

Succumbence and Redemption in Doug Moench's *Batman & Dracula* Trilogy

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Dracula had always been a source of inspiration for Batman, something confessed by his very own creator Bob Kane in his autobiography. Written by Doeg Moench³ and published in what is called the Modern/Dark Age of Comics, the Batman & Dracula Trilogy reunites the two characters in one person(age). This paper investigates the development of some motifs from Bram Stoker's Dracula and explores the matter of the fallibility of the hero as raised in this graphic trilogy. A hero is exemplary, yet human nevertheless. Being human, he is imperfect and, therefore, subject to mistake. But how grave can a hero's mistake be? To what extent is a mistake a fall? And does a hero have the right to redemption no matter the gravity of his fall? The rationale and the morale behind the very idea of Batman have been lost once the hero succumbed to anger and lust and could not stop his fall anymore. Does the sacrifice he eventually undergoes entitle him to redemption?

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1. Introduction

The first volume in Doug Moench's *Batman & Dracula* trilogy introduces the parallel between Batman and Dracula, and situates the story in the *Elseworlds*⁴ line of DC comics. Batman's creator himself, Bob Kane, writes in his autobiography about the

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³ The series is penciled by Kelley Jones, inked by Malcolm Jones III and John Beatty, coloured by Les Dorscheid and George Wright, and lettered by Todd Klein.

⁴ *Elseworlds* is a series of stories published by DC that are set outside the reality canon established traditionally by a comic book. The *Elseworlds* stories take place either in different places/worlds/dimensions and/or different times than the general flow of the main chronological storyline. *Gotham by Gaslight* (1989), written by Brian Augustyn and drawn by Mike Mignola, was the first *Elseworlds* enterprise with Victorian Age Batman trying to catch Jack the Ripper who has come to Gotham to commit his murders according to the same well-known pattern that he has established in London.

inspiration he drew for the character from the 1931 *Dracula* movie starring Bela Lugosi (Kane, 1989, 41). That particular horror motion picture and the character of Dracula exerted a great influence not only on the character's appearance but also on the general atmosphere and tension that permeated from the settings imagined by the artisans of Batman: artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger.

This graphic trilogy capitalizes on the many similarities that exist between the two (anti-?)heroes, which actually make this story possible, appealing and somehow plausible or at least easier to digest. One would have even wondered when the two Dark Knights representing the two sides of the same coin would meet in a decisive confrontation. The analogy is spurred on by the black clothing and wing-like cape, the bat symbol, the metamorphosis and dual personality, the pointed ears, the ominous presence and voice, the solitude of the character, the glorious but traumatic past, the repressed feelings and inhibited memories and the desire for revenge.

Die-hard fans might even recognize something of Dracula in Bruce's mysterious mentor, Ra's al Ghul. The leader of the Leagues of Shadows is himself immortal, cruel and inclined to the dark side even more than his disciple, the Dark Knight himself, through his intransigence and radicalism. Just like with Dracula, you're either with or against Ra's al Ghul. Only Batman spots the nuances that humanize him and make him the true hero.

Batman & Dracula is a compelling read for the fans of the genre and poses an insightful matter to research, that of the humanity of the hero and the demonization of the champion. Batman goes through both phases as he tries to annihilate the demon which, in the end, leads to the loss of his humanity. And, as if this turn of perspectives weren't enough, the Dark Knight essentially gains more humanity in losing it (and consideration for that matter) for integrating his error and natural drives.

2. *Red Rain* (1991)

Gotham is suffocated by continuous rain which appears to be of red(dish) colour and which clouds the city in a dark gloomy atmosphere that makes everyone weary, especially since there has been a spree of mysterious murders among the homeless. The people's only explanation for the red rain is that it is caused by "chemicals in the air", but every time after it ceases new victims are found with their throats slashed.

While Batman is investigating these murders, Bruce Wayne is having strange dreams of a beautiful woman visiting him and infusing him with such extraordinary strength that, when he wakes up in the morning, he does not feel worn out by the

intensity of the dreams but rather invigorated by them (*"It's as if the dream has empowered me... as if the soul of the night herself has merged with my own soul..."* - unpaginated). The woman who visits his sleep is actually Tanya, a rogue vampire, who chooses to help Batman, (Bruce Wayne: *"It starts as a mist, sinuous, hypnotic... and ends as a woman."* – unpaginated) by giving him vampiric strength through a series of gentle neck bites, not too deep and severe to transform him into a vampire and neither too feeble to be without visible consequences (Tanya: *"My purpose is to give, not to take"* - unpaginated).

A motif inspired from Bram Stoker's novel is the transfer of identity between the vampire and the hero. An exchange of identity takes place between Jonathan Harker and Dracula, because the woman who comes to take her child back from the vampiric castle confuses Harker with the vampire count, and calls the British character monster: *"Monster, give me my child"* (p.66). However, Jonathan Harker does not become a (full) vampire, even though he was bitten during the encounter with the three female vampires. But his nightmares and his poor mental state after he manages to escape from the vampiric castle indicate that he was seriously affected by his encounter with Dracula and his wives. Jonathan's wife, Mina Harker, will also go through a vampirisation process after she succumbs to Dracula's *"baptism of blood,"*. But that process of transformation is also stopped when Dracula is killed at the end of Bram Stoker's novel. However, Mina's friend, Lucy, is a victim of Dracula who undergoes the whole process of vampirisation, and she becomes, in England, a vampire similar with Dracula's brides in Transylvania. In order to be saved from her vampiric life, Lucy will be exorcised by the vampire hunters led by the Dutch professor Van Helsing, by the same brutal method that would be applied to Dracula and his brides.

We can see a reverberation of Tanya's kiss in the female vampires' kisses in Stoker's *Dracula*. Jonathan Harker meets Dracula's brides in the vampiric castle at night, and he is not sure whether he is dreaming or awake. Although he is terrified by their attempt to bite him, he feels an irresistible attraction towards them: *"I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips."* (p. 51). The three female vampires do not obey Dracula's orders to stay away from Jonathan Harker.

In *Red Rain* the rogue vampire Tanya also disobeys Dracula's authority, but she surpasses her prototypes (Dracula's brides), by allying with the forces of good against the malefic actions of Dracula and his vampire hordes. The tendency to use a single character instead of the three female vampires in Dracula sequels is not a recent adaptation of the narrative structure of the original novel. In the Swedish (1899-1900) and Icelandic versions of *Dracula* (1899, 1900), the three female vampires

were already replaced by one female vampire who seduces the British guest (De Roos 2017, Crișan 2019).

Bram Stoker's female vampires are depicted as lascivious characters, with an animal hunger for human blood. In *Red Rain*, with her generosity and desire to help the humans, Tanya is rather linked to the model of the sympathetic vampire, developed in fantastic fiction since 1970s.

Due to Tanya's help, Batman discovers that a horde of vampires led by Count Dracula is responsible for the murders. The Count intends to build an army of vampires from the homeless whose absence is not detected, to conquer Gotham and then the World. The strength instilled in Bruce by Tanya allows him to stand up to Dracula's followers while still being human. Tanya also tells him that Dracula has absolute power over the bodies and the psyches of the vampires that he creates.

In order to do away with Dracula and his acolytes, Batman sets a trap for them in the Batcave. After luring them inside his own underground dwelling, Batman blows it up sealing their fate forever. Unfortunately, Tanya is also caught in the explosion and falls victim to the war which has consumed her life dying while Wayne Manor crumbles onto the desperate vampires underneath it.

The Dark Knight then goes after the Count himself and annihilates him too in an extraordinary aerial fight at the end of which Dracula ends up impaled in a utility pole. However, the cost for this victory is high and irreversible: Dracula sucks all of Batman's blood before falling to his death, which is the onset to the Caped Crusader's permanent damned transformation. Dracula's impalement is illustrative for the punishment he himself had so masterfully applied onto others as Vlad Țepeș. Bruce Wayne expires while Batman tells Alfred: "*Bruce Wayne may be gone but Batman will go on... forever*" (- unpaginated).

This volume is the beginning of Batman's transformation. It introduces the themes of sacrifice, succumbence and redemption; it assures us of Bruce's humanity and integrity. He goes to great lengths to protect his city and its people at all costs, including his own sacrifice. He would gladly offer his own life if he were sure that it would make a change for the better, if he were sure that there was somebody else better to carry on the fire and the fight. And that is particularly why he is chosen by Tanya to spearhead the war against Dracula. His probity and his humanity make him invulnerable to the Count's manipulation, as opposed to the effect on the other vampires, including Tanya, that rebel against Dracula. They are much easier to control and influence because of their sinful past and lust. Precisely due to this spirit of sacrifice of his, Batman does not despair when he realizes that he is going to become a vampire because of Dracula sucking his blood, but embraces the opportunity of protecting his city for eternity.

3. *Blodstorm* (1994)

By now Batman has become a full-breed vampire (*"I'm long dead – reborn in rage and lust, now a vampire myself"* - unpaginated) with increased strength in his fight against the criminality in Gotham, but also with a growing weakness in controlling his vampiric lust for blood. He uses the synthetic serum which Tanya has developed in order to quench the thirst for human blood but it is becoming increasingly inefficient in his case.

It also seems that Dracula's vampires have not died out and another fiendish grotesque figure (re)appears to take advantage of the circumstances: the Joker. He tracks down and recruits what is left of Dracula's horde and manipulates the vampires into following his orders by profiting from their inability to see beyond their carnal hunger since their leader's death. Under the Joker's guidance instead, they move on the turf of Gotham's infamous crime families, annihilate their leaders by transforming them into vampires and take over the clans (Batman: *"now the mobsters have literally become what they've always been – vampires bleeding the city dry"* - unpaginated).

Batman, Commissioner Gordon, Alfred, and a team of vampire hunters from the Gotham City Police Department eventually unite to go after the vampires. Gordon, Alfred and their men hunt the former mobsters during the day while Batman finishes them off at night by driving wooden stakes into their hearts and cutting their heads off. Catwoman also joins the fight to seek the vampire that transformed her into a were-cat (*"my name... Selina... It means <<child of the moon>>"* - unpaginated).

Just like in the first volume, *Red Rain* (1991), love is the only thing keeping Batman human and offering him the resources he needs to overcome anything that threatens to destroy him. Tanya offered Batman physical strength to stand up to Dracula and his army, and now Selina provides Bruce the emotional and erotic fulfillment that increases his resistance to blood. The lust for blood is actually a metaphor for physiological cravings that are specific to all human beings. The appearance or the creation of a monster is an indicator of a crisis (Cohen 1996, 5). Bruce has denied himself all the pleasures of life and has trained himself into controlling his needs and impulses but what this story does is to offer an insight into Bruce's unnatural struggle against his own humanity. He has been trying to deny or cancel it all this time in order to be able to fight criminality and make his parents' death worth something to the world if to him it was so futile and painful. But going against your own biology is not easy, it has its costs and Jung specifically wrote about how everything that people repress goes into the unconscious and resurfaces later with destructive force (2014). Therefore, if in the first volume we had Bruce being

on top of his humanity, in this second one, we have him trying to suppress it. Jung's perspective will be proven in the third volume where the archetype of the shadow simply bursts and everything that Batman has been repressing is unleashed until it consumes him.

The author, Doug Moench, however does provide Bruce with some outlets of genuine humanity for his drive to overcome his natural instincts, and those outlets come in the form of love. In the first volume there was Tanya, and in this one his spiritual and carnal craving for Selina shape the myth of a woman's pure selfless love that quenches the lust, the thirst (Batman: *"The bloodlust has been eased... almost completely. (...) Was it just her touch? Her caring? The fact that I wasn't alone... that she held me while I slept?"* - unpaginated). Her companionship soothes Bruce because the simple fact that he is not by himself gives him the power to overcome and endure anything as long as he does not have to carry the burden alone (Batman: *"It's the compulsion I can't face alone – the burning urge – and somehow, last night and today, she helped me through it."*, *"Even now the fever is still damped, the need quelled from just her presence, her caring... (...) and it's enough to help me fight it..."* - unpaginated).

The ferocity of the craving for blood is countered by the potency of love and the two are unified in the symbolism of the moon. Its meaning is explained to the readers through the character of Ariane who is Batman's expert in the occult. She explains to him how the same passion and intensity animates both criminals and lovers enraptured in a sort of lunacy (from the Latin word *luna*, meaning "the moon") that makes them lose control over reason and give into the instinctual (Ariane: *"The moon's gravity affects the ocean's tides – and if our bodies are seventy percent liquid couldn't the moon create <<tides within us>>?"*, *"violent crime soars on nights of the full moon" "and lovers become more amorous during the full moon"* - unpaginated)⁵.

The moon is frequently associated with Dracula's presence in Bram Stoker's novel as well, as the vampire count usually attacks his victims at night. There are several references to the image of the moon in the scenes in which Dracula follows Lucy. Dracula's brides are depicted as some creatures who appear and disappear in the moonbeams:

But as I looked, they disappeared, and with them the dreadful bag. There was no door near them, and they could not have passed me without my noticing. They simply seemed to fade into the rays of the moonlight and pass out through the window, for I could see outside the dim, shadowy forms for a moment before they entirely faded away. (Stoker 1994, 53 – 54)

⁵ The symbolism of the moon is explored to an even greater extent by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean in their graphic novel, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, 1989, where all the atrocities in Arkham, the asylum for the criminally insane, take place under the auspices of full moon nights.

Jonathan Harker is terrified by these creatures who are constantly associated with the moon: *"The phantom shapes, which were becoming gradually materialized from the moonbeams, were those three ghostly women to whom I was doomed"* (p. 60). In *Bloodstorm*, humanity is strangled by the malevolence of this world, so Catwoman is killed by the Joker. She sacrifices for Batman as Tanya did by standing in the way of a crossbow bolt that was meant for him. Losing the only person that managed to help him keep his humanity, Batman snaps and loses his humanity; he hits the Joker violently and breaks his neck. With all the strings keeping him attached to sanity broken, Batman gives into his bloodlust and drains the Joker out of his blood (Batman: *"I have succumbed to weakness and hate, an act of vengeance, rage, and predation..."* - unpaginated).

In a gesture that would become a pattern of murder and redemption from now on, Batman drives a stake into the Joker's heart to make sure that he won't change into a vampire and thus carry on his sadistic crimes forever. In the end, with his proverbial self-righteousness and spirit of sacrifice, Batman gives precise orders to Gordon and Alfred to stake him too so that he too would be spared of eternal damnation and torment in the form of a murderous and bloodthirsty vampire. He knows that he has just done and become what he has always feared he will: a monster unleashed on a one-way road. However, the wrong is not on the people, who have actually been saved permanently with the Joker's demise, but on himself, and not because he killed somebody, but because he does not allow himself to take into consideration this aspect of crime-fighting where people, especially criminals, might die, even by accident. This proves how fragile Batman's mental well-being actually is, how traumatic the death of his parents was and how much help he would have needed to restore himself, psychically in the first place. That is exactly the area that the Joker constantly exploits, especially in the Bronze and Modern Age stories, because he knows that making Batman break at all costs would only prove the ideology he conducts himself by: that any type of order is futile in life and that the only way to exist in it is by going with the flow even at the price of losing one's sanity.

4. *Crimson Mist* (1999)

Although staked to his coffin, undead Batman neither dies, nor lives – his mind is still active, yet he cannot rise and do anything about it:

*Awareness but immobility... paralyzed in a state of eternal suffering;
I can think but I cannot move, thinking of nothing but the blood I cannot
take, the life I cannot have;
This is death for an undead vampire, the final reward of the damned,
and it is not death at all;
It is a trap between the world of the living and the realm of true death,
spanned by the length of splintered oak transfixing my heart to the limbo
between. (Moench 1999, 11)*

He is doomed to eternal damnation not by God, but by the torment of his own thoughts that chase away his peace and only bring about remorse and anxiety (Batman: *"As I rot, so do I go mad..."*, *"I feed once, yet the memory will haunt me forever."*. *"There is only the eternity of each moment, every moment made meaningless by the sameness of ceaseless torment..."*, 11; *"Horror is the awareness that the awareness of horror will never end."*, 2)

In his absence, the criminals, sensing that Batman is dead, have again taken over Gotham and spread havoc with the Dark vigilante not being able to do anything about it. Prompted by Commissioner Gordon, Alfred removes the stake from Batman's heart in an attempt to provide Gotham with a savior once again (Gordon: *"At least the devil we knew...was once a dark angel"*, 14).

Brought back to life and enraged at the decrepitude of his body, the loss of the women he had loved, the growing lust for blood and the desecration of his beloved city, Batman goes on a mad murderous spree killing and draining, literally and figuratively, the city's criminals including his arch-villains from Arkham Asylum (the Penguin, the Riddler, the Scarecrow, and Poison Ivy, among others). Such gruesome events are called in the book "the night(s) of the crimson mist" (39) in a somber analogy with the Nazi *Kristallnacht* that was intended to purge Germany of Jews.

In another grueling historical evocation Batman impales the heads of the criminals in the gate and fences facing the window cells of Blackgate Penitentiary as a warning for the remaining inmates. This gesture reverberates Dracula/Vlad Țepeș's forest of impaled Turks as a warning to Sultan Mehmed II invading Valachia. In both cases it seemed to have worked as strong deterrents since it countermanded the final offensive.

Only now can we see the force, the might and the amplitude of Batman's rage, when it is unleashed, and how majestic and noble he was when he controlled it. Batman is aware of the evil possessing him, experiences remorse and torments:

*Cursed by Dracula's kiss and the Joker's blood, I am beyond redemption,
and soon to pass beyond caring.*

Resisting evil is no longer possible, not when it tempts so seductively and offers such power.

With nothing but a random criminal here and there, I would be forced to prey on innocents – just as Riddler and Scarecrow did. (Moench 1999, 63-65)

Two-Face and Killer Croc escape this fate and contact Gordon and Alfred in a plan to kill Batman, who hides in his new lair in the caves beneath the ruins of Wayne Manor. Alfred lures his master into the center of the cavern while the others blow off its walls in order to let the sun consume the now vampiric knight. Batman is annihilated with a wooden bolt by Gordon. As soon as that happens, Two-Face and Killer Croc turn against Gordon trying to get rid of him. Consumed by guilt, Alfred offers his life to his master so that Batman can save Gordon and have a chance against the betraying criminals. He impales Croc in a stalagmite and shoots bolts into both of Two-Face's cheeks. With only Gordon left, the evil that dwells inside Batman first proposes to the Commissioner to turn him into a vampire as well and rule the world together (*"Become me! And if you do, no one – no one will ever stop us! Time will be ours, and we will take them all! Billions, Gordon, one crimson feast after another – oceans of blood until the whole world is drained dry!"*, 87).

Upon Gordon's refusal, Batman convinces him to blow up the roof of the Batcave which thus caves in accidentally crushing Gordon in the process. Considering that his mission is over after ridding Gotham of all criminals once again, but with the price of his own soul, in the manner of Faust, Batman walks into the light of the shining sun in a cathartic attempt to finish off the monster he had become and redeem his troubled spirit. The only thing that remains of him is his cape and cowl – a reminder of the hero that he once was.

Batman's demise mirrors Dracula's final dissolution in Bram Stoker's novel. Just like the Dark Knight, the darkest of vampires also disintegrates into dust:

As I looked, the eyes saw the sinking sun, and the look of hate in them turned to triumph. But, on the instant, came the sweep and flash of Jonathan's great knife. I shrieked as I saw it shear through the throat. Whilst at the same moment Mr. Morris's bowie knife plunged into the heart. It was like a miracle, but before our very eyes, and almost in the drawing of a breath, the whole body crumbled into dust and passed from our sight.

I shall be glad as long as I live that even in that moment of final dissolution, there was in the face a look of peace, such as I never could have imagined might have rested there. (Stoker 1994, 447)

5. Conclusions

The Batman that we know is disciplined, composed and self-controlled. He does not act on impulse because he knows *that* might be fatal. He controls terrifying anger and he knows that, once unleashed, it would be difficult, if not impossible to hold back with irreversible consequences, and then his mission would fail. So far he has directed all his strength, fury, capability for violence, anxiety, horror, intelligence, instinctuality onto himself as a fuel for his energy in fighting crime, and he managed to do that because he is a superior being. He was able to do it while the vast majority of people are not.

People mostly give in to temptations and instincts of all sorts and thus lose respect for themselves and the others, but not Batman, he is the best of heroes precisely because he struggles to dominate and actually does master all his instincts, feelings, drives and trauma. Batman is a perfect example of self-command of everything he does and feels and of nobody and nothing disturbing his self-discipline and morality. But for that he must overcome himself with courage, evil, self-motivation, suffering, and solitude, which very few people are capable of. He fills the void that opens in a culture where fundamental values are eroding.

This graphic trilogy is actually the most humane of all Batman stories reminding us that Batman, just like everybody else, is a human being, subject to error, imperfection and fall. It is an insight into what would happen if an impetuous and perfect justiciary like Batman snapped and succumbed to that which has tempted him forever: killing villains and wrong-doers who never reform, like the Joker, and thus putting an end to their forever coming-backs with newer and improved evil schemes that only bring about increasingly more chaos, pain and harm. Does that make him a monster or rather an accomplisher of something that the law will never be able to deal with completely? Is it a monster that which actually reveals the fragility of rules, order, and principles of morality (Cohen, 11)? Isn't that precisely the part of the villains that we empathise with: that they point out the imperfections and the ugly aspects of systems which we ourselves are actually aware of but never dare to confess or do something about openly and strongly? That's exactly what the villains do all the time (esp. The Joker, Two Face, Ra's Al Ghul) and so does Batman after he becomes a vampire. Monsters are in fact our own creations (20). They are actually mirrors into our own souls and reflections of our own thoughts and impulses.

Doug Moench and Kelley Jones' trilogy is actually one perspective on the answer to the question that all Batman fans have undoubtedly always thought of: 'What if Batman did kill the Joker and all the sadistic and psychopathic bad guys once and for all?' Well, beyond the obvious reason that maintaining them alive and

recurrent keeps the saga going and provides grounds for Batman's existence, the authors show how there is actually no real satisfaction for Batman in doing so. For an impetuous specimen such as him, doing justice with evil methods is a failure, not a victory, although the enemy has been defeated and peace has been established. We see in the second volume that this is but an illusion since evil uprooted in malevolent ways sprouts again, mutated and even more vicious. Giving up his principles and compromising is actually a painful defeat for the hero and all sacrifice is rendered futile. Therefore, the craving for redemption becomes all-consuming.

Not only does Batman deny himself all the pleasures and happiness of a normal life, such as somebody to love, friends, a family, children, minor indulgences etc. but he goes the whole distance: he sacrifices his own life to the benefit of others. In *Red Rain* Bruce Wayne dies and is buried, in *Bloodstorm* Batman is impaled with a wooden stake and in *Crimson Mist* he is consumed by the sun, all proving that he would and will sacrifice no matter how many times, if it serves and helps the people. That is actually the creed that consumes him and that makes him the hero that nobody else is capable to be.

But is that redeeming?

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