

**THE PORTRAYAL OF CRIME AND JUSTICE  
IN THE COMIC BOOK SUPERHERO MYTHOS\***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the representation of crime and justice in the worlds and lives of two of the most popular and pervasive comic book superheroes: Batman and Superman. The messages conveyed in the stories of these two superheroes are identified and discussed in relation to three different contexts: (1) the structure of the society in which the superhero resides, (2) the crime and criminals they come up against, and (3) the crime-fighting superheroes themselves. The perspectives of crime and justice conveyed by the predominant images and messages are then examined in accordance with Sutherland's tripartite framework of criminological inquiry: The representation of law, the breaking of law, and the reaction to the breaking of law are considered. Finally, the hegemonic messages implicit in the comic book superhero mythos are discussed.

**INTRODUCTION**

For decades, young Americans have looked to the world of comic book superheroes for a sense of justice. Since the 1930s the mythos of comic book superheroes has pervaded adolescents' sense of crime, justice and order. Whether it was through the weekly dose of comic book reading or, more contemporarily, through television and movie viewing, youths in America have been fixated on "superheroes" and their battles for justice: good vs. evil, right vs. wrong. What do they learn about justice from these superheroes and the worlds they inhabit? What "perspective" are they gaining from such mythologies? These are the questions that this article, through an analysis of the portrayal of crime and justice in the stories of comic book superheroes, attempts to answer.

Through analyses of two of the earliest comic book superheroes, Superman and Batman, and the worlds they inhabit, this article examines the message that superhero mythologies transmit in regard to the social phenomena of crime and justice in America. Superman and Batman were selected for analysis for two primary reasons: (1) they are two of the most consistently popular and pervasive comic book superheroes ever created, and (2) despite their similarities, each character offers a unique perspective by which to examine the superhero mythos within American culture. Dating back to the late 1930s, titles featuring both Superman and Batman have persistently been among the top selling comic books (Wright, 2001). In the early 1940s *Superman* reached a circulation of over 1,250,000 per month (Wright, 2001); *Batman* was not far behind with sales figures that ranked second only to *Superman* and *Action [End page 96] Comics*, which featured Superman (Goulart, 2001). Over a span of more than 60 years, the popularity of Superman and Batman comic books has not waned (Wright, 2001). In fact, an examination of the current top 50 solicited comic book titles for January of 2003 demonstrates the ongoing popularity of both Batman and Superman. According to *Wizard: The Comics Magazine*, of the 50 top selling comic books for January 2003, 14% feature Batman and/or Superman (Top 50, 2003). In fact, of the core titles, *Batman* currently ranks number 1 and *The Adventures of Superman* (formerly, *Superman*) ranks 48<sup>th</sup> (Top 50, 2003). Add to this the obvious transition of both superheroes into many other forms of media such as television, film, books, and video games and there is little question that both Batman and Superman have permeated popular culture in America and that their images pervade the consciousness of many. In addition to the ubiquity and popularity of these two superheroes and their associated mythologies, we are presented with two similar but in many ways divergent perspectives of the superhero mythos in popular

culture. By examining Batman and Superman, we are offered the unique opportunity to analyze two of the first iconic superheroes that were developed within similar historical and social contexts but who represent diverging aspects of American culture and, importantly, two different perspectives on the nature of crime and justice in America.

The article begins with a brief discussion of the historical context in which Superman and Batman and their stories were developed. The genesis and backgrounds of Superman and Batman are then examined—who they are, how they came to be superheroes, and what motivated them to become crime-fighters. This is followed by an assessment of the social context within which each superhero operates—the social structure of their society—specifically focusing on the worlds they inhabit. Next, the crime and the criminals that are pitted against the superheroes are analyzed. Subsequently, the crime-fighting superheroes themselves, and, specifically, their responses to such crime and criminals are examined. Finally, the "perspectives" of crime and justice represented in these superhero mythologies are considered, drawing comparisons with some of the dominant perspectives in the field of criminology and criminal justice. The article concludes with a discussion of what the comic book superhero mythos says about crime and justice in American society.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BATMAN AND SUPERMAN MYTHOLOGIES**

Any examination of the impact and enduring influence of Superman and Batman must consider the historical context which gave them life. Both products of the 1930s, their origins and subsequent mythologies owe much to the American cultural landscape following the Great Depression (Goulart, 2001). Movies, serials, and radio programs offered escape from the memories and lingering effects of the Depression and quickly became popular forms of fantasy entertainment. As a cheap and easily accessible medium, comic books offered an especially attractive form of escapist fantasy for youth. Furthermore, with the passing of the Depression came a reluctant optimism that the worst was over and America's best times were yet to come. Public works projects moved mountains, changed the flow of mighty rivers, and raised buildings that tickled the clouds. In many ways, it seemed as if anything was possible for Americans. At the same time, however, the Depression shattered the fantasy of America's invulnerability, and with this Americans awoke to a new cultural landscape characterized by the realities of urban decay, poverty, and crime. **[End page 97]**

These two heroes epitomize this apparent cultural paradox in distinct ways that have been constructed through their respective mythologies. With his immigrant beginnings, patriotic red and blue costume, almost unlimited super powers, and unwavering commitment to "truth, justice, and the American way" Superman represents the hope and idealism of post-Depression America. Batman, however, offers a much more realistic construction. Born of violence, Batman adopts the mantle of the bat to strike fear into street criminals like the one who murdered his parents. His dark gray and black costume, his reliance on technology, and his willingness to resort to violence to accomplish his ends suggest that the new face of crime in post-Depression America necessitates a more retributive, street level form of justice. By adhering to common themes of the hero mythology while offering distinct interpretations of American culture and the nature of crime in the wake of the Great Depression, Superman and Batman, respectively, epitomize both the idealism of justice and the realism of urban crime. Although both Superman and Batman have evolved along with the American cultural landscape over their more than 60 years of existence, their central characterizations have remained largely intact; and, both have remained rooted firmly in the times in which they were created—post-Depression America.

## ***WHO ARE THESE GUYS? THE GENESIS OF SUPERHERO MYTHOLOGY***

No two names are more synonymous with comic book crime-fighters than Superman and Batman. Virtually every American can recall some image of these two superheroes, diligently fighting crime and preserving American justice. Indeed, Superman and Batman were thrust into the popular culture limelight in the late 1930s, almost immediately becoming pop icons. Through stories of Superman and Batman, the world was introduced to larger than life crime-fighters that would be the prototypes for a genre that would grow and thrive in the decades to come—comic book superhero stories. Since their inception, Superman and Batman have pervaded popular culture (Goulart, 2001; Wright, 2001).

Through television and film, these superheroes are as big today as they have ever been. But who are these crime-fighting superheroes? Where did they come from and how did they become such powerful superheroes?

Like many of the superheroes that would follow in his footsteps, Superman was not originally from this planet—he was an extraterrestrial. Superman was born on the planet Krypton. He was sent, via a rocket with only enough space for a child, to Earth by his parents just as Krypton was on the brink of destruction. On Earth, John and Mary Kent, an elderly couple that had always dreamed of raising a child, found him. They adopted him and named him Clark. Clark would grow up on the Kent's farm in a small town named Smallville.

As he grew up on this foreign planet, Clark quickly learned that he was not the same as the other boys and girls. He found that he had super powers—abilities to do things normal humans could not. He had super strength, super speed, x-ray eyesight, impenetrably strong skin, and the ability to fly. As he continued to mature, he learned to use these powers for good. His father, on his deathbed, implored Clark to "become a powerful force for good" and warned "[t]here are evil men in this world...criminals and outlaws who prey on decent folk! You must fight them...in cooperation with the law!" (National Periodical Comics, 1971, p. 207). Orphaned for the second time, Clark moved to Metropolis and got a job as a reporter on a newspaper, which, he felt, would keep him in touch with those who need his help. He vowed to spend his days fighting crime and injustice, and helping those in need. **[End page 98]**

Batman's story began when he was eight years old. The young Bruce Wayne, son of wealthy socialites, witnessed the killing of his parents during a botched robbery on the way home from the theater. Standing over his parents' graves, he proclaimed "I swear I'll dedicate my life and inheritance to bringing your killer to justice...and to fighting all criminals! I swear it!" (Batman #47, 1948 in Kane, 1988). Traumatized by the brutal death of his parents, Bruce Wayne devoted his youth to developing the strength and knowledge to fight crime and avenge his parents' senseless murder. Independently wealthy because of his sizable inheritance, Bruce Wayne was able to concentrate on becoming an expert in scientific criminal investigation and on training his body to "physical and athletic perfection" (Batman #47, 1948 in Kane, 1988).

Once thoroughly trained, Bruce Wayne decided he must take on an alternate identity. Inspired by a bat that flies through his window, he decided he would become a bat, a creature of the night, *The Batman*. Aided by an underground scientific lab dubbed the "batcave," Bruce Wayne is able to create all the tools he needs to fight crime. Most importantly, he is able to create the bat-suit that will protect him and make him nearly invulnerable. Driven by his vigilant desire to fight crime and avenge his parents' death, Batman becomes an "obsessed loner" (Pearson and Uricchio, 1991, p. 19), wandering the streets at night in search of criminals whom he can make pay for their crimes.

### *SOCIAL STRUCTURE*

The social structure of the worlds within which Superman and Batman fight crime is central to their roles as superheroes. The social structure says as much about the superhero mythos as do the images of the superheroes themselves. In many ways, Superman and Batman are confined to the worlds in which they exist. Their actions are largely reactions to the world around them. The structure of law, order and justice in their respective worlds shape the way they react to crime and injustice. While Superman and Batman are products of their worlds they also, to a large degree, define the worlds they inhabit. As Uricchio and Pearson (1991) claim in the case of Batman, it is a "symbiotic relationship" where "the fluctuating image of Gotham City relates to the fluctuating nature of crime in Batman's world and has implications for the playing out of the Batman's hegemonic function" (p. 187).

Both Superman and Batman reside in generic metropolitan cities, reminiscent of modern American metropolises: Superman in the aptly named Metropolis and Batman in Gotham City. Both cities are full of colorful criminals, and crime seems to be the most crucial social problem on the minds of the citizens. In each city there is an ongoing battle between the innocent, law-abiding citizens and the criminals. The superhero is the champion of the law-abiding masses and fights to maintain order in his city.

The similarities of Metropolis and Gotham City end there, however. Metropolis is a city of hope and optimism, while Gotham City represents the darker side of American cities appearing almost as a post-apocalyptic landscape full of dark alleys, dangerous streets,

and corruption. Metropolis, on the other hand, is presented as a bustling community of relatively happy citizens where there is a clear division between good and evil. In a way, Metropolis and Gotham City represent the dichotomous nature of the great American city: at once offering hope, [End page 99] order, and the American dream while at the same time threatening despair, danger, and anarchy. Metropolis represents more of the former while Gotham City represents more of the latter.

Although both superheroes fight for justice, attempting to protect and serve the powerless and innocent masses against threats of crime and criminals, justice is notably different in their respective worlds. For Superman, law and the justice system are bright and shining examples of "the good guys." Law and justice must always prevail and are always to be respected. The officials of law and justice act in the best interest of the citizens of Metropolis and represent value-consensus about what is good and what is evil. For Batman, things are not so clear-cut. The line between good and evil is blurred. Those representing law and justice are not always the good guys. In Gotham City there are corrupt officials and irresponsible law enforcement officers. It is no surprise that Batman feels compelled to work outside the confines of the law, while Superman works only within the bounds of the law. The nature of society in Metropolis is one of consensus regarding values and norms. Gotham City, on the other hand, represents a state of conflict in which good and evil spring from the same place and where what is right and wrong is not always agreed upon.

### *CRIME AND CRIMINALS*

The threats to the citizens of Metropolis, like their superhero, come from somewhere else, deriving from some point external to their community. The threats to the citizens of Gotham City, on the other hand, generally come from within, almost as if they were generated by the city. Both superheroes contend with many of the same types of criminals, however. Faceless, nameless "thugs" and "hoodlums" are common in both Metropolis and Gotham City. Stereotypical gangsters and members of organized crime groups are also common foes. The difference is that in Superman's world such criminals are represented as outsiders who threaten the peace and social order in Metropolis. In Batman's world such criminals are depicted as *products* of Gotham City, part of the social fabric in which those on both sides of the law exist.

Although Metropolis and Gotham City have certain types of criminals in common, they also each have some that are distinctly unique. The outsider/insider dichotomy represented by the differences between Superman and Batman's respective worlds can be seen in the different types of criminals they encounter. For example, Superman often encounters anti-Americans that threaten democracy and the "American way" (See, for example, National Periodical Comics, 1971, p. 64). Superman is also likely to contend with recurring foes from other worlds—even more of "outsiders" than those from "un-friendly" countries. Batman, on the other hand, often contends with corrupt politicians—members of the very system that is in charge of upholding law and justice in Gotham City. Many of Batman's recurring foes are members of the wealthy community that want to "control the world." Others are "freaks" that have risen up from the bowels of the city, products of a harsh society that in one way or another cheated them. These villains in Gotham City are often only trying to create disorder and anarchy. Much like Batman, they are often driven by a traumatic event and an obsession with revenge. [End page 100]

### *RESPONSES TO CRIME*

Both Superman and Batman claim to be champions of the oppressed and to fight for justice and order. However, the ways they go about fighting crime and protecting citizens are quite divergent. Superman works within the boundaries of the law and in cooperation with official law enforcement. Superman fights for justice as defined by lawmakers. As Eagan (1987) puts it, Superman is the "defender of truth, justice and the American way" (p. 88). Batman, on the other hand, works outside the boundaries of the law and considers himself an arbiter of justice. Distrustful of law enforcement, Batman takes it upon himself to uphold justice and fight crime. While he often cooperates with law enforcement, he refuses to accept their boundaries as defining what is and is not just.

From the very beginning it was clear that Superman would represent a value-neutral proponent of American justice. In the first Superman comic book (National Periodical Comics, 1971), he takes on a variety of criminals, among them a street thug, a female offender, and an organized crime gangster. He even saves an innocent person from

execution. There would also be numerous times that Superman would put a stop to vigilantism even though the victim was a known criminal. When confronting a lynch mob about to attack a criminal, Superman simply proclaims "this prisoner's fate will be decided in a court of justice" (National Periodical Comics, 1971, p. 23) and in another instance "even this rat deserves a fair trial" (National Periodical Comics, 1971, p. 345) and puts a stop to the violence.

Batman provides a direct contrast to Superman's value-neutral crime-fighter. Batman is a vigilante himself and fights for justice on his own terms and in the context of what he considers to be just. Batman would not have stopped the aforementioned lynch mob; he would have looked the other way or maybe even have joined in. Batman is motivated by his own values and his obsession with vengeance, while Superman is motivated primarily by the American justice system and democracy. Both superheroes are fighting for the same things—justice and social order, but their methods in responding to crime could not be more different.

## **PERSPECTIVES OF CRIME AND JUSTICE**

Sutherland (1934) proposed that three processes make up the "object-matter of criminology:" the making of law, breaking of law, and reaction to the breaking of law (p. 3). The superhero mythos provides us with examples of each of these processes in its portrayal of crime and justice. More importantly, the mythologies of comic book superheroes reflect certain perspectives regarding crime and justice in the real world. In the previous sections, the focus was on describing the superhero mythos and the images that it presents. The focus of this section turns to an interpretation of the extant superhero images in the context of the field of criminology. This is done loosely in the context of Sutherland's three proposed processes.

### ***Representation of Law***

In regard to the making of law, or the representation of law in general, there is a clear distinction between Superman and Batman. The law as Superman sees it is best represented by the five consensus oriented propositions outlined by Chambliss (1999, p. 18-19): **[End page 101]**

The law represents the value-consensus of the society.

The law represents those values and perspectives which are fundamental to social order.

The law represents those values and perspectives which it is in the public interest to protect.

The state as represented in the legal system is value-neutral.

In pluralistic societies the law represents the interests of the society at large mediating between competing interest groups.

Superman represents the state and what Durkheim (1893) referred to as "the collective conscience" as a rational, value-neutral "defender of truth, justice and the American way" (Eagan, 1987, p. 88). As previously mentioned, Superman works within the bounds of the law and in complete cooperation with law enforcement. The basis for Superman's morality, in fact, derives from the laws that the American government imposes.

It must be pointed out that Chambliss introduced the five aforementioned propositions as antitheses to his arguments. Chambliss, in fact, argues that such consensus-oriented propositions are false and that "there is no value-consensus that is relevant to the law" (1999, p. 21). Chambliss (1999) discusses law as a result of competing interests with some groups or individuals having more power and influence over the law-making process due to the unequal distribution of wealth. Batman would tend to agree with Chambliss' conflict-oriented perspective. Batman refuses to accept the official definition of law and takes it upon himself to become an arbiter of justice, deriving his sense of law from within

himself. His defiance of the law and the fact that he is extremely wealthy is dual evidence of a conflict perspective. His purpose is to fight crime and protect the citizens of Gotham City, but he refuses to accept the official laws in doing so, thus indicating that there is not value-consensus regarding law. Furthermore, he uses his wealth to produce his own brand of justice in the context of his own moral code, supporting Chambliss' (1999) conflict-oriented proposition that those who control the resources exert more influence over what does and does not become a law.

There is another role of the comic book superheroes that must not be neglected—that of "champion of the oppressed." This is a role that both superheroes embrace. Superman's approach to this role is much like that of the child-saving movement of the early 1900s as described by Platt (1969). Reformers involved in the child saving movement assumed an absolute morality and felt that they could "cure" the anomalous delinquents. Superman's view, like that of the reformers', is positivistic. Superman would agree with the reformers that the only way to change the "criminal class" would be to save them from the forces that lead them to criminality and to reaffirm faith in the traditional American system. Both Superman and Batman also often provide help to those less fortunate through acts of charity: Batman through his extreme wealth and Superman through his use of his super powers. For example, in one story, Superman claims "I'll rebuild this area so people won't have to live in slums" (National Periodical Comics, 1971, p.199). Believing the assumption that socioeconomic status is correlated with crime (see Tittle and Meier, 1990), this is just one more way the superheroes can preserve social order. **[End page 102]**

### ***Breaking of Law***

The superhero mythos provides us with vivid depictions of criminals. The portrayal of different types of criminals and the processes by which they become criminal are often very colorful. The depictions are also often indicative of certain criminological theories and perspectives. In this section, what some of those theories and perspectives are and how they are represented in the superhero mythos will be discussed.

First, a variety of types of criminals are presented throughout the pages of superhero comic book stories. There are gangsters, faceless thugs, corrupt politicians, ingenious madmen, alien (outside) threats and freakish aberrations. As diverse as the criminals are, some general patterns among the criminals can be detected. They all represent a threat to social order, they are generally motivated by either money and/or power or by revenge, and they have generally become criminals through mythical processes paralleling those of the superheroes. The recurring villains are generally more interested in destruction and world domination, usually out of vengeance (e.g. Lex Luthor, The Joker, The Penguin), while the myriad, run-of-the-mill criminals are generally after financial gain.

What do the crimes and criminals of the superhero mythos tell us about the breaking of law? In many instances we are presented with rational criminals with rational goals. Tunnell (1992) investigates such rational behavior of criminals and the various reasons and motivations that criminals commit property crimes. While most simply want money, many commit their crimes for a sense of accomplishment, sport, or vengeance. All these reasons are prevalent throughout the pages of superhero comic books. While money always seems to be a goal, challenging the superhero (sport), gaining revenge, and gaining power are extant motivations of the villains.

But what, according to the superhero mythos, led these individuals to become criminal? The single representation that flows throughout the many representations of criminals and villains is a sense of deterministic causes that led these individuals to a life of crime. Like the superheroes, the criminals and villains are presented as beings who were thrust into their roles by forces beyond their control. The causes are varied and virtually span the array of criminological theories that might be applied to their criminality.

The representation of genetic mutants, deformed freaks, and even the distorted facial features of the average street thug can be interpreted in the context of the early biological theories of criminal behavior. Lombroso (1911) would classify many of the criminals represented in the superhero mythos as "born criminals." Akers (2000: 43) summarizes the physical characteristics associated with Lombroso's notion of the born criminal as "asymmetry of the face or head, large monkey-like ears, large lips, receding chin, twisted nose, excessive cheek bones, long arms, excessive skin wrinkles, and extra fingers or toes." It seems that the comic book artists knew what they were doing when they conceptualized the criminals—the criminals they drew almost seem to epitomize these

Lombrosian characteristics. While, as Fishbein (1990, p. 27) points out, "biological criminology was eventually discredited," the biological perspective's depiction of criminals still exists in the superhero mythos. **[End page 103]**

Other theories can be drawn upon in attempting to interpret the crime and criminal behavior in Metropolis and Gotham City. Learning models such as Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory and, more currently, Akers' (1985; 1998) social learning theory are good explanations of the crime resulting from the level of social networking by the criminals in Metropolis and Gotham City. In the superhero's world there are the good guys and the bad guys. The bad guys stick together, often forming alliances, learning from one-another and reinforcing each other's criminal behavior. Sutherland would interpret the villains of the superhero's world as having "an excess of definitions favorable to violation of the law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law" (1947, p. 6). Generally, the needs and values of the villains are the same as those of the superhero, but because of this "differential association" of definitions favorable or unfavorable to breaking the law, the villains become criminal while Superman and Batman become superheroes.

The representation of crime on the societal level, particularly in regard to Gotham City, can best be interpreted in the context of social disorganization perspectives such as those of Shaw and McKay (1941) and, more recently, Bursik and Grasmick (1993a; 1993b). The urban decay and social disorder of Gotham city is an integral image in the development of its criminal sub-class. This image of Gotham city clearly approximates Shaw and McKay's original conception of "the zone in transition," and the crime in Gotham City reflects the effects of such disorder. As mentioned before, the criminals in Gotham City, like Batman, are integral parts of the social landscape. They seem almost to be formed from the bowels of the city. It seems as if the chaos and social disorganization of the dark and deteriorated Gotham City generates the criminals. It is the pervasive goal of the superhero to retain social order in the city and to eradicate crime.

### ***Reaction to the Breaking of Law***

The primary message regarding the reaction to the breaking of law in the superhero mythos is that, as indicated in the previous section, law and order must be maintained and certain behavior must be controlled. Eagan (1987) claims that the Superman mythos derives from the traditional American presumption that "the purpose of government is to maintain law and order, to police" and "to regulate behavior" (p. 91). These presumptions are integral to both Superman's and Batman's roles as crime-fighters.

What, though, do these superheroes represent as crime-fighters? The best interpretation can be made through Klockars' idea of "voluntary avocational policing" (1992, p. 1465). Voluntary avocational policing is defined as being "done by private citizens not because they are obliged by a threat of punishment but because they, for their own reasons, want to do it" (Klockars, 1992, p. 1465). As previously discussed, both Superman and Batman have their own reasons for fighting crime. Batman's approach, more specifically, represents the subcategory of vigilante voluntary avocational policing. Both Superman and Batman's approach to fighting crime also supports Klockars' argument that coercive force is the single defining factor of policing (1992, p. 1466). Superheroes, in their roles as crime-fighters, not only use coercive force, but often take that force to extremes. **[End page 104]**

## **THE HEGEMONIC FUNCTION OF THE SUPERHERO MYTHOS**

The superhero mythos depicts a fanciful world of perfect heroes and colorful villains but also depicts a world reflecting the dominant values of American society. Such a depiction is by no means unintentional. Take, for example, the comics code enacted by the Comics Code Authority in 1954:

In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.

Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to promote distrust in the forces of law and justice....

All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.

All situations dealing with the family unit should have as their ultimate goal the protection of the children and family life. In no way shall the breaking of the moral code be depicted as rewarding.

(Comics Code Authority, 1954 as cited in Boichal, 1991, p. 13)

It is clear that the Comics Code Authority knew the impact that the superhero mythos might have on those who were exposed to it. In many of the Superman and Batman stories over the decades, the superheroes almost come straight out and say "CRIME DOESN'T PAY!" While the mythos of Superman and the mythos of Batman present different perspectives of the law (Superman tells us that the law is to be respected; Batman tells us that law is to be feared), they are ultimately saying the same thing: Don't break the law!

But what, specifically, does the superhero mythos tell us about crime and justice in American society? The representation of crime and justice in the superhero mythos is predominantly derived from a conservative or "right" oriented perspective (as evidenced in the aforementioned comics code). The best way to outline what we learn from the superhero mythos is in the context of Miller's thorough discussion of ideology and criminal justice (1973). In discussing the ideology of the "right" or conservative perspective of crime and justice, Miller identifies five "crusading issues": (1) "excessive leniency toward lawbreakers," (2) "favoring the welfare and rights of lawbreakers over the welfare and rights of their victims, of law enforcement officials, and the law abiding citizen," (3) "erosion of discipline and of respect for constituted authority," (4) "the cost of crime," and (5) "excessive permissiveness" (1973, p. 143). These "crusading issues" of the political "right" are virtually mirrored by the crusades of the superhero mythos.

The messages portrayed in the comic book superhero mythos are clear. We are being told that we must preserve the status quo, or, as Superman might put it, "democracy and the American way"; threats to the status quo must be extinguished. We are presented with a world in which there is clearly right and wrong, good and evil. Good must prevail and social order must be maintained. The dominant hegemony is safe in the hands of the comic book superhero. **[End page 105]**

## ENDNOTES

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It should be noted that our analysis is limited to the representation of these superheroes in comic books alone. Although both of these superheroes are icons that transcend this particular medium, they have their genesis in comic books and their central characters (which are the central focus of this article) developed therein. Although an analysis of other media representations of both Superman and Batman would add an important element to the understanding of the superhero mythos and its portrayal of crime and justice, it is outside the scope of the current analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Although the primary sources for analysis were the original comic book stories of Batman and Superman, our analysis of Batman was supplemented by Frank Miller's (1989) quintessential depiction of Batman in his Dark Knight series of graphic novels. Although Miller's depiction of Batman is, as the title suggests, much darker and "edgier" than the original, it remains predominantly true to the original Batman mythos while at the same time adding important depth to the character. Furthermore, in *The Dark Knight Returns* Miller (1989) presents a future version of the DC Universe in which both the mythologies of Batman and Superman, discussed herein, are taken to their logical extremes.

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A superhero is a fictional character with special powers. Since the first Superman story was written in the USA in 1938, superheroes have appeared in various comic books around the world. But more recently they have become better known as film characters. Although superhero powers vary widely, superhuman strength and the ability to fly are common. Some superheroes do not have special powers but have developed other important abilities. In order to protect friends and family, a superhero's identity is normally kept secret, which often means superheroes have complicated double life. In the comic book superhero mythos\* by Scott Volland. This article examines the representation of crime and justice in the worlds and lives of two of the most popular and pervasive comic book superheroes: Batman and Superman. The messages conveyed in the stories of these two superheroes are identified and discussed in relation to three different contexts: (1) the structure of the society in which the superhero resides, (2) the crime and criminals they come up against, and (3) the crime-fighting superheroes themselves. The perspectives of crime and justice conveyed by the predominant images and messages are then examined in accordance with S