bruce to escape in the confusion. Before he does, he saves Ra's (though at the time, Bruce only knows him as Ducard) from falling off a cliff and leaves him in a nearby village.

The two meet later in a final showdown at the end of the film. The battle is on a train carrying a device capable of destroying the entire city. Unknown to Ra's, Batman has enlisted the help of Gordon, who is ahead of the train attempting to sabotage the rail line and stop the train. Batman defeats Ra's and pins him to the floor. Ra's again asks: "Have you finally learned to do what is necessary?" to which Batman replies, "I won't kill you, but I don't have to save you" (*Batman Begins* 2006). Batman then blows a hole in the train and glides to safety, leaving Ra's to plummet to his death at the hands of his own maniacal scheme.

On rare occasions, Bruce's rage has to be restrained from going over the line (as illustrated in *Hush*), but often his commitment to the preservation of life is absolute. Even in cases like the Joker, where it would probably be better for all parties if Batman simply

killed him, he holds to his ideals in the hopes that someday the criminals he faces may be saved from themselves.

In a similar fashion, Peter Parker's journey begins on a dangerous path of vengeance as he seeks to track down Uncle Ben's killer. In the first *Spider-Man* film, Peter is almost immediately successful, and corners the killer in an abandoned warehouse. Still wrestling with out of control emotions (in this version Ben had just been killed on the same night Peter finds the perpetrator), Peter smashes the killer's head through two windows, breaks his wrist, and throws him against a wall. It is at this point that Peter sees the criminal's face and realizes that it is the same man who Peter refused to stop at the wrestling arena. The man attempts to stab Peter, only to be knocked off balance and falling through a window to his death. In Brian Michael Bendis's *Ultimate Spider-Man*, Peter finds the killer that night as well, and after a short scrap, the man is tossed hanging from a window, alive and unhurt (for the most part). In *The Amazing Spider-Man* 2012, Peter goes on a rampage throughout New York, where he tracks down any suspect that matches the description of Ben's killer. After a close call with a thug and his friends, Peter decides that the best way to honor his uncle's memory is to put his powers to use for the good of the city rather than for vengeance.

Each of these iterations addresses the conservative element of Peter trying to find Ben's killer, but the details of each version are dynamic. In one, Peter defends himself, inadvertently causing the criminal to fall to his death, another Peter subdues the man and leaves him to the authorities, and the third finds him giving up the pursuit. While there have been multiple tellings of this part of Spider-Man's story, there is no consensus about

the fate of Ben's killer across the wide range of narratives that address this portion of Spider-Man's origin.

Spider-Man's mercy is not only extended to the common street thugs he thwarts on a daily basis, many of which he leaves dangling from street lights or stuck on giant webs like flies, but also to his larger and more powerful foes, such as the Green Goblin. In Lee's original story, after the death of Gwen on the bridge, Spider-Man goes after the Green Goblin with the intent to avenge Gwen's death. Even in the grips of his grief and rage, Spider-Man stops short of killing the Goblin once he realizes that, just like Uncle Ben, harming someone else will not bring back what he has lost. After Spider-Man decides to spare him, Norman (aka Green Goblin) responds by trying to use his glider to kill Spider-Man from behind. Spider-Man dodges the glider, but that instead puts it on a collision course with the Goblin, and he is killed by his own weapon. The Green Goblin's death in this manner is a conservative element in both Lee's story from the 70s and Raimi's *Spider-Man.*

While narratives about death are certainly not unique to folklore, the way these narratives manifest are. The deaths that occur in both the Batman and Spider-Man mythos exhibit Toelken's twin laws of dynamism and conservatism. Whether it is the conservative deaths of Bruce's parents, Uncle Ben, or Gwen Stacy and her father, there are also multiple dynamic versions of the same core story. In some stories, the Joker kills Bruce's parents, in others, it is Joe Chill. Gwen's original death on a New York bridge appears in Mary Jane's near death experience at the end of *Spider-Man* 2002. Again, this highlights the folkloric concept of there being no absolute or correct version of a story. The Raimi films are just as valid as the Webb films, and are no less accepted than Stan

Lee's original work. The narratives can reflect one another, but there is no true or correct version.

In the individual journeys of Bruce and Peter, we see dynamic takes on Propp's functions, with genetically modified spiders acting as supernatural agents/donors, or the encouraging words of lost loves reaching beyond the grave via digital recordings. These heroes exemplify literal death, bearing the burden of early trauma and guilt born from inaction (or inability), as well as symbolic death through transformative experiences both spiritual and physical in nature. Whether the deaths they bear are real tragedies, or a mere passage from one phase of the hero's journey to another, death's visage casts a wide shadow that manifests itself in both conservative and dynamic versions of Batman and Spider-Man narratives. Despite being elements of pop culture, these narratives show dynamic variation, as well as conservatism in their presentation. The narratives (some of which are separated by decades) reflect one another, while simultaneously being adjusted to ensure their continued relevance within their cultural landscapes. Even though each iteration is not folklore in and of itself, there is still value in examining how these stories shift and move in a folkloric way over time.

THE HERO'S BURDEN: A LIFE OF LOVE AND SACRIFICE

If death and mortality are common themes across mythology, then so too are the high points of life, such as love. Now love, in its many forms, is a complex idea, but I will endeavor to focus in on a few key manifestations of love, namely: romantic, familial, sacrificial, and dutiful. Though it is true in many other places around the world, there is a particular history here in the United States of reverence and respect for civil servants. This includes policemen, firefighters, and our military personnel. In a similar manner, we hold our superheroes (though fictional) in high esteem, because they are portrayed as the embodiment of American ideals. We hold in high regard remarkable men and women who choose to put themselves in harm's way for the benefit of their fellow man. When the term "American Hero" is used in conversation, we are often referring to these types of individuals. Despite this respect, their daily and regular acts of sacrifice and heroism often go unappreciated. In a similar vein, there is a tendency to see these individuals by their job rather than as a person. For example, we might be upset with a police officer for giving us a ticket or being "unreasonable," but we may not consider that they may have suffered a death in the family, or they may be struggling with financial issues, or any number of human-centric factors we cannot see.

Enter the superhero. What are superheroes if not hyper concentrated embodiments of American idealism? They exhibit bravery and sacrifice, often in the face of personal difficulties, and they often go unappreciated by the very people they seek to protect. At times, they are even persecuted by the very souls they aim to save on a daily basis. Along with these remarkable actions, they are, at their core, very human characters. They love,

dream, and struggle with maintaining a whole and balanced life. This complexity of character is a unique element to the contemporary hero narrative. While classic heroes had ambitions (Odysseus wanted to go home to his family), this internal struggle between the hero as a man (or woman, in some cases) and their superhero alter ego is a new layer of complexity added to superhero narratives that is not found in traditional hero tales. Regardless of this additional facet, superheroes possess this in addition to (not at the expense of) the other traditional elements in hero tales.

It should be noted, however, that as superheroes have evolved and expanded over the years, the American ideal-centric formula has been played with. There are alternate reality comic arcs that take a "what if?" angle to the conservative elements of the heroes. A prime example is the Superman graphic novel *Red Son* which explores how Superman would have turned out differently had he landed in Soviet Russia rather than the plains of Kansas. There are also anti-heroes like The Punisher and Deadpool, who toe the line between hero and villain. The Punisher is a particularly dark and violent character, who has no moral dilemma when it comes to killing. Pimps, drug dealers, and crime lords are all fair game and are often put in Frank Castle's (The Punisher) crosshairs. However, as I have mentioned, a thorough examination of superheroes in all their varieties and iterations is an undertaking that exceeds the scope of what I aim to accomplish here, which is a discussion of American superheroes as folklore.

Romantic Love

One of the components of the hero's journey is the hero's role as a lover. While

Campbell's work is no doubt skewed in examining male heroes (female heroines,

particularly superheroes, are a more recent trend in hero folktales), his examination still

holds value. While there is not a great deal of academic criticism leveled against

Campbell's work, Robert Segal does acknowledge that Campbell's greatest limitation is

his general disregard towards religion.

> As hostile as [Campbell] variously is toward Christianity, toward western
> religions as a whole, toward eastern religions, toward primitive religions, and
> most of all toward religion per se, he is especially hostile toward Judaism. Even if
> his aversion to the supposedly patriarchal, literalistic, exclusivist, and anti-
> mystical character of Judaism is an instance of his aversion to these characteristics
> in other religions, he still singles out Judaism as the worst offender (Segal 1999,
> 461).

There are also some interesting (and somewhat amusing) arguments against Campbell's

lack of consideration for female heroines at the folk (public blogger) level. An article

titled "Eight Reasons Why the Hero's Journey Sucks" argues that: "Why does the hero

encounter the goddess halfway through? Because she's hawt and he's a guy. If the hero

was a chick, would the goddess be a dude? Somehow we doubt it" (Anders 2008).

Despite Campbell's theories being male-centric and dismissive of various theologies, his

ideas still hold merit for an examination of secular male heroes. Part of Campbell's

examination looks at the role that woman plays in relation to the male heteronormative

hero.

"[Woman] is the maiden of the innumerable dragon slayings, the bride abducted

from the jealous father, the virgin rescued from the unholy lover. She is the 'other

portion' of the hero himself—for 'each is both'" (Campbell 2008, 293). Finding love is

often the hero's reward for completing a difficult and arduous task, but as Campbell states, the woman serves a key function in the completion of the hero. Without love, they are incomplete or broken. Since most hero tales are often tragic in nature, this bliss of wholeness and love is usually short-lived or ill-fated, but no less potent and powerful.

As far as the larger Batman mythos is concerned, the character of Rachel Dawes (a character that Nolan created for his *Dark Knight Trilogy*) is a dynamic element introduced to help reflect Bruce's humanity. From a structural standpoint, Rachel exists as a version of function thirty-one in Propp's "Dramatis Personae." Function thirty-one is the wedding, where the hero marries the princess and/or ascends to his rightful place on the throne (Propp 1968). In Bruce's case, this element is frustrated. While he assumes control of his family's company, his alternate life as Batman bars him from living a life with her, an aspect of his life that is perpetually frustrated. Rachel's role in Bruce's life is further complicated by the fact that the two were childhood friends, and presumably have been in love for quite some time. After Joe Chill is killed outside the courthouse, the two get into an argument about whether vengeance can serve to fulfill justice.

> Bruce: "My parents deserved justice."
> Rachel: "You're not taking about justice, you're talking about revenge."
> B: "Sometimes they're the same."
> R: "No, they're never the same, Bruce. Justice is about harmony, revenge is about making yourself feel better" (*Batman Begins* 2006).

Once Bruce admits that he planned on shooting Chill and shows Rachel a loaded revolver, she slaps him repeatedly. "Your father would be ashamed." After this argument with Rachel, Bruce flees the city and travels abroad, ultimately meeting the League of Shadows and beginning his journey toward becoming Batman. Bruce's departure, and eventual return to Gotham years later, exemplifies points seven and ten in Raglan's

schema. The hero is spirited away, in this case of his own accord, and after years abroad,

he returns to Gotham to eventually reclaim his kingdom, in this case, Wayne Enterprises

(Raglan 2003).

Upon his return, Bruce puts on the act of an eccentric and self-centered billionaire

to help preserve his true identity as Batman. Bruce goes to dinner at a hotel with two

models and promptly purchases the hotel and goes "swimming" in the decorative pools in

the dining room. As he exits the hotel, he runs into Rachel (this being the first time

they've seen each other since his return to Gotham after his years abroad).

> Rachel: "You were gone a long time."
> Bruce: "I know. How are things?"
> R: "The same. Job's getting worse."
> B: "Can't change the world on your own."
> R: "What choice do I have when you're too busy swimming?"
> B: "Rachel, all- all this, it- it's not me, inside, I am, I am more."
> R: "Bruce, deep down you may still be that same great kid you used to be, but it's
> not who you are underneath, it's what you do that defines you" (*Batman Begins*
> 2006).

The relationship between the two remains strained throughout the film. Rachel is unable

to reconcile the seemingly selfish man Bruce has become with the young man she knew

and loved growing up. In turn, Bruce is pained by the fact that Rachel must be kept out of

the loop regarding his secret identity. Even though he later saves Rachel from the

psychotic Doctor Crane, she is still kept in the dark about Batman's true identity.

It is not until the climax of the film that Rachel learns the truth about Bruce. With

the inmates of Arkham Asylum (one of the most prominent locales in the Batman

mythos), a mental asylum for the criminally insane, turned loose onto the streets of

Gotham, Batman saves Rachel from a crowd of armed inmates who are overrunning the

Narrows (one of Gotham's poorer districts). Leaving her safely on the roof before

heading off to confront Ra's and thwart his plan; Rachel stops Batman before he leaves.

> Rachel: "Wait. You could die. At least tell me your name."
> Batman: "It's not who I am underneath, but what I do, that defines me."
> Rachel: "Bruce?"

Batman then leaps off the rooftop to deal with the larger problem threatening the city.

Batman pauses just long enough for his words to register with Rachel before leaping from

the rooftop to confront Ra's. Here, Rachel serves as the catalyst for function twenty-

seven, "Recognition." In the brief moment after Batman leaps back into the fray,

Batman's identity is laid before Rachel, and Bruce's journey as Batman is made clear. In

the aftermath of Ra's al-Ghul's attack on Gotham, Rachel sees Bruce with her new

understanding of his true identity.

> Bruce: I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Rachel...
> Rachel: No. No, Bruce, I'm sorry. The day Chill died I... I said terrible things.
> Bruce Wayne: But true things. I was a coward with a gun. Justice is about more than revenge, so thank you.
> Rachel: I never stopped thinking about you. About us. And when I heard you were back, I... I started to hope… Then I found out about your mask.
> Bruce: Batman's just a symbol, Rachel.
> Rachel: [Rachel touches Bruce's face] No, no, this... is your mask. Your real face is the one that criminals now fear. The man I loved - the man who vanished - he never came back at all. But maybe he's still out there, somewhere. Maybe someday, when Gotham no longer needs Batman, I'll see him again (*Batman Begins* 2006).

Rachel's claim that Bruce's actual face is his true mask is a dynamic interpretation of

Propp's function twenty-nine, Transfiguration (Propp 1968). Even though Bruce's

physical appearance remains the same, he has symbolically transformed. Bruce Wayne

has become his cover, and his heroic identity as Batman has transfigured to be his new

(and truest) self. The ending to the film is interesting because it is an inversion of the

traditional hero tale theme of marrying the princess. In this particular case, the hero

doesn't get the girl, even though she still remains an important part of his life. It also illustrates an important degree of personal growth on Bruce's part, since he is often characterized by extreme mistrust of others. In the case of Rachel, he entrusts her with knowledge of his alter ego, even though it could prove to be a liability in the future. And while the relationship ultimately ends in tragedy, it is still nevertheless an important aspect of Bruce's character that carries with him even after Rachel's tragic death in *The Dark Knight.*

While my primary purpose is to examine how dynamic and conservative elements operate within the same mythos, it is, at times, useful to compare the two heroes and how they relate and differ from one another. Unlike Peter Parker, who is often involved in genuine romantic relationships with "regular" people, Bruce Wayne's romantic partners consist of two main camps: shallow cover relationships with beautiful women (often models) to help solidify his billionaire playboy façade, or hyper complex (albeit genuine) relationships with women who straddle the line between villain and ally. In Batman canon (canon in this case referring to written, published, and accepted works within the mythos), Bruce has two main relationships outside of his public appearances. The first is with Selina Kyle (aka Catwoman), a cat burglar and high end thief who operates from a morally grey area, and the second is Talia al-Ghul, daughter of Bruce's mentor Ra's, and mother to their son Damian Wayne.

Of these two, Bruce's relationship with Talia, a byproduct of his years spent training with the League of Assassins, is the primary focus of DC Comics New 52 run. Talia is an interesting character because she is a more conservative depiction of Raglan's princess. She is the daughter of Ra's al-Ghul, Bruce's mentor and leader of the League of

Assassins. She is Ra's' direct successor, often referred to as the "Heir to the Demon." While it is no doubt a twisted monarchy, in this context she is essentially royalty. A great deal of conflict between Ra's and Bruce stems from Bruce's refusal to assume control of the League from Ra's and marry Talia, which are points twelve and thirteen in Raglan's schema: "(12) [The hero] marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor [Ra's], and (13) Becomes king" (Raglan 2003). This is complicated, because while the two are a couple (albeit a very odd one), they never marry. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* outlines that one of the great calamities a hero brings upon himself is the refusal of the call (Campbell 2008). It is because of Bruce's constant refusal to heed the call of Ra's al-Ghul that he so often incurs the wrath of the League, which often puts Talia in a strained position of torn loyalties between her father (and king), and Bruce as her lover. Talia and Bruce's relationship is highlighted in The New 52 comics by way of the presence of their son, Damian.

The New 52 comics, an initiative started by DC a few years back which involved a complete reboot of fifty-two different comic titles (many of which are Batman titles), focuses on Damian's presence in Bruce's life. After being dropped off by Talia so that he might learn a more tempered approach to fighting criminality from his father, Damian assumes the role of Robin and works alongside Bruce in Gotham City. Damian's tutelage under his father is an unspoken inversion of point twenty from Raglan that states the hero is not succeeded by his children. In Damian's case, it is implied that Damian would take Bruce's place as Batman when the time came, creating a dynamic twist on Raglan's structure. In most versions of the Bruce and Talia relationship, Bruce is very much aware of Talia's identity as the daughter of Ra's, as well as her position as second-in-command

of the League of Assassins. As is Nolan's tendency, Talia is introduced in *The Dark Knight Rises* as a dynamic element, because she is posing as the businesswoman Miranda Tate. Bruce falls for her, but is unaware of his parentage. The conservative versions of this relationship have Bruce aware of Talia, though the two are often at odds over their disagreement about taking the lives of criminals.

Fig. 3.1-3.2. Talia al-Ghul- *Son of Batman*, *The Dark Knight Rises.*

Peter's Great Loves: Gwen and Mary-Jane

As I discussed in the first chapter, one of the most powerful romantic relationships in Peter Parker's life is his relationship with Gwen Stacy. Gwen is an interesting character because she rivals Peter in his intelligence, and is similarly inclined towards the sciences as an academic discipline. Most iterations of Gwen's character set her as the opposite of Mary Jane (Peter's other prominent love interest), with Mary Jane being more street savvy (though Brian Michael Bendis inverts this role in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* comics). Bendis's take on Gwen and Mary Jane is dynamic because we are

introduced to a more nerdy depiction of Mary Jane, whereas Gwen is introduced as a

punk rock rebel that pulls switch blades on her classmates for harassing Peter.

Fig. 3.3-3.4. Gwen Stacy- *Ultimate Spider-Man*, Mary Jane- *Ultimate Spider-Man.*

These dynamic variants are of critical importance, not only within the Spider-Man

mythos, but for the evolution of superhero narratives as a type of heroic folk tale. Just as

the conservative and canonical elements are important to note, the variance is perhaps

even greater in its theoretical value. As the folklorist Theo Van Baaren notes,

> The occurrence of changes in a myth as such does not mean that the myth in
> question is beginning to lose its function and will probably disappear in time; on
> the contrary, changes in myth occur as a rule to prevent loss of function or total
> disappearance by changing it in such a way that it can be maintained. By
> changing it, a myth is adapted to a new situation, armed to withstand a new
> challenge (Van Baaren 1984, 218).

Bendis's dynamic interpretation of two of Spider-Man's most iconic female leads is not only a breath of fresh air, but allows him the liberty to branch out and do something different with the Spider-Man myth. Because Bendis broke the conservative form of Spider-Man narratives, it allowed his *Ultimate Spider-Man* run (which clocks in at around 160 issues) to be one of the most popular and long-running takes on the wall crawler that has ever been produced.

Stan Lee's original depiction of Gwen showed a sweet and intelligent young woman who was Peter's best friend. In Lee's arc back in the 70s, the couple was college age and both living in New York City proper. The two were very close and had been dating for some time, which is indicated by the fatherly attitude of George Stacy, Gwen's father, towards Peter. Their interactions were very flirtatious, and in the tradition of 70s era comic writing, a little unusual.

Fig. 3.5. Peter and Gwen- *Death of the Stacys*.

Despite the close nature of their relationship, Gwen is never aware of Spider-Man's true identity, even though her father put two-and-two together, but never said anything. While the dialogue may be a bit cheesy by today's more gritty and realistic standards (it is entirely possible that people spoke this way in the 70s on a regular basis), the dynamic between Peter and Gwen is still a strong one.

What is interesting about the Peter/Gwen relationship is how dynamic the various iterations can be. The Peter/Gwen relationship is the most conservative take on Peter's love life, because it is the original (or "ur" form) version that Lee created. While Gwen's arc (Peter's first love combined with her tragic death) is the most canonical in Spider-Man's mythos, there are many dynamic variations that change the roles of Mary Jane and Gwen, as well as the order they appear in Peter's life. The conservative trajectory of the Spider-Man narrative puts Peter and Gwen together first, and only later does he begin dating Mary Jane, but even with narratives that focus on Gwen's role in Peter's life, her representations are very different. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* 2012 and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, we see an intelligent and mature Gwen in her late high school/early college years without the conflicting presence of Mary Jane. The ironically named Marc Webb, director of the *Amazing Spider-Man* films, decided to focus on the relationship between Peter and Gwen, which worked out well for the two films. The success of the films is due in no small part to the chemistry between Andrew Garfield (Peter) and Emma Stone (Gwen) because the two are a couple in real life, having first met on the set of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. This off-screen component makes the intensity and sincerity of Peter and Gwen more convincing, which only serves to highlight just how important

Gwen is to Peter. Right before the film's climax, Peter decides to leave New York and

follow Gwen.

> You're wrong about us being on different paths. We're not on different paths.
> You're my path. And you're always gonna be my path. And I know there's a
> million reasons why we shouldn't be together. I know that. But I'm tired of them.
> I'm tired of every single one of them. We've all gotta make a choice. Right? Well,
> I choose you. So, here's my thought. England. Both of us. I'm following you now.
> I'm just gonna follow you everywhere. I'm just gonna follow you the rest of my
> life (*The Amazing Spider-Man 2*).

In *The Spectacular Spider-Man* television show, we are introduced to a younger

(and somewhat socially awkward) Gwen that leans a bit more toward a geek stereotype.

In *Spectacular*, we are also treated the sometimes awkward love triangle of Peter, Gwen,

and Mary Jane.

The complex relationship between Peter, Gwen, and Mary Jane is a key

component of Jeph Loeb's (yes, the writer of *Batman: The Long Halloween*) graphic

novel *Spider-Man: Blue*. The story begins with Peter stating: "This is the story of how we

fell in love. Or, more appropriately, how we almost didn't fall in love" (Loeb 2011, 1).

The premise of *Blue* is an older Peter, now married to Mary Jane, who still carries with

him the burden of Gwen's death, even years after the fact. This works as function XVII,

where the hero is branded (Propp 1968). In Peter's case, the branding is spiritual rather

than physical. Even though he has moved on and started a life with Mary Jane, Peter still

carries the symbolic mark left by Gwen's death, as well as the death of her father.

The entire story is told as a flashback, with Peter providing narration about the

story's events as he uses a tape recorder to tell the story of their relationship to a deceased

Gwen. While Peter's objective for this behavior is never clearly stated, it is implied that

even though he is (presumably) happy in his marriage to MJ, that he still carries the guilt

of losing Gwen, and that discussing his past with Gwen's memory is somehow therapeutic for him.

Arguably one of the most problematic depictions of Gwen's character came in Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 3* which was released in 2007. The film received mixed reviews from critics and fans alike, and this can be partly ascribed to the offhand manner in which Gwen was presented. Gwen's presence in *Spider-Man 3* was problematic because conservative threads in the Spider-Man mythos place her in Peter's life before Mary Jane, not well after Peter and MJ have been together. Gwen's character is shoehorned into the film to serve as an additional complication for Peter and Mary Jane's floundering relationship, but this version misses the mark as far as establishing the monumental impact Gwen is supposed to have made on Peter's life. While Raimi no doubt took a creative liberty with the source material, this particular version did not take well. We see more shots of Gwen trying to build a modeling career (traditionally Mary Jane's trajectory) than we do of her showing herself as Peter's intellectual rival. Despite the generally negative response to *Spider-Man 3*, Gwen was not the only issue with the film; however, its presence in the Spider-Man mythos highlights an important aspect of folklore. Raimi created a dynamic variant that deviated so widely from the conservative story, and was so poorly executed, that it was killed off. Part of a narrative's persistence deals with whether or not it is successful and perpetuated by the receivers (in this case the audience). Due in part to its poor reception, *Spider-Man 3* marked the end of Raimi's involvement with Spider-Man narratives. This also highlights the self-correcting nature of folklore. Raimi's variation on Gwen deviated too much from the core material, and was so poorly executed, that this caused a severe amount of backlash from the fan base.

Because Raimi's take was too far from the canonical Gwen, the result is a story that used up its relevance by the time the credits began to roll and has since been corrected in later versions of the character.

Fig. 3.6-3.8. Different versions of Gwen Stacy - *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Spider-Man 3*, *The Spectacular Spider-Man.*

In the Spider-Man mythos, Peter's primary (and longest lasting) love is Mary Jane. While the conservative element of Peter's narrative is that he winds up with Mary Jane (in narratives that look at an older adult Peter the two are often married), the nature of this relationship and the interactions between the two are very dynamic in their presentation. Most versions of MJ present her as the pretty "girl next door" type who goes on to be a model and/or Broadway actress. While certainly not stupid, MJ does not rival Gwen or Peter in her own intelligence, which is an idea that Brian Michael Bendis twists around in *Ultimate Spider-Man.* Rather than MJ being a more shallow and less complex character, Mary Jane is often referred to as "Brainy Jane", and assumes the role

of Peter's best friend and confidant which is typically reserved for Gwen. Even though

Gwen is present as a character in Bendis's arc, her role is more secondary than that of

Mary Jane's. This is interesting because Bendis's *Ultimate* story is one of the largest

coherent arcs in Marvel history, spanning over twenty volumes and comprising roughly

one-hundred and sixty issues over a period of several years, giving it a great deal of

weight in the Marvel universe.

Fig. 3.9-3.11. Different versions of Mary Jane- *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man: Blue*,
Ultimate Spider-Man (TV).

Within the Sam Raimi films, we see a more conservative take on Mary Jane's

character that takes its lead from Lee's original imagination of the character as the

beautiful girl next door. She is depicted as more socially shallow, at least while they are

in high school, though she does become more complex as the story progresses. In the

Raimi version of the character, she is the primary object of Peter's affections, though

Gwen does have a brief (albeit ineffective) role in the final film of Raimi's trilogy. Raimi's version focuses on the long running relationship between Peter and Mary Jane, who moved next door when Peter was about six years old, and Peter's long distance affection for the fiery red head.

Familial Love and Relationships

Of course, not all the relationships that Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker juggle are romantic in nature; they also experience very complex familial and platonic relationships that prove to be critical aspects of their characters as well. One of the interesting differences between Bruce and Peter are the polarities in their relationships. While Bruce may lack in the genuine romantic relationship department, he actually has Peter beat in the close friends and family aspect of his life.

Where Spider-Man primarily operates alone, though he is known to team up with the Avengers and the X-Men on occasion, Batman operates with a team. While the size of his team has grown over the years, he has always had some assistance. Batman's close-knit group of allies is referred to as "The Family." This comprises: Batman, Alfred (Bruce's surrogate father and butler), Batgirl (aka Barbara Gordon/Commissioner Gordon's daughter), Oracle (a dynamic variation of Barbara stemming from *The Killing Joke* where the Joker shoots her in the spine and paralyzes her from the waist down), Nightwing (aka Dick Grayson, who was the first Robin), Red Robin (Tim Drake, who was the third Robin), Red Hood (Jason Todd, the second Robin who was killed in the 1980s through fan voting but brought back in the New 52 run), Batwoman (Katherine Kane who is named after Batman creator Bob Kane and is currently depicted as a Jewish

lesbian), and Bruce's son Damian Wayne, who is the current Robin. The position of Robin functions as an allomotif, where it is more of a state than a set role. All of Batman's allies that occupy the role of Robin only hold it temporarily, abandoning the title of Robin once their training is complete. The result is always an inexperienced trainee, despite who is actually behind the mask.

Batman's impressive roster of close allies is interesting, and unusual, because the character is known for his general distrust and paranoia when it comes to other people. That being said, Bruce's personality doesn't always lend itself to the smoothest relationships, even with those closest to him. Dick Grayson (Nightwing/Original Robin) is one of Bruce's oldest allies, having been adopted into Bruce's crusade after his parents were killed during a trapeze act at the circus. Dick was raised by Bruce and Alfred, and he assumed the mantle of Nightwing once he had outgrown his old role as Robin. Even though Nightwing operates in a neighboring city called Bludhaven, he often works in Gotham alongside Batman and the others. Because of the fatherly dynamic between Bruce and Dick, the two are occasionally at odds. This tension often manifests itself when the two clash over Bruce's stoic and emotionally detached demeanor. In Scott Snyder's *The Death of the Family*, Alfred is kidnapped by the Joker, and Batman meets with Nightwing to bring him up to speed about the situation. Since they are in their superhero disguises, Batman is speaking in detached terms, referring to Alfred by his last name.
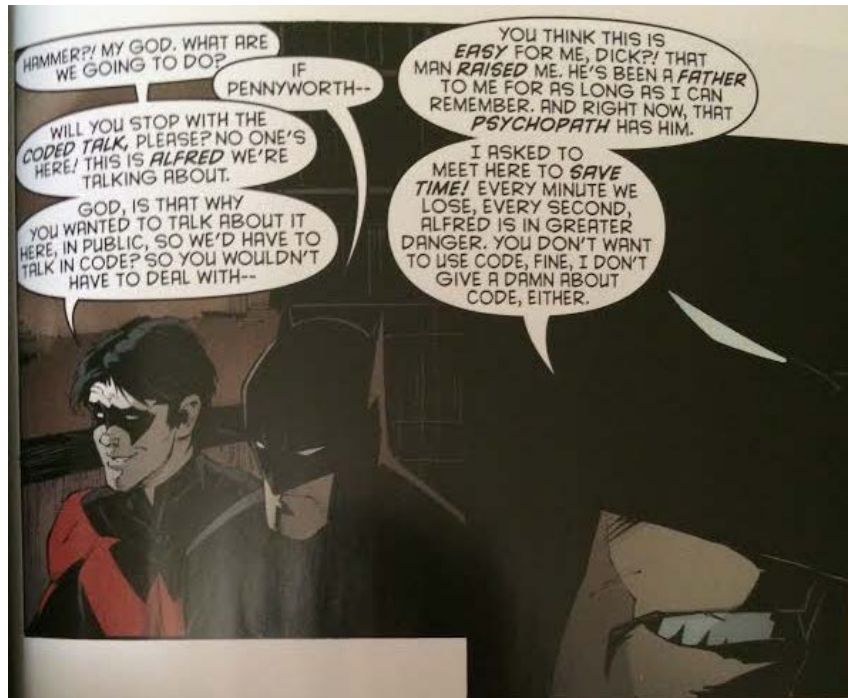
Fig. 3.12. Loss of Alfred- *The New 52: Batman: Death of the Family.*

While Bruce's emotional distance is often frustrating for Dick, their relationship serves as

a balancing element in Bruce's life. Even though Dick's tragedy of losing his parents

mirrors Bruce's, Dick tends to be more upbeat and optimistic. While he uses his personal

losses as a catalyst to fight crime, much the same way as Bruce, Dick also tries to lead a

happy and whole personal life. This stands in contrast to Bruce, who merely uses his

personal life as a smokescreen for his real life as Batman.

Another of Bruce's oldest allies is Barbara (aka Batgirl). Originally, the character

was brought in to help generate appeal for female readers. Rather than the hyper-

sexualized female villains that Batman often deals with, Batgirl was introduced to be a

sympathetic female heroine that would pique the interest of a larger audience. While

certainly a feminine character, her suits are form fitting but not revealing, Barbara stands

apart from most other females within the Batman pantheon of characters. Another of

Bruce's protégés, she has a very different dynamic with her mentor than Dick does. Since she is the daughter of Commissioner Gordon, she has a strong parental figure in her life, even if her father is often away or busy trying to maintain peace in Gotham. Even though she shares her father's commitment to justice, Barbara sees the value in Batman's ability to operate without bureaucratic restrictions that often hinder the police. Because she is aware of Batman's identity as Bruce Wayne, and yet has not outed him to her father, she maintains a unique place of trust and confidence in Bruce's circle.

For Dick and Barbara, following Bruce into the lifestyle of vigilante crime fighters is an enactment of Campbell's "Call to Adventure" (Campbell 2008). For them, meeting Bruce was "apparently the merest chance— [revealing an unsuspected world, and [they are] drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (42). For Damian, Bruce's literal son and heir-apparent to Bruce's empire, the story is a bit different. Damian's mere existence in the Batman mythos is interesting, because it follows a very specific dynamic thread within Batman narratives, that being Bruce's relationship with Ra's al-Ghul's daughter Talia. Even though the two make the oddest of odd couples, and at times are only together in a very loose interpretation of the word, Damian's introduction into Batman narratives is a dynamic spin on one of Bruce's most complex conservative relationships. Rather than Bruce and Talia having a strained, but rather straightforward, relationship, Damian is a dynamic complication. It also allows for a new lens through which Bruce can be viewed. Though he is a de facto father figure to Dick, Damian is Bruce's literal flesh and blood. Bruce's son, however, was raised by his mother Talia and his grandfather Ra's al-Ghul. The result is that Damian was raised in a culture where he was essentially a member of the ruling royal family, as well as being

taught that lethal force was nothing to shy away from; his mindset is very different from Dick and Barbara. The animated film *Son of Batman* introduces Damian's character and also highlights the complexity of his interactions with Bruce. While Bruce reluctantly takes the boy under his wing, the problems with Damian's upbringing within the League of Assassins become apparent right away. Damian is violent, headstrong, and operates with little to no restraint.

Since he was taught that lethal force should be met with lethal force, Damian pushes against his father's philosophy of non-lethal confrontation. Hoping to temper his hot-headed son, Bruce allows Damian to assume the role of Robin, a decision that does not sit well with Nightwing. At the film's climax, Damian manages to track down Deathsroke, a dangerous assassin responsible for killing Ra's al-Ghul after an attack on the League's primary compound. Damian has Deathstroke death to rights, but he hesitates.

> Deathstroke: Finish me. You were trained to kill your enemies, weren't you? It's what you want.
> Damian: It's what I would do.
> Deathstroke: It's what your grandfather would do. Well, do it!
> Damian: No. I'm my father's son, too. I'm Robin. (*Son of Batman*)

Damian chooses to stay in Gotham with his father, while his mother returns to assume control of the League of Assassins and rebuild it in the wake of Deathstroke's assault. Damian begins to ease into the role of Robin, and makes the gradual adjustment to fighting crime the same way his father does.

While all members of The Family are important parts of Bruce's life, perhaps the most pivotal is Bruce's relationship with his butler, Alfred Pennyworth. In the wake of the murders of his parents, Bruce is raised by Alfred and becomes his first ally and

confidant in Bruce's war on crime in Gotham. Alfred's role in Bruce's life is twofold: he functions as the wise old man, "a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the [hero] with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 2008, 57), as well as being Bruce's foster parent, which is point eight in Raglan's criteria (Raglan 2003, 174). This is conservative across all versions of the Bruce/Alfred relationship. Alfred is always the surrogate father, as well as the wise old man who operates as Bruce's first ally. This relationship, and its importance to Bruce Wayne, is one of the primary focuses of Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy*. Rather than create a version of Batman where The Family is a centerpiece, Nolan instead created a dynamic version of Batman that existed in a vacuum that does not account for the larger DC Universe and characters. Instead of the mystic and fantastical elements that Batman often engages with, Nolan presents a version of the character largely tethered to reality.

Because the Bruce/Alfred dynamic is one of the focal points of the films, especially when it comes to being supportive of Bruce, the audience gets a much better sense of how close these two are. Early in the film *Batman Begins*, Bruce falls into a well and breaks his leg. Bruce's father Thomas uses the phrase: "Why do we fall? So that we can learn to pick ourselves up" (*Batman Begins* 2006). This is later echoed by Alfred after Wayne Manor is attacked by the League and is destroyed by fire. As Bruce despairs about how hopeless the situation is, Alfred asks: "Why do we fall? So that we can learn to pick ourselves up." Bruce then asks: "You still haven't given up on me?" and Alfred replies: "Never." The repetition of Thomas's words by Alfred not only evokes a fond memory for Bruce about his father, but it also indicates the role that Alfred plays as Bruce's surrogate father. By the time Bruce returns to Gotham and begins his life as

Batman, he has just spent just as much, if not more, time with Alfred functioning in a fatherly capacity than his own biological father.

Fig. 3.13-3.15. Alfred Pennyworth- The Dark Knight Trilogy, *Batman* (1989), *Son of Batman.*

Throughout his tumultuous tenure as Batman, Alfred stands by Bruce through the ups and downs. In *The Dark Knight*, the situation with the Joker continues to escalate and spin out of control. As Bruce tries to discern any motive on the Joker's part, he confers with Alfred about what should be done next.

> Bruce: Criminals aren't complicated, Alfred. Just have to figure out what he's after.
>
> Alfred: With respect Master Wayne, perhaps this is a man that you don't fully understand, either. A long time ago, I was in Burma. My friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders by bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. So, we went looking for the stones. But in six months, we never met anybody who traded with him. One day, I saw a child playing with a ruby the size of a tangerine. The bandit had been throwing them away.

> Bruce: So why steal them?
>
> Alfred: Well, because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn (*The Dark Knight* 2008).

Later, Bruce asks if and how Alfred caught the bandit in Burma. Alfred confirms that they did and the way they found him was "[w]e burned the forest down." This story gives Bruce the idea to turn all cellular devices in Gotham into transmitters that he can use to triangulate the Joker's location.

Despite Alfred's stalwart support of Bruce in his endeavors as Batman, the relationship between the two reaches a breaking point in *The Dark Knight Rises*, which is set eight years after the events of *The Dark Knight*. Having retired from his role as Batman in the wake of Harvey Dent's death, Bruce's mental and physical health deteriorates. When he is shown for the first time in TDKR, he is seen hobbling around with the aid of a cane, despite the fact that Bruce is only in his thirties. As the mercenary/terrorist Bane begins attacking Gotham, Bruce slowly gets drawn back into the conflict. This reaches a tipping point when Commissioner Gordon is abducted by Bane's thugs and shot while escaping the sewers.

After Gordon is hospitalized, an officer John Blake confronts Bruce at his mansion about his identity as Batman. Blake then proceeds to explain how he deduced Batman's true identity and matched the timeline of Batman's disappearance after Dent's death with Bruce's removal from the public eye. As a side note, Blake's character is a nod to Tim Drake (the third Robin) who figures out Batman's true identity by studying news reports of Batman and Bruce Wayne. After Drake brings his finding to Bruce,

Bruce decides to take him under his wing and trains him to be the new Robin. This also

led to widespread speculation that Blake's character in the film would be assuming the

role of Robin. While this never officially happens, there are many hints throughout the

film as Bruce gives Blake advice and insight about fighting crime as a masked vigilante.

The final implication comes at the film's conclusion when Blake is given a GPS and

climbing gear from the Wayne estate. In this shot, the woman who gives him the package

says that Blake should use his middle name: "I like that name. Robin" (*The Dark Knight

Rises* 2012). It is Blake's arrival at Wayne Manor that pulls Bruce back into his role as

Batman.

After Bruce's first public appearance as Batman, he returns to Wayne Manor and

asks Alfred to have a piece of intel decrypted for him.

> I'll get this to Mr. Fox, but no more. I've sewn you up, I've set your bones, but I
> won't bury you. I've buried enough members of the Wayne family. You see only
> one end to your journey. Leaving is all I have to make you understand, you're not
> Batman anymore. You have to find another way. You used to talk about finishing
> a life beyond that awful cape (*The Dark Knight Rises* 2012).

In an attempt to divert Bruce from returning to his role as Batman in a diminished

physical and mental state, Alfred leaves, and Bruce continues alone. While Alfred

abandoning Bruce in his crusade is a dynamic twist introduced by Nolan, it nevertheless

highlights the depth of Alfred's love and concern for Bruce. What is also interesting with

this portion of the narrative is that it fits Propp's first function: "Absentation- *A member

of the family absents himself from home*" (Propp 1968). This makes Alfred's departure all

the more dynamic, because this event takes place mid-way through Nolan's final film,

even though Bruce fulfills this same function of leaving home early in *Batman Begins*.

This functions as a new phase for Bruce, where he must move forward without the

continued support and aid of his surrogate father. While it is not what either wanted, both Bruce and Alfred had reached an impasse as a result of the ongoing strain that being Batman put on their relationship with one another, as well as both of them individually.

The Parkers: Family Ties

While Bruce certainly has the most complicated familial ties (both blood and adopted, though many of Bruce's are adopted), Peter Parker is not without his own familial bonds. The most obvious family connections in Peter Parker's world are his Uncle Ben and Aunt May. Besides the formative role they play in raising Peter like their own son, both Ben and May are powerful driving forces that act as his moral compass. Ben, in his many incarnations, is most famous for his speech to Peter shortly before his tragic death. While the wording has some dynamic variation, the most conservative version is used in Raimi's *Spider-Man*: "With great power, comes great responsibility" (*Spider-Man* 2002). The phrase originally appeared as narration in an early Spider-Man comic, but since has widely been repurposed and attributed to Uncle Ben. In both Raimi's film and *Ultimate Spider-Man*, the phrase is part of a lecture Uncle Ben gives to Peter before his death. Both arcs have Peter getting angry with Ben and taking off into the city, leaving it their final conversation before Ben's death.

Fig. 3.16-3.18. Ben Parker- *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Spider-Man* (2002),

Ultimate Spider-Man.

Even though Ben's physical presence in the Spider-Man mythos is limited, he always dies in the first act of the film or in one of the early issues of a comic, his memory lingers on and remains a driving force for Peter. Haunted by his failure to save Uncle Ben because he neglected to stop a criminal, Peter uses Ben's death as a reminder of what happens when his power is neglected or used improperly.

In the wake of Ben's death, Aunt May assumes the role of being the wise old woman who helps Peter along his journey. Much like Alfred for Bruce, Ben and May operate as Peter's wise old supernatural helpers, as well as his surrogate/foster parents. Most versions of May depict her as being unaware of Peter's identity as Spider-Man, though in many of her motivational speeches to Peter, there's an implied undertone that she knows, but never says anything. In *Spider-Man 2*, after giving up his life as Spider-Man because the personal cost was too high, Peter visits May at his childhood home. While discussing the absence of Spider-Man, she tells Peter:

> Too few characters out there, flying around like that, saving old girls like me. And
> Lord knows, kids like Henry need a hero. Courageous, self-sacrificing people.

Setting examples for all of us. Everybody loves a hero. People line up for them, cheer them, scream their names. And years later, they'll tell how they stood in the rain for hours just to get a glimpse of the one who taught them how to hold on a second longer. I believe there's a hero in all of us, that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride, even though sometimes we have to be steady, and give up the thing we want the most. Even our dreams (*Spider-Man 2* 2004).

This unspoken understanding is implied in cryptic remarks May makes in an offhand manner. "Everyone has a part of them they hide. Even from the people they love most" (*Amazing Spider-Man 2* 2014). Even though their relationship is often strained by Peter's bizarre, seemingly irresponsible, and erratic behavior, May's constant support of Peter, coupled with help from the likes of Mary Jane and Gwen are key factors in Peter's life. While their close affiliation with Peter often puts them in the crosshairs of danger, the interdependent nature of their relationships helps each of them survive chaos and difficulty of their lives.

Fig. 3.19-3.21. May Parker- *Spider-Man* (2002), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Ultimate Spider-Man.*

.

Whether the love shown and expressed in these tales is romantic or familial, these ties are pivotal components of the hero's emotional and psychological makeup. Because both

Batman and Spider-Man have something to lose, they have something to protect and live for. Even though these ties can, at times, be a liability, their significance offsets the potential tragedy for both the heroes and their loved ones. Along with their pivotal nature to both Batman and Spider-Man, their loved ones also function as key dynamic manifestations of the princess, the successor, the old crone/man, and surrogate parents. Even beyond their reflection of classic hero tale archetypes, the same characters exist in radically different dynamic iterations, even though they often derive from the same core materials.

BEACONS OF HOPE IN A DARK AND CHAOTIC WORLD

One of the early appeals and initial catalysts of the superhero's popularity stemmed from its role as escapist fiction. In a world where life was riddled with uncertainty and chaos waited around every corner, these heroes offered a glimpse at a better world. Or to borrow the words of prolific comic writer Grant Morrison, who argues that superheroes as we know them emerged out of fear of atomic weaponry, he states: "The superheroes laughed at the Atom Bomb. Superman could walk on the surface of the sun and barely register a tan" (Morrison 2011, xv). He goes on to say that "[h]ere men, women, and noble monsters dressed in flags and struck from shadows to make the world a better place. My own world felt better already. I was beginning to understand something that gave me power over my fears" (xv). Superheroes exist to help us understand the world around us. They exist to give us hope that the world can become a better place through the actions of just a few brave souls.

The closest parallel I could find to addressing hope in hero narratives are points thirteen and fourteen in Raglan's schema, where the hero "(13) Becomes king. (14) For a time reigns uneventfully" (Raglan 2003, 175). Once the hero has attained power, they are in a position to affect change on their environment. However, much like the internal character complexities mentioned earlier, the hero existing as a symbol to bring hope to the people is a newer function of modern hero narratives. In traditional iterations, the hero was simply heroic for the sake of being heroic, because that is what they did. However, as these narratives have evolved into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their purpose has become more nuanced. Heroes are now heroic because they stand above the norm, they operate in a selfless manner, and as they do so, they set examples and

standards for us to follow. In this regard, the notion of a hero as a symbol for hope is a newer and dynamic element within the realm of hero tales.

The American superhero tales as we know them today emerged in response to a variety of cultural and historic factors. Yes, there was the growing concern over atomic weaponry, but there was also the very real concern about the Great Depression. Superman first appeared in the 30s, just as the Depression was being felt around the world. While escapism is no doubt a contributing factor to their popularity, especially amongst American youth, these heroes evolved alongside the world they reflect. Even early multi-media iterations of these characters, such as the Batman of Adam West fame in the 60s reflected this idea. Roughly a decade after the carnage and horrors of World War II, we were introduced to a more lighthearted and goofy version of the Dark Knight. Rather than operating in a dark and violent world, Batman was often seen in the daylight, even attending parties as Batman. While this is not the most popular dynamic version of Batman to have been created, it highlights an important point. These heroes, in their many forms over the years, exist to help us understand that it gets better. As bad as things are, or were, tomorrow holds the potential for a better world. It is this central idea, that there is always hope, that is the most powerful concept in superhero tales: there's still hope, there are heroes in this world, and one man, or woman, can make a difference.

At the end of his book, Morrison cites the Renaissance philosopher Pico, who theorized that humanity was not meant to be tethered by narrow or dogmatic beliefs. "[Pico] is without a doubt urging us to go far beyond the human, into the realms of angels and gods. It asks us to accept the superhuman as an undeniable fact of our nature, and the goal of our future evolution as people" (Morrison 2011, 414). Morrison believes that

what we choose to highlight in ourselves and our media can have a direct correlation to

what humanity can become or achieve.

> If… we emphasize our glory, intelligence, grace, generosity, discrimination, honesty, capacity for love, creativity, and native genius, those qualities will be made manifest in our behavior and in our works. It should give us hope that superhero stories are flourishing everywhere because they are a bright flickering sign of our need to move on, to imagine the better, more just, and more proactive people we can be (414).

In our heroes, we not only see the very human faults of remarkable individuals, but we

are given a glimpse of what mankind can achieve. To quote Peter Parker, "I like to think

that Spider-Man gives people hope" (*The Amazing Spider-Man 2* 2014). It is this quality

of hope that has made superheroes so popular, especially in the last fifteen years.

As I have mentioned earlier, Sam Raimi's first Spider-Man film hit theaters in

2002, just a year after the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11th. This is made even

more potent by the fact that Spider-Man's city is New York, being one of the few

superheroes to live and operate in a real world locale. While there is no reference to the

attacks in the film, there are patriotic undertones throughout. At the end of the film, we

see two shots of an American flag in the background behind Spider-Man. The first is

when he arrives at the bridge to confront the Green Goblin and save Mary Jane, and the

second is in the final frames just before the credits roll.

Fig. 4.1. Spider-Man as a Symbol- *Spider-Man* (2002)

.

Even Spider-Man's traditional red and blue coloring is indicative of American patriotism.

His positioning in the image above highlights Spider-Man as a symbol. Much like the

flag, Spider-Man stands above the city as an icon that people can look to for hope. At the

point where he is attached to the flag pole, he is a literal stand in for the American flag

and the many things that it symbolizes.

Tragic though they were, the events of September 11th had a distinct unifying

factor amongst Americans. In the wake of the tragedy, American rallied together and,

briefly, set aside differences like political party lines. This unity was again echoed in

Spider-Man in the final battle with the Green Goblin. While trying to save Mary Jane and

a trolley full of children, several New Yorkers on the bridge above the battle did what

they could to help stop the Green Goblin. "You mess with Spidey, you mess with New

York! You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!" (*Spider-Man* 2002). Here

Spider-Man acts as a rallying symbol for the people to get behind. This not only worked

for its purpose in the film itself, but mirrored the sentiments felt by Americans in the

aftermath of the attacks.

> While Batman may not be as colorful, both in the literal and figurative sense of

the word, his driving motivation is also to use his skills and resources to be a symbol of

hope for the people of Gotham.

> I'm going to show the people of Gotham that their city doesn't belong to the criminals and the corrupt… People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy and I can't do that as Bruce Wayne. As a man, I'm flesh and blood, I can be ignored, I can be destroyed; but as a symbol... as a symbol I can be incorruptible, I can be everlasting (*Batman Begins* 2006).

In creating Batman, Bruce hoped to inspire others. "Batman could be anyone, that was

the point" (*The Dark Knight Rises* 2012). Despite his efforts to help Gotham, not

everyone appreciates Batman. In the midst of the Joker's terrorism spree across the city,

the Joker calls for the unconditional surrender of Batman to stem the chaos in Gotham.

"People are dying, Alfred. What would you have me do?

Endure, Master Wayne. Take it. They'll hate you for it, but that's the point of Batman, he

can be the outcast. He can make the choice that no one else can make, the right choice"

(*The Dark Knight* 2008). The struggles of both Batman and Spider-Man are amplified by

the often negative public sentiment.

> While Batman suffers mistrust in Gotham, Peter's problems are compounded by

the fact that his editor, J Jonah Jameson, at the Daily Bugle newspaper uses Peter's

photos of Spider-Man in a relentless smear campaign.

> Peter: Spider-Man wasn't trying to attack the city; he was trying to save it. That's slander.
> Jameson: It is not. I resent that. Slander is spoken. In print, it's libel" (*Spider-Man* 2002).

Despite constant bombardments in the realm of public opinion, both heroes refuse to be deterred from their efforts to protect their cities.

Part of Robert Segal's analysis of hero myths includes the observation that after surviving trials, persecutions, and wars, the hero "dies young" (Segal 2004, 86). This is perhaps the greatest degree of dynamic variation found within superhero tales. In some instances, the death is literal, and in others it is metaphorical. In *Ultimate Spider-Man*, Peter dies while protecting his loved ones (Aunt May, Mary Jane, and Gwen) from the Green Goblin. Even though he is successful in defending them, he pays with his life. Bendis's version of Peter has him operating as Spider-Man in his mid-teens. By the end of the *Ultimate* comic run, Peter was only sixteen years old, lining up with Segal's analysis of the hero's death.

What is interesting about Bendis's Spider-Man narrative is that even though it deals with the literal death of Peter, which is a tragic loss for May and his loved ones, Peter's final moment is cathartic for him. Having rescued Aunt May from mortal peril helps absolve Peter, at least in some small way, of his failure to protect Uncle Ben before he became Spider-Man. Despite his heroism as Spider-Man, Peter never forgave himself for failing Uncle Ben, which serves as Peter's version of Propp's Lack function (VIIIa). This also highlights a core complexity to these narratives. From one angle the end of *Ultimate Spider-Man* centers on Peter's death, but also focuses on the hero attaining peace in his final moments.

Fig. 4.2. Peter's Death – *The Death of Spider-Man*.

Due to the often tragic nature of hero tales, the heroes are often under-appreciated during their tenure. It is not until they are dead (often the result of a battle) that the larger populace gains a true appreciation for their actions. In some cases, as with *The Dark Knight Rises*, the hero's death and absence is symbolic, rather than literal. Spider-Man's absence in *Spider-Man 2* is temporary, but in the wake of the hero's disappearance, the impact the heroes had become tangible. Despite being beacons of hope for others, it is the heroes themselves that often struggle with maintaining hope for themselves.

The film *Spider-Man 2* focuses on Peter's loss of hope and purpose about being Spider-Man, which is derived from *Amazing Spider-Man #50*: *Spider-Man No More*, where Peter gives up the mantle of Spider-Man. An iconic scene from the film is a recreation of the panel from the comic where Peter throws his suit in the trash.

Fig. 4.3-4.4. Peter quits- *Spider-Man No More!, Spider-Man 2*.

Peter's final words before tossing the suit are "No More" (*Spider-Man 2* 2004), which is a direct reference to the comic that helped inspire the film. At this point, Peter has lost his own hope and drive; the result is a brief abandonment of his role as Spider-Man, though his vacation is short-lived as he returns to Spider-Man to save Mary Jane.

A recurring struggle for heroes is whether or not the toll of offering hope to others is worth the personal sacrifices they themselves suffer. As mentioned in chapter one, in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, Peter ceases his life as Spider-Man after Gwen's death at the clock tower. Unable to handle his grief and responsibility for the loss of Gwen, he retreats inwards. In the final moments of the film, Peter is given sage council from Aunt May, but it is Gwen's final message, a recording of the graduation speech given at the beginning of the film, that sparks Peter's return. Early in the film, we (as the audience) get a portion of Gwen's speech, but it is shown in tandem with Spider-Man trying to stop a stolen armored truck, and it is not heard in its entirety until Peter watches the video. Gwen's speech is a modern interpretation of Campbell's theories of the supernatural

assistance offered to heroes. Even though Gwen is dead, technology allows her to speak to Peter from beyond the grave.

> It's easy to feel hopeful on a beautiful day like today, but there will be dark days ahead of us too. There will be days where you feel all alone, and that's when hope is needed most. No matter how buried it gets, or how lost you feel, you must promise me that you will hold on to hope. Keep it alive. We have to be greater than what we suffer. My wish for you is to become hope; people need that. And even if we fail, what better way is there to live? As we look around here today, at all of the people who helped make us who we are, I know it feels like we're saying goodbye, but we will carry a piece of each other into everything that we do next, to remind us of who we are, and of who we're meant to be (*Amazing Spider-Man 2* 2014).

Because Gwen helped to rekindle Peter's hope, and begin the slow process of healing and moving on with his life, she also inspired him to return to defending New York as Spider-Man.

The significance of the hero's role is never more apparent than at the time of greatest crisis. When dragons need slaying and the kingdom needs defending, even the hero's critics will look to them for hope. One of the focal points of *The Dark Knight Rises* is Bane's siege against Gotham. After defeating Bruce, Bane throws him into a prison and forces him to watch the news reports of Gotham's descent into chaos. Like Peter, at this point Bruce is broken, both mentally and physically. When he asks Bane what he hopes to accomplish, Bane tells Bruce that he plans to use Gotham's hope against the city.

> There's a reason why this prison is the worst hell on earth... Hope. Every man who has ventured here over the centuries has looked up to the light and imagined climbing to freedom. So easy... So simple... And like shipwrecked men turning to sea water from uncontrollable thirst, many have died trying. I learned here that there can be no true despair without hope. So, as I terrorize Gotham, I will feed its people hope to poison their souls. I will let them believe they can survive so that you can watch them clamoring over each other to "stay in the sun." You can watch me torture an entire city and when you have truly understood the depth of your failure, we will fulfill Ra's al Ghul's destiny... We will destroy Gotham and

then, when it is done and Gotham is ashes, then you have my permission to die (*The Dark Knight Rises 2012*).

During Bruce's physical recovery, he tries to regain his mental footing in the prison. The prison rests at the bottom of a massive pit that must be free climbed in order to reach the top. All the prisoners have to protect them from the certain death if they fall is a rope anchored by another prisoner down below. Each time a prisoner attempts the climb, all the others gather to watch and begin to chant. Upon seeing and hearing yet another attempt, Bruce asks: "What does that mean?" to which another prisoner answers, "Rise".

While Bruce tries to convince his fellow prisoners that he is not afraid, the prison's doctor tells him that fear is necessary to survive. "How can you move faster than possible, fight longer than possible without the most powerful impulse of the spirit: the fear of death" (*The Dark Knight Rises* 2012). Bruce eventually learns that the only other person to escape from the prison was Ra's al-Ghul's daughter, who managed the climb, and the hazardous jump that killed dozens of other prisoners. Bruce makes the climb and escapes to return to Gotham.

Fig.4.5. Rising from the pit- *The Dark Knight Rises.*

The goal of Bane's plan is to destroy Gotham, but while he institutes martial law, the people believe that the bomb only has a trigger, and they will be safe as long as no one attempts to escape the city. However, what they do not realize is that the bomb is on a timer which will go off regardless of what the people do. Batman returns to the city and enlists the help of Selina Kyle, aka Catwoman, to help free the captive police officers and retake the city from Bane's mercenary army. Inspired by Batman's arrival, the officers rally and move against city hall, where Bane is fortified.

While Batman aids in the assault on Bane's position, Gordon and Detective Blake work on tracking the three trucks roaming the city to find the one holding the bomb. Once the truck is found and neutralized, Batman prepares to take the bomb away from the city limits so that it can detonate with no collateral damage. Before Batman can sacrifice himself, Gordon tries to learn his true identity.

> Gordon: I never cared who you were...
> Batman: And you were right.
> Gordon: ...but shouldn't the people know the hero who saved them?
> Batman: A hero can be anyone. Even a man doing something as simple and reassuring as putting a coat around a young boy's shoulders to let him know that the world hadn't ended.
> [Takes off in the Batwing]
> Gordon: Bruce Wayne?

Batman manages to get the bomb out over the city, but is presumed dead from the explosion. Since there is no body to bury, an empty grave is placed for Bruce next to his parents, and the city commissions a statue to immortalize the hero who saved the city.

Fig. 4.6. Batman Memorial- *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Nolan's take on Batman's death fits four of Lord Raglan's final criteria about the hero's death: "(18) He meets with a mysterious death, (19) Often at the top of a hill (in this case the sky), (21) His body is not buried, but nevertheless (22) He has one or more holy sepulchers" (Raglan 2003, 175). In this particular case, the hero's death is metaphorical. While Batman is "dead," Bruce Wayne lives on. Batman, having served his purpose, is laid to rest, while Bruce moves on to live his life, finally free of the burden of being Batman. Even with the loss of Batman, his legacy lives on in the city. Spurred by his sacrifice, the police begin working to rebuild Gotham in the wake of Bane's occupation. Detective Blake, the implied spiritual successor to Batman, is given coordinates to the Bat Cave underneath Wayne Manor. The film closes with Blake stepping into the cave, and being raised onto an automated platform where Bruce would store his vehicles. The literal ascension of Blake into the cave is symbolic of passing the

torch to a new hero, implying that Batman will continue to protect the city, no matter who wears the mask.

The theme of hope is problematic because it varies so much between characters. For Alfred, he hopes that Bruce might one day abandon his life as Batman and find the happiness Alfred believes Bruce never had. Bruce's hopes center on doing all he can to ensure that the tragedies that befell him and his family never happen for anyone else. Bruce also sees the hope that Batman can bring to the people of Gotham, and how important that can be even if he is not the man under the mask. The notion of Batman as an enduring symbol is what Nolan hoped to accomplish with Blake's final scene in the bat cave, but it is also an idea explored in the animated series *Batman Beyond*. *Beyond*, which is a cartoon produced in the 90s, examines a Gotham that has lived without Batman for several decades. A young man named Terry McGinnis stumbles upon the bat cave at Wayne manor, and eventually revives the role of Batman, studying under the tutelage of an aged Bruce. Terry, like Bruce, uses the symbolic power of Batman to bring hope back to the streets of Gotham City.

After nearly a century in circulation, superheroes have only continued to rise to prominence in American culture. While their initial creation may have been a response to the Great Depression and atomic weaponry, the great fear of Americans today is terrorism. This is particularly true of anyone old enough to recall the events of 9/11 with tragic clarity. Just as Americans in the early-to-mid-twentieth-century feared the unknown variables of nuclear radiation, Americans in the twenty-first century have learned to fear terrorism. In a world that continues to grow in violence and uncertainty, superheroes like Batman and Spider-Man show us that there is still good in the world.

They act as exemplars of human potential for selflessness, honor, and sacrifice. Despite falling under the umbrella of what Bascom would label as folktales, their fictional nature is still efficacious in our culture. This is only evidenced by their radical shift into mainstream American awareness over the last twelve years. In a world plagued by increasing uncertainty and silent terrors, these heroes reflect the best of humanity, giving us hope that one person can make a difference, and that a "hero can be anyone" (*The Dark Knight Rises* 2012), regardless of how high or low their personal station may be. These heroes inspire and resonate with some of the most powerful and noble human desires we possess, and consequently, we can learn a great deal from their examples. As mentioned earlier, this idea of hero's operating as symbols of hope is a new facet to hero narratives. In the past, the hero's motivations for their actions were fairly one-dimensional. But now, the heroes exist with the intent that their presence and actions might affect a change in those around them. As Bruce Wayne says early in *Batman Begins* "I want to show the people of Gotham that their city doesn't belong to the criminals and the corrupt"; and to quote Peter Parker, "I like to think that Spider-Man gives people hope" (*The Amazing Spider-Man 2*). As these heroes evolve in their complexity, so too, do their motivations. Hercules may not have been overly concerned with inspiring the people of Greece, but both Bruce and Peter keep the idea of a heroic symbol as part of their identity, creating a new dynamic aspect in hero narratives.

CONCLUSION

It is no secret amongst folklorists that we often have difficulties agreeing upon the reach of the discipline. Because folklore can cover such broad avenues of study, there is little consensus over how far studies can be pushed before they cease to be considered folklore. As a folklorist who is comparatively fresh to the field, I have witnessed numerous debates/arguments over a statement as simple as, "What is folklore?" While this has become a bit of running joke with other folklorists at Utah State, it highlights a larger concern that merits examination. As we know from Toelken's twin laws, one of the key markers of any folklore element is its ongoing evolution. If it doesn't change over time, it cannot be folklore. And yet there is merit in looking at any specific version of a tale (such as Disney's *The Little Mermaid*) as a synchronic snapshot and example of one piece of folklore at a specific time.

One of the seminal folklore collections in the field are the tales compiled by the Grimm brothers in Germany. Despite their prevalence and popularity, the tales collected by the Grimm brothers are not viewed as the truest (and most correct) form of these tales. They are simply a glimpse of an ever-evolving tale at a specific time and place in history. Yet, there would be very little argument as to whether or not the Grimm texts are folkloric enough to merit a serious examination from a folklorist's perspective.

In the rapidly evolving digital age of the internet, we are seeing new types of folklore emerging in the digital sphere. Whether this is as simple as an internet meme, the re-appropriation of chain letters via social media posts, or grass roots movements (such as last year's ALS Ice Bucket Challenge) through YouTube and other social media websites, the discipline of folklore is always evolving and adapting. It is my belief that to

ignore new and emerging types of folklore because they do not conform to classic notions is a great disservice to folklore studies, particularly as it relates to participatory culture. What I find interesting about these superhero narratives is how, despite their distinct corporate top-down transmission and their position as elements of pop culture, these texts still exhibit characteristics that are distinctly folkloric in nature. From a folklore perspective, it is unusual that copyrighted commercial works in pop culture and mainstream media can still possess so many dynamic and conservative elements.

One of the many difficulties facing a folkloric examination of superheroes, in their many multi-media forms, is the general disregard with which comics have been treated over the years. The folklorist Adam Zolkover observes,

> Given the kinds of constraints in the past placed on folklorists engaging in the study of folklore in literature, as well as the broader perception of comic books as marginal and even ultimately harmful, comics could hardly seem like an appealing subject to pursue. Richard M. Dorson's proclamation in his 1957 article, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," that authors engaging in the study of folklore and literature must be able to prove the orality and traditionality of folklore items and motifs in a given text, severely limits the horizons of scholarly inquiry into comic books. Comics, after all, tend to integrate and reinterpret folklore, or explicitly refer to literary renderings, especially of myths and folktales, leaving the role of oral influences either irrelevant or impossible to determine (Zolkover 2008, 39).

The stereotype that comic books, and their superhero leads, are banal, campy, and meant for children is a misperception. An oft cited example is the old Adam West *Batman* show in the sixties. This is partially due to the fact that the original Batman television show was one of the first versions of the character to receive any sort of recognition on a wide mass media scale. However, anyone who has read a Batman story written in the last thirty years knows that most narratives featuring the Caped Crusader would give even the darkest of the Grimm brother fairy tales a run for its money.

Despite a long standing stigma about the perceived lack of value in superhero narratives, both in political and academic spheres, they constitute an important part of American culture. That being said, some of these stigmas are beginning to fade. Many articles written about superhero narratives examine them from a wide range of perspectives, including: gender studies, queer theory, socioeconomics, and psychology. While other disciplines are digging into these narratives, any significant folklore based examinations are conspicuously absent from the academic lexicon. In the past fifteen years alone, superheroes have risen to an unprecedented level of popularity in American media. Even though comic books as a printed media have suffered through their own growing pains over the decades, they still persist in American consciousness. This persistence, coupled with their ever-expanding popularity across all types of media merit a serious study of the material at an academic level. It has been my intent that my analysis of just two of these superheroes (Batman and Spider-Man) might spark a more serious consideration of the superhero genre within the realm of folklore.

These superhero tales, or folk tales to use Bascom's terminology, exhibit and share many of the same qualities that folklorists accept as part of classic hero tales. Whether it's Raglan's twenty-two criteria, Propp's functions, or Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the American superhero fits comfortably within these parameters. Not only that, but they fit within Barre Toelken's twin laws of dynamism and conservatism, which are regarded as two of the most important aspects of what constitutes folklore. Part of the evolution of these heroic narratives (in this case referring to the heroes directly) deals with the constant processes of change. Arnold Van Gennep argues that rites of passage are broken into three primary types, "each rite of passage… is

really a rite of either separation, transition, or incorporation" (Van Gennep 1992, 166). In these narratives, we see the heroes being separated from loved ones, or even from their old lives and past selves. There is the transition from a state of powerlessness to power, and incorporation as they are welcomed by the society (or cities) they serve and protect. Both Batman and Spider-Man exhibit qualities that are inherently folkloric. Their origin stories, as well as the larger narrative structure of both heroes' respective mythos contain both dynamic and conservative elements. Each hero has been portrayed and re-imagined over the decades in a variety of formats. Whether one is looking at Bob Kane's and Stan Lee's original depictions of Batman and Spider-Man respectively, or we are looking at the newest film iterations from Christopher Nolan and Marc Webb, these characters are dynamic and constantly evolving.

One of the greater difficulties in defining superhero narratives is determining what brand of story they fall under. In their own self-contained narratives, Batman and Spider-Man are legends, yet to us as the audience, they are folktales because we are aware of their fictitious nature. Stepping away from Bascom's labels, it may be easiest to say that these are pure works of fiction that, while not folklore in and of themselves, are a newer brand of narrative that merits study as a type of folklore. Despite the complexity of defining what these stories are, these hero narratives resonate with key elements of American culture and identity. The symbols of the bat and the spider, in their many forms, are readily recognized, even by individuals who have no interest in superheroes. The literal symbols, along with their connotative meaning are imprinted on the American psyche.
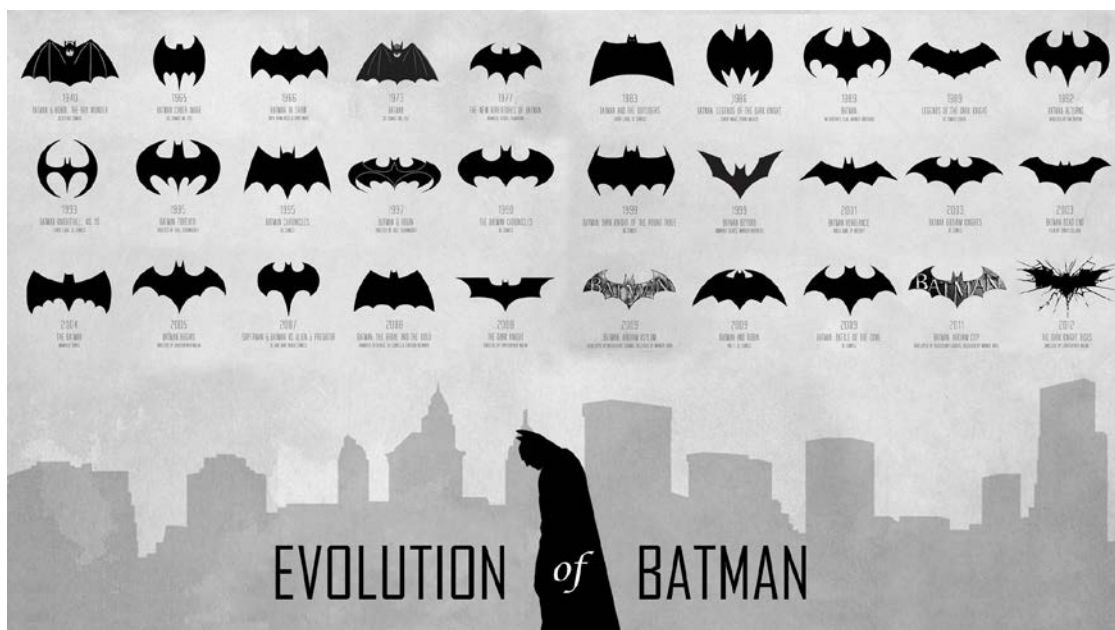
Fig. 5.1. Evolution of Batman.

Their cultural relevance is due in no small part to the fact that these heroes evolve and reflect the culture and history that produced them. The heroes themselves are synchronic snapshots of the circumstances surrounding their creation. We see a wide treatment of Batman and Spider-Man stories. Some narratives examine them in their infancy as heroes, with concern given to how they became superheroes, as well as the missteps of inexperience and youth. Examples of this include Scott Snyder's *Zero Year* in the New 52 Batman, Mark Miller's *Batman Year One*, and Brian Michael Bendis's *Ultimate Spider-Man*. There are also examples of Batman and Spider-Man as seasoned veterans in *The Dark Knight Rises, The Amazing Spider-Man 2,* or Dan Slott's *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic run.

These stories not only entertain, but they instruct. Even though they are rooted in fiction, they tap into some powerful elements of the human condition. They exist as paragons of what we can strive to become, and function as exemplars and champions of

overcoming great adversity and personal suffering. They show us the world as it could be, and highlight the value and importance that a single individual can have. The stories are, at their heart, self-affirming and powerful demonstrations of the best of humanity.

Because of the great variety within Batman and Spider-Man stories (the same can be said of many superheroes, though a comprehensive examination of Marvel and DC alone would a massive undertaking), as well as their conformity to classic hero tale structure and archetypes, these narratives are worthy of greater study by the academic folklore community. Since they exemplify Toelken's twin laws of dynamism and conservatism, and given the sheer scope of each character's mythos, superheroes fit comfortably within folklore. Granted, their pop culture and top-down corporate transmission are ways in which these characters deviate from folklore; however, examining the narratives as they exist in relation to other stories within the same mythos (i.e. how Spider-Man stories relate to and differ from one another), and also how they compare to other stories (fitting in the theoretical schema of Raglan, Propp, and Campbell, as well as how they compare to other superheroes), modern superheroes embody many critical folkloric elements that make them worthy of study as folklore in the modern age.

Bibliography

The Amazing Spider-Man. Directed by Marc Webb. 2012. Columbia Pictures. 2012. Blu-
    ray.

The Amazing Spider-Man 2. Directed by Marc Webb. 2014. Columbia Pictures. 2014.
    Blu-ray.

Anders, Charlie Jane. "Eight Reasons Why the Hero's Journey Sucks." *Io9.com*. 17 Jan.
    2008. Web. 4 Apr. 2015.

AshleyC. "Bruce Wayne A Day: Evolution of the Batman Symbol."
    GeeksandCleats.com. last modified July 21, 2014,
    http://www.geeksandcleats.com/2014/07/bruce-wayne-day-evolution-batman-
    symbol/

Batman. Directed by Tim Burton. 1989. Warner Brothers Entertainment.

Batman. 1966-1968. Twentieth Century Fox. Television.

Batman Begins. Directed by Christopher Nolan. 2005. Warner Brothers Entertainment.
    2012. Blu-ray.

Batman Beyond. 1999-2001. Warner Bros. Animation. Television.

Batman & Robin. Directed by Joel Schumacher. 1997. Warner Brothers Entertainment.

Bendis, Brian Michael, and Mark Bagley. *Ultimate Spider-Man Omnibus.* New York:
    Marvel Worldwide, 2012.

---. *Death of Spider-Man.* New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2011.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces: Collected Works*. Novato, CA: New
    World Library. 2008.

The Dark Knight. Directed by Christopher Nolan. 2008. Warner Brothers Entertainment.
    2012. Blu-ray.

The Dark Knight Rises. Directed by Christopher Nolan. 2012. Warner Brothers
    Entertainment. 2012. Blu-ray.

Dundes, Alan. *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth.* Berkeley: University
    of California Press. 1984.

---. *The Meaning of Foklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes.* Logan, UT: Utah
    State University Press. 2007.

Finch, David, Paul Jenkin, and Richard Friend. "Batman: The Dark Knight Volume 1-Knight Terrors" New York: DC Comics. 2012.

Lee, Stan, and Gerry Conway. *The Amazing Spider-Man: Death of the Stacys.* New York: Marvel Comics, 2012.

Lee, Stan, and John Romita. *Spider-Man No More!* New York: Marvel Comics, 1967.

Loeb, Jeph, and Tim Sale. *Spider-Man Blue.* New York: Marvel Comics, 2011.

---, and Jim Lee. *Batman: Hush.* New York: DC Comics, 2003.

Miller, Frank and David Mazzucchelli. *Batman: Year One.* New York: DC Comics, 1986.

Moore, Allan and Brian Bolland (Illustrator). *The Killing Joke: The Deluxe Edition.* New York: DC Comics, 2008

Morrison, Grant. *Super Gods.* New York: Spiegal & Grau. 2011.

Propp, Vladimir. "The Functions of the Dramatis Personae." *The Morphology of the Folktale.* Austin: University of Texas Press. 1968.

Raglan, FitzRoy Richard Somerset. *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama.* Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 2003.

Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 1992.

Segal, Robert A. "Joseph Campbell as Antisemite and as Theorist of Myth: A Response to Maurice Friedman". Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Jun., 1999), pp. 461-467. Oxford University Press. JSTOR.

---. *Myth: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2004.

Schrempp, Gregory Allen, and William F. Hansen. *Myth: A New Symposium.* Indiana University Press. 2002.

Snyder, Scott, Greg Capullo, and Danny Miki. *Batman: The New 52 Volume 4-Zero Year-Secret City.* New York: DC Comics, 2014.

The Spectacular Spider-Man. 2008-2009. Adelaide Productions. Television.

Spider-Man. Directed by Sam Raimi. 2002. Columbia Pictures. 2002. DVD.

Spider-Man 2. Directed by Sam Raimi. 2004. Columbia Pictures. 2004. DVD.

Thury, Eva M. and Margaret K. Devinney. *Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013.

Toelken, Barre. "The Twin Laws." *The Dynamics of Folklore.* Logan: Utah State University Press. 1996.

Ultimate Spider-Man. 2012-Present. Film Roman Productions and Marvel Animation. Television.

Van Baaren, Theo P. "The Flexibility of Myth." *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth,* edited by Alan Dundes. 217-224. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*: *A Classic Study of Cultural Celebrations*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1992.

Zolkover, Adam. "Corporealizing Fairy Tales: The Body, the Bawdy, and the Carnivalesque in the Comic Book Fables." Marvels & Tales 22, no. 1 (May 2008): 38-51. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed April 3, 2015