New Times, New Heroes

Ambiguity, Socio-Political Issues and Post Modernism in

Frank Miller’s Graphic Novel *The Dark Knight Returns*

Nya tider, nya hjältar: Tvetydigheter, sociopolitiska problem och postmodernism i Frank Millers serieroman *The Dark Knight Returns*

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Abstract

Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* is one of the first graphic novels to redraw the map for this kind of literature but perhaps first and foremost for the characteristics of superheroes and villains. It is a story which we have read before in the sense that Batman, the eternal crime fighter, chases his arch enemies Two Face and the Joker, but it is also a new story in which we meet an ambiguous and complex superhero. Batman has become an old man tormented by his past, in which his side kick Robin died, and the present, where he is forbidden to operate under his alias. It is also a story of a corrupt and inept government and its errand boy, Superman. In my analysis I have focused on how Miller has changed the superhero and made him more complex than we are used to see. For instance does a super hero have to have superpowers or is it enough to be super-potential? Furthermore I will show how socio- realism and socio-political issues, such as a corrupt government, have crossed over to comics. My conclusion is that this old Batman has gone from a young crime fighter to an old anarchist and altruist. The fact is that there are no clear borders or lines between good or bad, crime fighter and villain, the characters, and comics, are no longer in black and white but more brought forth in different shades of grey.
David Barnett summarizes Frank Miller’s graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* in the article “Are Frank Miller’s politics visible in his comics?” in *The Guardian*: “Revisiting *The Dark Knight Returns*, it's altogether possible to conclude that Miller's super-gritty, ultra-violent Batman isn't fighting for social justice at all” (Barnett). But I beg to differ. In this essay I am going to show that Batman in the hands of Frank Miller is more complex than Barnett implies. Barnett builds his thesis on a statement where Miller criticizes the Occupy Wall Street Movement and then Barnett applies it in a context where I find it strange. What I object to is the statement that Batman is not fighting for social justice. In this essay I am going to show how Frank Miller, with the 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (TDKR), changes the superhero and makes him more complex than we are used to see, and the same is true for the super villains that he is confronted with. Furthermore I will show how socio-political issues and socio-realism have crossed over to comics.

During the economic depression in the nineteen thirties, comics about superheroes became popular, especially those about the man of steel, Superman. Though he was from another planet, Krypton, he became an American hero, a hero who stood for American values and protected the country not only from threats from outer space but also threats from organized criminality and other countries, especially Russia. Another patriotic superhero was Captain America, who was seen hitting Adolf Hitler in the face on the cover of an issue of DC Comics’ *Captain America*, during World War II (fig. 1).

![Fig. 1 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, "Captain America" (ugo.com)](ugo.com)

In 1939 a completely different superhero saw the light of day – Batman, the world’s greatest detective, also known as the Dark Knight. Batman is no ordinary superhero. Regular superheroes have extraordinary powers. Superman is from another planet, he can fly, he has x-ray vision and he is super strong, but the Dark Knight is simply human. He has to rely on his intellect, science and technology and martial arts when fighting crime.
The history of our modern superhero starts in the nineteen fifties when the market for superheroes slowly turned down. The decrease in sold magazines forced Marvel and DC, the two biggest comic publishers, to rethink and change strategies. The old superheroes were not that popular any longer so during the seventies Marvel updated their superheroes and created the Marvel Universe with great success. DC however did not manage to revive their heroes as successfully, not until Miller’s \textit{TDKR} in 1986. Also at this time there was another change when the term for this kind of comics changed into the literature we now know as graphic novels. Compared to comics, often suited for children and teenagers, graphic novels have longer stories and the books are more expensive, often with thicker paper, and moreover they have softbound covers and quite often they are also hardbound. But what really makes them graphic novels is the content, which often is referred to as being adult oriented. This does not necessarily mean they contain sex or nudity. It is rather a question of complexity in that the reader must possess some knowledge of the history, and possibly social science and science, of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century to be able to understand the novels. Another aspect of the graphic novel is censorship. In 1948, the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) was formed to protect young readers from violence, sex, drugs and foul language. Jenny Northrup says, “Since its origins, comic book publishers, artists, and writers have created books aimed at adult and alternative audiences. These books often focus more on adult and real world issues, such as politics, war, social issues, culture, etc.”

Miller himself is not in favor of censorship and due to the dark nature of the story, the historical references and the violence in this graphic novel I would state that it is obvious that \textit{TDKR} belongs to this adult category rather than targeting kids and young adolescents.

Some terms used in this essay need to be explained. I claim that \textit{TDKR} is a postmodern graphic novel. The term postmodern is as ambiguous as the superheroes in this essay. It is often used in architecture and art and is a mixture and interaction of different styles, for example ancient and modern styles. Northrup refers to graphic novels in her essay “Toward a Postmodern Understanding: An Analysis of Comic Book Culture” when she says, “The culture of comic books is two-sided and involves both human interaction and the experience of the book itself,” which means that you have to have some understanding of what you read whether it is of history or of the contemporary society. Northrup continues:

As the artwork found within comic books increasingly imitates, or discusses, real world events and real world events seem more similar to the events in comic books, one is led to assume that the culture within the comic books would influence and be influenced by real world culture, and therefore, the two would seem similar.
Postmodern graphic novels often take the society we live in as the starting point and let us interact through our knowledge of it. It is almost like we can never be outside the fiction since everything is fiction and fiction is everywhere.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a German philosopher who wrote critical texts on philosophy, contemporary culture and religion saying God is dead. Two terms by Nietzsche used in this essay are the “Übermensch” and “nihilism”. Pamornpol Jinachitra claims that the Übermensch, or overman, is someone who should re-think morality in our everyday lives when God is dead. To be able to do this no moral or worldly laws would restrict him, he should be the one who makes the laws. But it does not mean that it would benefit the overman only, this was a leader for the whole mankind and it would benefit us all. Finally Vered Arnon says that “Nihilism is when people feel alienated from values, and have lost the foundation of their value system but have not replaced it with anything, then they become nihilists. They become disappointed with the egoistic nature of ‘truth’ and ‘morality.’” When society fails to be true to the citizens and when morality fails and corruption grows, people lose their faith in the elected ones, even in God since Nietzsche claimed that God is dead, and turn to something or someone else to find support, sometimes they turn to an overman.

I would like to start with the claim that Frank Miller’s Batman from 1986 is the first really troubled and also complicated hero we meet in the superhero genre. In *TDKR* we meet a 55-year old Bruce Wayne, the alter ego of Batman, in a future Gotham. He retired as superhero when he was blamed for the accidental death of his sidekick Robin, Jason Todd, ten years earlier. He is a broken man who spends his days looking for a way to die. He takes medicine against anxiety and depression and he takes part in car races where he crashes his cars without hesitating. In this graphic novel the strengths of Frank Miller’s craftsmanship is perhaps best shown in the complication of setting, history, and political messages. Miller has moved the Batman we know into a dystopian near future (in relation to when the book was published). He has put him on a timeline where he evolves and grows old as people do. There are more things which put *TDKR* in our universe. Ronald Reagan, who was the president of USA from 1981 to 1989, is a spitting image of the President in the novel and serves as a time marker we can recognize. He is still the president, some five or six years after his actual retirement, when this story takes place, approximately in the mid-nineties. The President is never called by name but there is no doubt it is Reagan. The Cold War started not long after the end of World War II and ended in the beginning of the nineties, when Michail Gorbachev was president of the Soviet Union. But here in the mid-nineties it is still on and there seems to be no way of ending it. Miller gives this story a sense of recognition when he incorporates historical references, he is capitalizing on the reader’s horizon of experience. He is portraying actual people and events to give the story more credibility and a feeling of recognition.
Mature readers know who President Reagan was, we have read about the Cold War during history lessons in school and we can also find characters such as Dr. Ruth Westheimer (Miller et al 18) a sex and relation expert known from TV during the nineteen eighties and nineties, and Dave Letterman (Miller et al 13), an American talk show host, in the story.

Through the introduction of these complications to the character and the narrative, Miller deconstructs the comic-book tradition, creating post-modern comics in which we recognize political issues and social history. Alex Sorondo says in his article “What is Postmodern Literature?” that, “It blends the reality of its fictional world with the reality of the real world, [...] and often suggests that the two are inextricable, that the boundaries are indecipherably muddy and impossibly evasive.” We have lived this history and can relate to it, the novel becomes a part of our reality. Miller takes on old heroes and turns them into something completely new and more contemporary, something mature readers can relate to. In order to make Batman a more composite character, Miller gives this old superhero the characteristics of an ordinary man of flesh and blood. This represents a departure from the formula of fiction: Batman becomes an anti-hero, a person with flaws, not the kind of superhero we are used to see. According to Link Yaco postmodernism in comics was first used by Will Eisner, the creator of The Spirit (1940). Eisner wanted to show “urban alienation and cynical lassitude, themes utterly consonant with the collision of the classical and modern” (Yaco). In TDKR, we can see that Gotham itself has become alienated along with its citizens, the whole police force and Batman, first by a corrupt president and then by the governor and a mayor who does not want to make any decisions. No authorities try to stop the criminal menace to society. No wonder the whole society and its citizens have become cynical and turn away as crime is committed. Therefore Wayne cannot stand it anymore. He must come back as Batman and clean the streets from the filth. Yaco compares Miller’s work to the much acclaimed English contemporary comic writer Alan Moore – who, together with Miller, is seen as the biggest innovator of the superhero genre: “Moore’s Watchmen retooled the Charlton superheroes with menopausal characterizations, Mcarthyite politics, and toxically real nuclear physics. [...] It is often compared with Frank Miller’s reworking of the Batman mythos in his Dark Knight story cycle of the same vintage.”

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1 Alan Moore is an English writer most famous for his Watchmen, a graphic novel about superheroes without superpowers, fighting crime just like Batman. Like Batman they are in their mid-fifties, unwanted not only by the citizens but also by a totalitarian society run by President Nixon, trying to come back from retirement and solve a chaotic situation in which they are killed one after the other. The Mcarthyite politics refers to Joseph McCarthy who was a republican politician in the USA during the nineteen fifties whose administration persecuted people who allegedly were communist sympathizers and here it is compared to the superheroes that have to retire because they are no longer wanted in the USA. Miller and More wrote their graphic novels in the same year, 1986.
The complexity and duality of Batman and the villains in this story is best shown when they meet man to man. Harvey Dent, also called Two Face, and the Joker, two psychotic criminals treated in Arkham Asylum for the criminally insane, are awakened by Batman’s return. Dent, former prosecutor in Gotham and friend of Wayne, has become a criminal. Wayne pays for his medical treatment which later turns out to be of no use. The Joker is freed due to the demand of the public and his psychiatrist Dr. Volper. According to Volper, the media and Batman are the real criminals – they are the ones guilty of having created Two-Face and the Joker (Miller et al 10). As soon as they are free from Arkham Asylum they start to commit crime. Dent’s transformation from good to bad lies very much in his appearance. The left side of his face has been deformed by fire and though he has undergone plastic surgery and psychiatric treatment, he is still the same old criminal. When he finally is captured by Batman, Dent says, “Got the whole world to smile at me... got them all to keep their lunches down when they saw my ... my face ... saying I was cured ... saying I was fixed ... Take a look ... have your laugh. I’m fixed all right. At least ... both sides match ...” (Miller et al 47) What Dent means is that appearances deceive. He is still the old misfit or freak he was before the plastic surgery (fig. 2).

Batman’s answer is also of this conclusion. He thinks, “The scars go deep, too deep ... I close my eyes and listen. Not fooled by sight, I see him ... as he is”, (Miller et al 47) and what he sees is the picture of the old semi deformed Dent now fully deformed. But there is more he sees, “I see ... a reflection, Harvey. A reflection” (Miller et al 47) (fig.3).
Fig. 3. Miller et al 47. The true nature of Batman.

The question is what this reflection is. Is it a reflection of the old Harvey or is it a reflection of Batman? Batman is in fact the same kind of misfit or freak as Dent, he too has a hideous face, but it is a mask, and he too has psychological problems or a demon he is carrying around, but he manages to master them and make them work for him, not against him.

The character of the Joker and his relation to Batman is equally complex. The Joker’s first appearance in freedom is as a guest in a talk show on TV where he kills everyone present in the studio with gas. (Miller et al 23) The final fight between the Joker and Batman takes place in a county fair where they fight and Batman knows he cannot kill him. He must incapacitate him and bring him to justice, so he breaks the Joker’s neck leaving him paralyzed. The Joker says,

I’m really … disappointed with you, my sweet … the moment was … perfect … and you … didn’t have the nerve … Paralysis … really … Just an ounce or two more … of pressure … and … Do I hear … sirens …?…Yes … coming close … you won’t get far… But then … it doesn’t matter … if you do …They’ll kill you for this … And they’ll never know … That you didn’t have the nerve… (Miller et al 47)

Though the Joker is paralyzed from the neck down he manages to twist his head and breaks his own neck in a last effort to make Batman look like the perpetrator.

Batman who used to be the one who did anything to bring criminals to justice shows empathy for both of his enemies though they are his archenemies. In fact he saves Dent from a certain death when they fight, and when he takes on the Joker he does not want to see him dead either. With age and personal experience – he is after all 55 years old, takes heavy medication against anxiety and he witnessed his sidekick’s death – comes wisdom and he knows that imprisonment is not what they need but psychological help.
The Batman stories pre *TDKR* cast an ensemble of characters more or less painted in black and white, good or evil. The villains commit crimes and Batman punishes them and brings them to justice. But in Miller’s hands the story and its characters have turned into different shades of gray, not only the story but the characters have become more complex. There is black and white, good and evil not only in the villains but in Batman as well, but what makes Batman tick most is perhaps anxiety and doubt in the legal and societal system. Marcus Broaddus says that the “societal values have turned topsy-turvy where the release of a murderous villain, the Joker, is heralded as a good thing.” It was after all a public demand that made it possible for the Joker and Two Face to be free, and the question is: wherein lies any societal justice in banning superheroes and letting mentally deranged criminals out? There is no longer a distinct line between good or bad – such binaries are conflated in this postmodern narrative.

Batman is still, and foremost, human, living by moral laws and rules though he has had several opportunities to kill his enemies. This separates Batman from the criminals. He still has his humanity left and he knows the difference between right and wrong. One of the things which easily could have made him a criminal and which has formed Wayne into what he is was when he and his parents went to see the movie *The Mark of Zorro* (1940). After the show outside the theatre in an alley, his parents were robbed and killed and when he grew up he became a modern Zorro to avenge this. He is masked, has his own mark, the bat, and he fights injustice just like Zorro. As a child he was affected by something disastrous which turned him into a kind of an avenger. The murder of his parents is why Wayne became Batman in the first place and since then he has felt the urge to bury his pain in the pleasure of punishing criminals. But now it seems that he has had enough of revenge. Michael Price, member of the Monitor Staff at APA, American Psychological Association, tells us that in the Bible in Exodus 21:23 we get to learn to avenge an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth. But he also tells us that Martin Luther King Jr. responded “The old law of ‘an eye for an eye’ leaves everybody blind” (qtd. in Price). We can see that Batman feels sympathy for Two Face, he has had enough of revenge. Kevin Carlsmith, a social psychologist at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y. says, “Ask someone why they seek revenge, though, and they’re likely to tell you their goal is catharsis. But exactly the opposite happens” (qtd. in Price). Batman no longer finds any comfort in punishing mentally deranged criminals. He can see the monster in Two Face though he has undergone a face restoration; he knows there is more than the eye can see. He sees himself in Two Face, the monster in himself, that he has a part in the creation of the evil and if he continues to punish then there will be no end to it, no catharsis. Carlsmith continues, “Revenge comes at a price. Instead of helping you move on with your life, it can leave you dwelling on the situation and remaining unhappy” (qtd. in Price). Batman who doubts the necessity of punishment and revenge tries to make the Joker understand that there is a cure and a
place for him but all that matters to the Joker is Batman’s failure and death. Batman offers him a peaceful solution but the Joker does not want it. In connection to this the social psychologist Ian McKee says, “People who are more vengeful tend to be those who are motivated by power, by authority and by the desire for status. They don’t want to lose face” (qtd. in Price). Instead of Batman it is the Joker who wants to have revenge, on society and Batman. The Joker is motivated by power when he kills the people in the TV-studio, the authority he wants to avenge is Batman and the status he desires is that of being Batman’s killer. The young Batman, pre TDKR, only wanted revenge for the sake of it, he was a crime fighter who wanted to punish criminals. Gregory J Golda says Batman was, “Often acting as judge and executioner.” But now when he is old he sees the perpetrators as they really are, as mentally deranged people who need help. With age he has become an idealist and altruist and this helps him see that they need help not further punishment.

The duality and complexity in good and bad and even the monsters in the characters can be compared to what Nietzsche says in his Beyond Good and Evil (1886): “He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee” (ch.4, v.146). Batman is a kind of a monster and here is the second thing which has formed him. He has taken the characteristic looks of a bat since he fell into a cave full of bats as a child, he has literally gazed into the abyss and not only become a bat but also seen the monstrosity and the strength in it and, like Zorro did with his Z, taken it as his sign. But there is also the figurative, psychological abyss of man which Nietzsche in fact talks about: the abyss or the depth of a tortured and distorted soul, such as the souls of Two Face and the Joker. Dent and the Joker have also been subject to crime and gazed into the abyss, but instead of fighting crime they have chosen another path and become monsters and made the decision to fight society, which they consider have done them wrong. As we know by now Batman carries his monsters, the avenger and the bat, within. He wants to avenge his parents and bring justice to society. Two Face and the Joker also carry monsters within but they are of another nature, they will kill to reach their goals while Batman never would, his job is to serve, not to sever, and that way he reaches catharsis.

Miller has put all three characters in a grey zone where they show new sides of their characters. Two Face has become a crushed soul, he knows he is beaten and now Batman has seen and revealed the monster in him. The Joker is crushed not only physically but also mentally, and he is disappointed with Batman since he does not walk the whole line and kill him. Since he and Two Face woke up in Arkham Asylum they have longed for their revenge on society and Batman. All they want is to carry out their crimes. When Batman realizes that Two Face and the Joker are responsible for the crimes he wants to catch them and punish them, but he does not. Instead he shows understanding for his enemies, he
caresses Two Face and he wants to bring the Joker back to Arkham Asylum. He does not want to see them dead or incarcerated, he wants to see them cured, and this is not what the old Batman would have wanted. Could that be societal justice not only for the criminals but for the citizens of Gotham too? The fact is that Batman has become an altruist. The young Batman wanted to live up to the standards of being the one who should revenge his parents’ death, no matter who the villain was. He was the incarnation of the jury, judge and executioner. But he cannot afford to become a monster, as his enemies are, if he wants to save Gotham. A proof for Batman’s newly found empathy or altruism is in a picture where we can see him embrace and comfort Two Face when he is broken down (Miller et al 47). Altruism is perhaps a strong word when we see what he does to the Joker, but bear in mind that the Joker is the most lethal criminal there is so it is better to have him incapacitated in Arkham Asylum than roaming the streets. It is perhaps best to call Batman an ambiguous vigilante altruist. According to Carlsmith the German psychologists Ernst Fehr and Simon Gechter say, “Punishing others in this context[…] is a way to keep societies working smoothly,” […] “You’re willing to sacrifice your well-being in order to punish someone who misbehaved” (qtd. in Price). This means that Batman punishes in a humane way by offering help and that he will stop sacrificing his own well-being, or stop punishing himself, if he helps the criminals.

I have shown some of the complexities of the new Batman with the help of Nietzsche’s monster in the abyss and complexities can also be seen in Nietzsche’s thoughts about nihilism. The concept of nihilism can be interpreted in several ways. According to Will Slocombe it promotes “a pantheon of modern gods: contingency, not absolutism; ethical relativism, not Christian morality; the present, not the past.” Nihilism requires a change from the past into the present. There must be a development, nothing can be static, as Jinachitra states:

An overman is willing to risk all for the sake of humanity. In contrary to the last man who is incapable of creating anything beyond himself in any form. This suggests that an overman is someone who can establish his own values in the world. An overman can affect and influence the lives of others. In other words, an overman has his own values, independent of others, which affects and dominates others’ lives. An overman thinks nothing in the past and future is more important than the present, or more precisely, the pleasure and happiness in the present, but with the purpose for humanity.

There are no objective or moral laws or values that apply to what Nietzsche calls the ubermensch or overman. We can see this in Batman since he does not care about society’s laws or rules in his pursuit of order in Gotham. Another aspect of nihilism, as Ashley Woodward explains, is that it is “a symptom
of society, and is generally thought historically as a diagnosis of an ailment in a society at a particular time in history. Nihilism is the sickness, destruction and decay symptomatic of the decline of the West.” The sickness in society, not only of Gotham but the whole of the USA, which it symbolizes, is best shown in the reluctance of dealing with crime and anarchy, and the ongoing cold, and real, war between the USA and Russia. The straw that breaks the camel’s back, or the ultimate decline of the west, is when a nuclear bomb detonates over US territory. Gotham and big parts of the USA are sent back to medieval times with riots and looting. Here we come to the point when Batman and his army really take the lead, securing Gotham for the citizens. He is willing to risk everything personal to uphold law and order and save people’s lives and take charge when the herd runs loose. Gregory J. Golda discusses the Golden age of comics, which was the breakthrough of comics between the late 1930s and 40s, in “The Rise of the Post-Modern Graphic Novel”, and says “The Golden age was an era of stereotype and symbolic personifications [...] There was no place for ambiguity.” Miller’s Batman has gone from the old school stereotypical detective to a nihilistic anarchistic vigilante. At first glance, when he uses all means to get to his goal, he is no better than the villains and criminals he is fighting, but he has to do this to clean the streets and re-establish law and order. This is what separates this new hero from the old school heroes, or the heroes of the golden age. We see that Batman is this ambiguous person when he wants to save Two Face and the Joker but also when it comes to Superman.

The Superman we have known for more than seventy years is an almost infallible godlike hero who should rise to the occasion and help people, help humanity. But Miller’s complex Superman is not the godlike superhero we expect in this novel. When we meet Superman he is portrayed simply as a yes-saying hero; we can see that Miller has turned him into an ironic version of the Superman we know and he, not the villains, is in fact Batman’s worst enemy. Batman does not see eye to eye with Superman because of several things. One thing is Superman does not age. Batman, or rather Wayne, is reminded of his age by Superman. “You’re not a young man anymore, Bruce...” (Miller et al 14). We see that Superman is in fact patronizing him, telling him it is time to retire permanently and we know that Wayne is painfully reminded of his age every day when he wakes up aching after having battled villains. Indirectly Superman means that Batman’s crusade is something passed to history, but according to Nietzsche the overman does not care about history, only the present. Superman also says he is going to be ordered to bring him in by “Somebody with authority,” meaning the President, if he does not stop (Miller et al 15). But then why should a God obey a human? He is after all the one and only Superman. We have seen that the answer is the public ban. Superman is the only superhero who always has played by the rules, there has never been a need for him to bend them or to set up his own set of rules.
He is really the light bearing hero in opposite to Batman who is the dark one, the one who operates outside the law but here it is the reverse. According to the public ban no heroes can act so when Superman wants to do what he does best he must do it in the hidden, on orders from the President, after all Superman is a team player. “When that happens Clark ... may the best man win” (Miller et al 15) Wayne says, and here we are told that sooner or later they are going to fight against each other and that fight is due to Superman’s reluctance to tear off the shackles of the worldly powers. Because of them he has become the worst nemesis of Batman in this graphic novel. Miller has turned Superman more or less into a cowardly traitor which is worse than being a villain. And this is indeed ironic when comparing to the Nietzschean superman, or übermensch. According to Iain Thomson’s “Deconstructing the Hero” the “superhero” [...] is someone who becomes a hero by superceding the hero who inspired him or her” (Thomson 18), meaning that Superman who looks up to the President and obeys his every command must cut lose from the chains of restrictions he is bound with. He must defeat the power, and his own reluctance, and go back to and act as the hero he used to be, unselfish and always ready to serve and protect, not running the errands of the President. Superman is later called away by the President to stop Russian troops from invading the island of Corto Maltese. When a nuclear warhead detonates over US territory Superman dies and we see him fall to earth shrivelled and emptied, drained of all his powers. The explosion is “Blotting out the source of all my power... the hope for screaming millions...” (Miller et al 25). The sun, which keeps him alive, is blocked and he falls to earth, but earth is also fuelled by the sun and he receives new powers from it. What Miller shows us is another drastic change in the character of Superman. He is no longer an alien. He has now become a child of the earth, a man, just like all other human beings. And becoming a man means that he no longer has some of his divine powers. He is no longer a God. God is dead according to Nietzsche.

After the nuclear explosion there are riots and looting and Batman gathers his army of ex-mutants to reinstall law and order. The people who are rioting are upset when a banned superhero takes the law in his own hands and in a TV interview the leader of the mob says: “Like the Gestapo, they moved in on us... Batman and that brat army of his... you’d have thought we were criminals” (Miller et al 35). But we can also see that there is reconciliation. The mob realises what could have happened if Batman had not shown up. Here Miller gives us a hero who stands up for the people, even if it is to tell them they are behaving wrong. Miller’s Batman has now become the overman, the übermensch Nietzsche described. God is dead and there are no longer any rules for people to follow and so they roam the streets looting and killing until Batman reinstalls his law. But it is a law for everyone to live up to, even for Batman, and here in the presence he becomes the leader they need. Not long after this Superman challenges Batman sending a message written in fire on the ground, a question where to meet and settle who is
going to run Gotham once and for all, “...Then ... a blast of heat... from the sky... Where? ...And it begins...” (Miller et al 34). Here we understand it is time to put an end to Batman’s anarchic regime in Gotham and Superman is the one who is challenging him. I read this as Superman is tired of Batman defying him and the laws of society so he decides that it is enough. He is convinced he will beat Batman now that he has been reborn and he is full of confidence. Since the USA is still in turmoil the President, a striking Ronald Reagan look-alike, is on TV trying to reassure people they are safe: “... Nothing we can’t handle, folks. We’re still America... And I’m still President” (Miller et al 34). But we know the President is not doing anything to stop crime. The reader knows he has imposed limited martial law and given the military forces power to maintain order. It is just another way for a dictatorship, which in fact the USA have turned into, to keep the power. But there is one place where they are not – Gotham. “Thanks to the Batman and his vigilante gang, Gotham’s streets are safe... unless you try to commit a crime...” (Miller et al 34). At last Batman is acknowledged as a man upholding the law even if he is called a vigilante. We understand that people long for someone who stands up for them, whether it is a hero or not does not matter as long as someone does it. Since neither Superman nor the President take care of people Batman will even if he does not have to. He cannot afford to be petty, he has to look beyond the old public demand of banning heroes and step up to the occasion, be the overman and save what can be saved. The President is obviously worried, even scared, and does not dare to send his troops to Gotham. Instead he sends Superman.

Batman is not alone in the fight against Superman. He gets help from a 13 year old girl Robin and the Green Arrow who also is an old banned hero and a socialist. Green Arrow was also a rich man as Wayne but according to Greg McCue in Dark Knights. The New Comics in Context he lost his wealth and he is now cast a defender of the poor tackling problems such as “overpopulation, racism, sexism and judicial due process” (McCue 52). My impression is that he is out for vengeance for two reasons. First of all he lost an arm in a fight with Superman. At the point when society turns against the heroes most of them decide to quit and that is when Superman becomes a government agent. Miller implies that Green Arrow refused to quit and Superman had to stop him by severing his arm. Green Arrow says, “I always knew it’d get down to you and the big blue schoolboy. Planet’s too big for the two of you. When it all comes down... I want a piece of him. A small piece will do. For old times sake. You know...It still hurts when it’s cold...” and he looks at his severed arm (Miller et al 34). We get the impression he has always known that one day the fight will stand between Batman and Superman. The latter is in a derogatory way called schoolboy. Superman always goes by the book of rules, he would never bend or break them unlike Batman and Green Arrow, they do what it takes to win a fight. The second reason why Green Arrow wants revenge lies in the fact that Superman has sold himself to a corrupt
government, in the eyes of the Green Arrow he is no longer a people’s servant, he is a corrupt traitor, a tool for sale to the one who pays the most. Miller’s girl Robin is also a step from the old into the new. Robin is not a boy any longer but a thirteen year old girl, a bright contrast to the aged Batman.

Miller has chosen Crime Alley, where Wayne’s parents were killed in 1940, as the place where the fight will take place. We already know this is where Batman, or rather Wayne, met death for the first time and this is where he perhaps will reconcile with his destiny, to die. My interpretation is that Miller wants to send Wayne back to the one and maybe only place where he, strangely enough, seems to feel safe in what he is going to do. He has come to terms with the old nightmare where his parents were killed. My reading is that what has been taken from him 46 years ago is now symbolically going to be given back. If he cannot kill or punish his parents’ killer then maybe he can do it to another traitor.

We understand that Batman’s altruism and empathy, all of a sudden, is gone but this time it is no ordinary criminal he is going to punish. Since Superman has sold himself to the government Batman feels Superman has no existential rights. It is as if Batman, who never has killed before, now is determined to show Superman that he is serious, serious not only when it comes to serve and protect the society but also when it comes to, possibly, kill him.

Superman who has lost a bit of his divinity is vulnerable to the weapons Batman has prepared for him and with the help from Green Arrow and green kryptonite he is beaten. All which is left are the fists of Batman. “… I want you to remember, Clark… In all the years to come… In your most private moments…I want you to remember… My hand… At your throat… I want… you to remember… The one man who beat you…” (Miller et al 43). At last Batman defeats his nemesis. Miller shows that the transformation from an alien to an earthly creature has made Superman vulnerable to physical violence. McCue says, “Not even Superman is what he used to be. Here he is only a tool of the government with nothing to say for himself. He is the unbeatable God from another planet but now he is defeated by a man, by Batman” (McCue 68). We understand that there is a flaw in Superman. Superman has been reborn and he is still a god but he is a god who is guilty of hubris. He cannot see that he will be beaten by an overman and therefore he goes into this fight certain he will win and that makes him more human than before. Then Batman dies. But he has prepared a drug which “kills” him at exactly twelve o’clock when his hands are around the neck of Superman. We are now led to understand that the hidden identity of Batman is unveiled and he is buried. But at the funeral we understand that Superman finally revolts against the President’s power when he hears Wayne’s heart starting again but he only winks his eye to girl Robin. From this we can conclude that Batman’s secret is safe with Superman, he will not reveal it.

Instead Superman will go back to being the superhero that maintains the law and does everything
needed for the people and hopefully Batman will continue to bring justice to Gotham, as long as he does it in the hidden.

Iain Thomson says that Nietzsche not only had theories about an overman but also a superhero. Nietzsche said that the overman must supersede the past to make a future worth living in and the superhero in his turn had to supersede the heroes of the past to help create that future (Thomson 17-18). My interpretation is that Batman must beat the old laws, and possibly Superman, to make a bright future and Superman must vanquish himself to contribute to the same future. And this is what Miller has shown us here. Batman has managed to beat not only the government and the old ban of heroes but also Superman. Superman on the other hand beats himself when he is transformed into a new kind of God when he first dies and then is reborn and becomes more human. He also goes from being a lackey to no longer taking orders from the President. The sum of all this then must be that Superman who used to be the one who served in secret on the President’s order now has to step up and do it in public. Batman on the other hand who did everything to fight both the power and the villains in broad daylight now has to go underground and continue his fight from there. Miller lets us understand that order is restored and Superman can go back to being the bearer of light while Batman, the Dark Knight, goes back to fight for justice in the dark.

Conclusion

Frank Miller has gained recognition because of his inimitable style when it comes to stories and characters. His male characters are often compared to Clint Eastwood’s cop character Dirty Harry and martial arts film characters such as Seven Samurai (1954) by Akira Kurosawa. This can be seen when Batman takes matters in his own hands and fights the corrupt power of the government, state and the local authorities. Miller is also known for reinventing the superheroes. His Batman is more complex than just to say that he does not care for social justice. Yes, Batman breaks the laws but there is no other way to do it if he wants to save the society and its citizens. It often takes an underdog to make a change, whether or not it comes from the people or from a fictional hero as in this graphic novel. And here we see that an underdog also can become a Nietzschean overman when he fights for the rights and wellbeing of the people. But there is more than just a refusal to follow rules to this Batman. Here for the first time in the history of superheroes Batman wants to save the villains. He used to be the one punishing villains but now he wants to see them cured from their mental illnesses. Miller has made him an altruist and herein lies the complexity of this new hero and the villains. Both Batman and the villains are of the same breed, there is good as well as evil in all of them, but they use it to their advantage in different ways and only one can handle the monster he carries around inside. Two Face goes back to
Arkham Asylum and the Joker dies but Batman carries on his work. Batman and the villains are not the only ones who are remodelled. Superman in this novel is not who we expect. He is part of the corruption and he is in fact the weakest superhero in this story, not the godlike character we have known for the last seventy years. He is called the man of steel but here steel is nothing compared to flesh and bone. It is not until he is transformed into a man that he starts to do good. Miller often uses historical references and also a sense of recognition of real life in his graphic novels and I have shown some of them in this essay. First we have the spitting image of the former President Ronald Reagan and the Cold War he was a part of. Then there are the popular cultural references we see in the character of Doctor Ruth and David Letterman. The real life recognition I am referring to is reflected in Bruce Wayne who has turned old and has become more human than any superhero ever. Here he is old and he is not comfortable with his life and what turns it has taken. He is simply human. The examples of historical references and recognition of real life are also parts of what makes this a postmodern graphic novel. There is a mixture of fiction and reality and we become a part of what happens in the story when there is a sense of recognition which we can relate to in some extent.

There is no doubt; this new Batman of Miller’s is a vigilante and a criminal, but there is a meaning to all of it, it fills a purpose. And furthermore his own personal moral code, which he got when his parents were killed, prevents him from being a force of evil or doing things for his own gain. And here is the heroic fantasy that those with power over us will use this power for our benefit instead of their own. Batman is not doing it for his own sake but for the citizens of Gotham when they lose faith in everything and the whole society turns nihilistic. Instead he becomes the overman who secures the present and possibly the future for the citizens of Gotham.

Finally I would like to use the words of Maurice Broaddus and show what he says about The Dark Knight Returns:

> Batman has always been a dangerously focused character. The death of his parents at the hands of a criminal gave him a mission in life, but how he went about his mission has led writers to depict him as either a revenge-driven psychopath (continuing to punish the man who killed his parents) or an ardent pursuer of justice (pursuing a higher calling and mission). So this hero’s journey has always been as much internal as it was external (Broaddus).

Miller has, figuratively speaking, placed Batman on the therapist’s sofa. The Dark Knight Returns is a kind of a therapy session where we get to dig in on Batman’s psyche. For the first time we see a
troubled superhero that realises he has as big mental problems as the villains he is chasing. But there is also a kind of a remedy. By making amends he heals himself.
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