

Rationale Statement for Using *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* in the Classroom

Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is one of the graphic novels that changed how audiences view superheroes. Batman, like society, has grown and changed. The once clear drawn lines of right and wrong become blurred as Gotham's Batman, who was retired and now in his 50's, dons the cape once again takes the law into his hands. He not only faces the evil of the criminals of Gotham, but also from within himself.

Graphic novels grab students' attention and help them learn for several reasons. Gene Yang's article, "Graphic Novels in the Classroom", states that, "By combining image and text, graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read" (Yang 187). Generally, people, young adult students included, like to watch television, go to movies, play video games, and the like. Why should we not include some of that popular culture into the classroom? With traditional novels, we ask students to read words on the page, but it is easier to hold interest, and recall facts, when images are associated with that text. Images also have a dual meaning; not only does the dialogue and text need to be inferred and analyzed, but the images carry heavy significance, such as sharing narrative responsibility (Yang 187).

It is also important to get students motivated to read. According to the National Endowment of the Art's recent report, "To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence", reading is on the decline and young people's reading is dropping at alarming rate. By introducing a medium between watched media and text, students will be more likely to have positive feelings toward the experience of reading. Many scholarly articles have addressed the benefits of graphic novels engaging students. One of which is Gretchen Schwarz's "Graphic Books for Diverse Needs: Engaging Reluctant and Curious Readers". By introducing

“...graphics books that focus on superheroes, mysteries and crime, real life issues, and history are aimed especially at teens who resist reading...there is enough action to satisfy a reader, but the story can also provoke deeper thought...” (Schwarz 54). I believe it is worth the effort to try something new that not only will excite but also engage students with literature in my classroom. Not only that, but *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is quite malleable and couples nicely with the usage of canonical texts such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and/or *Beowulf* in a unit study.

While *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* may not be suited to younger readers who have not yet grown into the mental and emotional maturity to work with abstract concepts, it is highly appropriate for older teenagers, specifically those in high school junior and senior level English courses. This graphic novel provides chances for discussing a wide array of concerns from personal dilemmas to global problems. However, this book does not come without a certain level of apprehension, especially for parents, teachers, and administration. Censorship concerns are that it is too violent (crimes are discussed and carried out, people are harmed and killed), as well as having sexual innuendos (Selina Kyle runs an escort service), and it contains explicit language. However, these issues can be addressed within the context of the realistic portrayal of Gotham being overrun by crime, and Batman fights the crime by punishing the criminals. The language and violence, while inappropriate in many settings, help build and make a creditable setting, which is a city over run by crime, and to the deep conflicts that characters have externally and internally. If necessary, other works, such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and/or *Beowulf* could potentially be used as alternative readings and would suffice as a substitute if need be.

Multiple topics that pertain to literature can be taught with this text. For example, Bruce Wayne's character frequently uses flashbacks in Book 1 to explain a certain emotions or events that have taken place. This will prompt a look at how authors make a point use literary devices such as flashback, flash forward, and stream of consciousness and how these devices aid readers' understanding and comprehension of the text. Another large topic, as mentioned before is conflict. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* offers many more discussion and learning points. Some thought-provoking questions and topics include what makes a superhero, character development, internal and external struggles that the character has with his own self and other forces, what is justice, making predictions, duality/split personas, analyzing images and speech, investigating historical, media, and social ties from the text to real life.

Overall, the purpose of using this book, whether they know about Gotham's Dark Knight or not, is to allow students the opportunity to engage positively with others in the classroom through discussions and special projects, empowering students to make their own decisions in their own learning, and connecting with the world beyond their classroom. By incorporating graphic novels into the curriculum, students can be shown that reading and learning can be a fun experience that they can pursue inside and outside of the classroom.

Works Cited & Consulted

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