

Giants Still Walk The Earth

PART I

In the mid-1980's, a period known as *The Bronze Age of Comic Books* was slowly coming to an end. *The Bronze Age* took traditional superhero comic characteristics, and started to add things relevant to the world issues such as drugs, and poverty. This more mature approach started to become accepted among the population, but soon several releases took deep dives into mature, violent themes that were mostly unseen in the American comic book industry.¹ As these new, grit-filled stories of moral conflict transformed into the *Modern Age of Comics*, two popular titles stood out, becoming icons among the industry. One of those icons, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* follows the return of the caped crusader to a life of fighting crime, as it shows aged versions of classic characters and deals with complex themes of morality and power. Specifically, the book addresses the theme of control, through Superman's actions and Batman's resistance of the control attempted to be placed upon him.

In an interview with a reporter, Jenette Kahn, a DC Comics editor, described *The Dark Knight Returns* as 'a seismic shift.' She continued on to explain: "All the extraordinary books that have come after it, *Watchmen*, *The Killing Joke*, *Arkham Asylum*, *The Sandman*, *Preacher*... and great books from other publishers too, owe a debt to it. *The Dark Knight Returns* turned comics on its head, and it ushered in a new era of formats. With paper of the highest quality and perfect binding, *Dark Knight* was more book than comic. Unlike magazines and other supposedly disposable ephemera *Dark Knight* and the comics it made possible could take their place on the library shelf."² This iconic story paved the way for a wave of a new genre of comic books that saw their heroes existing in a world where real problems existed, allowing readers to relate. Many themes can be found throughout the book, but one that stands out the most is a large power struggle between two of the most audacious characters in the story: Bruce Wayne - the Dark Knight himself, - and Clark Kent, - Superman: the Man of Steel. In the story it becomes evident that insecurity exists over who will keep these God-like figures in check, and how will humanity know that these protectors will always do the right thing.

As *The Dark Knight Returns* picks up, the world of DC's superheroes has changed dramatically. Beloved characters have aged and moved on, as the world is falling into disarray. The United States government pushed to outlaw heroes acting above the laws in events before the comics, leading to a world existing where heroes are either secrets, or not active at all. The Batman had been retired by Bruce Wayne at this point, but after ten years he finally returns to help defend his crime-ridden city. Superman has also retired from his public spotlight, but instead works as a government agent, secretly fighting the pending war between communism and capitalist America. While flying through Soviet jets to effortlessly destroy them, the Man of

¹Keith Booker. *Comics Through Time*. 2014

²Jenette Kahn. 2015. *Jenette Kahn on DC Comics History* Jennifer Contino Interview by Radio.

Steel recalls the fate met by the prominent members of the Justice League: "The rest of us learned to cope. The rest of us recognized the danger- the endless envy of those not blessed. Diana [Wonder Woman] went back to her people. Hal [Green Lantern] went to the stars. And I have walked the *razor's edge* for so long... But you Bruce, you with your wild obsession..."³ This quote sets up the relationship between the two for the rest of the story, as Superman is contentious towards Bruce Wayne, for not accepting his fate as a former crimefighter like the other heroes. However, Superman also makes a point about his own fate, of 'walking the razor's edge' showing that he knows what he's doing is no longer black and white and he instead caught in the middle of that contrasting battle.

PART II

Frank Miller depicted Superman, and even Clark Kent, as a large brilliant man, with a strong stature and vibrant colors, even in panels of darker, less saturated colors. This reminds the readers that The Man of Steel, is anything but man. Superman sits above the laws of mortals, and throughout the book, his imagery as well as his statements remind us of this. While thinking to himself on page 191 of the book, Superman states "Bruce you're just bone and meat like all the rest."⁴ There is evident self-awareness of his God-like status in this, as Superman reminds the Dark Knight that no matter what, he is still just a mortal man, equal to all the rest. Knowing this, in the story Superman still is submissive to the US Government, acting as an agent in tasks against other countries, and single-handedly fighting wars on his own. At one point the president himself addresses Superman privately, telling him to "make your country proud son."⁵ This interesting take on the character adds complexity to the storyline, as the reason behind this might grow unclear.

Early in the book, Superman has a monologue while he is fighting battles for the US army against Soviet forces, and he thinks about what led up to his position. This moment is crucial because Superman explains that due to Batman's brutal approach, people began to fear what would happen if the superheros ever did turn on them, leading Superman to make the choice he did 'saving them all'. "You were the one they used against us, Bruce. The one who played it rough. When the noise started and the subcommittee called us in for questioning. You were the one who laughed... that scary laugh of yours. 'Sure we're criminals,' you said. 'We've always been criminals. We have to be criminals. I gave them my obedience, they gave us a license and let us live. I don't like it, but I get to save lives.'"⁶ Superman believed that by giving mankind the control they wanted, that he would be able to still stand for something good, and remain a positive icon. Superman hoped that his surrendering would end the hunt for other

³ Frank Miller, Janson Klaus, Lynn Varley. 1997. *The Dark Knight Returns*. (London: Titan), 120

⁴ Ibid, 191

⁵ Ibid, 84

⁶ Ibid, 135

masked heroes and that they would settle down quietly. He hoped that people would learn not to fear heroes if they cooperate with the government's requests.

Superman's relationship with Batman in this story is pivotal, as the two heroes are considered icons among their time. Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne meet together towards the middle, and go horse riding while discussing the tension between their alternative identities. "These aren't the old days, Bruce... The world's got no room for... It's like this, Bruce -- sooner or later, somebody's going to order me to bring you in. Somebody with *authority*. When that happens...[- Clark] 'When that happens, Clark. May the best man win. [- Bruce]'"⁷ This encounter shows the Man of Steel acknowledging that to him, he is not the highest current authority. Prior to this panel, Bruce states: "Nobody can make you do anything you don't want to do Clark."⁸ Bruce attempts to remind Superman that he is above the law in his ways, and above mankind, but Clark Kent has limited himself to the control of politics, and Superman has changed from a symbol to a weapon.

At one point before the battle of the two great heroes, Superman defends the United States from an incoming atomic bomb, nearly costing him his life in the process. In a ghastly depiction of the event, a monologue overlays the bright panels as Superman fights for his life. In the monologue, the Man of Steel acknowledges how fearful mankind has become. "Our people Bruce. You laugh at them. They can do this... and yet you laugh."⁹ After living with Godlike status, the Kryptonian has finally found himself in fear of being challenged by mankind. Because of this Superman justly continues to submit to their will, as the government no longer see him as god like figure, now having weapons able to kill him. The vast destruction of the atomic bomb kills thousands of plants and animals and Superman seems to be affected by the devastation, going on to say "You have every reason to be outraged, Mother Earth. You have given them everything. They are tiny and stupid and vicious but please, listen to them."¹⁰ While he knows humans are small compared to the likes of himself, by submitting, as he tells the Earth to do, they are keeping them from bringing more doom and destruction among them. Batman however, does not see this in the same light as Superman.

PART III

As the Dark Knight returns to a life of vigilante justice, he exhibits an aged perceptive of the world around him, evident by his actions and thoughts throughout the storyline. Bruce Wayne struggles throughout the book, with inner morals, age and change, as well as timeless villains such as the Two-Face and the Joker, and new rising foes. Bruce's return saw the people of Gotham praising and fearing the Batman at the same time, while the government sought to

⁷ Ibid, 120

⁸ Ibid, 119

⁹ Ibid, 168

¹⁰ Ibid, 177

end his activity once and for all. By the final arc of the story, Batman's true challenge came to light: a epic battle with the Man of Steel himself. Batman makes his opinion of Superman's current occupation apparent throughout the novel, and captures his thoughts perfectly during the pair's face off: "We could have changed the world... now look at us... I've become a political liability and you... you're a joke."¹¹ Witnessing the two great superheroes reduced to battling each other reminds us of the changed world that *The Dark Knight Returns* presents; never would people think Superman, the icon for hope, would be reduced to the position he is in, as he is always presented above all. Batman reminds Superman further of this, and that he needs to realize what it means to be, as society defines, 'a man', and stand up for what he believes in: "Yes. You always say yes to anyone with a badge or a flag. It's way past time you learned what it means to be a man."¹² The Dark Knight has always been seen as the more uncanny superhero, pushing further into moral grey areas than the more traditional Superman.

In this world, Batman has witnessed Superman be reduced from his status of a savior to the world, to now a tool at the hands of mortal men, fighting wars instead of saving those in need. He took it upon himself to attempt to remind the Man of Steel, the symbol of hope he once was, as he himself fought to return to aiding the innocent he swore to protect. Superman was not upholding the beliefs he started his superhero career upon, and Batman brought it upon himself to challenge this change. As Superman defends America from a soviet nuclear attack, Batman sees Superman as the real 'failure', not the Soviet Union or Americas. He goes on to describe the event that unfolded as "A special kind of nuke that both sides have been trying to develop... yes Clark. both sides. I keep track of these things. One of us has to."¹³ Batman had been watching mankind as they grew and evolved, and knew that both sides of this icy war had ill intentions. The Dark Knight was not bound to a side and could see the struggle and race to build immoral weapons, while Superman, bound to a side, failed to see that there was not necessarily a right or wrong party. What these heroes did to make them stand out was remove themselves from the mortal equation (so to speak), and elevate above. As Superman now is confined, so is his ability to remain this 'super' icon, and Batman must stand up for the symbols Superman used to represent.

PART IV

As unspecified events led to the demise of superheroes before the plot begins, Frank Miller's world deals with the aftermath of abolishing the greatest heroes to walk, or fly, in our time. Batman's role of beating Superman in battle is crucial, for seemingly no one is able to keep the man of steel in check should he go astray from his morals, in a time like this. Oliver Queen, arrested and imprisoned for his crime fighting as Green Arrow, understand this better than

¹¹ Ibid, 191

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid, 168

others. While talking with Bruce Wayne about their super problem, Oliver says “I always knew it’d get down to you and the big blue schoolboy. Planet’s too big for the two of you.”¹⁴ Oliver recognizes that the only force able to stand against Superman is Batman, and the two cannot co-exist with different moral standards. Oliver goes on to address his own agenda, “I want a piece of him. A small piece will do. For old times sake, you know.” [Motions to his missing arm] “It still hurts when it’s cold.”¹⁵ The Green Arrow also seeks justice and to be liberated from the oppression that stole his identity, as well as his arm, and believes that with Batman, they have fighting chance to regain their freedom.

As the story reaches its penultimate arc, Bruce Wayne contemplates words of Oliver Queen, saying to himself “Oliver - maybe Oliver was right all along... crazy as it sounds.”¹⁶ Queen, addressing his fellow billionaire about fighting back against the oppression that they face, from the US Government and its assets. Bruce realizes the inevitable and prepares for battle. In this case, the Dark Knight is standing for all superheroes, as his last stand against this injustice that threatens their very existence, as protectors of the innocent. The title the caped crusader is often used to describe Batman, but in truth can be applied to all of these heroes as they crusade against crime as icons to humanity. Throughout the story, new anchors provide insight to events occurring and at one point a woman poses the question “Is this the military effort to capture the Batman -- or is this the final battle between two titans - the last stand for the caped crusader - facing the might of the man of steel?”¹⁷ In this ‘caped crusader’ represents not only Batman but all heroes as he stands against the fate of Superman. When Batman acts against Superman to help him understand the motivation behind his actions, he bares the responsibility of an entire group of gifted heroes. Other heroes like the Atom, and Flash, are trapped by government control at this time, and later freed in the sequel to this story, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. Batman and company is able to enlist their help as they remind the world of the good they stand for. By staying above the government, they remind the public that they are above the laws of mankind, essentially saviors, being what others can not. By standing up against Superman, Batman is able to remind him, and the world, that there is hope for superheroes once again.

PART V

The impact that *The Dark Knight Returns* has had on modern popular culture is substantial, and evidence of themes from the novel are seen in comics as well as the growing superhero movie genre. The current *Marvel Cinematic Universe* is growing into the largest movie franchise of all time, releasing large budget superhero movies that everyone can enjoy. However, even in this growing world of hit comic book movies, themes first presented in *The*

¹⁴Ibid, 187

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Ibid

Dark Knight Returns are evident. The *Marvel Cinematic Universe* is developing a large amount of its story from *Marvel's Civil War* comic arc in 2006. As a result the TV show *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* as well as the newest *Avengers* and *Captain America* movies have ties to the themes in those comics.¹⁸

In *Marvel's Civil War*, following a battle in which a team of young superheroes accidentally kills 600 civilians, the political leaders in Marvel's fictional universe repeat a similar act from *The Dark Knight Returns*: They pass a ruling that bans all costumed superheroes (in this case, excluding those who agree to register with and work for the federal government.) The Superhuman Registration Act¹⁹ splits the superhero community, with pro-registration heroes lining up behind Iron Man and anti-registration heroes backing Captain America. Although it is never spelled out explicitly in *Marvel's Civil War*, the pro-registration side presents a point. How do humans hold Superheroes accountable if they exist outside the rule of law? As Captain America states in *Marvel's Civil War* comics, however: "Heroes need to be above direct government control, because when politicians can control the heroes, they can decide who the villains are."²⁰ This is evident in the *Dark Knight Returns* as Batman's principals are similar. His mission to show the world that heroes can keep each other in line when they go astray can be seen in Captain America's actions.

In the classic book *Watchmen*, characters and themes tie heavily to *The Dark Knight Returns*. Dr. Manhattan, a godlike figure, acts as Superman does in the story. Manhattan's powers have allowed the US to gain control the outcome of the Cold War, similar to Superman in *The Dark Knight Returns*; acting as the United States' primary weapon against soviet power. As the president in *The Dark Knight Returns* says: "don't fret... we've got God on our side... or the next best thing anyway."²¹ Superman is no longer an icon but a weapon, as Dr. Manhattan has become. However Alan Moore decided to show the flaw in trusting someone above mankind by having Dr. Manhattan, his 'Superman' leave Earth, alas, leaving humanity to its own fate, without hope in heroes. At this point, the Soviets invade Afghanistan, as the threat of Dr. Manhattan is no longer present and the US no longer poses a threat.²² Miller's story, on the other hand, retains faith in superheroes, as Batman fights to remind the world that heroes exist above the law, even fighting against Superman himself to remind him of his state as a hero.

In the book *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, author Richard Reynolds traces a comprehensive portrait of the basic characteristics of a superhero story by outlining seven basic 'laws' of the genre²³. In this outline, Reynolds' third law stipulates "The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law." In both *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*,

¹⁸Paul Jenkins,. 2007. *Marvel's Civil War*. New York: Marvel Comics.

¹⁹Ibid

²⁰Marvel.com,. 2015. 'Civil War - Marvel Universe'.

²¹Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*, 119

²²Alan Moore, and Dave Gibbons. 1987. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics Inc.

²³Richard Reynolds. 1994. *Super Heroes*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

superheroes have been forced into retirement, forcing those who continue to fight crime to operate outside of the law. The authors of both stories are able to present two important and thought provoking characters that challenge the government's authority and use of force. The use of force sanctioned by the government in both, is often ineffective and unable to ensure that crime is controlled. Rorschach in *Watchmen*, and Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*, despite their sometimes questionable conceptions of justice, reflect powerful symbols of justice, above the law.

PART VI

As comics evolved to address modern material, *The Dark Knight Returns* led the pack, being the first story to brutally dive into a world of violence and despair. The roots of this story now dive deep into the current generation of superhero stories told through every medium. Modern blockbuster movies hold the very themes that *The Dark Knight Returns* introduced to pop culture. The story brings up controversies, and questions regarding the moral behind those who pursue justice outside of mankind's reach. It also brings a human perspective of the struggles that these icons deal with. As the Latin phrase “Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?” states, “who will guard the guards themselves?” Batman and Superman butting heads across the final arc reiterate this statement. While Superman’s morals go grey, who is left to keep such a powerful being in check. In this case, Frank Miller’s Batman was written as that guard of guards; fighting to remind Superman of the position he held as a symbol of hope.

Frank Miller’s brilliance in *The Dark Knight Returns* has been recognized as one of the greatest superhero story ever written, and it lives up to it’s title. As the iconic Batman returns to humanity in his aged, distraught state in attempts to remind the world that heroes still exists, Superman attempts to sway Bruce Wayne away from reclaiming his mantel, proclaiming: “They’ll kill us if they can, Bruce. Every year they grow smaller, every year they hate us more. We must not remind them that giants walk the Earth.”²⁴ Batman however accepts the challenge, fighting until his ‘very last breathe’, going against Clark Kent’s wishes. Batman, the symbol that he is, reminds the people of Gotham, and the world, that superheroes; giants, are out there, and still protect and uphold justice in times of need. The story ends setting up a new beginning for these ‘giants’ as Bruce Wayne raises a new group of heroes, with Robin and Green Arrow, to lead a crusade against the suppression they have received in an effort to protect mankind. *The Dark Knight Returns* led a new generation to accept stories they can relate to and address themes previously uncrossed by popular culture, leaving a lasting impact on generations to follow.

²⁴Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*, 129

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Standard: Analyze Complex Characters

Grade: 4

Explanation: Fantastic job analyzing characters that have almost a hundred years worth of baggage (about half a century's worth is relevant and used very well in this paper). You are thorough and precise in your language and handling of them and place them in to historical context effectively.

Standard: Analyze Plot

Grade: 4

Explanation: Good job dealing with major plot points, putting them also in to context and linking them to both characters and the themes they explore.

Standard: Analyze Complex Themes

Grade: 4

Explanation: This one was close for me, but again how thorough you are on this really pushed it over and made it evident that you truly understand this standard.

