UNMASKING THE VILLAIN: A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE VILLAIN
ARCHETYPE IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Unmasking the Villain: A Reconstruction of the Villain Archetype in Popular Culture

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DEDICATION

For my students of the fall 2012 semester, who made me fall in love with teaching all over again.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Unmasking the Villain: A Reconstruction of the Villain Archetype
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The idea of the villain in literature seems to be inextricably linked to notions of immorality, selfishness, and chaos, thus placing the villain in binary opposition with depictions of the hero figure in contemporary America. This project offers a reevaluation and reconstruction of traditional views of villainy in popular culture for two purposes: first, to challenge the aforementioned binary in order to develop a new schema for understanding the villain, and second, to better understand the villain’s role in prompting introspection regarding our own values. To these ends, I focus on three texts of different genres and time periods for providing a possible archetype for the modern villain. To set the foundations of the villain, I first analyze the process of vilification of problematic characters in ancient Greek myths, focusing primarily on Homer’s Odyssey in conjunction with Joseph Campbell’s influential work on the epic hero and the monomyth. After situating the villain as a powerful figure working within social institutions (rather than being apart from these institutions), I transition to the modernized idea of the supervillain as it relates to the superhero. This section draws on conflicting views of William Moulton Marston and Fredric Wertham regarding the didactic nature of villains and heroes in comic books, and then introduces the role of the Joker from the Batman franchise in subverting social norms via the carnival as explained by Mikhail Bakhtin. Finally, I apply Jeremy Bentham’s theory of the panopticon to Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy to promote the idea that President Snow’s role as a villain is imposed upon him by both internal and external audiences, and that he does not possess as many qualities of the stereotypical villain as the audiences does. In short, then, through these texts, I hope to demonstrate how the villain functions in popular literature today, and how this role challenges our own – often polarized – views of “good” and “evil.”
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At one point in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker and Batman are discussing the fate of Harvey Dent, a new district attorney who has been working to stamp out crime in Gotham City. After Dent’s girlfriend, Rachel, is murdered, the Joker convinces Dent to find Rachel’s killers, prompting the district attorney to go on a violent hunt. When Batman confronts the Joker about his involvement with Dent’s sudden change in behavior, the Joker (as always) toys with the hero, remarking,

Oh, you. You just couldn’t let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren’t you? You won’t kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness. And I won’t kill you because you’re just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.

Batman, in turn, insinuates that their battles with one another will not go on forever, promising that he will put the Joker in a padded cell in Arkham Asylum. The Joker shoots back, “Maybe we can share one,” and takes pride in his influence over Dent: “I took Gotham’s white knight and I brought him down to our level. It wasn’t hard. You see, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push!”

The Joker – easily one of the most well-known, maniacal, and violent villains in the comic book industry – offers some interesting insights in this scene with regards to his position as an antagonistic force in relation to Batman. A recurring theme in the Batman mythos is the parallel between the Joker and Batman, with the Joker alluding to Batman’s own insanity by offering to share a padded cell. Moreover, the Joker challenges Batman’s notions of righteousness and morality, mocking the Dark Knight’s fixation with justice – in a sense, bringing him down to the same position as any other obsessive lunatic, becoming a member of, as the Joker says, “our level.”

But let us take the Joker’s revelations about Batman and extend them to a wider thematic issue. Oftentimes in popular culture – which can involve both modern-day texts as well as forms of widely accessible literary traditions of the past, including myths and fairy
tales – there appears to be some form of a binary when it comes to the hero and the villain. Orrin E. Klapp offers the typical overview of heroes and villains in his article “Heroes, Villains and Fools, as Agents of Social Control.” The heroic figure, Klapp explains, “is a supernormal deviant, his courage, self-abnegation, devotion, and prowess being regarded as amazing…heroes dominate the scene of human action, symbolizing success, perfection, and conquest of evil” (57). By contrast, villains appear “as idealized figures of evil, who tend to counter-moral actions as a result of an inherently malicious will. Despite human form, they are at heart monsters, hated and shunned as enemies of social organizations, of the good, and of the weak” (58).

Klapp also mentions in his article that the two archetypal figures are most prominent in “comics, popular fiction, folklore and the like” (56). Indeed, American popular culture has developed its own monomyth with regards to the roles of the hero and villain, as John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett identify in The Myth of the American Superhero. They structure the American monomyth off of Joseph Campbell’s classical monomyth as presented in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, which identifies the following pattern:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Lawrence and Jewett 28)

Absent from this monomyth, though, is the relationship between the hero and the villain. Rather, favor is given to the hero’s struggle leading to victory, or ascension to a higher plane than that of his surroundings. Lawrence’s and Jewett’s American monomyth, however, addresses the connection between heroes and villains:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (6)

There is certainly a connection to Klapp’s definition of the evil, villainous figure, as both texts identify such a figure as a threat to the maintenance of the status quo. But Lawrence and Jewett notice a paradoxical trend in the monomyth that promotes exclusion, despite working within the context of an inclusive American culture. They ask, “Why, amid so many signs of secularization, do large audiences entertain so many fantasies of redemption by supernatural powers?” (7). Or, “why, in a country trumpeting itself as the world’s supreme democratic
model, do we so often relish depictions of...[being] rescued only by extralegal superheroes?” (7).

These questions prompt me to bring up another seemingly paradoxical issue: is it necessarily true that the evil force disrupting the normal institutions is, after all, entirely evil? Or, taken a step further, can we even attribute the disruption of the institutions to the villains themselves? Certainly, when we consider what the Joker says to Batman in The Dark Knight, there is the implication that Batman is just as responsible for perpetuating madness in Gotham City as the Joker is. A reevaluation of the villain may help us answer these questions, moving us away from the binary Klapp acknowledges and toward a new schema of who and what the villain figure is – and how much overlap with the hero is present.

To assist in identifying what the villain has become, we may look at what the villain was drawn from in American culture. Lawrence and Jewett offer a contextual discussion of villains by promoting the idea that the “intruding, evil other” in American popular culture is very deeply connected with actual people, organizations, and historical events, thereby giving villains a more human-like accessibility that seems absent from Klapp’s references to figures from myths and fairy tales. Particularly of note is Lawrence’s and Jewett’s discussion of the film The Birth of a Nation (1915), which depicts an Eden-like American South prior to the Civil War that is threatened with ruin by the meddling of abolitionists. The traditional institutions of American society – in this case, the institution of slavery – risk being dismantled, thereby casting an unfavorable light on the liberal abolitionists and implicitly praising the efforts of the Klansmen who kill the rebelling black militia. Thus, the KKK becomes the redeemer of the Southern paradise for preserving the norm, while the abolitionists are villainized for threatening the norm in the first place.

Lawrence and Jewett note, however, that this idea of a “paradise” needing a savior is problematic:

The redemption of paradise by lone crusaders would have been unnecessary in American mythology if actual experience with democracy had matched the Edenic expectation. Most of the materials [texts and films]...share The Birth of a Nation’s pessimistic premise that democratic institutions cannot lift the siege. Citizens are merely members of a spectator democracy in which they passively witness their redemption by a superhero. (29)

The disconnect between the realistic and the idyllic creates a shift in the conventional notions of heroism and villainy. The need for redemption is, interestingly, formed by the very
institutions that need saving (rather than by an outside, evil force) because they lack the means or ability to reconcile what is ideal and what is real. And, what is perceived as evil (the abolitionists, in the case of *The Birth of a Nation*) is what many now would consider to be good, while the redeemers (the Klansmen) are worthy of censure. In this case, what can be thought of as the villainous outsider could actually be the savior of social institutions.

When we consider what the Joker says to Batman, we realize that there continues to be a great degree of overlap between the hero and the villain, and between older stories like *The Birth of a Nation* and more recent works. But the overlap is not a recent trend – and it certainly is not limited to American culture. Just as Lawrence and Jewett pull the American monomyth from Campbell’s work, many of the texts from American popular culture draw on Greek and Roman myth to shape their own stories. Consider, for instance, Wonder Woman, the first superheroine to appear in comic books and a forerunner of feminist icons in the industry. Although a clear signifier of American patriotism (one need only look at her outfit decorated like the American flag), she is irrefutably Greek. She possesses “the eternal beauty of Aphrodite and the wisdom of Athena – yet whose lovely form hides the agility of Mercury and the steel sinews of a Hercules” (Moulton 8). She is also born of the earth fashioned by Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, and she closely follows the monomyths outlined by Campbell, Lawrence, and Jewett. Or, consider much more recent works in popular culture, like the television shows *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*; the young adult novel series, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians*; or the video game series, *God of War*. Because the heroes in many of these series draw from the stories of heroes in antiquity, it would behoove us to look at some of the myths themselves and work to extract a relationship between our villains today and those antagonistic forces from the myths.

It should be noted first, though, that there is no quintessential villain in Greek myth, but rather, hostile forces – humans, creatures, Fate – that challenge the hero. A possible explanation for this can be derived from Campbell’s monomyth of the hero, where emphasis is placed more on the hero and his journey (what he faces and what he overcomes), rather than the characteristics of the individuals themselves that the hero comes across. This is especially true when we realize that many obstacles are created as an offshoot of the gods’ own affairs and have less to do with the hero. For instance, Charybdis, the ever-consuming whirlpool that destroys Odysseus’ ship, was once a naiad that was punished by Zeus for
flooded large expanses of land. Another example, Medusa, the monstrous Gorgon that was beheaded by Perseus, was originally a beautiful woman that challenged Aphrodite’s supremacy when it came to physical beauty. Still, another explanation for the lack of explicit villains is that the difference between the hero and “the bad guy” is very slim – not unlike the relationship between Batman and the Joker. Or, in other words, the hero possesses characteristics that are, by many standards today, un likable. In the first book of the *Iliad*, for example, Achilles’ pride and anger lead him to refuse assisting the Greeks in the Trojan War because he is robbed of a consort by Agamemnon. Heracles, another epic hero of Greek myth, succumbs to violent fits of rage several times throughout his life, while Odysseus, the most cunning of the Greek heroes, exhibits hubris on occasion as he journeys home – especially during his interaction with the Cyclops.

If this second explanation is true, then the converse must also hold: that the antagonists from Greek myths possess characteristics of heroes (whether we use the definition of Klapp, Campbell, or Lawrence and Jewett). What we have, then, is a tangled intersection between villains, heroes, and social institutions in popular culture, both past and present. This project therefore attempts to untangle these relationships and reconstruct the concept of the villain, to answer questions about what constitutes a villain in popular forms of literature today, and to develop an outline of the villain figure by referencing more canonical stories from antiquity. I would like to draw particular attention throughout this project to the villain’s relationship to societal norms and institutions in order to accurately modify conventional attitudes about villains, which often incorrectly depict an oppositional relationship between the villain and society.

I begin by drawing on Greek myths to develop a framework of the villain in Chapter 2, “‘You Have No Cause to Blame the Achaian Suitors’: Antagonists as Communal Heroes in the *Odyssey*.” Specifically, I examine the trend of vilification of non-villainous characters, such as Helen of Troy, Pasiphaë, and the Minotaur, to set up a precedent for the frequent misattribution of negative characteristics to enemies of the hero. After referencing works by Campbell and the ancient rhetorician, Gorgias, I then move to Homer’s *Odyssey*, mainly focusing on the roles of the suitors and Polyphemus, the Cyclops. The section on the suitors deals largely with Greek notions of hospitality, especially as it pertains to Telemachus’ and Penelope’s inability to demonstrate agency in their own house. After incorporating the ideas
of Walter Allen, Jr. as they appear in his article “The Theme of the Suitors in the Odyssey” – along with several other scholars – I argue that the suitors are actually acting out in response to the social shortcomings of Telemachus and Penelope – rather than being a source of the shortcomings – and are themselves, for the most part, a continuous part of social norms that Odysseus and his family move away from. Odysseus, despite being the hero, is especially guilty in rejecting ideas of proper hospitality when he takes advantage of Polyphemus’ possessions (more so, I would say, than the suitors do of Odysseus’ household). In this sense, the definitions of villains by Klapp, Lawrence, and Jewett fall short, and it is in fact the suitors who preserve the status quo of social institutions.

Continuing with the idea of villains remaining as members of society – rather than being outsiders – I extend upon the notion of villains as agents of social change in Chapter 3, “‘What Do You Think I Am? Crazy?’: The Joker’s Hypersanity in Batman: The Killing Joke.” Before diving into the character of the Joker in the Batman series, I discuss the qualities of the original superheroes of the 1930s and 1940s in the comic book industry to segue into a discussion of the social roles of comic books. I provide a contextual analysis of these superheroes, using ideas from both William Marston, a psychologist and creator of Wonder Woman, and Fredric Wertham, a psychologist who condemned the comic book industry, to position Batman and the Joker as equally responsible for the didactic nature of comics. From there, I utilize Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival from his text Rabelais and His World to situate the Joker as a source of subversion and inversion of conventional rules and establishments. I then enter into an analysis of the Joker’s moral and causal responsibilities to separate him from depictions of him as a morally bankrupt character, specifically through analysis of Alan Moore’s Batman: The Killing Joke. Throughout this examination, Grant Morrison’s notion of the Joker’s “super-sanity” is also referenced, thereby characterizing the Joker (and, by extension, modern villains) as actually working to improve society through a hyper-awareness of society’s shortcomings.

Chapter 4, “‘What Is to Prevent, Say, an Uprising?’: Villains Preserving Social Order as Audience and President in The Hunger Games,” expands on hyper-awareness by looking at the roles of the audience (both external and internal to the text) in perpetuating violent acts within Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy. This chapter engages with Jeremy Bentham’s theory of the panopticon and the idea of the spectacle – and spectator democracy
that Lawrence and Jewett reference – to transfer traditional characteristics of villainy (violent, immoral, and sadistic, for instance) to the “popular mind” of the readers of the books and the citizens of Panem within the story. A reevaluation of President Snow, the primary antagonist within the series, is then presented, where I put forth the idea that he is a scapegoat for the masses’ desire for violence, as well as the notion that his hyper-awareness of the fragility of the nation’s infrastructure forces him to commit certain acts. In addition, such atrocious acts are regulated and limited to only what is necessary to preserve the status quo and sate the masses, freeing him from a great deal of immediate moral responsibility. Therefore, President Snow becomes a figurehead for a collective villain (the audience).

In essence, I believe that villains within popular culture offer insight into our own constructions (binaries, for the most part) of what constitutes “good” and “bad,” and that a closer examination helps us deconstruct our own rigid representations. In its simplest form, villains are seen as immoral, as bringing harm and pain and chaos to others, yet old myths tell us of heroes who have done the same. Or, we can consider villains as those who disrupt the status quo; but what of villains who wish to maintain the status quo, these leaders who are staples of dystopian texts like The Hunger Games? And, certainly, merely challenging the perceived paradise mentioned by Lawrence and Jewett cannot be enough to vilify somebody. Rather, such challenges to social norms can be indicative of a heightened level of awareness of grave issues that require resolution – the abolitionists of The Birth of a Nation and even the Joker within The Killing Joke both attest to this. The villain complicates much of what we hold true as we relate ourselves to our surroundings and to other people, and as we attempt to fully understand ourselves as a manifestation of the intersection between heroes and villains.
CHAPTER 2

“YOU HAVE NO CAUSE TO BLAME THE
ACHAIAN SUITORS”: ANTAGONISTS AS
COMMUNAL HEROES IN THE ODYSSEY

While the archetype of the epic hero has spanned from the days of Homer to popular culture today – we need not look far to see the model in the Star Wars and Harry Potter franchises, for instance – there does not appear to be an archetypical villain that follows suit. Or, to be more specific, greater attention has been paid to the figure of the hero than that of the villain. Consider, for instance, Joseph Campbell’s seminal text The Hero with a Thousand Faces, in which Campbell traces the monomyth of the hero. While applying a psychoanalytic lens to the classic mythic hero, Campbell identifies numerous characteristics of the archetype that cross cultural boundaries and center on the idea of “the hero’s journey.” This prototypical journey, according to Campbell, can be broken down into three stages: the hero’s departure from the mundane as a result of a call to adventure, his initiation into his new role as a hero through a road of trials, and his return to the “ordinary” world after reaching a heightened state of enlightenment. Furthermore, Campbell goes into incredible detail, mapping out key features pertaining to each of these stages; the departure, for instance, may include supernatural aid or a refusal of the call to adventure, while the initiation stage can entail a meeting with a goddess or atonement with the father figure.

Yet despite such an in-depth and scholarly analysis of the hero, there is no equivalent outline for the villain that is as readily accessible. Two questions thus arise: Can we use what we know of the hero archetype to extract a framework for a villain archetype? Or, is such a model of the villain even extant, especially when we take into account the classical Greek myths that contributed heavily to the idea of the epic hero? The answer, I believe, lies between forming a definite template and concluding that there is a complete absence of villains in the Greek myths, and it is this kind of medial perspective that would be most effective for understanding the nuances of the villainous in popular culture today.

The idea of developing a template for the villain based on Campbell’s guide has been explored by scholars before. Both Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals point out the similarities between the hero and the villain in their article, “Does the Villain’s Journey
Mirror the Hero’s Journey?” Within the article, the two scholars cite Christopher Vogler, a writer and Hollywood development executive, who argues that

whether a character is working toward achieving great good or great evil, the general pathway is similar. Both heroes and villains experience a significant trigger event….encounter obstacles, receive help from sidekicks, and experience success and setbacks during their quests.

But Allison and Goethals move beyond the parallels and observe an inversion of the hero’s journey, with the villain beginning with power as the hero is coming into his own. The paths of the two start on the opposite sides of the spectrum and converge toward “one or more epic clashes…[in which] the villain’s mastery is handed over to the hero” after the villain is defeated.

Complications arise, however, when, in addition to this inverted path, villains are subjected to a binary opposition with heroes in regards to morality. If, as Allison and Goethals claim, “a fine line often separates heroes from villains, a line that is clearly delineated in their opposing moral ambitions,” is it necessarily true to automatically attribute the label of “villain” to those who happen to have a moral compass at odds with the hero? After all, multiple classical Greek heroes exhibit traits that can be unsavory for many audiences: Odysseus is guilty of hubris and Heracles of wrath, for instance. Since inversion of the hero’s path is a characteristic of a villain, might not an inversion of morality – where the seemingly evil is actually nestled in communally accepted values – also occur for the villain?

Before diving into the image and moral levels of the villain, though, we might wish to explore the trend of vilification of non-villainous characters in Greek myths, and whether or not this trend is justifiable when applied to villains. The vilification itself is a common occurrence, as Campbell explains with the story of the Minotaur. Half man and half bull, the Minotaur was believed to be an abomination by all of Crete and exiled to live in a labyrinth away from any social interaction with the masses. But, the animosity does not end with the Minotaur. Rather, it shifts toward the Minotaur’s mother, Pasiphaë, who “had been seduced by a magnificent, snow-white, sea-born bull” (12). While Campbell acknowledges that “society has blamed the queen greatly” (12), he defends her actions and instead attaches blame to Pasiphaë’s husband, King Minos. Minos receives a white bull from Poseidon as a sign of favor, but, instead of sacrificing the bull back to Poseidon, Minos breaks his word and
keeps the bull for himself. As punishment, then, Poseidon inspires a lust for the bull in Pasiphaë. Thus, “according to legend, the primary fault was not the queen’s, but the king’s” (12) for the birth of the Minotaur.

The significance of Campbell’s reimagining of Pasiphaë lies mostly with his analysis of Pasiphaë’s implied justification for her ill-bred affair. Campbell transforms the monstrous birth of the Minotaur into something almost holy:

Minos’ mother was Europa, and it is well known that she was carried by a bull to Crete. The bull had been the god Zeus, and the honored son of that sacred union was Minos himself – now everywhere respected and gladly served. How then could Pasiphaë have known that the fruit of her own indiscretion would be a monster: this little son with human body but the head and tail of a bull? (12)

Campbell’s extended sensitivity to not just the Minotaur – the “little son” mislabeled as a horror – but to the Minotaur’s background as it pertains to Pasiphaë and Minos is, I think, indicative of a heightened awareness to personal context that all too often gets ignored in favor of disparagement.

But Campbell is not the only one to defend characters from Greek myths that have been accused of wrongdoing – and he is certainly not the first. As early as the fourth century B.C., the Greek rhetorician Gorgias composed the “Encomium of Helen,” in which he works to absolve Helen of any wrongdoings attributed to her with regards to the Trojan War. Traditionally, the Trojan War has been ascribed to the abduction of Helen; after Paris of Troy judges Aphrodite to be the winner of a beauty contest amongst the goddesses, Aphrodite rewards Paris with the most beautiful woman in the world. Thus, Helen leaves her husband, Menelaus of Sparta, and, in retaliation, Menelaus wages war against the Trojans for ten years in an effort to take his wife back home. Scholar George A. Kennedy notes, though, that “Helen’s role in the abduction is not specified in the Homeric poems and was variously interpreted by later writers” (251).

Gorgias picks up on the interpretations accusing Helen of being responsible for the war and offers multiple reasons that vindicate her. He lists four possible scenarios for Helen going with Paris: “For either by fate’s will and gods’ wishes and necessity’s decrees she did what she did or by force reduced or by words seduced or by love induced” (Kennedy 252). If Aphrodite charmed Helen into falling in love with Paris, “Helen must of all disgrace be freed…[since] god is stronger than man in force and in wisdom” (253), and Helen would have had no way to resist. If Helen was “seized by force and illegally assaulted….
assailant [Paris]…did the wrong and the assailed [Helen]…suffered wrongly” (252). If Helen had been persuaded by the words of Paris – and “the power of speech has the same effect on the condition of the soul as the application of drugs to the state of bodies” – then Helen, “the persuaded, forced by speech, is unreasonably blamed” (254). Or, if Helen was acting on love brought about by an attraction to Paris’ beauty, and “love, a god, prevails over the divine power of the gods” (254), then Helen, as a mortal, would certainly be unable to reject her love for Paris.

While Pasiphaë and Helen are far from maleficent, their situations are what deserve attention. The archetypical hero is characterized by what he experiences and undergoes – a departure, a crossing of the threshold, a return, and so on – but, if we examine the villain in light of Pasiphaë and Helen, we can regard the idea of the villain as a construction formed exclusive of consideration for background situations and contexts. Thus, we may be able to modify the traditional definition of the hero to produce an outline of the villain:

The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms…The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man – perfected unspecific, universal man – he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed therefore…is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed. (Campbell 18)

The villain, on the other hand, continues working within his personal and local histories; these histories are not limitations, but rather, a source of justification for his actions. And, in relation to the hero, the villain’s “second solemn task” of teaching “the lesson he has learned” is often in opposition to the hero’s, whose endeavors seem to have transcended normalcy. In this sense, the villain can even be, at times, more humanized than the hero because he is still situated within a communal construction.

The suitors in Homer’s Odyssey exhibit some of the strongest connections between morality, normalcy, didacticism, and villainy. Because Odysseus has been away for over well over a decade with no word provided of his whereabouts after the Trojan War, suitors line up in his house in the hopes of marrying his wife, Penelope, and acquiring the kingdom of Ithaca. Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, lacks the means and maturity to drive out the suitors and reestablish his family’s power in his own household – let alone the kingdom – and so finds himself at the mercy of the suitors’ whims. From the very first lines of the epic, the suitors are censured for their behavior via the story of Agamemnon. The gods of Olympus hold
council to discuss Odysseus’ fate, and Zeus comments on how Agamemnon experienced a tragic homecoming from Troy as well:

Aigisthos married the wife [Clytemnestra] of Atreus’ son [Agamemnon], and murdered him on his homecoming, though he knew it was sheer destruction, for we ourselves had told him…not to kill the man, nor court his lady for marriage; for vengeance would come on him from Orestes, son of Atriedes [Agamemnon], whenever he came of age and longed for his own country. (1.35-41)

Agamemnon’s return parallels Odysseus’ homecoming very closely. Both Odysseus and Agamemnon have been away from their kingdoms for over a decade fighting at Troy, and, in the meantime, their wives have been approached by suitors. But, while Telemachus has failed in ridding his house of the suitors, Orestes successfully kills Aigisthos to avenge his father’s death. Upon hearing this story from Zeus, Athena even remarks, “Aigisthos indeed has been struck down in a death well merited. Let any other man who does thus perish as he did” (1.46-47), thereby attributing fault with Penelope’s suitors by extension.

The scorn for the suitors in both stories may appear warranted because it is established so early on in the epic (by gods, no less). Yet some have attributed this foreshadowing as a necessity for the story to end with Odysseus’ successful return rather than as an objective reflection of the suitors’ nature and motives. Walter Allen, Jr. explains that “Homer has a trick of putting in the mouths of the gods matters which might not be so credible if they were expressed by mortals” (107). As a result of this “general atmosphere of doom [that] seems to press hard upon the wooers,” says Allen, the suitors’ “natural conclusion is that Telemachus and Odysseus…constitute the greatest danger to them” and “lead them to become potential murderers” (107). This, in turn, enables Homer to “prevent Odysseus’ regarding them [the suitors] merely as foolish young men” (107) and to repress any feelings of sympathy the audience may have for the wooers for the rest of the epic.

But if we are to study the suitors as characters – villains with dimension, in a sense – rather than plot devices, we can look at what the suitors have done and whether or not these actions warrant their slaughter. Allen, interestingly, assists in resurfacing the sympathy for the suitors that Homer worked to diminish; as Allen notes, the impetus for becoming potential murderers comes from Odysseus and Telemachus threatening the suitors’ lives. In other words, the suitors’ plot to kill Telemachus and Odysseus are a reaction to and defense against the possibility of their own deaths. And, since we can think of the suitors’ desire for the deaths of Telemachus and Odysseus to be a result of the suitors’ fear for their own well-
being, we could also examine their behavior as a response to Penelope’s and Telemachus’ own mishandling of the situation in Ithaca. This, in turn, creates a unique dynamic in which the suitors – in all of their perceived offenses – are actually the ones responsible for many instances of didacticism aimed at the “heroes” of the *Odyssey*. To put it another way, the suitors serve to demonstrate – both directly and indirectly – the proper responses to social interactions that Telemachus and Penelope seem to lack, thereby creating a moral inversion between the antagonists and protagonists.

The first scene with the suitors is, unsurprisingly, very unflattering with regards to the suitors’ actions. After the council of the gods disbands, Athena makes her way to the house of Odysseus in the guise of a friend, Mentes. As soon as she arrives, the chaos within the household is made apparent:

There she found the haughty suitors. They at the moment in front of the doors were amusing their spirits with draughts games, sitting about on skins of cattle whom they had slaughtered themselves, and about them, of their heralds and hard-working henchmen, some at the mixing bowls were combining wine and water, while others again with porous sponges were wiping the tables and setting them out, and others cutting meat in quantities. (Homer 1.106-12)

It is important to note that this first description of the suitors belongs to Homer, not a character within the text. Here, “the poet [Homer] is able to find fault only with their [the suitors’] manners, not with what they are actually doing” (Allen 108). The suitors’ eating, drinking, and gaming, although a nuisance, is not at this point rendered a serious violation. But, even when looking from the perspective of Athena, we see once again that the suitors’ actions are played down. Athena does attach blame to the situation – it just gets attributed to Telemachus.

In a move reminiscent of Helen’s guilt in the cause of the Trojan War and Pasiphaë’s implication in the conception of the Minotaur, Athena finds fault with one who would, by association with a heroic figure, be typically considered beyond reproach. It is not necessarily the way the suitors “‘insolently…swagger about in their feasting all through their feasting’” (Homer 1.227-8) that Athena primarily considers reprehensible. Rather, Athena is more concerned with how “‘a serious man who came in among them could well be scandalized, seeing much disgraceful behavior’” (1.228-9). Indeed, when Athena first enters the household, she is not properly received by the servants, and the brooding Telemachus’ “heart within him [was] scandalized that a guest should still be standing at the doors” (1.119-
Athena continues honing in on Telemachus’ shortcomings as the son of a far-famed hero; when she counsels him on going abroad to hear word of his father, she chastises him:

You should not go on clinging to your childhood. You are no longer of an age to do that. Or have you not heard what glory was won by great Orestes among all mankind, when he killed the murderer of his father, the treacherous Aigisthos, who had slain his famous father? (1.296-300)

Because Telemachus is so inexperienced in ruling over a household – he has lacked a strong father figure his entire life, after all – the suitors assume the role (albeit tangentially) by indirectly pushing him to accelerate his maturation into adulthood. In fact, the suitors chastise Telemachus just as Athena does by underscoring his mishandling of Penelope’s marriage, when, after Telemachus decry their presence in his home, Antinous reprimands Telemachus, declaring, “‘Telemachos, surely it must be the very gods who prompt you to take the imperious line and speak so daringly to us’” (1.384-5) as guests of the household. As such, the suitors do, in a sense, have a divine backing when on the subject of Telemachus’ poor behavior.

However, the suitors take on a much more direct function in the delivery of instruction on proper roles when the subject turns to Penelope, and it is in these exchanges we realize that it is Odysseus’ family that may have broken custom. Shortly after Athena visits Telemachus, the young prince calls for an assembly of suitors to address the wrongs that have befallen his house. He identifies two evils: “I have lost a noble father, one who was king once over you [suitors] here,” and “a greater evil, one which presently will break up the whole house and destroy all my livelihood, [for] my mother, against her will, is beset by suitors” (12.46-50). This greater evil, as Telemachus calls it, is not necessarily that Penelope has so many suitors waiting on her, but rather, how they handle the courtship:

These [suitors] shrink from making the journey to the house of her [Penelope’s] father Ikarios, so that he might take bride gifts for his daughter and bestow her on the one he wished, who came as his favorite; rather, all their days, they come and loiter in our house and sacrifice our oxen and our sheep and our fat goats and make a holiday feast of it and drink the bright wine recklessly. (2.52-8)

While it is true that the suitors are not following proper social protocol – they should be at Ikarios’ house, rather than Odysseus’, for Penelope’s hand – Antinous counters with Penelope’s deceitful words and actions. Penelope “‘holds out hope to all, and makes promises to each man, sending us [the suitors] messages’” even though “her mind has other intentions” (2.91-2). Antinous even references her plot with the shroud; Penelope promises to
choose a husband after she finishes weaving a shroud for Laertes, but she prolongs the decision-making process by unraveling the web every night. As Allen puts it, Antinous “represents their [the suitors’] anger at such shabby treatment as the reason for their present exhibition of bad manners” (111).

Actually, there is no reason to assume that the suitors have been acting so aggressively during their entire stay in Odysseus’ house. While “often the impression is received by the modern reader that they had been oppressing Odysseus’ house for ten years” (Allen 111) Athena mentions otherwise to Odysseus upon his clandestine return to Ithaca. She informs Odysseus that “for three years now [the suitors] have been as lords in your palace,” yet in the interim have still been “offering gifts to win her [Penelope]” (Homer 13.377-8). Thus, the period of rowdy behavior, as Allen calculates, “could have been a matter of no more than weeks” (111), only after discovering Penelope’s deceit. More importantly, the suitors’ treatment of Penelope (aggressive courtship) mirrors their treatment of Telemachus and Odysseus (plots to kill) in that the radical action of both spring from necessity; the former case from being treated inhospitably, the latter from being threatened with the prospect of death.

Scholar Ruth Scodel applies game theory to the Odyssey with regards to the suitors, giving us an extended look to the rationalization of the suitors’ actions and rebounding the vilification of the suitors back to Penelope. Scodel explains game theory as follows:

In game theory, a ‘game’ is a rule-governed situation in which each person must make choices in the knowledge that other people are also choosing and that the outcome depends in a prescribed way on all the choices. Game theory assumes ‘instrumental rationality’: without considering why people want what they want, it assumes that people have preferences and use rational means to achieve them. Ends do not need to be rational, but means do. (308)

The suitors, though, have both rational ends and means. Telemachus is not mature enough to assume the throne, Ithaca cannot be without a king, and Penelope cannot remain unwed. These factors all influence the rationale of the suitors who believe they have a right to court Penelope. And, to reach this end – to marry Penelope and acquire Odysseus’ throne, wealth, and reputation – the suitors follow a rational approach: court Penelope after Odysseus has been gone for over a decade and a half, and, when she has resisted social mandates to remarry, aggressively protest her decision (or lack of) by forcing Telemachus’ hand through excessive feasting and drinking.
The rationality of Penelope’s decisions, on the other hand, is a bit more questionable. While she might not be able to entirely dismiss the suitors from her household, there does not seem to be a prominently rational reason for encouraging individual suitors (as Antinous mentions). Scodel goes into great depth charting the “game” with the suitors and identifying multiple outcomes and possible reasons for Penelope’s actions, but a popular theory is that “Penelope at some level enjoys the attention of the suitors” (313). We can see a Helen-esque attribution of fault here, where some have blamed Penelope for the destruction of her household, but, unlike Helen’s implication in the start of the Trojan War, there is textual evidence of Penelope’s involvement with the suitors’ rowdiness. In addition to making several appearances in front of her wooers to potentially ignite their desires for her, Penelope has a dream of numerous geese being slaughtered by a bird of prey:

Only in Penelope’s dream (19.536-51), in which she weeps for the geese who represent the suitors, would suggest that she enjoys them, and such an interpretation of the dream is open to question. Athena herself says that Penelope has some hidden motive in encouraging the suitors. (Scodel 313)

But even though Penelope may, at some subconscious level, enjoy the suitors clamoring for her attention, Odysseus seems more concerned with the suitors’ disrespect of his household. This is not to suggest that Odysseus has complete faith in Penelope; sure enough, Odysseus questions his wife’s fidelity several times throughout the Odyssey. Yet the questioning does not persist for long. Right before the contest of the bow, Athena inspires Penelope to make an appearance before the suitors, during which Penelope claims, The behavior of these suitors is not as it was in time past when suitors desired to pay their court to a noble woman and daughter of a rich man, and rival each other. Such men themselves bring in their own cattle and fat sheep, to feast the family of the bride, and offer glorious presents. (Homer 18.275-9) Odysseus, disguised as a beggar in the audience of suitors, is not scandalized at his wife’s flirtatious behavior. On the contrary, he “was happy because she beguiled gifts out of them, and enchanted their spirits…while her own mind had other intentions” (18.281-3). Thus, the culpability of the entire situation – of suitors acting inappropriately toward Penelope – falls back on the suitors, even though Telemachus mismanaged his father’s estate and Penelope deceived the suitors for an extended period of time.

Odysseus does not even offer the suitors a chance to make reparation despite the shortcomings of his own family. After Odysseus wins the contest of the bow and reveals
himself to the suitors, Eurymachus attempts to reason with the old hero, begging him to spare the suitors, and “‘afterward we will make public reparation for all that has been eaten and drunk in your halls, setting each upon himself an assessment of twenty oxen. We will pay it back in bronze and gold to you, until your heart is softened’” (Homer 22.55-9). In order for the slaying of the suitors to be considered “legal,” Odysseus “should demand reparation from the suitors, or at least cessation of their actions (Allen 112). Yet, Odysseus predictably denies the suitors a chance to repent for their actions, and, with the assistance of Telemachus, slaughters them all without pause.

Interestingly, Odysseus’ reaction toward the suitors invading his home strongly parallels the Cyclops Polyphemus’ reaction to Odysseus invading his cave. And, once again, another character is thrust into the role of a villain despite having justification for his actions. When Odysseus arrives on the island of the Cyclopes, he and his soldiers sneak into Polyphemus’ cave. Several soldiers beg Odysseus to steal some of the cheese and meat in the cave, but Odysseus reasons that it is better to stay and wait for the resident of the cave to return, for he might give Odysseus and his men gifts as a sign of goodwill. So, as Polyphemus is away, Odysseus and his companions help themselves to the Cyclops’ food and set up camp in the cave – an act not unlike what the suitors have done in Ithaca. Odysseus does not even offer an apology for transgressing on Polyphemus’ land when he sees the Cyclops for the first time. Instead, he asks the Cyclops for “a guest present or otherwise some gift of grace, for such is the right of strangers. Therefore respect the gods…and Zeus the guest god, who stands behind all strangers with honors due them, avenges any wrong toward strangers and suppliants” (Homer 9.267-71).

But because the Cyclopes live on the fringe of common society, Polyphemus scoffs at Odysseus’ request for assistance that is tempered by a reference to Zeus. Polyphemus boasts, “the Cyclopes do not concern themselves over Zeus of the aegis, nor any of the rest of the blessed gods, since we are far better than they” (Homer 9.275-7). Despite being the son of one of the “blessed gods,” Poseidon, though, Polyphemus exhibits a great deal of hubris and decides to forcefully take his due as a host by eating Odysseus’ men. Even so, Pura Nieto Hernández indicates that the land of the Cyclopes is reminiscent of the Hesiodic Golden Age, while Polyphemus’ cannibalism connects with Cronus’ devouring of his own children: “Thus in both accounts [the Cyclopeia and Hesoid’s Works and Days] there is an idyllic description
of the earth’s fertility and the absence of agriculture, combined with a central character who practices cannibalism or, at all events, anthropophagy” (350). And, prior to Odysseus intruding on the island and causing an upheaval, says Hernández,

There is no indication in Homer that the Cyclopes were violent with one another. Moreover, when Polyphemus is blinded by Odysseus, he asks the help of his fellow Cyclopes, which indirectly shows that he trusts them; they do, in fact, come at his summons. Further, although it is not specified...that Polyphemus was the dominant Cyclops or a king among them, we may deduce his supremacy. (350)

The idyllic society of the Cyclopes, which is often compared to Elysium, provides support for Polyphemus’ claim that the Cyclopes are above the gods – a point further supported when Hernández links Polyphemus to Cronus. Yet this veritable paradise crumbles upon Odysseus’ arrival, and Polyphemus’ eating of Odysseus’ men is reactionary with cause.

In her article “Narrative and Rhetoric in Odysseus’ Tales to the Phaeacians,” Marianne Hopman presents the idea of a negative paradigm that we can apply to not just the Cyclops, but to the suitors as well – and, by extension, other Greek figures that we may retroactively consider blamable. The story of Odysseus’ adventures in the Odyssey are recounted by Odysseus himself (rather than Homer acting as the narrator) when Odysseus lands on Phaeacia and is introduced to the Phaeacians by Nausicaa. Hopman cites Glenn Most to demonstrate how Odysseus’ narration to the Phaeacians follows a ring composition that “emphasizes two extreme versions of bad hospitality: eating one’s guest alive (Cyclops, Scylla, Laestrygonians, Charybdis) and detaining him longer than he wishes (Lotus-Eaters, Circe, Sirens, Calypso)” (Hopman 2). Yet with the Cyclops, we see it is Odysseus who is the primary transgressor:

As Odysseus and his companions enter Polyphemus’ cave uninvited and help themselves to his cheeses (9.231-33), they violate the normal structure of Homeric hospitality scenes. Odysseus’ use of trickster strategies, above all his willingness to take on the name of “Nobody,” runs against the traditional ideal of heroic self-assertion epitomized by an Achilles or an Ajax. (Hopman 4-5)

If Odysseus runs against the traditional ideal of heroism, why can the Cyclops, then, not run against notions of wickedness? After all, as Odysseus sails away while Polyphemus wallows in his cave, the defeated Cyclops undergoes a drastic shift in character and finds solace in one of his rams, to whom he wonders out loud, “perhaps you are grieving for your master’s eye, which a bad man with his wicked companions put out, after he had made my
brain helpless with wine” (Homer 9.452-4). This humanization of the Cyclops – really, a brief pitiful moment that is easily overlooked – can serve as a model for a new “negative” paradigm when considering antagonistic characters. Hopman’s paradigm involves the audience (both external and internal) learning of what is not acceptable behavior – the Cyclops eating Odysseus’ men, the suitors courting Penelope and wasting Telemachus’ resources, Pasiphaë birthing the Minotaur, Penelope involved in the start of the Trojan War, to name a few. Instead, though, we can focus on what social and personal factors have contributed to these “negative” behaviors in the first place.

As we have seen in these Greek stories, the negative actions of many characters are not nearly as reprehensible when put back into social and personal context. Pasiphaë’s affair is brought about by Minos’ own indiscretions, while Helen’s relationship with Paris is excusable on all counts according to Gorgias. Within the Odyssey, the suitors are in the right when courting Penelope, and the issues of how they go about doing so may be restricted to a matter of weeks – especially when taking into account Penelope’s own implications in spurring on the suitors. And, ironically, Odysseus is guilty of doing to Polyphemus what the suitors did of his own household. Ultimately, though, Odysseus is depicted as being without fault and murders the suitors, while his son and wife are restored to positions of power. Allen explains that Odysseus’ righteousness is highlighted because “Aristotle stated that such an ending would be ‘popular’” (109). We will see shortly, however, that popularity favors the villain in modern times, largely due to a similar framework of antagonists in Greek stories.
CHAPTER 3

“WHAT DO YOU THINK I AM? CRAZY?”: THE JOKER’S HYPERSANITY IN BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE

The superhuman feats and fantastical figures of mythology found their way into American culture in the twentieth century as the superhero comic book genre skyrocketed in popularity. There was a major difference, though, between epic heroes of the past and the newfound American superheroes – namely, a heavy degree of polarization with regards to the morality of superheroes. Unlike their Greek predecessors who at times occupied a gray area despite being role models for generations – who succumbed to fits of jealousy and rage, who often committed adultery, raped, and pillaged – American superheroes of the mid-twentieth century were absolute pillars of justice, righteousness, and goodness. Grant Morrison, a prolific and successful writer of graphic novels and a powerhouse in the comic book industry, offers an explanation in his book *Supergods* as to why we, to this day, still connect with these American icons:

In a secular, scientific rational culture lacking in any convincing spiritual leadership, superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations. They’re not afraid to be hopeful, not embarrassed to be optimistic, and utterly fearless in the dark...They exist to solve problems of all kinds and can always be counted on to find a way to save the day. At their best, they help us to confront and resolve even the deepest existential crisis. (xvii)

Echoing Joseph Campbell, Grant points to an underlying universal experience shared in a collective unconsciousness that contributes to the shaping of a hero. Here, though, is an extension provided by Morrison; it is not just what the hero undergoes or represents, but what he is that solidifies him as a hero. In other words, personal characteristics are now a factor: heroes are hopeful, optimistic, and fearless, among other things. And, if we were able to pull out a framework of the villain from Campbell’s definition of the epic hero, we can add to that framework by modifying Grant’s description of modern-day superheroes. It would help our purposes, though, if we first look at the dynamics of the initial superheroes in American popular culture to better situate their villainous counterparts – or, for the purposes of this
chapter, to situate one of the darkest villains in comic book history, the Joker from the
*Batman* series, in a new construction inclusive of both background and personal character.

It is no wonder that comic books became as popular as they did in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The comic book industry during these decades occupied a very unique space, being simultaneously a mirror of American culture and an integral part of the cultural fabric. As scholar Mitra C. Emad describes, comic books act “as speculative fictions...that show utopic visions of social change” and “can yield much insight about the particular conditions” (956) of the times. Superman, one of the most popular superheroes in Western culture, serves as a prime example of such a definition. As one of the first superheroes in comics, he attained his iconic status largely because of the context surrounding his initial publication. Created during the Great Depression, the young Clark Kent functioned as a national role model, a sort of promise to Americans both young and old that it was possible to thrive during economic turmoil. Clark rises from his status as a poor orphan to work at The Daily Planet, a thriving newspaper company, and assumes the identity of Superman, a good Samaritan whose superior strength and moral compass enabled him to become the hero of the common man. This plotline served to be an incredibly successful sales tactic too, since a good portion of the readers of the comic came from the lower economic stratum. Rather than fight fantastical foes, Superman often battled modern criminals that exacerbated economic hardship during the New Deal era, including corrupt political figures, bosses, and stock brokers (see *Action Comics #1*).

Superman helped pave the way for other iconic heroes in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including Captain America and Batman. And, just like Superman, these heroes referenced the times to appeal to the common man. Captain America, for instance, answers the call for a candidate to intake a super-soldier serum in order to fight the Axis powers of World War II; the cover of the very first issue of *Captain America Comics* even depicts the patriotic hero punching a stunned Hitler to the ground. Taking a darker approach, a young Bruce Wayne assumes the mantle of Batman after witnessing the murder of his parents. In all of these stories, underdogs – a farm boy, a weak soldier, and an orphan – become something uncanny and extraordinary, acting as motivational and inspirational figures that foreshadowed impending success for the struggling American populace. And, to further encourage the masses, these characters transitioned into heroes *effortlessly*. Implying that
Americans – as Americans – had a heightened level of agency despite rough times, comic book heroes exhibited a similar type of autonomy. In the case of Superman, Clark Kent simply decides to do good and enforce justice in costume – there is no resistance or questioning of his decision. Similarly, Bruce Wayne develops the persona of Batman upon swearing to avenge the death of his parents, and his training follows easily without objection.

While Superman, Captain America, and Batman captured the hearts of Americans, psychologist and writer William Moulton Marston noticed a disturbing trend in the creation of superheroes. In his 1944 article for *The American Scholar*, “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” Marston mentions how “from a psychological angle, that the comics’ worst offense was their blood-curdling masculinity. A male hero, at best, lacks the qualities of maternal love and tenderness which are…essential to a normal child” (42). Marston deems love to be the most important quality of a hero – an understandable belief, especially when considering the then-recent Holocaust and bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – as a way of empowering and healing a fractured world. What’s more, though, is that Marston works to empower the young female readers of comics who were subtly insulted and sissified by such strong waves of masculine roles. When recounting his meeting with publishers, he argues,

> not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power. Not wanting to be girls they don’t want to be tender, submissive, peaceloving as good women are. Women’s strong qualities have been despised because of their weak ones. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of a Superman plus the allure of a good and beautiful woman. (42-43)

Indeed, Marston himself took it upon himself to develop such a character; he created Wonder Woman, the iconic and feministic superheroeine, in 1941, and addressed all objections before they could be made against a superheroeine; every effort was made to demonstrate Wonder Woman’s competence and capabilities. Consider Wonder Woman in tandem with Superman and Batman: while Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne effortlessly choose to become superheroes, Diana of Themyscira must prove herself in a contest in order to escort the wounded soldier Steve Trevor back to America.

Especially surprising, however, is that the female population and readership did not possess the same weakened power relations as their female comic book counterparts. If anything, women resonated more with the Superman-esque resolve to do good without struggle or complaint. By the early 1940s, World War II required countless American men to
serve overseas; the migration of men, in turn, weakened the workforce. To ensure economic stability and military success, the government turned their focus on women, working to convince them of their capital worth. One study conducted in the early 1940s entitled “Womanpower” went so far as to declare, “The more women at work, the sooner we’ll win.” Targeted by the War Manpower Commission of 1942, women occupied production lines and manufactured war materials. And, mentally and socially permeated by feminist propaganda including the now-famous Rosie the Riveter, women disassociated with their previous occupation as housewives and assumed masculine roles outside of their domestic lives.

Marston’s fixation on the need for a strong feminine character is indicative of a larger issue with comic books as a whole. He justifies the popularity of the industry in response to criticism, claiming that the “phenomenal development of a national comics addiction puzzles professional educators and leaves the literary critics gasping” (36). Contrary to the beliefs of educators and critics, Marston asserts that not only do comics develop a powerful connection with readers on a primitive level obsessed with a wishful self, but that comics can serve as instructional tools. The educational purpose is twofold: comics can teach children language skills in school, and can develop lifelong skills that will carry over into adulthood. It is this latter purpose that Marston stressed beyond all else:

Superman never kills; Wonder Woman saves her worst enemies and reforms their characters. If the incredible barrage of comic strips now assaulting the American minds establishes this new definition of heroics in the though reflexes of the rising generation, it will have been worth many times its weight in pulp paper and multicolored ink. (41)

The didactic nature of comic books was picked up on by German psychologist Fredric Wertham, but not for the same reasons as Marston. Unlike Marston, who believed that comics could impart wholesome values, Wertham considered comics to have the exact opposite effect and lashed out against the comic book industry in Seduction of the Innocent in 1954. Reading comic books, according to Wertham, lead to a plethora of negative impacts on children: increased violence, drug abuse, and sexual delinquency, to name a few. Moreover, while Marston considered comics to be fantastical due to an innate need among readers to find a “wishful self,” Wertham begged to differ:

Many adults think that the crimes described in comic books are so far removed from the child’s life that for children they are merely something imaginative or fantastic. But we have found this to be a great error. Comic books and life are connected. A bank robbery is easily translated into the rifling of a candy store.
Delinquencies formerly restricted to adults are increasingly committed by young people and children. (54)

Shortly after the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was formed in an attempt to better regulate the seemingly objectionable material in comic books. The CCA was comprised of dozens of rules and regulations for comic book writers and illustrators to follow. Thus, many of the big name comic book titles were reduced to “campier” collections of disjointed adventures. Rather than fight gun-toting crime lords, superheroes now found themselves fighting aliens and imaginary monsters (see *Wonder Woman #108* and *Batman #156*).

The absolutism of both Marston and Wertham, interestingly, fuse together in the *Batman* series to create a uniquely interstitial text. Although one of the earliest heroes and a fighter of crime who brings criminals to justice, Batman is a much darker figure than his patriotic counterparts, Superman and Wonder Woman. Instead of working within the confines of love for humanity, Batman is, from the very beginning, relentless in punishing criminals – indeed, his reason for becoming Batman in the first place is vengeance, not humanitarianism, as it is with Superman and Wonder Woman. From the outset, we realize just how gruesome the *Batman* comics could get and how many of the rules of the CCA the series broke retroactively. In Bob Kane’s “*Batman Versus the Vampire, Part Two*” (1939), Batman executes several vampires by shooting a silver bullet into each of their hearts. The violence escalates in Kane’s “*Dr. Hugo Strange and the Mutant Monsters*” (1940), when Batman shoots down criminals driving a truck, and then lynches another criminal from his plane. The violent overtones of the series, needless to say, were a large factor in the creation and implementation of the CCA.

It seems counterintuitive, then, to have this dark, violent superhero’s greatest opponent be someone who embodies humor, laughter, and chaotic fun (albeit in a maniacal fashion). Yet if we recall the observations of Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals in the previous chapter, the hero and the villain often begin at polar ends; the brooding and serious Batman thus faces off with the flighty Joker. But also recall our new construction of the villain, in which personal context (what has happened) combined with personal characteristics (who one is) combine to teach us, as mentioned earlier by Morrison, Marston, and Wertham. But what, exactly, do villains like the Joker – a volatile, homicidal maniac –
teach us about ourselves? We may arrive at the answer by examining the Joker’s context and characteristics, especially as it pertains to Alan Moore’s *Batman: The Killing Joke*.

As discussed with the suitors in the *Odyssey*, villains often work within social constructs, rather than transcend them as heroes do. This is literally the case for the Joker, who consistently makes his surroundings – whether in Arkham Asylum or out in Gotham City – a carnival fitting his name. The difference, however, is what he does to traditional social constructs in the setting of the carnival. Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque offers insight to what the Joker does in his environment. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin states that the concept of the carnival

is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play...everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (7)

Because there is emphasis on play, on a reality turned upside-down and inverted to subvert traditional social norms, the Joker is able to create a level playing field between himself and Batman. Indeed, the opening of *The Killing Joke* juxtaposes a failure on Batman’s part with a successful endeavor on the Joker’s part. Batman visits the Joker at Arkham Asylum to attempt reconciliation in order to avoid the eventuality that one will kill the other. However, the real Joker has escaped and Batman finds himself talking to an imposter. The very first panel with the real Joker shows the escaped criminal outside of a dilapidated amusement park that he soon converts into a grand-scale madhouse. The entire purpose of this carnival is to kidnap Commissioner Gordon – the epitome of a law-abiding bringer of justice – and shatter his psyche. The Joker wants Gordon – and, by extension, Batman – to realize that madness is not brought about by an extended exposure to external influences (a direct response, really, to Wertham, who blamed comic books for polluting the minds of youngsters and transforming them into criminals). Rather, according to the Joker, “all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy” (Moore).

The Joker drives this point home for Gordon by internalizing the carnivalesque through his interactions with the commissioner. After shooting and paralyzing Gordon’s daughter, Barbara (and possibly even sexually assaulting her), the Joker forces Gordon to look at photos of the crime scenes on monitors inside a tunnel ride. Gordon witnesses his
daughter’s tragic experience through these photos and finds himself losing his sanity – a
deterioration mirrored by his physical appearance, as he is stripped naked and chained like a
baser animal. During this time, though, the Joker assumes a role of power and becomes a sort
of counselor to Gordon by offering coping mechanisms:

    Then there’s a certain thing I do which I shall pass along to you, that’s always
guaranteed to make me smile…I go loo-oo-ony as a light-bulb battered bug, simply loo-oo-ony, sometimes foam and chew the rug…Mister, life is swell in a
padded cell, it’ll chase those blues away…you can trade your gloom for a rubber
room, and injections twice a day! (Moore)

When the Joker sees Gordon at the end of the ride, he notices how weakened Gordon has
become and attributes the weakness to reality (the reality of Barbara being assaulted). The
Joker remarks to his goons, “Look at him now, poor fellow. That’s what a dose of reality
does for you…Never touch the stuff myself, you understand. Find it gets in the way of
hallucinations” (Moore). The subversion of social norms abounds: insanity is really reality,
law gives way to chaos, and the serious becomes playful. In turn, criminals transform into
truth-seeking leaders; the Joker elevates himself above Gordon and Batman in his
understanding of reality – a point he thoroughly relishes at the carnival from his throne
surrounded by decapitated doll heads.

    The Joker’s surroundings – a manipulated and inverted social structure – thus lead to
an explanation of who the Joker is as a villain and why he came to be. Moore provides one
of, if not the most, sympathetic portrayal of the Joker’s back story in The Killing Joke,
despite the fact that the Joker is a serial killer that has killed on a massive level. In Moore’s
depiction, the Joker – before becoming the Joker – is a stand-up comedian struggling to
provide for his pregnant wife, Jeannie. There is no question that he loves his wife, especially
because he blames himself for his inability to financially support their growing family. In a
flashback, the Joker is crying with his head in Jeannie’s lap, gasping, “I don’t mean to take it
out on you. You’re suh-suffering enough, being married to a loser…It’s true. I can’t support
you. Oh Jeannie, what are we going to do?” (Moore). Shortly after, the Joker finds himself in
a bar, caught up with mobsters that promise him large amounts of money for assisting in a
crime. He agrees, only to find out that his wife and unborn child have been killed in a
suspicious electrical fire at home. At this point, the mobsters scare the Joker into still going
through with the proposed crime; he assents to their demands and leads them through a
chemical plant disguised as “The Red Hood,” and, after a run-in with Batman, falls into a pool of toxic waste that transforms him into the mentally unstable Joker.

This chain of events leading to the Joker’s “birth” leads to an interesting discussion of whether or not the Joker is responsible for his villainy; after all, it is not uncommon for writers to present villains and antiheroes in a sympathetic light. A division appears when examining the Joker both as a criminal and as a common man. As a criminal, he can be viewed as morally bankrupt because of his crimes (especially his murderous rampages), or he can be viewed as being irresponsible for his actions because he is deemed mentally unstable. Similarly, when he was still a “normal” person, his involvement with gangsters can either be damnable because he made a conscious decision to commit crimes, or exemptible because he did so to provide for his family.

Christopher Robichaud provides a convincing defense of the Joker in his article “The Joker’s Wild: Can We Hold the Clown Prince Morally Responsible?” Robichaud outlines two types of responsibility – causal and moral – and positions the Joker in relation to both. As far as Robichaud is concerned, the Joker is causally responsible for the deaths of many people because his actions tend to cause a chain of events that lead to those deaths. For instance, he pulls the trigger of a gun that shoots a bullet into Barbara Gordon, and that bullet, in turn, cripples her. Or, as another example, the Joker hides a needle in his palm and upon shaking hands with the amusement park salesman, injects the salesman with a chemical that causes him to die. On the other hand, moral responsibility is defined by Robichaud as “reasonably anticipat[ing] the sequence of events” (74) that will occur. So, when taking into account the Joker’s brief stint as a criminal under the name of “The Red Hood,”

it seems correct to say that while he [the Joker] surely had to be aware of many of the dangers and the ramifications of his actions, it would not be reasonable to expect him to have foreseen that becoming the Red Hood ran him the risk of turning into a homicidal maniac…He would have to have known a lot more about his psychological makeup to conclude that from the possibility of that chemical plunge, madness would likely ensue. (79-80)

This being the case, then, the Joker cannot, under philosophical rules, be deemed morally responsible for his actions since he “doesn’t perform his actions freely,” but rather, his “craziness has inhibited his ability to form second-order desires about his first order desires” (80).
Moore’s demonstration of how the Joker’s terrible past leads to the villain’s neurotic conduct – coupled with Robichaud’s analysis – certainly paints the Joker as a tragic figure deserving of our sympathy. More importantly, though, it gives insight to a new characteristic that we can use to help define and identify villainous figures. In his book *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*, Travis Langley references Peter Coogan to discuss the Joker’s behavior:

The Joker has always tried to reshape reality to fit himself, starting with the first crime he ever commits in the comics, when his Joker-toxin leaves a rictus grin on the dead millionaire he just robbed. ‘He wants to permanently stamp his unique face on nature, to transform the world in his image,’ writes comics scholar Peter Coogan. ‘He seeks to make the world comprehensible by transforming it into a twisted parody of himself.’ (Langley 155-156)

The Joker, however, *is* the twisted parody of the world. He projects his own experiences onto everybody else, especially Batman. The Joker points out how Batman also exhibits “crazy” behavior that must have been brought about by one bad day – the same situation that pushed the Joker over the threshold into madness. The Joker loses his wife, and is convinced that Batman lost somebody important as well. “Why else would you dress up like a flying rat?” (Moore) he asks Batman. To strengthen the bond with him, the Joker tells the Caped Crusader, “When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a coot!...It’s all a joke! Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for…it’s all a monstrous, demented gag! So why can’t you see the funny side? Why aren’t you laughing?” (Moore).

The idea of the Joker and Batman being foils of one another is very popular among scholars and fans alike of the *Batman* series. Both Batman and the Joker have experienced “one bad day” that irrevocably altered their lives: Batman witnesses his parents’ murders, and the Joker loses his wife and unborn child. Their trajectories, though, diverge; Batman works to reestablish order in a crime-ridden Gotham, while the Joker aims to bring the carnivalesque to the entire city. As a result, Batman fails to, as the Joker points out, laugh at the “black, awful joke” the world is. Possibly because he sees himself in the Joker, Batman offers a way out of the life of crime Joker has been living. The hero foreshadows, “Maybe this is our last chance to sort this bloody mess out. If you don’t take it, then we’re locked onto a suicide course. Both of us. To the death” (Moore). But the Joker refuses, and offers an analogy in the form of a joke to explain why he cannot stop himself from doing what he
does. He tells of two lunatics in an asylum who break out and try to jump across the rooftops to escape. The first inmate makes the jump, while the second one is too afraid to cross:

So then, the first guy has an idea...he says ‘Hey! I have my flashlight with me! I’ll shine it across the gap between the buildings. You can walk along the beam of light and join me!’ B-But the second guy just shakes his head. He suh-says...He says ‘Wh-What do you think I am? Crazy?...You’d turn it off when I was half way across!’ (Moore)

In this beautifully bittersweet moment, the Joker and Batman finally connect when they both realize their relative insanities and share a laugh at the tragic inevitability of their downward spiral together. What’s more, though, is that here lies the Joker’s – and potentially other villains’ – key trait: super-sanity. Darren Marks touches on the readings of super-sanity put forth by several other writers, including Grant Morrison, in his article “In the Face of Anomie: Batman from Golden Autoark to Modern Combinard”:

The storyline ends with a joke between the two, implying that both in the face of anomie [a catastrophic loss] are ultimately jokes in themselves. As Grant Morrison’s Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth (1989) asserts...the only certainty is death and our desire to find wisdom in this serious house is made pallid by the reality of anomie. For Morrison, the Joker is the poor unfortunate whose hyper-sanity prevents him for seeing the cosmic joke for what it is.

Rather than being insane, as commonly thought, the Joker has a heightened awareness of reality. Such hyper-sanity, though, is still regarding as a mental defect – not just by readers, but by the characters within the stories as well. But if we refer back to Morrison’s definition of superheroes (and we come to a schema of the villain by modifying the definition of a hero), it becomes apparent that villains can also help us deal with our existential crises. The Joker is proof of this; he attempts to convince both Gordon and Batman that their existential crises brought about by a tragic “one bad day” can be resolved by insanity (or rather, hyper-sanity). It is not necessarily that the Joker is wrong in his approach; it just differs from the love-and-rehabilitation method preferred by superheroes like Superman and Wonder Woman. And villains do ultimately work to create a new social order of understanding, just as Wonder Woman did with regards to the roles of women outside of the home. The Joker exists to solve what he deems a wide-spread social problem – the lack of awareness of the grand joke of life – by subverting and inverting the normal, and in this sense, is optimistic and fearless in his pursuit of modifying social constructs of life and normalcy. But while we may be quick to judge the villain’s goal of deconstructing and
reconstructing society and its values, we should remember Robichaud’s distinction between causal responsibility and moral responsibility. As the next chapter will discuss, the intersection between external context and personal characteristics may yet prove that hyper-sanity is vital in carrying out a higher order of moral responsibility – and that it can be the villain that is accountable for performing the task.
CHAPTER 4
“WHAT IS TO PREVENT, SAY, AN UPRISING?”: VILLAINS PRESERVING SOCIAL ORDER AS AUDIENCE AND PRESIDENT IN THE HUNGER GAMES

When Suzanne Collins’ young adult novel The Hunger Games was published in 2008, it was received with a great deal of praise from all around. Even now, after the last two books of the trilogy – Catching Fire and Mockingjay – have been out for a considerable amount of time, the series still has a massive following. Children and young adults gravitate toward the series because of its dark realism and premise – a trend continuing from the later Harry Potter books and the Twilight series – as well as the unique characters of the story.

Parents have also noticed the uniqueness of the series with regards to characters, with the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, being a positive female role model that possesses agency and promotes empowerment – a refreshing change from the largely controversial protagonist of Twilight, Bella Swan. Moreover, educators have been attracted to The Hunger Games as well, with many using it to teach students about dystopian texts, likening it to classics such as William Golding’s Lord of the Flies or George Orwell’s 1984. An article written by Sarah B. Bush and Karen S. Karp, entitled “Hunger Games: What Are the Chances?” even explains how The Hunger Games can be incorporated in a mathematics classes in middle school when teaching students about probability.

Yet this is not to suggest that The Hunger Games has been free from harsh criticism. Indeed, the series has been banned from numerous schools and libraries, and, as Hillel Italie notes in the article “Hunger Games again on list of challenged books,” the objections against the series has continued to rise as the last two books came out. Italie points out,

Complaints included ‘sexually explicit’ and ‘unsuited to age group and violence.’ Collins herself acknowledged her dystopian stories were not for everyone, telling the Associated Press at the time that she had heard ‘people were concerned about the level of violence in the books. That’s not unreasonable. They are violent. It’s a war trilogy.’

But The Hunger Games is more than just a war trilogy that speaks of a fictional world. True, the story draws heavily from Greek myth, especially the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur.
In the myth, King Minos demands seven youths and seven maidens be periodically sent to the labyrinth of the Minotaur as punishment for the death of Minos’ son by Athenians. Similarly, in The Hunger Games, one boy and one girl from each of the twelve districts of Panem (a dystopian America in the future) must be sent to fight to the death in a nationally-televised battle royal every year as punishment for rebelling against the Capitol government nearly seventy-five years ago. Yet even though there are fantastical undertones throughout the trilogy, the story is still planted firmly in reality, and more often than not mirrors serious social and political issues surrounding us today. In an interview with Scholastic, Collins explains how she came up with the concept of The Hunger Games by mixing fantasy and reality:

I was channel surfing between reality TV programming and actual war coverage when Katniss’s story came to me. One night I’m sitting there flipping around and on one channel there’s a group of young people competing for, I don’t know, money maybe? And on the next, there’s a group of young people fighting an actual war. And I was tired, and the lines began to blur in this very unsettling way, and I thought of this story.

The persistence of realistic violence is arguably the biggest point of contention in The Hunger Games among parents and educators. It is not as if violence is not a prevalent theme in other popular young adult texts; countless characters are killed off in the Harry Potter and Twilight books, after all. But the deaths in these stories are still partially within the realm of the impossible, with spells, vampires, and werewolves acting as the source of the violence. Not so with The Hunger Games; wands give way to much more realistic weapons, as the green light of an Avada Kedavra spell is replaced with knives, spears, bows and arrows, and technological warfare. From the very beginning of the seventy-fourth Hunger Game, Katniss bears witness to the intensity of the event as she grapples with a young boy over a backpack:

“then he coughs, splattering my face with blood. I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That’s when I see the knife in his back” (Collins, Hunger Games 150). The violence only intensifies as the Game progresses. Rue, a very young and endearing tribute, is caught in a net and is subsequently speared through the stomach. Katniss immediately kills the boy who attacks Rue, as her “arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck,” yet she realizes that she cannot save Rue, for “the spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach” (Hunger Games 233).
While the violence in and of itself is very graphic – especially so for younger readers, as many concerned parents and educators have asserted – there is a greater underlying issue of how this violence is presented, and why the violence is presented in such a manner. With regards to authorial intent, it would not be out of the question for Collins to be so graphic in order to provide social commentary on damaging social and political trends of today. But when we look into the text itself, we see that there are also those within the story who believe in the necessity of such violence – and, to an extent, the glorification of that violence. While the twelve districts of Panem aim their anger and resentment toward the Capitol for the Hunger Games, the collective animosity can be directed to a single person: the head of the government, President Coriolanus Snow. Considered a monster by most of Panem – and, frankly, most of the readers – because of his cold demeanor and cut-throat attitude, President Snow has become the straw man for attacks against the Capitolist government due to his support for the annual Hunger Games. Yet considering what was discussed earlier with regards to the Joker, we should examine President Snow in terms of hyper-sanity and both causal and moral responsibility to determine whether or not his work is necessarily that of a monster. Before diving into the character of President Snow, though, we should first examine the role of the audience of – and within – The Hunger Games to better understand why President Snow does what he does. We may yet find that he is much less associated with villainy than initially thought, or that we, as the audience, are just as guilty in perpetuating the very crimes the Capitol is accused of.

Orrin E. Klapp identifies several types of archetypal figures in “Heroes, Villains and Fools, as Agents of Social Control,” which can help us position President Snow as a more complicated figure than just an antagonistic character needing to be overthrown. True, he would fall under the classification of “the Persecutor, a powerful figure of evil who oppresses the weak” (Klapp 58), although the issue of Snow’s evilness could be debated. But let us consider Klapp’s overall definition of the villain as a prominent archetype:

Though villains are in some ways comparable to heroes—being, for instance, often strong enough to make martyrs of the latter—their black traits otherwise place them in total opposition to the hero. They are not super-human but by absence of sympathy, conscience, loyalty and good will, inhuman. Contemporary popular types such as the gangster and dope-fiend belong among villains, but the closest thing in real life approximating an ideal villain would probably be a psychopathic criminal. (58)
There are some key points here that would place President Snow at odds with the hero, Katniss Everdeen. He certainly is strong enough to make Katniss into a martyr (or rather, he is so powerful that the rebellious District Thirteen feels that Katniss needs to be made into some sort of martyr), and it would be incredibly difficult to sustain an argument that he is, on the whole, a man of good will. It seems, then, that the villain can typically be summed up as one who lacks any semblance of morality and decency.

Nonetheless, Klapp does realize that this definition is too broad, and therefore puts forth a list of criteria for recognizing villains. What’s pertinent, though, is that the same criteria apply for recognizing a hero: visibility (public and individual), apparent conformity to a popularly-established type, and the opportunity to play certain roles created by society. Both President Snow and Katniss fit the criteria. President Snow is publicly visible as a national figure, and takes care to depict himself as a patriotic leader working to quell the rebellion. Katniss is also visible thanks to the televised Hunger Games, and must conform to the star-crossed lovers trope with Peeta, and then to the role of the Mockingjay after being rescued by and taken to District Thirteen. The “popular mind” or the collective opinion of these characters is the common thread, leading to an even greater distortion of binaries:

It is usual for a problematic person at the outset to be defined in several contradictory ways at once. For example, reformers are often seen as crusaders (heroes), radicals (villains attacking the status quo), and crackpots (fools). It is also quite possible that an individual may begin as one type in the popular mind and develop into something opposite…There is likely in the case of a controversial person…a competition of claims, charges, guesses, suspicions, rumors and refutations, from which the public selects those which seem most true, apt or socially useful…Public figures usually eventually find that they have been simplified or typed in some way by the popular mind. (Klapp 59-60)

There is a great deal of reductionism present with regards to President Snow, as many are quick to vilify him for ruling over Panem so harshly. (And the same reductionism is true for Katniss, as she becomes a symbol of rebellion – the Mockingjay – instead of being viewed as just another tribute.) But looking through Klapp’s exploration of the popular mind, the animosity toward President Snow becomes problematic. Not only may he be inaccurately labeled, but the impetus for his actions may be thus labeled as well. In other words, a large part of President Snow’s motivation for maintaining the Hunger Games comes from audience demand. Suzanne Collins even references this mindset in her Scholastic interview, demonstrating a long-standing awareness of the almost schadenfreude-driven attitude of the
masses. She explains, “there’s this voyeuristic thrill—watching people being humiliated, or brought to tears, or suffering physically—which I find very disturbing. There’s also the potential for desensitizing the audience, so that when they see real tragedy playing out on, say, the news, it doesn’t have the impact it should” (“Conversation”). When Katniss and Peeta first arrive to the Capitol, they are greeted by a large mob cheering for them. While Peeta happily waves back to make a good impression, Katniss is “sickened by their excitement, knowing they can’t wait to watch us die” (*Hunger Game* 60).

The obsession with such violent spectacles is not a recent trend. The Games are, in essence, modernized gladiatorial games, with the country of Panem referencing the concept of *panem et circenses*, or “bread and circuses.” The metaphor appears circa 100 A.D. in Juvenal’s *Satire X*, in which he decries the Roman populace’s disregard for politics and cultural history in favor of simple distractions, thus enabling politicians to easily win the favor of the masses:

> Already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the People have abdicated our duties; for the people who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions – everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses” (10.77-81).

For the citizens of Panem, though, it is more of a case of bread or circuses. As Mark Fisher describes in “Precarious Dystopias: *The Hunger Games, In Time, and Never Let Me Go,*” the “world of *The Hunger Games* is rigidly stratified” (30). While the Capitol and an elite few of the districts occupy the highest rungs of the socio-economic ladders, “one of the points of the Games is to underscore the impossibility of any upward movement for most, even as it holds up the remote (and unappealing) chance of a limited escape for the competition’s victors” (Fisher 30). Once tributes emerge victorious from the Games, they obtain celebrity status and live in a lavish mansion within a Victors’ Village in their district. These affluent areas, however, are segregated from the poorer areas of each district, not unlike the polarization of the Capitol and the majority of the other districts. While inhabitants of District Twelve, for instance, get by with wild dog meat, the residents of the Capitol are consistently surrounded by an excess of food. When Katniss is on the train to the Capitol for the first time, she is greeted by a table so full of food that just “the basket of rolls they set before me would keep my family going for a week” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 55).
Because of such socio-economic stratification, it becomes very easy for us, as the readers, to target the Capitol and President Snow and criticize their involvement in promoting the annual Hunger Games. We automatically show disdain for the lavish lifestyles of the Capitol people that include
glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower in the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal. All the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes. (Collins, *Hunger Games* 59)

Contrasting with the world of the poorer districts, like District Twelve, where large poverty-stricken families live in cramped quarters and are kept closely in line by government’s Peacekeepers, Collins makes it very clear with whom we should sympathize. Katniss even explicitly mentions how reprehensible the Capitol is when, after a full meal is brought to her with a push of a button, she calculates that it would take “days of hunting and gathering for this one meal [in District Twelve] and even then it would be a poor substitution for the Capitol version,” and concludes that “the whole rotten lot of them [Capitol citizens] is despicable” (*Hunger Games* 65).

But are we entirely on the side of the underdogs? It is no coincidence that the Capitol culture reflects values shared by mainstream America today. There is heavy emphasis placed on looks, with the physical augmentations of the Capitol people – dyeing their skin another color, for instance – mirroring our own obsessions with implants and injections. And the scientific progress of the Capitol parallels our own fascination with continuously improving our daily lives through technology. What’s more, though, is that the connection between us and the Capitol is replaced with the notion that we are the Capitol in the recent movie version of *The Hunger Games*. The book itself tells Katniss’ story in the first-person perspective; readers are privy only to Katniss’ thoughts and perceptions, and as a result, we are meant to connect with her and the other victims of the Capitol’s rule. Of course, this perspective would be difficult to carry over into a movie, and so that level of intimacy between reader and audience is removed. But, what is important to note here is how we learn of the Games. The Games are televised nationally in Panem, and Cesar Flickerman, the announcer, offers play-by-play commentary, not unlike a televised sporting event today. However, within the movie, Flickerman speaks directly into the camera when offering background information regarding the venomous tracker jackers, with the effect being that
we, as the movie-goers, are pulled into the world of Panem and are directly interacting with the Games (rather than being movie-goers come to watch a film). True, we still sympathize with the poorer districts, but two points should be remembered: Capitol citizens also support the underdogs (the star-crossed lovers bit between Peeta and Katniss, to illustrate), and it is very unlikely that viewers from the poorer districts have the means or desire to pass the time by spending the day out with friends and enjoying popcorn and soda while watching others fight to the death.

The call for the Games, then, is clear, at least with regards to our own roles in the matter. Besides an innate desire for watching others suffer – the voyeuristic thrill that Collins mentions – we also become desensitized to the suffering and transform it into entertainment, using the spectacles as a distraction, as Juvenal notes. Back, then, to how the sinister President Snow works within these parameters: as we saw with the suitors from the *Odyssey* and the Joker from the *Batman* series, the villains, unlike the heroes, continue working within social constructs. *How* they work with these constructions vary. The suitors keep the constructions intact to support their cause, while the Joker inverts and subverts the constructions. In the case of President Snow, however, social constructs are a means of social control. Fisher identifies how Snow and the Capitol maintain direct control over the citizens:

> The name ‘tribute’ clues us in to the fact that the Capitol extracts wealth via direct expropriation rather than through the market. Market signifiers are, after all, strangely absent from the Capitol. Commodities are ubiquitous, but there are no corporate logos, shops, or brand names in the city. So far as we can see, the state, under the beady gaze of President Snow, seems to own everything. It exerts its power directly, via an authoritarian police force of white-uniformed Peacekeepers which inflicts punishment summarily, and symbolically, through the Hunger Games and other rituals in which the districts are required to demonstrate their subordination. (29)

The Capitol government, including President Snow, finds the need for subordination to be justified. During the Reaping, Katniss describes how the mayor of District Twelve recounts the history of Panem, “the country that rose out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America. He lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires…the brutal war for what little sustenance remained…Then came the Dark Days, the uprising of the districts against the Capitol” (*Collins, Hunger Games* 18). After the quelling of the rebellious districts, the “Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace…it gave us the Hunger Games” (*Hunger Games* 18).
Granted that Snow believes in the Hunger Games – as do several of the wealthier districts, where “career” tributes are born and bred to fight for the honor of their districts – Fisher touches on a unique component of President Snow’s rule. The punishment for rebellion is widespread, but the level of violence is rather low in comparison. In fact, President Snow seems to prefer stealth over brute force. The entire country of Panem functions as a panoptic system influenced by Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon from the late eighteenth century. Bentham designed a prison in which a single central guard has the ability to view the cells of every inmate. However, because the guard is unseen, the prisoners do not know whether or not they are being observed; thus, Bentham lauds the “plan’s possessing the fundamental advantages…[of] the apparent omnipresence of the inspector (if divines will allow me the expression,) combined with the extreme facility of his real presence” (22). In other words, the inmates experience the feeling of being watched at all times – regardless of whether or not they actually are being watched – and thereby internalize the perceived surveillance and modify their own behavior.

Katniss, like the rest of her district, has been forced to censor herself because of the panopticon. She recalls toward the beginning of The Hunger Games how, as a child, she would “blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol” (6), only to be reprimanded by her mother. Katniss learns, then, “to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts” (6). Even though the Capitol is so far off – and the government does have some oversights, as Katniss realizes that the electric fences around the border of her district are not even electrified – the outside districts learn to regulate themselves (even amongst themselves), making “only polite small talk in the public market” (6).

The conceived surveillance introduces another noticeable component of President Snow’s (and the Capitol’s) rule: the perception of power, rather than a grand-scale execution of it. Kelley Wezner expands on the role of perception with regards to maintaining social order in her article “‘Perhaps I Am Watching You Now’: Panem’s Panopticon.” As Wezner states, “the dangers and deaths in the Hunger Games transform punishment into spectacle…a dramatic spectacle that reinforces the absolute power and authority of the Capitol,” and “with repeated spectacle, deaths must be delayed longer each the spectacle is performed” (150). However, these large-scale spectacles are immediate to the twenty-four tributes each year:
The Capitol’s punishments, which are performed for an audience, have a physical and psychological impact on the immediate victim, but are constructed [emphasis added] to affect the wider audience through the idea of punishment. As Bentham argues, the benefit of punishment is that it minimizes the pain to a single victim while acting upon all others – those for whom it is actually designed – through its appearance (193). The panoptic system privileges appearance over reality when more than one person needs to be controlled. (Wezner 150)

In essence, President Snow’s interactions with Katniss, however limited, are meant to control the masses. But, even in his exchanges with her, he does not make an example out of her – at least, not in the most obvious sense of punishing her publicly. Rather, he takes a more subtle approach, reminding her of his ever-watchful gaze. After surviving the Hunger Games, President Snow visits Katniss at her new house in Victors’ Village, and Katniss is surprised at how he is so calm, despite the fact that there is a “mutual understanding that he could have me [Katniss] killed in a second” (Collins, Catching Fire 19). President Snow opts for another approach, proposing, “I think we’ll make this whole situation a lot simpler by agreeing not to lie to each other” (Catching Fire 19). What follows is a very candid conversation, with Snow explaining that Katniss’ and Peeta’s victory at the Hunger Games can create an uprising. He even says he believes her when Katniss states she did not mean to start any uprisings, and then informs her of the dangers facing the nation because of her subversive actions in the Games:

Do you have any idea what that [rebellions] would mean? How many people would die? What conditions those left would have to face? Whatever problems anyone may have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse. (Catching Fire 21)

To ensure order is maintained, President Snow resorts to threats based on surveillance. He knows of Katniss’ illegal hunting expeditions with Gale – and of the kiss the two shared in the past – and even outright declares, “Him [Gale] I can easily kill off if we don’t come to a happy resolution” (Catching Fire 24). The resolution President Snow alludes to is not to kill off Katniss, nor is it to kill off her family for public control. Instead, it is to maintain peace by having Katniss convince the masses that she and Peeta are, in fact, romantically involved, and that their dual victory was not an act of political subversion, but an act of love.

With this in mind, we realize that President Snow does what he can to avoid a full-blown rebellion, but he does so in as a controlled (albeit distasteful) of a way as possible. Surveillance supplants violence in favor of maintaining control, and violence is more of a last
Psychological warfare is favored much more by President Snow, and he works to dismantle the rebellion while keeping violence to a minimum; his “hijacking” (brainwashing) of Peeta is a case in point, as he knows that Katniss has an emotional attachment to Peeta. Furthermore, Primrose points out in *Mockingjay* that he would not kill Peeta – who is being held hostage by the Capitol – because President Snow wishes to break Katniss in order to subsequently weaken the rebellion.

Even after his defeat, President Snow maintains that he has not killed without reason, and that he is not as monstrous as popularly though. In *Mockingjay*, President Snow has the opportunity to have one last exchange with Katniss after he has been captured. Right before the rebel forces storm his mansion, a blockade of Capitol children bars the rebels from advancing. Not wanting to harm the children, Katniss stops, only to have a Capitol hovercraft appear and drop bombs on the children, subsequently killing them and Katniss’ sister, Primrose. When Katniss confronts President Snow, he claims that he was not responsible for the attack, and attributes the bombings to District Thirteen, whose leader, Alma Coin, is willing to do whatever necessary to become the new leader of Panem:

‘Well, you really didn’t think I gave the order, did you? Forget the obvious fact that if I’d had a working hovercraft at my disposal, I’d have been using it to make an escape. But that aside, what purpose could it have served? We both know I’m not above killing children, but I’m not wasteful. I take life for very specific reasons. And there was no reason for me to destroy a pen full of Capitol children. None at all.’ (Collins, *Mockingjay* 356)

Despite this explanation for his innocence, Katniss declares that she still does not believe he did not order the bombings of the children. President Snow’s only response calls back to the one condition he placed on their relationship in *Catching Fire*: “Oh, my dear Miss Everdeen. I thought we had agreed not to lie to each other” (Mockingjay 358).

Through this exchange, where we receive a new insight into his character, we are made aware that President Snow thus occupies an interesting position. Katniss ultimately realizes that President Snow has not lied to her. In fact, he makes her aware of an even more shocking truth, that Alma Coin was responsible for the bombings and deaths of so many Capitol children and Primrose, prompting Katniss to kill President Coin at Snow’s execution. His motivation is not necessarily grounded in morality – he admits himself that he has no issue killing children – but instead, housed under necessity: to maintain the status quo because he believes the system to be very fragile. And to protect this fragile system, he must
simultaneously appease the Capitol’s and the loyal districts’ sensibilities while keeping the other districts in order.

The Hunger Games serve this purpose. They are not indicative a villainous man – in fact, President Snow had no dealings with the conception of the Games, as they were founded nearly seventy-five years before *The Hunger Games* takes place. And as distasteful as the entire affair is, he considers it a requirement for upholding the government. Death, as far as President Snow is concerned, must happen for control to be maintained, but he does not abuse the power unless needed as a last resort, and, at the very least, attempts to keep a code of honor with Katniss while trying to sort out the issue of district rebellions. President Snow thus seems to be playing in a different set of Games – reconciling necessary killings with honor and morals – to appease the Capitol and, by extension, the readers: his own Gamemakers.
CHAPTER 5
Coda

By closely inspecting traditionally antagonistic characters like the suitors and Polyphemus of the Odyssey in tandem with more recent villains, like the Joker in Batman: The Killing Joke and President Snow in The Hunger Games trilogy, we can better understand – and work toward repairing – conventional acts of marginalizing those who challenge our norms in a typically aggressive fashion. The divergence of these characters from our understandings of good from bad and right from wrong is necessary to challenge our black-and-white constructions. In its most extreme state, such characters implicate us in the deterioration of the Eden-like paradise that needs protection and redemption from a lone hero. If Odysseus, Batman, and Katniss Everdeen are any indication, the redemption can often lead to more chaos – it is people like the suitors, the Joker, and President Snow that either prevent deterioration, or attempt to fully redeem society with their heightened perceptions.

What, then, does this leave for the heroes who are supposed to combat men like these? Do we create a cultural shift and push our sympathies to the villains within popular culture while we chastise heroes? What’s more, do we completely excuse the villains for their actions and subsequently elevate them above the heroes? The answer for the last two question, simply put, is no. I do not propose that we completely overhaul our traditional notions of heroism and villainy (although a complete inversion would probably be favored by the Joker). And there is no justifiable reason to completely excuse the villains for their actions involving mass killings and sexual assault, even though such actions may be justified in the minds of the villains themselves. What I do propose, though, involves answering the first question: while we should not completely excuse villains, we should not completely ignore them either. Rather, we should consider villains simultaneously with heroes. Not as foils, or as binaries, or as dichotomies, but – as the Joker always insinuates to Batman – as two sides of the same coin.

The rigidity of the constructions of heroes and villains, if anything, damages the genre’s trajectory of development. When William Moulton Marston discussed the nature of
the industry in his article “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” for *The American Scholar* in 1943, he explained that “the picture-story fantasy cuts loose the hampering debris of art and artifice and touches the tender spots of universal human desires and aspirations, hidden customarily beneath long accumulated protective coverings” (36). It is the genre itself, not superheroes exclusively, that contribute to the connection with human desire and aspiration. Leaving out the villains would immediately sever readers from a large component of the purpose of comic books and other forms of popular culture. And, if Suzanne Collins’ discussion of the voyeuristic tendencies of humans is any indication, Marston’s is correct when he claims that “comics continuities of the present period are not meant to be humorous, nor are they primarily concerned with dramatic adventure. Their emotional appeal is wish fulfillment” (39).

Ultimately, we can see ourselves in both the hero and the villain, and they can help us navigate social values and identities. We must allow for an emphasis of overlap, and avoid obsession with a paradise needing redemption from a lone hero, for the popular heroes we have been exposed to throughout our lives do not always signify the complete range of the human experience (as evidenced by earlier Superman and Wonder Woman comics, in which the characters were the pinnacles of perfection). By modifying the paradigm of perfection espoused by the heroic “good,” we can learn that villains are just as effective in transforming our understanding of our culture and ourselves. We will not be undermining traditional notions of being “good” by studying villains. We will be enhancing our perceptions – a super-sanity to rival the Joker’s.
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