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**GOTHAM'S DARK GARGOYLE: GOTHIC  
REPRESENTATIONS IN 1980S BATMAN COMICS**

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REPRESENTATIONS IN 1980S BATMAN COMICS**

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## RESUMO

O presente trabalho discute a possibilidade de uma leitura Gótica de dois quadrinhos do Batman produzidos na década de 1980, sendo eles *O Cavaleiro das Trevas* (1986), produzido por Frank Miller, e *A Piada Mortal* (1988), roteirizado por Alan Moore e desenhado por Brian Bolland. Pensando o Gótico como uma forma de escrita, utilizando como aporte teórico David Punter e Glennis Byron (*The Gothic*, 2004) Fred Botting (*Gothic*, 2005) e Avril Horner e Sue Sloznik (*Gothic and the Comic Turn*, 2005), faço uma leitura sócio-histórica dos quadrinhos elegidos, selecionando elementos que podem ser lidos como Góticos, relacionando-os com a tradição de textos Góticos do final do século XIX e do século XX. Para realizar a discussão divido ela em duas partes, sendo a primeira uma análise do Gótico urbano nas histórias selecionadas do Batman, refletindo acerca dos elementos que podem ser lidos como Góticos, e a segunda uma leitura acerca dos elementos de comicidade e humor em relação ao horror e terror, dentro do conceito de virada cômica (comic turn) de Horner e Sloznik. As discussões apontam para a representação da cidade de Gotham emulando a cidade moderna e suas disputas sociais e atividades criminosas, traçando um paralelo com as “classes perigosas”, tal qual narrativas Góticas do final do século XIX, como figuras monstruosas, o perigo à espreita que cria a sensação de medo. Ao mesmo tempo, a fragmentação do sujeito e da divisão menos clara entre realidade/ficção nas obras podem ser lidas como parte da pós-modernidade. O papel do herói oscilando entre uma atitude inspiradora e bem intencionada, ainda que antidemocráticos, se utilizando dos poderes estabelecidos como suporte, a polícia, por exemplo, como parte da privatização da violência, do combate ao crime, baseado em padrões morais individuais, sendo comportamentos fascistas, principalmente no Batman de Miller.

**Palavras-chave:** Batman, Gótico, Modernidade, Urbano, Comicidade.





## ABSTRACT

This work discusses the possibility of a Gothic reading of two Batman comics, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), created by Frank Miller, and *The Killing Joke* (1988), written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Brian Bolland. Thinking Gothic as a form of writing and using David Punter and Glennis Byron's *The Gothic* (2004), Fred Botting's *Gothic* (2005) and Avril Horner and Sue Sloznic's *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005) as theoretical framework, I employ a sociohistorical reading of these selected Batman comics, choosing elements that can be read as Gothic, relating them with texts of Gothic tradition from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In order to do the discussion I divide it in two parts: in the first one I analyze urban Gothic in the selected Batman stories, discussing elements that can be deemed Gothic; in the second part I do a reading over comic elements and humor and their relation with horror and terror, within Horner and Zlosnik's concept of "comic turn". The discussions pointed out Gotham City's representation emulating modern city, its social disputes and criminal activities, tracing a parallel with "dangerous classes", as in late nineteenth-century Gothic narratives, as monstrous, the danger lurking that creates the feeling of fear. Moreover, the fragmentation of the being and the blurring between reality and fiction can be read as part of postmodernity. The role of the hero oscillates between having a well-meaning and inspiring attitude, although by antidemocratic means, utilizing established powers, such as the police force, and privatizing the violence and crime fighting, based in individual moral codes that, can be deemed fascist, mainly in Miller's Batman.

**Keywords:** Batman, Gothic, Modernity, Urban, Comic.



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## PREFACE

I have been reading comics since I was a little child and before that, my parents read them for me before going to bed. By the time I became an adolescent, I had already moved on from *Turma da Mônica* and Disney titles, comics that formed my childhood reading, to Japanese manga arriving in Brazil through JBC and Conrad publishers.

My introduction to US comics happened as a freshman at the university, when a colleague of mine, Fernando Feitosa, was developing about Spiderman for the course final paper of the undergraduate degree in History. That was the moment I discovered that comics could be research objects, as valid any other. Fernando also lent me DC and especially Marvel comics, introducing me to comics that I knew only as cartoon and movie interpretations, as well as being the first person to tell me how *The Dark Knight Returns* was “amazing” due to Batman’s attitude and the beating he, as only a human with no superpowers, gives Superman. I was biased by Fernando’s interpretation when I first read the actual story, and I thought it was as great as a comics narrative could be, and I held the thought of someday working with it.

Ten years after meeting Fernando, I was concluding my Letras Inglês undergraduate course, presenting a comparative analysis between *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Ranxerox*. After several readings, my opinion about Frank Miller’s work changed, seeing the authoritarian and right-wing ideology that guided his Batman (at least), while at the same time I incorporate *The Killing Joke* in my thesis project and added the Gothic reading as a new element.

I am sometimes accused of being too historian for literary studies and writing history texts as a literature researcher. The result of the research is a discussion that mingles my historian side with my critic literary reading and provides what I expect to be a pleasant and well-grounded discussion.

## 1 - INTRODUCTION

This work investigates two comics released in the 1980s: Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* (1988). As cultural items, I understand these comics reflect the spirit of the time of the 1980s decade, and I will argue here that the sociocultural and historical elements imbued in these comics can benefit from a Gothic reading. I understand that the Gothic is an apt theoretical approach due to the range of analysis it can provide, as for instance, the representation of the city as a den haunted by a perilous mass of dangerous people, a perspective shared by modern depiction's of London in Gothic novels and of New York City in Batman's comics.

Although these two comics have been well discussed by critics such as Aeon Skoble, Geoff Klock, Nathan Tipton, and Paul Lewis, to name a few, I have never found a work discussing Miller or Moore and Bolland within a Gothic framework, which can perhaps provide a fresh gaze upon the corpus, and a new theoretical perspective to comics' researchers and the academic community in general.

In my two analytical chapters, I will approach the Gothic thematically, showing the presence of Gothic elements in *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke*. My sociohistorical interpretation of the Gothic and of its presence in the two graphic novels<sup>1</sup>, relies largely in David Punter and Glennis Byron's *The Gothic* (2004), Fred Botting's *Gothic* (2005) and Avril Horner and Sue Sloznic's *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005).

In the first chapter "Introduction", I introduce the origins of Gothic in architecture and the introduction of some themes for classic Gothic narrative, such as medieval buildings related to power holders during the Middle Ages, like castles and churches. Besides that, I display the theoretical framework for Gothic studies, presenting authors and the main idea for the development of the thesis. Furthermore, I discuss the choices I made for the comics studies theories that guide this work, debating why I select two main theories, but not agreeing entirely with none of them. I also introduce a discussion on postmodern time and its

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that my corpus is composed of two graphic novels, I am going to use the term "comics" more often, due to a theoretical position that sees comics as an umbrella term that encompasses cartoons, comic books, comic strips and graphic novels. Although some researchers have discussed the terminology of comics studies, as Will Eisner did by proposing the use of "sequential art", the great majority of works in the area use "comics" as a broad concept, as Scott McCloud (1993), Thierry Groensteen (2007) and Joseph Witek (1989).



relation with some aspects of Gothic narratives. Moreover, I introduce the origins of Batman and his characteristics, as well as a discussion about the problematic of the hero that can be deemed an antidemocratic positive character or a fascist individual.

In the second chapter, entitled “Gotham and the Gothic City”, the discussion is guided by a study of Gotham City as representative of the modern city<sup>2</sup>, discussing the context that led to the development of big western cities, such as London and New York City, and how their urban space is, on the whole, a Gothic representation. Some characteristics of the Gothic in the cityscape are given by dark crowded streets and alleys populated by millions of poor people, depicted as dangerous. After discussing the background for the modern city, I will focus on the characteristic of United States cities and the crisis<sup>3</sup> that affected them during the 1930s, the same decade in which Batman was created. The gloomier, arguably Gothic, aspects of urban context are more accentuated in *The Dark Knight Returns* than in *The Killing Joke*.

The objective of the chapter is to discuss socioeconomic and historical elements, establishing the ground for a Gothic reading of the broader cultural events that led to the creation of Gotham City, as it was in 1939. In addition, I will also revisit the sociocultural, political and economic events that led to a reinterpretation of Gotham City by Miller and Moore and Bolland in the 1980s, and how their reinterpretation of the cityscape is arguably a Gothic representation.

The third chapter, entitled “Gothic in comics: between humor and horror in *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke*”, considers the idea of the Gothic as a “comic turn”. This idea is proposed by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, who argue for the importance of the “comic relief” in Gothic representations and how they could be deemed too dark, or, at other times, used to soften a sorrowful or unsightly depiction with a lighter tone. In this sense, the presence of the comic turn in these comics deals with referentiality and expectation breaches. This idea of the comic turn is more noticeable and particularly accentuated in *The Killing Joke*.

One particular thesis produced at Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês (PPGI) bears great importance for my research, George Ayres

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<sup>2</sup> According to David Frisby, in *The Spaces of the Modern City* (2008), modern city has to do with urban planning, with Paris and Vienna the two representatives of the modern city in the nineteenth-century, with London and Berlin in a second tier category. During the twentieth-century new “metropolitan centers” arise, transforming big industrial cities in urban modern cities (21-22).

<sup>3</sup> By crisis I am considering events that lead to a worse socioeconomic condition for great amount of the population.

Mousinho's *Subversive Blood Ties: Gothic Decadence in Three Characters from Murnau's and Coppola's Renderings of Bram Stoker's Dracula*, published in 2013. In his work, Mousinho presents three characteristics associated with Dracula: "his relation to the night, to the ancient, and to the beasts" (28). Indeed, like Dracula, Batman also has all those attributes, bearing a special relationship with the night, when he roams the city searching for criminal activity. The night conceals his figure as he performs acts of vigilantism, as a predator looking for a prey (as Dracula looking for a victim). Wayne's fascination with bats, his attempted imitation, adopting the costume of the creature he emulates, resembles Dracula in his relationship with beasts, controlling and assuming their forms. Bruce Wayne assumes the form of the bat, becoming a bat-man himself.

Wayne/Batman also has a relation with "the ancient", as heir of a large family fortune and all their properties. The character could be thought of as an oligarch/aristocrat, who inhabits an old manor and is bound by his surname to honor his parents and mission. Wayne Manor traces back to the entire lineage of the Wayne family, not only to Bruce's deceased parents, in this sense, he is inheritor of the properties and traditions of an ancient Gothamite oligarch, of which he is a member.

Regarding the significance of the research, this thesis proposes a new perspective on two classic comics, namely *The Dark Night Returns* and *The Killing Joke*, proposing a Gothic gaze on them. I seek to highlight Gothic representations of social, political, economic, and cultural relevance in these cultural items. At the same time, this thesis reinforces the production and study of both Gothic and comics researches at PPGI.

The focus of the research is to debate how these sociocultural, politic and economic elements are depicted in the late twentieth century and how they could be seen as part of the Gothic imagination, particularly the fear of lower social classes, which can already be seen in nineteenth-century English narratives such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).

In broader ways, the research question that guides this thesis is: why is Gothic an adequate theory to discuss some particular moments and sociocultural context, echoing eighteenth and nineteenth-century narratives via Batman's comics? How it emerge in the 1930s and returns, particularly strong, in the 1970 and 1980s narratives?

As proposed by David Punter and Glennis Byron, Gothic writing emerges in literature as a popular narrative choice in periods of crisis (39), the scholars argue that late nineteenth-century English literature could be taken as an example. The same can be said for two periods of time

involving Batman, one of them being the 1930s, a period marked by a great crisis in capitalism, favoring the rise of a superhero like the “Dark Knight”, and the same can also be applied to the late twentieth century, with the release of *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). This “return” of Batman, which actually begins in the 1970s, coincides with an economic and social crisis, paralleled by the failure of a teleological apprehension of the time, markedly by many doubts about the notion of progress, which was the basis for both capitalist and socialist societies.

My focus relies in two specific 1980s comics alongside a discussion of Batman in late 1930s and early 1940s. Thus, my reading is only one of many possible, as an analysis of 1950s and 1960s Batman comics might reach different results, as well as a study of 1970s Batman might obtain results convergent (but not the same) to what I have attained, since each production provides a different sociohistorical background for each Batman incarnation, and therefore, particular Gothic representations. For instance, Will Brooker, in *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2000), points out that the period between 1954-1966 could be called “Pop Icon” Batman. During this time, the character lost its original violent demeanor, becoming more humorous and in the late 1960s, was largely influenced by the TV series (1966-1968), whose objective was to increase comic book sales, that had been down for a while (196).

## 1.1 Context of investigation

To put it rather plainly, Batman originates as the aspiration of a rich white man who turns to vigilantism for vengeance. From this perspective, he is the representative of the safeguard of private property and the defense of capitalism, criticizing the inefficacy of the police and government, who grant rights to crime suspects without immediately punishing them. Batman represents the hero who decided to fight crime with his own hands instead of relying on police enforcement and in the judicial system. In this sense he is a vigilante, someone who embodies the answer to issues that especially urban dwellers feared about, such as physical violence, murder and robbery. At first, faced with 1930s increasing crime rates, Batman used to kill criminals as the final punishment. The character would change over time but would still preserve his main feature: the fact that he was someone from the

establishment<sup>4</sup> fighting crimes in his city. Batman first appeared in May 1939, in the Detective Comics no. 27, since then some of his key characteristics would ring throughout the decades.

In the 1980s, Batman's representation is marked by a more blatant Gothic aesthetic and discourse, which echoes his origins. The differences between the character in 1939 and in 1980s are essentially the context in which they are produced and the questions I seek to debate here is why they emerge at those particular times. Furthermore, to see the Gothic as a sociocultural representation means that its themes and representations are not immutable, as Fred Botting argues, the early twentieth century productions are more related to nineteenth century Gothic and in the late twentieth century there is a change, more relatable to changes in modernity itself (7, 102).

Another characteristic of Batman comics in the 1980s can be associated with the "comic turn", which serves both to accentuate and alleviate the darker, Gothic scenes. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik propose an ironic or comic interpretation of the Gothic, discussing how parodical elements and references, which are typical of Gothic writing, provide relief for readers in scenes that would be disturbing (13). Still according to the authors, the strategic use of irony, parody or comedy can provide, at the same time, a higher level of sophistication in the narrative (30). The concept is particularly useful to my reading of Batman's main villain, the Joker, a clown that likes to play mortal tricks on his foes.

The 1980s decade is the focal point of this thesis, and the time period was selected because of its importance in relation to comics productions which defined new forms of representing old characters, like Batman. The 1980s were also a time of economic crisis that marked deeply the decade and the representation of the character. Since Batman's creation in 1939, the character passed through different modifications over time. As Cary Adkinson states, due to the flexibility of the Comics Code<sup>5</sup> "the Dark Knight himself returned to his roots during the 1980s, shunning the campy 1960s day-glow portrayals in favor of the moody

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<sup>4</sup> Adopting Norbet Elias and John Scottson's idea of establishment as groups in the upper scales of power, including economic power, that deny outsiders groups the same privileged position in society. For further reading see *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994).

<sup>5</sup> The Comics Code was a conservative setting of rules superintended by an independent authority established by the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954, following pressure from US government to regulate the media after criticism, the most famous from Fredric Wertham in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954).

blacks and grays” (257). This Batman composed of shades of black and gray is a remnant of 1930s Batman and, it is my argument, that the economic crises that reverberate in the 1980s crisis produced its version of the Dark Knight.

## 1.2 Gothic

For a historical overview of the Gothic, seeking to show its presence in the representation of cityscapes, it is necessary to recapitulate that, in 1550 Giorgio Vasari<sup>6</sup>, published the book *Lives of Artists*, using the word Gothic in connection to Goths, which at the time meant one of the “barbaric” folks that settled in Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Esmond Samuel de Beer affirms that Vasari was not “the first writer known to have associated the Goths with what we mean by Gothic architecture” as “three earlier writers give something of his background” (145). The distinctiveness of Vasari’s observation comes from the tone he gives to the association, as the ones before him did not evaluate the characteristic of the so-called Gothic architecture as an inferior one, while Vasari uses the term in a pejorative sense. Like other Florentines, Vasari privileged the Mannerism that he and his fellows were applying in their buildings during the sixteenth century, attributing the label of barbarism to other architectural styles from other parts of Europe.

Some of the main characteristics of Mannerism are the symmetry and the use of elements from classic antiquity, such as columns (255-266), as observed by the art historian Ernst Gombrich in his book *History of Art* (1995). It was essentially a question of confrontation between the classic Roman idea of architecture and another style developed under the influence of Catholic Church and western European reigns, which originated in France during the twelfth century.

In chapter named “The Church Triumphant”, Gombrich argues that the Romanesque churches from the eleventh century inaugurates a period in which “[t]he bishops and nobles who were the new feudal lords of England soon began to assert their power by founding abbeys and minsters” (120). Church and nobility composed the upper classes and were the rulers during the Middle Ages. Gothic churches were built and financed by these upper classes as much as during the Romanesque. The differences between Romanesque and Gothic surpassed the architecture

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<sup>6</sup> Vasari was an architect and painter living in the Duchy of Florence (Ducato di Firenze) under Medici family rule and patronage.

distinctions but, meant a shift in representation of the Church. In this regard, Gombrich states that:

These older churches [Romanesque] in their strength and power may have conveyed something of the ‘church militant’ that offered shelter against the onslaught of evil. The new cathedrals gave the faithful a glimpse of a different world. They would have heard in sermons and hymns of the Heavenly Jerusalem with its gates of pearl, its priceless jewels, its streets of pure gold and transparent glass (Revelation xxi). Now this vision had descended from heaven to earth. (134).

Therefore, Gothic architecture represented the symbolic idea of the Church in its most powerful state. Although the style was mainly applied to Catholic buildings, such as cathedrals, abbeys and monasteries, castles were also erected in Gothic architectural style, all of them indicating the power of the Church and nobility – later on I will connect this idea of nobility to Bruce Wayne/Batman. Thus, the use of castles and religious related buildings in Gothic texts have its origins in the Middle Ages Gothic architecture.

As a result of a certain prejudice against medieval times, Renaissance purported the idea of the period as a “Dark Age”, the centuries “that followed the fall of Rome soon expanded to include the medieval period generally, up to about the middle of the seventeenth century” at the time “‘Gothic’ became a term applied to all things medieval”(Punter and Byron 3).

Following David Punter and Glennis Byron I will argue here that the concept of “Gothic is above all, perhaps, a way of representation” (XIX). Moreover, if it is a way of representation, it has more to do with themes and sets of ideas than to a specific period of production. In other words, as a form of representation, the Gothic can appear, emerge and return at different times, being a transhistorical, transgeographical and transcultural manifestation. Although Gothic is not restrained to a temporality, “the Gothic is frequently considered to be a genre that re-emerges with particular force during times of cultural crisis and which serves to negotiate the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form” (39). I will treat the Gothic here both as a set of codes (a genre), in the sense it repeats certain elements, images and conventions (the castle/manor, the bat, the darkness) and as a discursive and visual manifestation that operates both thematically and aesthetically across time and space.

The idea of “instability of the being” is a central characteristic of the Gothic text, it emerges, for example, in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) as a matter of identity. Punter and Byron point out that protagonist depiction “suggests man may well be not a stable unified subject, but a ‘complex, multiform creature’.” (41) Like Dracula, Jekyll/Hyde and Dorian Gray, Batman is also a split subject, a multiform creature who is the product of his period. In latter representations, we can associate it with the so-called postmodernity, a time when the identities are fragmented. The representations of the characters in my corpus – Batman and also the Joker, his *doppelgänger* – can be deemed postmodern, given that they are composed of a multitude of identifications, for example, as the multiple realities of the Joker’s past presented in the afterword by Bryan Boland in the 2004 edition of *The Killing Joke*.

In this sense, Fred Botting argues that:

Gothic atmospheres – gloomy and mysterious – have repeatedly signalled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked motions of terror and laughter. In the twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and human values (1).

Botting’s idea can be used to think about postmodern representation and the Joker, as he highlights the relation between Gothic “terror and laughter”. At the same time, these Gothic figurations can produce counter-narratives to the tenets of progress and human welfare under technological development. The underlying question here can be seen in Reinhart Koselleck argument that in modernity apprehension of time, which he calls modern regime of historicity, the idea that progress dictates the perception of time and of the present, building our expectations about the future (58). For Koselleck, the “horizon of expectation”, that is, the expectations of the future, was transformed due to the end of a teleological structure of time, in which the progress was the final destination, reverting the expectations to the present itself (318). According to this perspective, the notion of a fragmented temporality, restricted to a representation and reflection upon the present structure, can also be interpreted within a Gothic framework.

When writing about Gothic postmodernism, Maria Beville offers a set of characteristics that explain the meaning of this late modernity Gothic, which are:

[t]he blurring of the borders that exist between the real and the fictional, which results in narrative self-consciousness and an interplay between the supernatural and the metafictional; a concern with the sublime effects of terror and the unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity; specific Gothic thematic devices of haunting, the *doppelgänger*, and the dualistic philosophy of good and evil; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative function. (15).

The way the Gothic is defined in Beville's theory, as a "thematic device of haunting", seems apt to the study of Gothic themes in Batman comics, just as those aspects presented by her as representatives of postmodern are relatable to Gotham's landscape and to Batman/Joker's relation and actions.

As previously mentioned, another dualistic aspect of the Gothic is the horror/humor layers of interpretation that this kind of fiction contains. In the book *Gothic and the comic turn* (2009), Horner and Zlosnik propose the concept of "comic turn", pointing out that the seminal *The Castle of Otranto* has various elements that relate horror and terror to comedy and humor, arguing that the presence of humor in Gothic texts is not an "aberration or corruption of the genre" (12), but "a measure of detachment from scenes of pain and suffering that would be disturbing in a different Gothic context" (13).

More to the point, the comic turn explores a sense of relief from tension in the narrative, in which this comic effect is achieved through a representation that is excessive, to bring one of Botting's ideas (1), and so stylized to the point that it became a parody of previous sociocultural tropes (Horner; Zlosnik 12). This is especially true in postmodernity, which includes late twentieth-century narratives, being an important concept for the discussion of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke*. For instance, Batman narratives tropes, discourses or themes that fit this discussion comprehend death, madness, crime and vengeance mingled with humor – in reference to the idiomatic expression "die laughing".

When arguing that Gothic horror is no opposite to humor, Horner and Zlosnik bring Wolfgang Kayser's notion that "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD" (18, highlighted by the authors). They



use Kayser's phrase to point out that "Gothic comic turn is to make such 'stranged' world more bearable" (18), offering a new perspective on modernity, without giving up an approach in which the narrative and its elements are still threatening. However, although maintaining the threatening elements in the narrative, the Gothic does so by transforming it in a comic aspect, due to the grotesqueness and artificiality of the situation and form.

In *The Gothic Body* (1996), Kelly Hurley discusses what she calls "the ruination of the human subject" (3), which she explicates in the next lines:

Or perhaps it would be more precise to say that the topic of this book is the ruination of traditional of new ones at the turn of the century. In place of a human body stable and integral (at least, liable to no worse than the ravages of time and disease), the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic offers the spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated; in place of the possibility of human transcendence, the prospect of an existence circumscribed within the realities of gross corporeality; in place of a unitary and securely bounded human subjectivity, one that is both fragmented and permeable (3).

Hurley elaborates the idea of a Gothic perspective of the *fin-de-siècle*, in the sense of the end of an era followed by the crisis that it entails. Kelly Hurley refers to William Hope Hodgson's term "Ab-human" (abhuman in Kelly's version), which means a "not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other" (4). According to Hurley:

One may read its obsessive staging and restaging of the spectacle of abhumanness as a paralysis, a species of trauma, but one must also note the variety and sheer exuberance of the spectacle, as the human body collapses and is reshaped across an astonishing range of morphic possibilities: into slug-men, snake-women, ape-men, beast-people, octopus-seal-men, beetle-women, dog-men, fungus-people (4).

In this regard, Batman is a reshaped subject that re-emerged through trauma as a new being, but now a fragmented personality and a dual character. A subject that presents itself as a Bat-man at night, fighting street crime, and as a millionaire in daylight, who rarely involves himself

in the politics (financing or supporting any candidates) to change the situation in Gotham.

Gotham city in itself is a special entity in Batman's imaginary, a dark environment, inhabited by creatures of the night; that is, all sort of criminals. In *Batman – an American Mr Hyde* (1998), Andreas Reichstein compares Gotham to Manhattan. Similarly, William Uricchio makes exactly the same comparison in his article “The Batman's Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance” (2010). For Uricchio “Gotham is explicitly modeled on the ‘dark and brooding’ aspects of New York City's architecture and atmosphere” (121). Uricchio emphasizes that the importance of the urban environment in Batman's stories vary, depending on the plot of the narrative, as in the following excerpt:

In many of these narratives, Gotham provides little more than a generic urban backdrop against which grandiose rhetorical flourishes compel spectacular scenes of confrontation. But at other times, Gotham's dark passages and anonymous urban canyons are home to far more familiar notions of transgression: crimes against property and threats to life and limb (120).

Uricchio argues that the city is not depicted in that way when Batman is battling supervillains, but only when fighting “petty criminals, like those responsible for the death of little Bruce Wayne's parents” (120). Moreover, he states in such representation “we can find evidence of a preoccupation with property crimes” (120). Indeed, this idea can be seen in the difference between Gotham's representation in *The Killing Joke* and in *The Dark Knight Returns*. In the first one, a single villain is the focus of the narrative and the readers see Gotham mostly from his gaze; in this narrative, it is actually possible to count the locations: Arkham Asylum, Joker's old apartment, a bar, the batcave, the chemical factory, Gordon's house and an amusement park. In other words, not much of the city is depicted, and although all these locations have a great relevance to the narrative, Gotham city is not key to the story, working mostly as a background where the narrative takes place. Nonetheless, it is possible to discuss a representation of the city, as I will show in the next chapter.

If in *The Killing Joke* the city is tenuously represented; conversely, the city is more central in *The Dark Knight Returns*. The narrative begins depicting a grey city and introducing Bruce Wayne and Commissioner Gordon as old men. In the first ten pages, Bruce Wayne roams the streets inhabited by heralds of doom, until he is approached by

robbers when crossing a park. The heralds can be related to the crises of the modernity in the late twentieth century, that led to a discredit in progress and at the same time, disbelief and mistrust in the future. Besides that, there is the ever-present feeling of fear that, in *Confiança e medo na cidade* (2005)<sup>7</sup>, Zygmunt Bauman points out that “we could say that modern insecurity, and its several expressions, is characterized by the fear of crimes and criminals”<sup>8</sup> (16). The city reveals itself to readers, creating a first impression that makes readers realize that it is doomed and that somebody should be doing something about it. That is when Batman comes back from his retirement. In this comic, Gotham city is not merely a backdrop for the narrative, it is a monstrous beast that causes fear in those who inhabit it and that should be fought, because it is the place that embraces all the violence and the violent.

The city’s outdoors scenarios are shown in detail, and although Batman does fight archetypical enemies, such as the Joker, Two-Face and Superman, most of the time he is confronting street gangs and common criminals, such as robbers, burglars and rapists. Frank Miller once said, “Batman only really works as a character if the world is essentially a malevolent, frightening place” (qtd. in Uricchio 125). That statement is from 1986, the same year he published *The Dark Knight Returns* and applied his ideas about Gotham and the main character.

In this section I have been discussing Gotham city as a contemporary Gothic space, a place that bears certain characteristics (a dark and oppressive location), which can be associated with castles and cathedrals that date back the origins of Gothic in architecture and then in literature. I also argued that when the city or the urban space is highlighted, there is a tendency to focus on petty crime and urban violence, my reading purports that it is a response to sociohistorical issues that were brooding in 1980 New York/Manhattan.

I argue that this is due to a blurring between reality and fiction in the depiction of Gotham city, in other words, the fictional Gotham city in the comics is a blurred representation of 1930s New York and the facts that were happening at the time, as much as 1980s Gotham city in *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke* represents 1980s New York

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<sup>7</sup> This book was published in Portuguese, Spanish and Italian. There is a 2003 English version entitled *City of Fears, City of Hopes* (2003), but this version consists only of chapter two of the 2005 book.

<sup>8</sup> Henceforth, all translation will be mine, unless otherwise indicated. “Poderíamos dizer que a insegurança moderna, em suas várias manifestações, é caracterizada pelo medo dos crimes e dos criminosos”

city. That blurring can be seen as part of a postmodern context in urban space. Maria Beville argues that the “distinctions between reality and fictions began to dissolve” (62), at the same time that the binaries “reality and fiction, reader and text” (7). The same can be said by the relationships between author’s reality and his fictional production. In an interview, Miller said that “in the *Dark Knight* series, there’s a much more direct use of my real life experiences in New York, particularly my experiences with crime” (Baetens and Frey 12). It is not possible to separate the fictional city from the historical one, as the first is based on the second.

### 1.3 Theorizing Comics

This subchapter presents a discussion on comics theory that guides the analysis of the research. I will explain why I use the term comics and who are the scholars selected to the study. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen point out that in their translation of Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* (2007):

Questions of comics form have received relatively little attention in English-language scholarship, which has tended to view the medium through historical, sociological, aesthetic (literary), and thematic lenses. Notable exceptions to these dominant approaches include Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) and Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) (Foreword).

Recognizing the importance of Eisner and McCloud and their prominent roles in the United States’ comics studies, Beaty and Nguyen situate the reader in relation to two different traditions: the Anglo-American, represented by the above mentioned researchers, and a Belgian perspective, represented by Groensteen, who sees comics as part of a Francophone tradition. The differences between Francophone/European tradition and US tradition are highlighted in the book, as Groensteen discusses using the French and the US contexts, situating both traditions for the readers in his approach.

Groensteen argues that “comics will be considered here as a language, that is to say, not as a historical, sociological, or economic phenomena, which it is also, but as an original ensemble of productive mechanisms of meaning” (2). His aim is on how comics should be addressed by comics studies. At the same time, the scholar argues against the notion that comics is a junction of image and written language, as in

the following excerpt: “against this conception, I intend to demonstrate the primacy of the image and, therefore, the necessity to accord a theoretical precedence to that which, provisionally, I designate under the generic term of ‘visual codes’” (3). In other words, Groensteen sees comics as an aesthetic language devoid of sociocultural meaning, a theoretical position which I do not subscribe to.

McCloud and Eisner are in favor of that combination of images and written text, with Eisner arguing that one should learn how to read comics, as it “presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretative skills” (Eisner 8)<sup>9</sup>. More than just an overlay of images and words that need to be decoded, as the reader needs to understand the order or the frames for instance. The conception is purported by McCloud and, in this regard, Groensteen argues that

at the end of the day, what makes comics a language that cannot be confused with any other is, on the one hand, the *simultaneous* mobilization of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitute it, and, at the same time, the fact that none of these codes probably belongs purely to it, consequently specifying themselves when they apply to particular “subjects of expression,” which is the drawing. (7).

The researcher points out the presence of two languages within comics but sees the image as dominant over the verbal discourses in the narrative. In addition to that, Groensteen states that

if I plead for the recognition of the image as preeminent in status, it is not for the reason that, except on rare occasions, in comics it occupies a more important space than that which is reserved for writing. Its predominance within the system attaches to what is essential to the production of the meaning that is made through it. (8).

Therefore, for the scholar, meaning is created more due to the images of the narrative, a perspective that guides my analysis of the corpus, despite my disagreement with Groensteen, seeing comics almost as an ahistorical language.

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<sup>9</sup> “Sobreposição de palavra e imagem, e, assim, é preciso que o leitor exerça as suas habilidades interpretativas visuais e verbais.”

As two graphic novels compose the corpus, it is necessary to develop a more detailed conceptualization of what is a graphic novel. In *The Graphic Novel: an Introduction* (2014), comics researchers Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey argue that *The Dark Knight Returns*, alongside *Watchmen* (by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons), are among the “major works that first introduced the notion of the graphic novel” (8), although, as reminded by Baetens and Frey, they were first published as comic books. This affirmation suggests that the boundaries between comic book and graphic novel are not that straightforward. Nonetheless, besides the importance of those aforementioned comics for graphic novels production, they were not the pioneers in graphic novels, as Will Eisner is pointed by Baetens and Frey as “one of the founding fathers of the graphic novel” (9). In terms of definition, Baetens and Frey present the graphic novel as a medium, distinguished from other comics in four aspects: “(1) form, (2) content, (3) publication format, and, directly related with this, (4) production and distribution aspects” (8).

Baetens and Frey argues that in terms of graphic novels’ form, “the narrator is much more present, both verbally and visually, than in the case of a comic book, where the story seems to tell itself, without any direct intervention from the narrator” (10). In relation to content, the graphic novel “is ‘adult’, not in the sense of pornographic, but in the sense of ‘serious’ and too sophisticated – or simply uninteresting – for juvenile audience, as well as graphic violence on show in some notable examples” (11). At the same time, there is an autobiographical aspect in graphic novels. In terms of format, the graphic novel is published in a “book format, while it tends to avoid serialization” (13), in “a format that resembles that of the traditional novel” (14). As for the last aspect, production and distribution, the authors present that the “graphic novels depended essentially, first, on the efforts of small independent publishers” (17), although things have changed throughout the years, as even big publishers launch graphic novels, such as DC through the Vertigo stamp. Regarding production, Baetens and Frey say that “it would be naive to think that all graphic novels are examples of the auteur ideology. In quite a few graphic novels, even those made singlehandedly by fiercely independent creators, there are many traces and aspects of popular mass culture and the culture industry” (18).

Adding a complementary perspective, Scott McCloud, in the book *Understanding Comics* (1993) brings a useful perspective to this thesis. In *Sequential Art* (1985), Will Eisner proposes the term “sequential art”, which comprehends comic strips, comic books, graphic novels and

all sorts of expressions made using frames, with images and texts in a sequential order. Stemming from Eisner's definition of sequential art, Scott McCloud explains in an imaginary conversation with an audience that the term sequential art generalizes much, for example, a movie would be sequential art as well. According to McCloud, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9), would be more adequate, but he uses comics as short, as in the title of his book, *Understanding Comics* (1994). Comics is a short version mostly used by researchers in the field for every production in a sequence of images mixing images and other signs, usually letters to form words, in an order selected by the creator to transmit a message to the reader.

Besides rethinking Eisner's concept of sequential art, McCloud also states that comics creators do not aim for realism when they draw, create or conceive a character, as opposed to a realistic artist targeting maximum similarity with the representation, as in a photograph. McCloud argues that humans have a tendency to recognize themselves in everything, including inanimate objects. He claims that the more cartoonish a character is, the more we identify ourselves with it (41). In this light, it can be observed that all characters are a little cartoonish (and the less cartoonish, the less we identify ourselves with them) to create identification, but the environment and the background are drawn in a more realistic manner, as walls, building, and other props. They are more detailed because they do not need to be relatable (42). Batman is a character who has no eyeballs, a cartoonish square jaw, and, as the image is not the only characteristic to which could generate identification, readers are attracted to identify with actions and feelings as well. Batman makes readers identify with him by the fact he fights criminals in the city, crimes seen as a problem for city dwellers. At the same time, it is difficult to identify ourselves with a rich man who fights crime. “The hero that could be you” was the ad made by Stan Lee when he created Spider-Man in 1962. Peter Parker is one of the most identifiable characters due to his origins, a low middle-class teenager who accidentally gets bitten by a radioactive spider and gains powers from it. Spider-man has family and relationship problems, also struggling in his job and with financial problems. Batman, on the contrary, was born rich, and he does not have many personal issues aside from his parents' death<sup>10</sup>. Spider-man was

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<sup>10</sup> His origins are not by chance as other superheroes such as Spider-Man or Hulk, as Batman worked out to become muscular and trained several martial arts for years in order to become a superhero. It is the realization of the self made “superhero” man.

created to be empathetic to young readers, while Batman is still a relatable character due to his mission and righteous posture; nonetheless, Spider-man/Peter Parker was easier to identify with, due to his mundane life problems, such as romantic relationships and having to work for living.

I discussed here why comics is an adequate term to refer to the media, the distinctiveness of graphic novels from other comics, for example, their authorial aspects, and presented the theoretical approach that guides my analysis of comics, in which I create a syncretic theory, composed of Groensteen perspective of privileging visual elements of the narrative and McCloud's idea of comics creating bonds with readers by means of narrative elements.

#### **1.4 Batman: the building of a character.**

The idea of this section is to present the origins of Batman. Writers Bob Kane and Bill Finger created the character in 1939, at the time when National Comics Publications (that would later become DC Comics) was looking for new superheroes, to match their success with Superman. Bob Kane received the demand and then, after sketching one initial character, asked for Bill Finger's help, who was at the time a writer and occasional collaborator employed by Kane since 1938. Instead of a partnership, the relation between Kane and Finger was an employee/employer one, i.e. Kane hired Finger as writer for his projects at the National Comics Publications in 1938 (Kane 41).

The first version of Batman, in Kane's words, "had a domino mask, like the one Robin would later wore, [...] wore a red union suit; the wings, trunks, and mask were black" (Kane 41) (Figure 1). It was Finger's suggestion to use a full mask, without the eyeballs to make the character more mysterious, as well as replacing the red outfit for a darker gray, turning the original rigid wings into a cape; Finger also added gloves "so that he wouldn't leave fingerprints."(41) Although Kane recognized, for the first time, in his 1989 autobiography, Finger's contributions to the creation of Batman, for many years he silenced or denied Finger's role as co-author.

Bill Finger died in 1974 and he was publicly acclaimed as one of Batman's writers, but he never received any money for his part in the creation of one of the most iconic and profitable comic books character of all time. Even after Kane recognized Finger's role in the creation of the character, it took DC Comics until 2014 to include Bill Finger's name in



the cover of a comic book and only after 2015 Bill Finger's name would be included in movies and TV shows about the Batman universe.<sup>11</sup>

To illustrate and better understand how Finger influenced the creation of Batman, I suggest a glance at Kane's version before Finger's contribution, see below a fan made image representing Kane's sketch:



Figure 1 - Fan made representation of Bob Kane's draft of Batman<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> DC aceita reconhecer Bill Finger como criador do Batman | Notícias | Omelete. Available in: [omelete.com.br/quadrinhos/noticia/dc-aceita-reconhecer-bill-finger-como-criador-do-batman/](http://omelete.com.br/quadrinhos/noticia/dc-aceita-reconhecer-bill-finger-como-criador-do-batman/) Accessed in 7 June 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "The Greatest Batman Graphic Novels" *IGN*, Ziff Davies, [www.ign.com/articles/the-25-greatest-batman-graphic-novels?page=3](http://www.ign.com/articles/the-25-greatest-batman-graphic-novels?page=3) Accessed 15 November 2018.

Besides the belt and the name (Bat-man changed into Batman), the character was completely recreated and transformed into the iconic superhero that readers recognize nowadays. The full mask created a more shadowy character, covering all his face but the mouth, but the fact that the color of Bruce Wayne/Batman's hair changed is worth the attention. Chelsea Anderson points out that "a person's hair color can cause viewers to assume specific characteristics about that person". (5) Characters with dark hair carry some stereotyped characteristics associated with being "smart and competent" (Anderson 20), traces that fit Batman, a superhero with no powers, who is known as one of the cleverest characters in DC universe.

The character is a traumatized rich man who has vowed to fight crime in his hometown, trying to make up for his parents deaths by the hands of a petty criminal during a robbery. He was a character that mixed the superhero and the detective genres, most of his role in the stories is to track down enemies and reveal their plans. As a character who works on the margins of the law, and as the character's core features was still being shaped, Batman employed firearms during his first five appearances in the *Detective Comics*, and, for a longer period, he used to kill enemies.

For Will Brooker, the origins of Batman are in the cinema, "[l]ike most elements of the Batman 'mythos', the character's name was [...] derivative of previous sources", more particularly cinema: "a silent movie called *The Bat* (1926) and its remake *The Bat Whispers* of 1931" (43). Those movies featured the figure of a robber who dresses like a bat, with a black cape and mask, including pointed ears (Figure 2). Other derivative elements from the 1926 movie is the idea to using bat-shaped gadgets; for example, Batman's batarang (a bat shaped boomerang), is similar to the bat shaped card shown in the movie (Figure 3).

In the film, *The Bat* directed by Roland West, there can be seen some tropes of the Gothic genre, such as the monster, in that case a human criminal expressing his inner, evil nature dressed up as a horrible creature; the haunted house and, the fear of not knowing who the robber is and that anyone in the house might be him. In this sense, it is possible to associate Batman's origins to the Gothic, since the references for his creation are a mix between horror and detective genre. In *The Literature of Terror* (1996), David Punter states that "[i]n one sense at least the horror film is very similar to eighteenth-century Gothic fiction" (97), with both being popular genres portraying a "psychological sophistication" in relation to horror. Even though he was referring to 1930s and 1960s movies, a 1920s

movie may also be inspired by eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well.



Figure 2 - *The Bat's* (1926) main character.

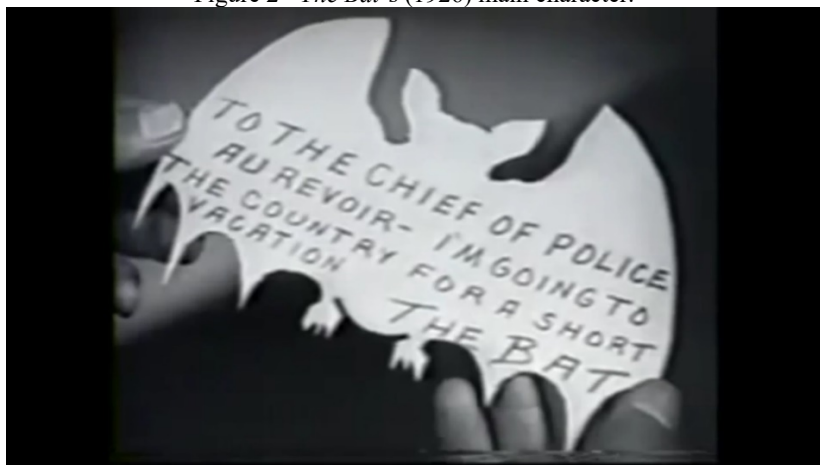


Figure 3 - *The Bat* (1926) – (bat)note.

After the presentation the Batman's main characteristics and origins, the controversy involving Kane and Finger's over authorship and the probable inspiration for the Dark Knight, it is time to introduce the

issue of authoritarianism and superhero, a question that helps the marking a position about Batman's social role.

### 1.5 “Leblon’s Batman” or the problem with the superhero

In a 1999 interview<sup>13</sup>, far-right politician and ex-military Brazilian congressman, Jair Bolsonaro<sup>14</sup>, based on his own code of morality, told the interviewer that “through the vote you will change nothing in this country. You will only change it, unfortunately, when we go for a civil war here, and doing the work that the military regime has not done. Killing thirty thousand people, starting with FHC”<sup>15</sup>. For him, in his concept of morality, the country was facing a situation in which people would have to take arms against Brazilian enemies, which included the then president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, elected to a second term in the previous year.

In 2013, the first demonstrations against the Brazilian government arose, initially organized by the Free Pass Movement (Movimento Passe Livre), rallying the streets about the price of bus fares, it would later become a right-wing oriented set of demonstrations against the vague term “corruption”. During that second stage of the movement, appeared a Brazilian version of Batman, a right-wing businessman who embodied his vision of the character, following his own set of morality, just as the congressman mentioned in the previous paragraph. Both figures marched side-by-side during the protests (Figure 4), with Brazilian Batman (Batman do Leblon<sup>16</sup>) being candidate for the city council by the congressman party in 2016, representing the far-right ideology that has taken the country by assault in the last five years. On another level, this Batman do Leblon case is also exemplary of the postmodern Gothic blurring between fiction and reality that Maria Beville proposes (15).

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<sup>13</sup> “Jair Bolsonaro Defendendo Guerra Civil, Fim do Voto e Fechamento do Congresso.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Thays Lira 19 April 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu6-ZZ1dTzk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu6-ZZ1dTzk).

<sup>14</sup> Since January 1st 2019 Bolsonaro is the presidente of Brazil.

<sup>15</sup> “através do voto você não vai mudar nada nesse país. Nada. Você só vai mudar, infelizmente, quando nós partirmos para uma guerra civil aqui dentro. E fazendo um trabalho que o regime militar não fez. Matando 30 mil, começando pelo FHC”.

<sup>16</sup> Leblon is an upper-class neighborhood in the south area of Rio de Janeiro.



Figure 4 - Jair Bolsonaro and Batman do Leblon.

However, for Chris Yogerst, the superhero genre cannot be associated with far-right ideology due to the fact that superheroes do not create a fascist national complex, instead, they are popular characters because they create and revolve around inspirational moral virtue. They are bearers of “courage, humility, righteous indignation, sacrifice and responsibility, and perseverance associated with an accepted moral compass” (27), adjectives that designated heroes as special characters. A superpower alone does not equate to heroism, as evidenced by supervillains across the genre (Yogerst 27). For the researcher, it would be impossible for a genre that explores traits considered positive such as courage, sacrifice and responsibility, to represent a negative morality. However, there is more to this rather straightforward interpretation than meets the eye.

Historian of Italian fascism Chiara Ferrari presents excerpts of Benito Mussolini’s speeches during the fascist period of Italy, in which Mussolini gave the following statements:

“la Patria si serve soprattutto in silenzio, in umiltà e in disciplina, senza grandi fra si ma col lavoro assiduo e quotidiano” (One serves one’s country above all in silence, in humility and discipline, not with grand phrasemaking, but with assiduous, daily work) (100).

“il patriottismo non è che un sentimento. Diventa una virtù solo mediante il sacrificio. Questa virtù aumenta secondo la natura del sacrificio” (patriotism is no more than a feeling. Sacrifice makes it a virtue. The virtue is greater in proportion to the magnitude of the sacrifice) (101).

In those selections made by Ferrari, humility, sacrifice and virtue are elements that constitute a particular idea of morality, and are adjectives also present in Yogerst’s superheroes characteristics. If for Yogerst those characteristics proved that superheroes could not be fascist, at the same time the same adjectives are present in Mussolini’s idea of a fascist supporter. Although fascism of the 1920s to 1940s (whose Italian fascism was part, as seen in Mussolini’s quote) was strongly related to an idea of “manipulative nationalist formal procedures”<sup>17</sup> (Konder 53), Leandro Konder asserts that fascism changed their *modus operandis* after WW II. In *Introdução ao fascismo* (2009), Konder points out that fascism cannot be reduced to dictatorship, authoritarianism, nor with nationalism (27), but it is “a chauvinist movement, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-socialist, anti-working class”<sup>18</sup>. Batman’s acts, especially in Miller’s version, makes fun of left-wing characters; his actions are anti-democratic in relation to the critics, namely the press, depicted as dumb and manipulative and, to critics of Batman’s outlaw vigilantism. Moreover, Batman proves to be anti-liberal regarding critics towards Ronald Reagan, by than US President and a supporter of economic liberalism.

In “Frank Miller’s New Batman and the Grotesque” (2008), Geoff Klock asserts that “Miller’s Batman is an unapologetic fascist: in the process of an interrogation, he threatened a man he had already left in a neck brace and crutches and mocked him when he claimed, “I got rights” (45)” (38). For Klock, Miller is, along with Alan Moore, the most important comics creator from the past twenty five years (35), and for applying his talent, Miller raises a dilemma to Batman critics in *The Dark Knight Returns*. Klock concludes: “we must accept Miller’s Batman as he is, or reject him as he is - knowing that if we reject him, we reject the whole genre” (36).

Yogerst is not only a researcher of comics, as he has a passion for the media and the genre, presenting at the Comic Con about Batman

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<sup>17</sup> “procedimentos nacionalistas-formais de tipo manipulatório”.

<sup>18</sup> “O fascismo é um movimento chauvinista, antiliberal, antidemocrático, antissocialista, antioperário”.

and keeping a blog about comics, but he has the misconception that only positive messages can be spread through the media.

Chris Gavaler sees a fundamental contradiction of the superhero genre, stating that “viewed in their original context, comic book superheroes express the paradox that democratic utopianism can be defended only through anti-democratic means” (70). Only by acting in a vigilantism, one-man-army condition, it would be possible to defend society from the evil within and the threats from ones overseas.

At the time when Batman was created, the major urban areas in the United States had increased in population. At the same time, with economic crises from the late 1920s and the 1930s, crime rates increased, specially mob-related crimes in urban areas such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia<sup>19</sup>. In that context, Batman emerges as a fictional response to a historical reality, addressing the question head on and proposing a solution to criminality, so much so that his first enemies are not supervillains, but mobsters and petty criminals. Cary Adkinson argues that:

Superheroes are simultaneously extra-legal vigilantes and symbols of the dominant cultural ethos. The social problems created by the dominant cultural ethos are incapable of being resolved by the hegemony’s own agents and institutions of social control. Only the superhero whose vigilantism is counter-hegemonic by definition, has the power to uphold and protect the dominant class’s interests when its own institutions fail to do so. (249).

Following Adkinson’s idea, Batman can be interpreted as a character from the establishment, a rich industrial white man with an English surname, dressed up as a giant bat to combat the problems created by the capitalist system, which paradoxically encompasses Bruce Wayne and all of city powers. From this initial characterization, many other Batmen were made by numerous creators throughout the last seventy nine years.

Adkinson develops the idea that the superhero genre is based on a dubious relation: even though it represents the dominant class aspirations, particularly the defense of private property, the legitimization

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<sup>19</sup> “Crime 1920 – 1940 – Dictionary Definition of Crime 1920-1940” *Encyclopedia.com: FREE*, Encyclopedia.com, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-and-education-magazines/crime-1920-1940>. Accessed 8 June 2018.

of political and judicial powers, and police enforcement<sup>20</sup>, it does so by creating a figure who is marginal to that system, going beyond the reach of those powers to fight criminality as an outlaw who prevents, deters, stops, judges and punishes criminals, sometimes by killing perpetrators. The character represents a hegemonic defense of the *status quo*, and, at the same time, he is counter-hegemonic in its defiance of the laws and institutions, which are part of the hegemonic powers.

Adkinson attributes to the justice and police enforcement system a defining characteristic: “to combat potential abuse, the U.S. criminal justice system has been founded on the presupposition of ‘innocent until proved guilty’” (250). Moreover, the judicial system is based on the idea that it is a better situation to let criminals go unpunished in order to not condemn innocents. In this sense, Adkinson argues that:

The problems with this approach, however, arise from the limitations it places on ferreting out criminal activity, apprehending offenders, and applying proper measures of punishment and rehabilitation. In short, crime control proponents argue that overindulgence on the due process model ensures that many crimes will go unpunished as law enforcement and court officials often have their hands tied by “rules and regulations” guiding “proper” conduct. (250).

In the light of this, vigilantism arises as a response to the feeling of frustration, in a context of increasing criminality and the fear and anger generated by criminality. Therefore, the creation of a character such as Batman makes sense in a context like the US society; given that “the American system of criminal justice has also been historically associated with vigilantism because of the failure of these principles to completely eradicate the crime problem” (250).

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<sup>20</sup> Police enforcement is necessary to fulfill Batman’s objective of combating crime and, at the same time, preserving class privileges and the structure that enables him and others like him to retain socioeconomic status, just as every right-wing ideology (Konder 27). One example of police enforcement bond with Batman is the relationship between Batman and Commissioner Gordon supporting one another. In *The Killing Joke* and in *The Dark Knight Returns* Gordon has a supporting role, being the victim/hostage, as well as Batman’s conscience, telling Batman to obey the law (even though it is not possible to be sure if he did) in the first one. In the second comics, Gordon is a friend, backing Batman and breaking the rules to give the hero what he wants. Its only when Gordon ceases to be Police Commissioner that the police enforcement is seen as bad or inept.



## 1.6 Batman *Pobre*: an Adjectival Subject

The superhero is in most cases a paradoxical and contradictory subject, for instance, assuming antidemocratic attitudes in order to defend democracy or committing outlaw activities in order to defend the law. Batman is one superhero whose focus is the protection of private property and he has his image associated with right-wing subjects and causes, such as the Leblon's Batman.

If the association of Batman with right-wing movements is a possibility, the use of the character by other political spectrum and their movements are legit as well. In the same year of 2013 that Leblon's Batman was supporting right-wing politics and their agenda, two different Batman incarnations arise in Rio de Janeiro: one of them assuming the name Batman *pobre* (poor Batman) and the other one was a poor right-wing Batman.

While Leblon's Batman had an adjective attributed to him by the media, referencing the upper class neighborhood in which he arose and lived in, poor Batman was self-assigned with the adjective "poor" to show that they do not share the same upper class environment of Batman and his Rio de Janeiro's counterpart. If Batman is a rich man, poor Batman would be his antithesis.

The poor right wing Batman follows a similar performance to his rich Rio de Janeiro's double, diverging in two aspects: while one uses an expensive Batsuit and lives in an upper class neighborhood (Leblon), the other one uses a Batsuit similar to the ones found in costume parties and lives in a middle and low-middle class neighborhood (Marechal Hermes).

A different depiction exists in Carlos D, creator of the poor Batman. He is an artist that imagined how Batman's life would be if he were poor. This depiction is of a shirtless man, dressing up with a trash bag as mask and cape, with the Batman sigil painted in his bare chest. The character appears in street performances and in photoshoots. While in his performances and his Facebook profile he presents a political engagement aligned with anti-racism, anti-discrimination and defense of periphery dwellers, his photoshoots depict what would be Bruce Wayne/Batman's life if he were a poor person.



Figure 5 - Poor Batman<sup>21</sup>.

Poor Batman is depicted sometimes like a homeless Batman, but always in peripheral environments such as city streets, decayed bars, interacting with low class workers and residents, sleeping in sidewalks, besides sugarcane liquor, and eating packed lunch (traditionally rice and beans wrapped in aluminium foil) with an appearance that does not look appetizing (figure 5). Carlos D impersonation is not Batman, like his poor right-wing counterpart, he need to have an adjective, as his performance of Batman resignifies the character: he is not only poor, but do not defend private property, aligned with subjects from the periphery, not with upper classes demands, and violence for him is not just a question of inefficacy of the state, but an issue of race and class, as his Facebook posts depict. Poor Batman is a facet of the hero that is only possible, in Carlos D envisage, if he was disposed of money and influence, developing a new class perspective.

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<sup>21</sup> “Batman Pobre do Rio City – M.A.f.I.A” *MAfIA - Movimiento Argentino de Fotografos Independientes Autoconvocados*, <https://somosmafia.com/wp/portfolio/costumbres/batman-pobre-do-rio-city/> Accessed 10 March 2019.

## 1.7 Gotham's Gargoyle

Ingrid Lunnan Nødseth, in “Reframing the Margins: Marginalised Sculpture on Gothic Cathedrals” (2013), assembles ideas from art and architecture scholars about Gargoyles and discusses the importance of the statues and the meanings given to them. Nødseth points out that gargoyles had a structural use, that varied from waterspouts to support for “pilasters, roofs, windows or larger sculptures” (12). Besides that first function, Nødseth says, based in Ernst Gombrich, that gargoyles had a secondary duty, which was to protect the building from evil spirits (6). Gargoyles then protected the physical structure by supporting it and preventing water infiltration, at the same time that protected the structure and its inhabitants by preventing malevolent entities to do them harm.

Batman is like a Gargoyle in Gotham's skyline, occupying the top of buildings at night in order to protect the city and its inhabitants, as well as its institutions from evil entities, from supervillains to common criminals. Batman is a creature made to protect Gotham, represented by the character's image on top of buildings, sometimes mingled with stone gargoyles, as in saying they are the same, just as in figure 6. In this panel from *The Dark Knight Returns*, all buildings on sight have gargoyles of their own, as five gargoyles are depicted in the scene in two or three different buildings. Nonetheless they are ineffective in avoiding crimes and protecting city dwellers, as they are made of stone. Just a gargoyle made of flesh and bones could safeguard the city, and that is what Batman does, based in his own set of moral code.



Figure 6 - Miller, Frank. *The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics, 1986. p 48.

## 2. GOTHAM AND THE GOTHIC CITY

In this chapter I am going to discuss: a) the process that led to the development of the modern city and, focusing specifically on New York, how the 1930s crisis created the scenario for the appearance of Batman and how the representations of Gotham city are marked by the decadence of the big city both in the 1930s and then in the 1980s; b) how the worsening of life conditions and the process of city decay is mingled with a Gothic representation of the city, comparing conditions in London and in New York.

When Batman was created in the year of 1939, the titular character inhabited New York City, later on the name was changed to a fictional location called Gotham City. As previously discussed, 1930s decade is a period of the major economic changes and social crisis in the United States, whose effects would be felt until the recovering of the economy with US's entrance in World War II and the decades after it. During the 1930s, the unemployment rates, poverty and homelessness were among the problems city dwellers-endured.

### 2.1 New "Gotham" York

Batman is the hero of Gotham city, even though in his first stories he was a vigilante in another city, New York. The representation of Gotham kept the same atmosphere and characteristics of Batman's previous home city, only changing its name to be set in a fictional location. In order to understand why New York was selected to be the place background for Batman stories, it is necessary to understand what the city's general situation and the living conditions in the 1930s, United States, when the Dark Knight was created.

A brief explanation about the development of the modern city is necessary. According to Henri Lefebvre, urbanization is a consequence of industrialization, as medieval cities were mainly formed by merchants who settled, gaining money over the surplus product of the fiefdoms and by the usury, leading to a capital accumulation in the cities (in Marx vision, less influential to capitalism than the accumulation made in the rural areas<sup>22</sup>) in the hands of the merchants and bankers (10-12). For Lefebvre, there were disputes for the power in the cities, between the

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<sup>22</sup> For more information see Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Penguin Books, 1990. ———. *Book One: A Critique of Political Economy*.

“*popolo grasso*” (great merchants and bankers) and the “*minute popolo*” (lower classes), to which the first group “feel always in danger. They justify their privilege towards the community spending sumptuously their fortunes: building, foundations, palaces, embellishment, parties”<sup>23</sup> (13).

The excerpt selected from Lefebvre depicts a situation in which city dwellers of dominant classes, in the context of a pre-industrial city, would have to spend their profit in the benefit of others, in order to keep their position of power. One example of this situation is the Medici family in Firenze (Florence) who spent large sums of money building infrastructure and buildings to become one of the most powerful families in Europe, commanding Firenze for decades; they indicated three popes from their own family and started a dynasty of bankers. By transferring some of their money into the city structure, the Medicis were showing other inhabitants that they love and belong to the city, in this sense, the ruling classes created an ethos among the inhabitants of the city. However, after the industrialization, the way of life (and therefore the rules of living) would change for power holders such as the Medicis; alongside the shape, size and composition of the city.

With the arise of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, major changes in the modes of production caused the centralization of production in factories, in which machinery was installed, forcing workers to commute every day to the factory. That change would also obligate workers to live near their city jobs, moving from the rural areas to urban sites. This movement made the “urban concentration became gigantic; the population pile up reaching disturbing densities”<sup>24</sup> (Lefebvre 18).

In *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974), Perry Anderson affirms that industry owners had become the new ruling class of the late eighteenth century (197), with a mass of peasants turning into labor workers in factories, and alas as a reserve army of unemployed people populating the city. In order to protect their privileges, instead of investing in the city, the new power holders expelled “from the urban center and even from the city the proletariat, destroying the ‘urbanity’<sup>25</sup>”<sup>26</sup> (Lefebvre 22).

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<sup>23</sup> “sentem-se eles sempre ameaçados. Justificam seu privilégio diante da comunidade gastando suntuosamente suas fortunas: edifícios, fundações, palácios, embelezamentos, festas.”

<sup>24</sup> “As concentrações urbanas tornam-se gigantescas; as populações se amontoam atingindo densidades inquietantes”

<sup>25</sup> For Lefebvre, “urbanity” is a synonym of “urban society”, in the sense of a democratic city, shared and planned for all its dwellers.

<sup>26</sup> “Do centro urbano e da própria cidade o proletariado, destruindo a ‘urbanidade’”

The most famous “reform” made to expel the unwanted from urban centers is the one made by Baron Haussmann as mayor of Paris between 1853 and 1870. Based on an eugenic project, Haussmann destroyed old buildings and narrow and tortuous alleys in order to build new edifices and large straight avenues, pushing the worker class to the boundaries of the city, expelling them from the urbanity. Haussmann was not the only one to implement similar project, as in England comparable proposals were executed, all of them with social hygienist purposes of pushing to the suburbs the lower classes inhabitants that have established themselves in those cities due to the factory implementation stage of Industrial Revolution.

In the United States, the situation of eugenic city planning was not the same as in other Western countries. Christopher Tunnard says that, despite the debate among architects and urbanists in the late nineteenth century, “it was only in the first decade of the twentieth century that cities began to accept it [urban planning] as responsibility of local administration”<sup>27</sup> (89). According to Tunnard, the delay in city planning in the United States was due to an unwillingness of US citizens to accept the interference of government, which in their point of view would constrain the free initiative.

This distrust in city planning was solved by adopting the same solution Haussmann had adopted in Paris, remodeling the urban center. Following that project, “urban zoning quickly became a popular method to eliminate the unwanted and raise the land value” (Tunnard 91). One of the first cities to receive this treatment in the US was New York, with the first zoning project in Harlem in 1916 (when it was still a white middle class neighborhood), setting the mark to be applied in the country. At the same time the first skyscrapers were built in New York, as the Metropolitan Life Insurance building (1906), Woolworth building (1913) and the Empire State building (1931). While the city grew horizontally and vertically, a storm awaited, as in 1929 a crisis of gigantic proportions stroke the United States (and in different degrees, all countries felt its effect). The Empire State, whose construction began in 1930, became firstly a symbol of the decay of the decades of the growing city, as it “remained for ten years as a memory of another era, desperately searching for tenants”<sup>28</sup> (Tunnard 107).

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<sup>27</sup> “foi apenas na primeira década do século vinte que as cidades começaram a aceita-lo como encargo do governo local”.

<sup>28</sup> “permaneceu por dez anos como lembrança de uma outra era, desesperadamente em busca de inquilinos”.

The city felt the effects of the crisis more than the rural areas, as Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal plan to save economy helped first rural areas (107). Sarah T. Phillips points out that one of Roosevelt's focuses was in giving rural dwellers/workers better conditions to survive in their jobs without abandoning countryside. The purpose of the New Deal was forged a decade before, when the government was thinking about the precarity of rural areas in US. As Phillips points out:

They believed that regional planning for land and water resources would alleviate poverty, modernize farm areas, and restore viability of rural living. These observations, labeled "The New Conservation" by one observer in 1925, broadened the resource and set the policy agenda for the "New Deal" (23).

The rural area problems were not only caused by the crisis, as the Calvin Coolidge administration had already made studies on the cause for massive rural exodus into cities before 1929. During Roosevelt administration and the New Deal the rural areas were helped with investments to save the production, the way of living of countryside dwellers and to keep their inhabitants from moving to urban areas, as the overgrowing cities had become a problem, one that was increased by the crisis of 1930s.

The movement from rural areas to urban ones caused issues, according to Riccardo Mariani, points about the situation of peasants in modern cities:

Far from those places [rural areas] and among millions of other neo-urban subjects, any imposed rule is repelled, besides the fact that there was no one concerned about teaching than new rules. [...] In this dimension, phenomena as rape, incest, prostitution, infanticide, theft and outrage take on another meaning, very diverse from the one well-thinkers observers attribute to them in that time, even without a doubt the necessity, that is, for the misery, despair and the fact that no one considered all of this abnormal nor extraordinary, given that, in essence, it was repeated in the city what have being occurring in the countryside<sup>29</sup> (14-15).

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<sup>29</sup> "Longe daqueles lugares [do campo] e em meio a milhares de outros neo-urbanos, qualquer regra imposta é repelida, além do fato de não existir ninguém que se preocupe em ensinar-lhes novas regras. [...] Nesta dimensão, fenômenos como o estupro, incesto, prostituição, infanticídio, furto e atentado assumem outro significa, bem diferente daquele que lhes atribuem os observadores e bem-pensantes da época, mesmo não existindo dúvidas quanto ao fato da



Besides the fact that Mariani mixes “rape” with other elements originated from the poverty and despair, his statement embodies the long study made by Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki and US sociologist William Thomas in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. In this study, Znaniecki investigated the situation of rural peasants in Poland, their way of life, familiar constitution, labor routine etc, while Thomas did the same in the United States, working with those peasants in the context of a US’s city during the late 1910s. Among their conclusions, the changing in their lives structure, from one environment to another, made them a displaced group. One of the issues was the violence, to which Polish men were much more susceptible to crimes and arresting, including familiar violence (95). One of the reasons is that every issue they had in Poland was discussed and mediated by the local priest, with a based in a religious moral, while in US the government and police enforcement, without any mediation, applied the law (6; 94). For them, the migratory movement is based in a process of social disorganization and reorganization. In order to the existence of migratory movement, the disorganization has to begin in the homeland, but it is than reinforced in the new country. If the reorganizational experience of groups and subjects is not satisfactorily made, it would lead to delinquency and the weakening of the ethnical community.

Thomas was a professor at Chicago University and *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* is the landmark of the so called School of Chicago in sociology (not to be mistaken with the economic School of Chicago), in studies of urban structure. Thomas and Znaniecki work have developed key concepts such as social disorganization, marginality ad acculturation as crucial to understanding migratory movements, rejecting the idea of biological differences between ethnic groups and focusing in the differences between social structures. They choose the Polish as focus of this research due to the importance of this group, as the Polish were among the most important group arriving in Ellis Island during the first two decades of the twentieth century. According to *Annual Reports of the Commissioner General of Immigration, 1892-1924*, Polish citizens represented 2,5 million people, oscillating between being the second and the third major group, only behind Italians and sometimes Jewish<sup>30</sup>. After the creation of the State of Poland in 1918 Polish migration reduces, but

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necessidade, ou seja, pela miséria, desemprego e, enfim, porque de fato ninguém considerava extraordinário, dado que, em essência, repetia-se na cidade aquilo que precedentemente ocorrera no campo”.

<sup>30</sup> It is likely that Polish Jews were among those described as Jewish in the records.

those millions of rural workers who have migrated in the previous decades still populated urban areas in the US.

In the subsequent years, the studies made by the School of Chicago would expand their use to other areas of humanities, such as history, and to urbanism, as Jane Jacobs approach to the city in the seminal work *Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961) that will be discussed further on.

Being them foreigners or US citizens, urban areas have grown with peasants, detaching them from their social environment. With the crisis of 1929 that extends during the entirety of the 1930s, cities were a mixture of poverty, despair, unemployment and social inequity. While rural areas were being helped by federal administration, the cities were also being assisted with federal investments. As Tunnard argues, “the metropolitan centers, in 1933, found themselves alongside semi executed projects and massive unemployment”<sup>31</sup> (108). Even with federal investments in housing for the poor and investing in infrastructure for the city, New York and other big cities were only saved during the growth of the economy during World War II, and especially in the twenty years after it, from 1946 to 1966, with a “largely tranquil growth” (32) according to Hyman Minsky.

The city in which Batman is created is the decadent New York, trying to be saved by federal investment, populated by a massive army of unemployed and homeless people. It is not a coincidence that Bob Kane choses New York as home for the Batman, as it was the biggest US city with seven 7.454.995 inhabitants<sup>32</sup> in 1940, during economic and social crisis. The hero arises as an entity to control and combat the symptoms of that crisis, although its causes would not be addressed.

In this section I argued about the origins of the modern city and the constitution of its population, mainly deriving from poor rural areas contexts. Besides the formation of the modern city, I presented the nineteenth-century urban reforms in Europe in order to expel poor people from town center and, how in US cities this process of urban intervention promoted by the State took place only in the twentieth century. In order to discuss the process of rural inhabitant’s exodus into the city and migratory arrival in US great cities, I used Polish as representative of both groups due to the existence of Thomas and Znaniecki research and the dual situation of Polish migrants, as they were migrants from a rural

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<sup>31</sup> “Os centros metropolitanos, em 1933, encontravam-se a braços com projetos semi-executados e desemprego maciço.”

<sup>32</sup> Biggest 1,000 US Cities by Population in 1940 - <https://www.biggestuscities.com/1940>

environment arriving in the city. Because of this dual situation, the problems Polish people faced represented the issues of group disorganization and displacement endured by new urban dwellers, alongside the situation of a bankrupt city environment in the 1930s crisis, mentioning State projects in order to assist the cities.

### 2.1.1 The arrival of Batman

Regarding the relation of “Gothic and decadence”, David Punter and Glennis Byron points out that the Gothic narratives are linked to times of crisis, re-emerging to communicate sociocultural matters. Three examples they bring are on how *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula*, highlighting how they were written in a “time marked by growing fears about national, social and psychic decay”, “being linked primarily by a focus on the idea of degeneration” (39). However, in these Victorian-era narratives, even though the main background was the big city of London, none of them deal with city problems in a straightforward manner (such as Dickens’ novels, for example), focusing instead on nobility and middle classes characters, as Punter and Byron adds:

In the new fictional Gothic landscapes of the city, however, it is not primarily the criminal underworld or the poor that are implicated as a source of horror. The focus is usually far more on the middle classes, and on exposing what underlies the surfaces of the supposedly civilized and respectable world (40).

It is possible to see the character of Bruce Wayne and those of the Victorian era characters, such as Dr. Jekyll in Stevenson’s novel, who, turned into his alter ego Mr Hyde, to roam freely to the city at night, doing things that his more respectable persona could not do. Andreas Reichstein, in his article “Batman – an American Mr Hyde”, makes a comparison between Kane and Finger’s Bruce/Batman and Stevenson’s Jekyll/Hyde, to which we can see a reminiscence of Victorian Gothic classics.

Reichstein also traces comparisons between Gotham and Manhattan, not demonstrating awareness that, at the outset, they used to be the same city. William Uricchio does the same in his article “The Batman’s Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance”. Uricchio points out that “Gotham is explicitly modeled on the ‘dark and brooding’

aspects of New York City’s architecture and atmosphere” (121). Moreover, Uricchio argues that the aforementioned depiction of the city is not the background for a showdown between Batman and the supervillains but, an arena to combat “regular” criminals (120).

Changing the name New York to Gotham kept the atmosphere of the previous name, and as Uricchio says, sometimes it is just a generic city working as background for the action, while other times it is an important element of the story. In *Batman* no.4 published in 1940, with no indication of date in the edition, only labeled “winter issue”, the following frame is the first of the third story in the volume, occupying two thirds of the page (Figure 7).



Figure 7 - Kane, Bob and Bill Finger. *Batman* 4. 1940. p 27.

The newspaper gives a clear indication that the story takes place in New York, as written in its front page. Another point that is relevant for the present discussion is the fact that in the yellow dialogue bubble, the narration brings the description that the Batman was “the nemesis” of the “men of evil”, and alongside Robin, Batman “had crashed the loathsome criminal vultures who sought to prey on society” (Kane and Finger 27). Batman’s mission was to stop the degenerated criminals, “petty criminals” in Uricchio’s words. Even though Batman fights those “petty criminals” for their partake in city violence, these were only symptoms of a big economic crisis, in that period 14.45% of the labor

force in United States was unemployed, taking in consideration that only 56 million subjects were considered economically active population, while the total US population was 101 million people and millions depended on others to survive<sup>33</sup>. Necessity lead to increasing crime rates and taking in consideration Tunnard and Phillips, when they say that the crisis control was first applied in the countryside areas (107, 40), such crimes as theft and robbery can explain the creation of a character like Batman. The first unemployment insurance law was established in the State of New York, it stated that

The New York State Unemployment Insurance Law was enacted on April 25, 1935 and its constitutionality was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in November 1936. This law's declaration of public policy stated: "The public good and the well-being of the wage earners of the state require the enactment of this measure for the compulsory setting aside of financial reserves for the benefit of persons unemployed through no fault of their own" (New York State Department of Labor III-2).

That information suggests that the problem of unemployment was bigger in New York than in other places, as it was the first State to approve some help for workers. Despite being declared constitutional in 1936, the document says that it was first applied in 1938. By the time Batman was created, the problem was not yet solved, and recurring to Minsky, only during WW II that unemployment rates fell due to a development in the economic conditions.

## **2.2 The inescapable Gotham: Modern Labyrinth**

The modern city is a setting for exploring nineteenth-century Gothic themes, particularly in relation to population density and size, which creates social division, namely, situations of uneasiness and unfamiliarity for former dwellers and power holders, as new inhabitants arrive in the city. In that context, dark alleys and proletarian neighborhoods causes fear in the bourgeois and in the nobility. Batman is partially a nobleman and partially a bourgeois, settled in the city for generations, claiming to be its protector from the degeneration of the

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<sup>33</sup> "Unemployment Statistic during the Great Depression." United States History, [www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1528.html](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1528.html) Accessed 13 august 2018.

newcomers, which makes him an oligarch (“aristocrat”). He is also a successful industrial owner of factories and machineries.

When talking about Victorian Gothic, Punter and Byron identify an approximation between readers and the narrative subjects in the London settings, being “disturbingly familiar: the bourgeois domestic world and the new urban landscape”, as the city is a place in which horror lingers, in the figure of “criminals, madmen and scientists” (26). Realism embraced the Gothic elements, as seen in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1838), in which “the city, with its dark, narrow, winding streets and hidden byways replacing the labyrinthine passages of the earlier castles and convents, is established as a site of menace through the importation of various traditional Gothic motifs and scenarios” (Punter and Byron 28).

As I argued earlier, from 1838 to the end of nineteenth century, urban reforms were frequent in big European cities, transforming narrow alleys from central urban areas into large streets and avenues<sup>34</sup>. However, in the United States, in which Gotham is located, urban reforms were not done until the first decades of the twentieth century, as the revamp of a late capitalism city in Batman’s homeland. These urban reforms had a social hygienist approach, with the objective of pushing away from the urban center the feared lower classes, which were seen as menaces to a more established society.

Jimmy Stamp, an US architect dealing with Batman and Gotham city, discusses how Gotham is the representation of modern urban paranoia, with the titular character being “inarguably a product, an expression, of the city he lives in. But is he its demon or its savior?”<sup>35</sup> With that point, Stamp questions if a product of that environment can be a personification of its problems, or if it can somehow (allegorically or metaphorically) produce a hero who will save and transform that location through his actions. Answering Stamp’s question, Batman is a product of the violence and corruption of the city, but not in the sense that it can solve the problem by fighting crime, as this is only the symptom of a more complex situation. As expressed in the previous subchapter, a multiplicity of issues (unemployment, poverty and the lack or ineffectiveness of

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<sup>34</sup> Although London would not have an urban reform until the first decade of the twentieth century, projects for problems, such as degrading housing quarters, poverty and homelessness, began to be made in 1880s (Lenger 93-95).

<sup>35</sup> Stamp, Jimmy. *Batman, Gotham City, and an Overzealous Architecture Historian*. Life Without Buildings, 1 Jun. 2009, [lifewithoutbuildings.net/2009/06/on-influence-batman-gotham-city-and-an-overzealous-architecture-historian-with-a-working-knowledge-of-explosives.html](http://lifewithoutbuildings.net/2009/06/on-influence-batman-gotham-city-and-an-overzealous-architecture-historian-with-a-working-knowledge-of-explosives.html) Accessed 14 August 2018.

public administration) corroborates the creation of the depiction of Gotham city.

Using Punter and Byron's idea that the perpetrators of evil in the cities are the madmen and criminals; in Batman the supervillains as the Joker, the Riddler, and Penguin are madmen, representing singular crimes in Batman's comics, but they do not appear in every story. The most commonly seen as foes in the Dark Knight comics are regular criminals, such as robbers and burglars, rapists and drug dealers, the ones that represent the majority of crimes in the newspapers pages as well as in comics. That is the case of *The Dark Knight Returns*, in which, despite the presence of antagonists such as the Joker, Two-Face and Superman, during most of the pages the troubles are caused (and combated by the vigilant) by street gangs and petty criminals.

In the article "Rates of crime and Unemployment: An Analysis of Aggregate Research Evidence" (1987), Theodore Chiricos points out that during the 1970s decade, "unemployment rose more sharply and to higher levels than at any time since the 1930s" (191). In this sense, the context of both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Killing Joke* are closer to the origins of Gotham's cape crusader, characterized by a high tax of unemployed people, urban violence, and situated in time a of crises, as it was the case in 1930s. The context of production of those comics is marked by a breakdown in the capitalist system and in the 1980s, what can be noticed in a *fin-de-siècle* disappointment, the end of the expectation of a brighter future based on the idea of progress.

While in *The Killing Joke* Alan Moore and Bryan Bolland focus on the Joker, the plotline follows two timelines: in the present time, by the supervillain (the Joker) and his associates, and in the flashbacks, represented by an unemployed man with a pregnant wife, that is approached by two robbers in order to attempt a factory heist (Figure 8). The man accepts the offer, as he needs money to support his family. The robbery goes wrong, that man gets disfigured in toxic waste and later becomes the Joker.



Figure 8 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bollard. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 14.

In need of providing for his wife and unborn child, the man accepts what would be just “one big crime”, with no intention of becoming a criminal himself, but with the expectation that this robbery would be enough to move to a better neighborhood and supply food, clothes and material goods. The neighborhood is one of the main complaints that the man has, as he currently lives in a rented apartment in a poor area (Figure 9). Jane Jacobs in *Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961) criticizes how cityscape in New York (and all big modern cities) is planned to exclude people from one neighborhood to the other, forbidding city integration, creating separate spaces for every urban category, as the area for parks, the area for good restaurants, and the area for poor housing, in which, according to the Jacobs, people would only



live there until they found a way to move (112). For Jacobs, “an unsuccessful neighborhood is a place that is overwhelmed by its defects and problems and is progressively more helpless before them” (112), for which a there would be no solution for a neighborhood to solve its problems, only by the will of the dwellers<sup>36</sup>. Gentrification projects in New York neighborhoods of Tribeca and SoHo during the last two decades show that when the status of the place changes, old inhabitants are expelled alongside (or as one of) the problems.



Figure 9 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bolland. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 8.

A big city, in Jacobs’ vision, is a place constituted of little spaces that are not connected, as big cities do not grant their citizens accessibility to the entire city. Returning to Lefebvre, the right to the city is limited (141-145). We can call the city a labyrinth, with all its streets, avenues, alleys, neighborhoods, and zones, but it is a maze more due to their inhabitants only knowing a small part of it, only seeing the remaining metropolis from the distance, imagining where it ends. The city as a

<sup>36</sup> In the 1940s census, New York City had 7.454.995 residents, a higher population than in the 1980s census, which reached the number of 7.071.639 inhabitants. The peak of New York’s population was in the 1970s census, that presented the population as high as 7.894.862 subjects living in the city. During the 1970s economic crisis affected most countries, and middle and upper classes abandoned New York. “The 1970s are considered a low point for New York City. More than 820,00 people fled the crime and an unreliable transit system over the course of the decade, moving from the city to the suburbs” (Dailymail). City problems were the same discussed by Jacobs in 1961, with a lower population but higher unemployment and poverty rates comparable with the 1930s.

labyrinth is an image of great Gothic potential, as the maze is the place of confusion where people get lost and may even go mad trying to find a way out. When talking about Gothic literary tradition, Botting presents the idea that “[t]he horror of the labyrinth and its confusion of fears and desires lies in its utter separation from all social rules and complete transgression of all conventional limits” (52). Regarding the city, as seen in Mariani (1986), newcomers to this labyrinthine site did not know the rules and limits of urban space, and transgression was part of their daily routine. During the 1930s transgression became part of all city dwellers’ routine, living among it or committing transgressions, during the crisis, in what can be read as a development of that labyrinthine reality, “as places of radical politics and confusion, are identified as dangerous, subversive sites destroying established boundaries and conventions” (53).

Moore and Bolland only depict the city as a major experience, presenting the Joker with a story for the acts that led to his first crime and to his transformation, justifying his actions before the accident that turned him into a madman and supervillain. The difference between the settings of the flashback from the rest of the story is that it presents the city, the deteriorated urban spaces, in a poor neighborhood and in a simple bar inhabited by thugs and drunkards. The background for the rest of the story is Gordon’s House, presenting a middle-class neighborhood not placing it in the urbanity, while Arkham Asylum and the Batcave are elements detached from the urbanity, aside from social problems affecting Gotham.

Beyond the crisis and unemployment rates brought by Chiricos, another 1980s specificity set the tone for Miller’s city. In “Anomia, outsiders e identidades no tempo presente através de *Batman: A Piada Mortal*” (2011), Thiago Monteiro argues that governments in the United States and in Great Britain were aligned with an idea of the dismantling of the Welfare State and labor regulations that protected the working classes and the poorer. Both Reagan and Thatcher took part in a process of “dissolution of a social order, producing the feeling of displacement and uneasiness” (4) that are represented in *The Dark Knight Returns*. The characters are mostly poor people, unattended by the State. We see that in the Joker background story, in the ambiances his unemployed character attends: the dirty bar, the small apartment in a poor neighborhood with streets populated by prostitution (representing the marginal society and its moral distortion) and the factory with loose safety regulations in which the Joker fell in a tank of chemical waste. After becoming a supervillain, the place the Joker inhabits is a decayed and bankrupted amusement park. Monteiro concludes that Moore and Bolland’s story that “narrative of *The*

*Killing Joke* is not centered in Batman, but in the fictional universe, that circumscribes the character<sup>37</sup> (4), that is, the city that circumscribes the hero's upper class world.

The plot in Moore and Bolland's comics is based on a chaotic society, abandoning once again city dwellers on their own, while labor relations crumble, poverty increases, alongside unemployment. In Frank Miller, the story setting is in the city, taking those elements of a broken society and moving it to the Gotham (Figure 10). Miller's version of the environment is one that makes an older Bruce Wayne, in his 50s, returning after ten years of retirement and to once again fight crime, dressing the Bat-suit one more time.

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<sup>37</sup> “Os governos conservadores de Reagan e Thatcher promoveram, no curso da década de 1980, profundas reformas neoliberais. Desfazia-se em dez anos a estrutura do Estado do Bem-Estar Social que por quase meio século havia regulamentado as relações entre capital e trabalho criando redes de proteção contra o infortúnio e garantindo algum tipo de segurança as sociedades capitalistas após a II Guerra Mundial. Entendemos esse processo como a dissolução de uma ordem social, o que produziu um sentimento de desencaixe e mal-estar cujas vozes podem ser ouvidas, lidas e vistas no enredo desta *graphic novel*. A trama narrativa de *A Piada Mortal* não é centrada em Batman, mas sim sobre universo ficcional que circunscreve esse personagem.”



Figure 10 - Miller, Frank. The Dark Knight Returns. DC Comics, 2002. p 27.

On that full-page scene selected, there is the image of a dark Gotham, focusing on a dirty sidewalk of a random place in the city, in

which the first criminal Batman fights after coming back from retirement makes his move, attacking a woman that seems to be poor or low-middle class, by her clothes and the neighborhood where she is walking home. Crime is not portrayed as necessary but, it is possible to read that social convulsion of the city due to an economic crisis, as the period represents, alongside the criticism made by Miller to US president Ronald Reagan and his police in *The Dark Knight Returns*, including Reagan himself as a liar and manipulative president. However, Frank Miller never presents another possible city, only the decadent metropolis, in which there is no visible border, populated by gangs, corrupts, moralists, hypocritical and passive citizens.

Valéria Cristina Pereira da Silva, talking about the city, argues that

intercross in this labyrinth political maneuvers, personalistic wishes, capitalistic logics allied with their borders and techniques – within discourses, its cracks – these elements configure a space fragmented, marked by their pursuit of a historic place that operates an orchestrated between cultural practices and social formation.<sup>38</sup> (155).

The city is a place of contest, with political-bias, class, and gender marked by one vision of a city. For Silva, “the labyrinth is not only in the differences of the urban fabric, breaking the modern perspective of the mass plan, but above all, the ideas that forge the city”<sup>39</sup> (155). In that sense, the city presented is multiple in Moore and Bolland, depicting the struggles of other groups of people, having poor people as actively trying to change their lives and realities (even though it is through crime). In Miller, there are gangs, evil for the sake of being evil, and the ones presented as passive watchers or victims of the criminals.

### 2.3 Dangerous classes: urban Gothic as class marginalization

In 1872 Charles Loring Brace published *The Dangerous Classes of New York*, in which he recognized in immigrants, prostitutes, homeless,

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<sup>38</sup> “Cruzam-se nesse labirinto as manobras políticas, os desejos personalistas, a lógica do capital aliadas à técnica e os limites de ambos – no interior dos discursos, as suas fendas – esses elementos configuram um espaço fragmentado, marcado pela busca de um lugar histórico que opera uma orquestração entre as práticas culturais e a formação social.”

<sup>39</sup> “O labirinto não está apenas nas diferencialidades do tecido urbano, quebrando a perspectiva moderna do plano de massa, mas, sobretudo, as ideias que forjam a cidade”.

working classes and poor people in general, the cause of social convulsion and deterrent of a better economic advance in the city. Brace is not the first one to use the term “dangerous classes”, as it appears in an 1865 article in *The New York Times* referring to London. It highlights the fact that the city, which at that time had more than 3 million inhabitants, was crowded, with more than a million newly arrived from rural areas, and that there was “indeed, a frightful mass of social evils and inequalities. The condition of the homeless and lowest poor in London, is one of the most fearful spectacles in the civilized world” (*New York Times* 4). The tone of the article is alarming. In the subsequent paragraph, the notion of London as a collapsed metropolis became clearer, as in the city,

you find them in street after street and lane upon lane, thousands by thousands, hungry, filthy, ignorant, imbruted and cunning; vagrants, thieves, beggars, “tramps,” burglars, outcasts, and all the nameless crowds of people living daily from hand to mouth. Here they burrow and live and breed, increasing at alarming rates in every way (*The New York Times*, 4).

The city then congregated a mass of poor people, seen as a social problem that should be dealt with. For the *New York Times*, if not for the “aristocratic classes”, London would be lost, as “the middle and upper classes are brave enough. There would be no lack of daring men to fight for law and order”, fighting those dangerous classes, namely every manual laborer, unemployed and all sorts of marginalized subjects.

Chris Gavalier begins his article entitled *The Rise and Fall of Fascist Superpowers* (2016) stating that “viewed in their original context, comic book superheroes express the paradox that democratic utopianism can be defended only through anti-democratic means” (70). His positioning is that vigilantism emerges with particular force during the “Depression-era” and that Superman is the main exponent of that period. Superman is also important for the opposition with the nazi-fascist ideal of Superman (*übermensch*), arising as an antifascist hero who uses extra-legal power. Bradford Wright, discussing comics books as a cultural phenomenon, calls our attention to the fact that Superman creators were two Jewish low-middle-class teenagers, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. For Wright,

[t]he distance between the American dream and reality seemed particularly large during the Great Depression. Pervasive

scarcity and unemployment frustrated consumption and called into question the Victorian middle-class axiom that success follow hard work. The old heroes seemed out of touch with the suffering millions. The self-made men of yesterday, the Herbert Hoovers and Horatio Algers, had become the greedy fat cats and “economic royalist” of Depression (10).<sup>40</sup>

Wright points to the question that, besides being a character associated with an anti-fascism structure, Superman is more aligned with the population that suffered most during the crisis of the 1930s, working classes, ranging to the poorest to middle classes, that struggled with unemployment, famine, and homelessness. Only through State interventionism those problems could be solved. Superman embodied those struggles and supported plans made by US government, such as Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, as its writers and readers were among those more affected with the Depression.

“Morality tales attacking the evil of greed dominate the first several years of Superman’s adventures” (Wright, 11), as one story in which Superman traps a mine owner inside his own mine after an accident caused by the owner’s negligence gets workers trapped there. Superman teaches the owner two lessons: a) respect working regulations; b) do not privilege profit in the expense of workers safety. After that experience, the mine owner is eager to implement safety regulations in his mine, swearing to Superman, while crying, that this would be his priority. Wright points out that “other Superman stories explore the conflict between corporate greed and the public welfare” (12). Superman fights employers not respecting employers and stockbrokers in search of a bigger profit, in disregard of the great majority of US’ population, while supporting social reform and improvement in the conditions of the poor financed by the government.

Superman had a moral duty of fighting social injustice in US and represented an opposition to nazi-fascism *übermensch*, although his working method, as presented by Gavalier, was authoritarian. By the end of WW II, authoritarianism was associated with nazism, fascism and Soviet Union communism, with critics of superheroes practices stressing the paradox of beings that used anti-democratic ways to defend the democratic society. In 1945, “*Time* magazine asked, ‘Are Comics

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<sup>40</sup> Herbet Hoover was elected president of the United States in 1928 before the economic crisis with a discourse that individual will could reach economic success. Horatio Alger was an US writer during the second half of the nineteenth century whose characters and stories were based in the idea that hard work in its own lead to better economic conditions.

Fascist?'" (Gavaler 11). Between 1944 and 1946, fifty three superheroes titles were canceled, due to the critics of how they operated within a totalitarian vigilantism.

Both Gavaler and Wright ignore Batman in their works. His absence can be read as much as his presence. In Gavaler, his discussion about superheroes in opposition to fascism while Wright focus on the late 1930s superheroes as a product of a time in which social justice and improvement were key concepts due to the context of economic crisis. Unlike Captain America, Batman was never actively involved in WW II nor was he searching for improvement in social and economic conditions of Gotham's population, but only fighting criminality deriving from the crisis. Batman has more in common with aristocratic classes mentioned by the New York Times, willing to fight the dangerous classes all over the city, as they are seen as the problem to be opposed, while upper classes are the saviors of morality, civilization and order.

William Uricchio, when talking about the city of Gotham from Batman's perspective, presents a list of descriptions made by Dennis O'Neil and Frank Miller comparing what New York is the one represented in Gotham (125). They present Gotham as Downtown Manhattan at night, mentioning Hell's Kitchen, Tribeca, SoHo, Bed Stuy, The Bronx, poor neighborhoods with high criminality activity, which created a dark, frightening and deteriorated background for Batman's adventures.

This depiction of Gotham helps Batman to work as a character by persuading the reader to empathize uncritically with the hero's actions. Gotham – or at least the parts inhabited by the Batman – is indeed 'dark, moody and frightening' (Uricchio 125).

We, as readers, by reading Batman's comics uncritically, tend to support the hero's main goal in the narrative that is to "restore order" (126). Batman aims for order, while Superman aims for social justice.

Roger Luckhurst refers to London as representing the Gothic Victorian *fin-de-siècle* context, in which Dracula appeared, for instance. For him the late 1980s and 1990s highlights a "contemporary Gothic revival" (527). During that period, a great variety of literary pieces (including a comics by Alan Moore comics about Whitechapel murders) took place in a mournful London of the 1980s, linking this version of the city to the Victorian one.



Luckhurst points out that “as the first megalopolis of modern era, London becomes a sublime object that evokes awe and evades rational capture” (531). For him, the modern city “evades totalized planning” and that the haunted is inherent to modernity the spaces it creates. Luckhurst also argues that in the Gothic revival there is a return to a Gothic representation of the city through a ghostly creation of fear of the masses, including the working class and lower classes.

If Luckhurst argues that Victorian London and the eugenic projects for the city as part of the Gothic context, exploring lower classes as the origin of the haunted representation of London, Linda Dryden states that the invocation of atavism<sup>41</sup> in urban Gothic, such as *Jekyll and Hyde*, “defines its states as Gothic” (89). Both are relating political projects aimed to eliminate the poor and the social marginalized city dwellers, labeling them as frightening.

Linda Dryden claims that *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which sold more than forty thousand copies in its first print, was a “Gothic horror story” (76) made in the *fin-de-siècle* period in which the nation seemed to be in danger of being taken for the “primitive ‘other’” (76). Exploring the theme of duality, this Gothic trope is seen through a hygienist and atavist gaze. Jekyll is a respectable member of the establishment, a rich doctor living in the heart of a wealthy neighborhood. On the contrary, Hyde was a man (usually described as a creature) living in a poor neighborhood, with an appearance that was not tolerated by Jekyll friends. In atavistic theory, it is possible to say if someone is a criminal by analyzing his/her physical appearance, based in a radicalized and discriminatory process considered science in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The binary, the *doppelgänger*, as in the case of Jekyll and Hyde, is similar to the condition of Batman and the Joker. As Jekyll, Batman comes from a wealthy family, gifted with a physical appearance considered normative and positive, while Hyde and the Joker share the opposite pole of society. Hyde lives in Soho, a peripheral neighborhood of London, a place of prostitution, “tramps” and criminals, while the Joker came from a poor New Yorker neighborhood before turning into a criminal and a deformed figure. Both Hyde and the Joker are abhumans, with their bodies reshaped: one shortens and gets hairy, while the other one has the color of his skin changed and his face deformed, besides the

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<sup>41</sup> Cesare Lombroso atavism was a “scientific” method in criminology during the second half of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century in which the physicist judged if one was a criminal by their appearance, studying the shape of his head, the size of the nose, presence of tattoos, abnormal bodies and other characteristics based in prejudice and exclusion.

fact that they both became wicked, with a grim smile in the face and a violent nature.

Dryden argues that in relation to their appearances, divided into good and evil parts of the self (and of society), Robert Stevenson represents “the perception that the race itself was succumbing to degenerative tendencies that threatened the very fabric of society” (77). The criminal type is always associated with the working classes, with the dangerous classes. In late nineteenth century, the decaying of the British Empire was seen as a spreading of working classes’ degeneration, which affected society in general, including high classes. Batman can be seen as perpetuating the notion that he is the representative of the aristocratic group that would protect the city, as in the New York Times article, but at the same time someone contaminated by the Joker (lower classes) degeneration. The city is where every degeneration takes place, the home of a new proletarian class menacing the comfort of the upper classes. Dryden says that:

Hyde’s nocturnal criminality echoes public insecurity engendered by the expanding city even before awful events in Whitechapel in the summer and autumn of 1888, and the Bryant & May match girls strike pressed home the point that the proletarian was a constant presence on the city’s street (82).

Whitechapel crimes were the ones committed by the so-called Jack the Ripper, assassinating women<sup>42</sup> in the district of Whitechapel, a poor working-class neighborhood on the margins of the upper class London. The Bryant & May match factory strike was a huge strike of 1400 female worker fighting for better working conditions at the factory. Those two events were marks of the marginal perilous city just outside the upper-class city. The city frightening because they fear those millions marginalized, degenerated, lurking in the dark<sup>43</sup>. London had become a huge place to fear about, “a labyrinthine hell” (Dryden 86) in which criminals could hide, just as Hyde after committing a murder. Dark alleys and buildings were the perfect place to be if someone had no wish to be found. Batman’s foes in Gotham city lurk in the streets, covert by

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<sup>42</sup> By the time of the crimes they were identified as prostitutes, even though researchers such as historian of Victorian age Hallie Rubenhold disagrees, suggesting that the five victims were in fact working class women labeled for being by themselves at the street.

<sup>43</sup> By 1807 London received its firsts gas lighting, but poor neighborhood like East End would not receive any of that until the twentieth century (Dryden 91).

darkness and hideouts, just in the margin of the wealth symbol that is Wayne Manor, outside upper-class walls, in the dangerous world of the city, a place to be feared, a place inhabited by the other.

In *The Killing Joke*, the amusement park is depicted as abandoned for some time, with broken rides, a dark and decayed environment. While the realtor is not confident that he would sell it to anyone, surprisingly for him, the Joker demonstrates excitement with the place. One element that calls the attention in that scenario are the posters of the freak show cast. Those subjects are depicted as having abnormal figures, with an uncommon number of limbs or not considered acceptable body shapes, being the case of the “Fat Lady”, whose poster headline shows the phrase “gals, be glad it ain’t you” (6) (Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 11 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bollard. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 6.



Figure 12 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bolland. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 6.

The Joker “buys” the park and embraces the subjects of the freak show, accepting their deviant figures. The freak show then becomes Joker’s henchmen in this story, following the acceptance the villain demonstrates to them (Figure 13). Using Kelly Hurley concept of abhuman in Gothic tradition, “the ‘proper’ somatic response to abhumanness, the sensation of disgust” (45) would be produced by those characters. In a social reading, it is possible to see another possibility, as the Joker being the one who accepts and helps these social outcasts. If the 1980s represent an economic crisis for normal bodies, abhuman characters suffered a lot more in the period. According to the report “Has the Employment Rate of People with Disabilities Declined?” (2004) produced by Cornell University under guidance of David C. Stampleton, during the 1980s unemployment rates for people with disabilities were

around 60% for men and slightly below 80% for women. In the story it is not possible to know if the freak show members are evil, besides the fact that their appearance and relationship with the villain renders them as bad guys, they flee when Batman arrives. From a social gaze, they were offered help by an outcast like them, and accepted the proposition, while the hero appears only to confront them.



Figure 13 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bollard. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 20.

If society is rejecting the freak show and the Joker is embracing them, it is more due to the fulfillment of his evil plan. Nonetheless, those characters represented are within what Dryden and Luckhurst discuss of the Gothic depiction of the haunted, as they were the evil presence, the elements to be feared, the marginalized, the lower classes. The freak show characters can be framed in Cesare Lombroso atavism by their appearance. As Hyde, their mischievousness is printed in their faces and bodies, born marginal and monstrous. As Beville says, in Gothic texts the limits between what is real and what is fictional is not clear; the freak show is the marginalized, the dangerous classes of a city populated by unemployed and poor subjects seen as dangerous. By using Lombroso's

theory, there is a return to the past, reminding the reader not only the 1930s Batman context, but also racist and prejudiced theories from the past century, as Gothic is a return to the past as pointed by Botting (1). However, that return to the past questions modern “enlightenment and human values” (1), as Lombroso’s theories, an invalidated pseudoscience there once were an instrument of marginalization.

In this section I highlighted that Gotham City, *The Killing Joke* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, can be compared with late nineteenth-century Gothic texts. This approximation is due to how degenerated characters, villains, monsters, are part of the same “dangerous classes”, working classes and poor people. That degeneration are seen in their bodies as well, as the villains are presented as deformed (body and faces), while Batman, as a representative of aristocracy/oligarchy is the one able to avoid the degeneration and save the city.

### 3. GOTHIC IN COMICS: BETWEEN HUMOR AND HORROR IN *THE KILLING JOKE* AND *THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS*

“laughter is sometimes represented like death, as an annihilation force, as suggested by the idiomatic phrase ‘I nearly died laughing’” (Horner; Zlosnik 14).

The epigraph above is from a discussion by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, based on Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royles’s ideas, about the role of the “comic” in Gothic literary studies. That idea comprehends humor and laughter as destructive elements, capable of killing. Following that idea, my intention is to discuss the presence of the duality horror/humor in the graphic novels *The Killing Joke* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. How it is possible that a joke becomes a potential killer? Fred Botting says that Gothic texts evoke “motions of terror and laughter” (1). Within this idea, Gothic writing has been subverting and parodying, mangling horror and humor in the narrative since the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In this chapter, I will connect Miller’s and Moore and Bolland’s comics to the idea of a comic Gothic.

Horner and Zlosnik’s working definition of comic turn is, “Gothic writing as a spectrum that, at one end, produces horror-writing containing moments of comic hysteria or relief and, at the other, works in which there are clear signals that nothing is to be taken seriously” (15).

*The Killing Joke* and *The Dark Knight Returns* are considered by comics researchers and enthusiasts as two of the most influential and important Batman comics, as they are ranked third and first in IGN ranking of The Greatest Batman Graphic Novels<sup>44</sup>. These two comics defined Batman’s central characteristics in the 1980s, which would be used in the subsequent productions in comics, movie and cartoon adaptations in the following years.

In order to discuss the idea of comic aspects of Gothic in those two comics, I decided to approach them together, instead of splitting them in two distinct parts, for better use of the discussion by means of a comparative analysis.

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<sup>44</sup> “The Greatest Batman Graphic Novels” *IGN*, Ziff Davies, [www.ign.com/articles/the-25-greatest-batman-graphic-novels?page=3](http://www.ign.com/articles/the-25-greatest-batman-graphic-novels?page=3) Accessed 15 November 2018.

The plot of Moore and Bolland's story is based on the Joker trying to prove a point: that anyone having a trauma can become a mad killer, as he did. His plan involves the creation of a bad day for Gordon by using physical and psychological violence against Barbara Gordon and Commissioner Gordon, kidnapping and subsequently torturing them. The Joker is the main character, not only the title of the story concerns him but he also has more scenes than Batman in the narrative, so readers can observe the character development, including a version of the Joker's past and how he became a mad criminal.



Figure 14 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bolland. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 49.

In the frames above (Figure 14), the Joker is telling Batman a joke, and they end up laughing, as partners. In opposition to the usual aggressive response from Batman, in that specific situation there is a bond



between Batman and the Joker, as their traumas generates mutual empathy expressed in the conjoined laughter. As the Joker tells Commissioner Gordon, in situations involving pain, anguish and fear, one can only smile (Moore; Bolland 27). The joke told by the villain approximates Batman and the Joker, who can be described as complementary to one another. For example, in 1986 Miller's version, in which the Joker was in a catatonic state for ten years after Batman's retirement. When the Dark Knight is back to action, so is the villain.

David Punter and Glennis Byron mention Henry James, his "masterful use of irony and ambiguity" (132). In the frames above (Figure 14), we also have the same attributes as James's. The ambiguity lies at the inability of readers to answer the question of what happened to the Joker at end of the story. Did Batman murder him? The irony resides in the fact that, in the beginning of the story Batman went to Arkham to talk with the Joker about their inevitable deaths by each other's hand if they did not changed their actions. Therefore, it is ironic that the character who worried about that fate, became the other's killer.

Pointing out the elements of the Gothic genre, Maria Beville highlights the presence of the *doppelgänger* and its inherent duality between good and evil, someone's *doppelgänger* will act as a reverse copy of the subject (Beville 15). Even though Moore and Bolland suggest that the Joker and Batman are doubles, the relation between who is good and who is evil is well established. Besides the fact that Batman is traumatized and, just like the Joker, usually breaks the laws and promotes violence, Batman is depicted as the hero. The hero in the sense that he uses his anger and trauma against what is deemed socially bad, while the Joker encompasses the villain. Their status as *doppelgängers*, as seen in the joke's scene, is supported by Daniel Malloy, who states that "Batman's greatest nemesis is the embodiment of levity (a dark and twisted levity, it's true), the Clown Prince of Crime himself, the Joker", the Dark Knight's would be the other half, as the "only time Batman has any fun is when he's hurting people" (242). Although both characters arguably have fun while hurting people, the Joker seems amused most of the time, while Batman is a graver character.

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman has been retired for ten years. During that time, the Joker was in a catatonic state at Arkham Asylum. Is the Batman's return to action that makes it possible to the villain for the villain to recover his conscience. It is an irony depicting the relationship between those two characters as complementing each other and creating a dependence in order for them to exist.

There are no pseudo-medieval castles in *The Killing Joke* to represent the decay of places and the subjects that belonged there, as it was common in the eighteenth-century Gothic novel. Nevertheless, Moore and Bolland introduce the Gothic trope of decadence in a different setting: the amusement park. If a castle can be haunted, with its cold and dark walls, an abandoned amusement park can also be sinister without lights, with old clowns and decrepit rides and with a general grey aspect.

In that secluded place, monsters and other creatures can operate without limits, be them of juridical, moral, or ethical nature. At the same time that the Joker and his henchmen are sheltered in this off-limits place that is a deserted amusement park, a night creature like Batman is also not an outsider to such a space. The one who does not belong there is Commissioner Gordon, depicted as a law-abiding, frail mundane human figure in comparison to the creatures that inhabit and trespass sociocultural limits in that forbidden space.

The amusement park is an iconic space linked to Gothic. In *Brazilian Horror: Zé do Caixão in Multimedia Work of José Mojica Marins*, Daniel Sá argues that:

The contemporary attractions and thrills found in amusement parks also have a dark side, which materializes in a number of disquieting fun-fair attractions such as the fun house (bodily distortion by mirrors), the haunted house (heart-pounding frights), again, freak shows (human anomalies) and a series of wild ride machineries which involve buzzing sensations, near-collisions and abrupt plunges into the void (69).

Those elements in the amusement park can be related to the Gothic setting of the story, as well as representing the Joker personality in the space (Figure 15). The disquieting of the appearance, the abnormality of the Joker and his henchmen bodies, themselves part of the freak show. They are abhuman characters.



As mentioned before, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik in *Gothic and the Comic Turn* present the concept of comic turn in Gothic, stating that it is not an “[a]berration or corruption” (12) of the genre, otherwise known to its relationship with horror but, it is an unquestionable part of the genre that is hybrid in its form. Horner and Zlosnik also point out that the result of the hybridism is the inclusion of humor, and that it does not represent abdication of horror, but “a measure of detachment from scenes of pain and suffering that would be disturbing in a different Gothic context” (13).

Following Horner and Zlosnik's proposition, the representation of the Joker and his henchmen in *The Killing Joke* embody humor elements, as in the fact that they are subjects of a freak show, as their bodies break the "laws of symmetry and proportion, in relation to the human." (Horner; Zlosnik 16). These aspects can be exemplified by characters such as the little people with almost bald heads, blonde ponytails tied with pink ribbons, and cherub wings, whose appearance mingle infantile and BDSM<sup>45</sup> elements (Figure 16). Those characters are responsible for torturing Commissioner Gordon, but, at the same time, they contain a degree of hilarity which creates a comic effect, reducing the readers' shock and the impact of the violence present in Barbara Gordon's attempted murder and Commissioner Gordon's torture. The scene suggests that Commissioner Gordon is going to be sexually abused, and the argument here is that Gothic text may adopt comic relief as a discourse during the presentation of gruesome scenes, images and ideas.

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<sup>45</sup> Bondage and sadomasochism: sexual practices that involves at least two people in which one performs the submissive role while the other is the dominant.



Figure 16 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bollard. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 22.

In this sense, *The Dark Knight Returns* revisits some characteristics that were present in his first, 1939 Batman comic book. In this new sociohistorical context, the character uses extreme violence against his foes and adopts a more fierce position when fighting criminals, with some of them even dying, although not by Batman's weapons. There is a scene of a murder in which a criminal kills the mayor with his bare hands, but it occurs off-scene and the brutality of the murder is shown by means of a reverse point-of-view. In other words, what the readers see is the reaction of the witnesses, their astonished expressions and the blood spilt on the wall, without showing the body or the act of aggression.

One of the most dramatic moments in *The Killing Joke* is the scene in which Barbara Gordon is shot by the Joker and, subsequently it is suggested that she is raped after she had her spine destroyed by the bullet (Figure 16).



Figure 17 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bolland. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 16.

The scene in which Barbara Gordon is shot depicts a gruesome representation of the violence. To reduce the impact of this scene the Joker's outfit provides a degree of comic relief. He is not wearing his usual purple suit with green shirt, but a Hawaiian shirt and a Panama hat with a camera hanging from his neck, much like a tourist. In my interpretation, this is only a comic way to present the camera, through the figure of the tourist who sees everything with his lenses instead of his

eyes, providing a comic relief as well as an organic approach to showing the camera.

In Moore and Bolland's version of Batman, the burning shot in Barbara Gordon shocks and sickens the reader provoking anger and disgust towards the Joker, especially because Barbara Gordon is also the Batgirl.

*The Killing Joke's* gloomy, arguably Gothic, mood and setting, mark Batman comics produced after Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. The graphic novel produced by Moore and Bolland can be perceived as a Gothic characterization of the characters, particularly in the relation "creator and creature" that Batman and the Joker share, since Batman is partly responsible for the villain's origin. At the same time, the trope of *doppelgänger*, or the double, with them sharing bonds because of their traumatic histories and the madness that encompasses them both.

Humor appears here as a counterbalance element in the narrative, its function is not to overburden the reader with explicit violence. The concept of the "comic turn" in the Gothic writing becomes then a form of reducing the impact of violence and the effect of reality in the narrative.



Figure 18 - Moore, Alan and Bryan Bolland. *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 2014. p 46.

Like the scene in which Barbara Gordon is shot by the Joker (figure 17), this scene reproduces the same structure in a sequence of four frames: 1) the Joker holding the gun; 2) a close up in the gun; 3) a close shot in the character facing the villain, with a tense expression; and 4) the gun shooting. In the fourth panel there is an expectation breach, as the scene is reconstructed and the reader are expecting the same results. The actual conclusion is unexpected, creating a comic response due to the toy gun and by the incongruity generated by the last panel.

If in Moore and Bolland narrative humor have the function of reducing the impact of the violence against the characters depicted as good, in Miller's version the humor is heavily associated with irony. Quoting George Meredith, Horner and Zlosnik present that "[t]he satirist,



however, ‘is a moral agent, often a social scavenger, working on a storage of bile’” (57), in which the satire is made by the use of irony. Miller uses mockery to embarrass some characters, such as gang members, news reporters, and left-wing subjects.

When fighting armed criminals, Batman uses the element of surprise and the dark to overcome numerical advantage (Figure 19).



Figure 19 - Miller, Frank. *The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics, 1986. p 63.

In those frames there are the use of the abhuman characters, as in the grotesque figures of the freak show characters in *The Killing Joke*. However, in this case the abhuman aspect of the characters serve to create

a dehumanization and reinforce the homogeneity of the Mutant's gang members. The comic aspect in these frames resides in the fact that one of the criminals shoots his partner in order to try to hit Batman. The irony that he was killed by his own accomplice instead of the hero or police enforcement are reinforced by the confused face of the gang member before being shot. Miller also uses satire to criticize society, as in Robin's parents, representing left-wing oriented subjects (Figure 20).



Figure 20 - Miller, Frank. *The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics, 1986. p 60.

In Miller's story, left-wing characters, in this case Robin's parents, define Commissioner Gordon as a perpetrator of machismo (which he is, not happy that a woman will succeed him) and accuse him of killing an adolescent. Gordon did kill the teenager gang member, but for Miller it was justified, as he was a criminal that attempted against

Gordon's life. Defending the life of criminals and human rights is mocked in this scene. Robin's parents also say that they were "tripping", associating leftist political views and consumption of illegal drugs. Beside left-wing subjects representation as drug users, they are also depicted as careless, as their daughter is escaping through the window to join Batman's mission of fighting crime on a dark and perilous city.

In this chapter, I discussed how comic elements were mingled with horror and terror elements in a narrative that can be deemed Gothic and/or possessing Gothic elements. Those Gothic elements such as the *doppelgänger* trope, the decayed environmental, were essential for the creation of the narrative mood and tone, while comical elements can be framed in two aspects; the comical relief, a writing technic to reduce the impact of scenes considered too dark and humor elements as expectation breach or irony, to create a comic aspect to demean antagonists.

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

The proposal of this thesis was to discuss Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* as texts that reflected their time of production, in which their sociocultural and historical elements would benefit from a Gothic reading and also reflect issues from the 1980s that could be deemed Gothic. Through the text, I have considered a thematic cross-reading between Batman universe, urban sociology, and Gothic representations. The following paragraphs are a brief overview of the thesis' discussion.

In classic Gothic texts from the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, Middle Ages buildings were the locations where narratives took place, a reminiscence of the past haunted by former rulers, named the Catholic Church and the nobility. Their now decayed castles and abbeys represented the fall of their time and rise of a new political, social and economic age, modernity, with the introduction of capitalism. In modernity, populational dislocation to cities changed the perspective of some Gothic authors from the late nineteenth century, such as Bram Stoker and Robert Louis Stevenson.

While Stoker's narrative was still using the trope of the ancient nobility and the haunted castle in the countryside as background for the first part of the story, for the most part the story takes place in a great city, London, with the monster being a newcomer to town, bringing degeneration to that society.

In Stevenson's text, the narrative also takes place in London, representing in the duality of Jekyll and Hyde in urban spaces: within the rich and respectable London/Jekyll also exist a poor, degenerated and darker London/Hyde. Working classes, homeless, beggars, sex workers, unemployed, were all seen as "dangerous classes" (Hyde), the ones who haunted the streets and lurked in the shadows in the eyes of upper-class Londoners (Jekyll).

Just like London in Stevenson's narrative, New York/Gotham City is a place haunted by lower classes. Both in Batman's creation in 1939 and in the 1980s, there is a constant fear of encounter a criminal lurking in the shadows of Gotham's streets, usually petty criminals, combated by Batman, the alter ego or *doppelgänger* of Bruce Wayne, a rich white man belonging to a traditional Gothamite family, who also uses the shadows and dark environment of the city in his fighting against criminals. Besides the use of the city for the representing the struggle against "dangerous classes".

Batman's duality also manifests itself in the dynamics of right-wing and left-wing politics, in which he can be seen both as a private property defender, authoritarian vigilante and as a hero with deep-seated moral virtues, although not by democratic means.

Other Gothic tropes can be read in Miller's and Moore and Bolland's comics, as the "degeneration" of society, interconnected with body grotesqueness, the abhuman, as the Joker after the accident and transformation, the Joker's henchmen, in Gotham's gang members, all of them presenting physical deformities. Batman also presents this characteristic; while Bruce Wayne is a common respectable wealthy businessperson, his alter ego, Batman is a creature that show the inner Wayne, a deformed character who embodies a bat, as Hyde living inside Jekyll, or as Dorian Gray decaying morally without anyone noticing it. The drama of the split personality in one body.

Besides that, the Gothic reading of Miller's and Moore and Bolland's Batman comics highlights the relation between Batman and the Joker, as a split personality in two different bodies, they depend on each other; they are also doubles, the *doppelgänger*. The Joker was created by Batman and depends on the Dark Knight vigilant activity to act, both have similar origins in traumatic events, and Batman and/or the villain, as depicted in *The Killing Joke*, are going to be responsible for the death of the other. I also discussed how the use of irony and comic relief allows creators to depict frightening and disgusting scenes, making the tone of the overall narrative lighter without losing impact.

In conclusion, Batman and the bat-universe can be read as Gothic, appropriating and changing cultural and historical background from classic Gothic narratives, reshaped, but maintaining elements that allows the recognition and reading of the text as Gothic.

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