



‘With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility’:

The Impact of the Parent-Child Relationship on the
Development of the Heroic Identity within Comic Book and
Graphic Novel
Culture

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Declaration of Originality

Declaration: I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research and does not contain the work of any other individual. All sources that have been consulted have been identified and acknowledged in the appropriate way.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore the impact of the parent-child relationship on the development of the heroic identity within the comic book and graphic novel genre. The life of a hero is seen as a solitary one. For many, this solitary life begins in childhood, often with the loss of the parent. For many heroes, their origin story begins with trauma and isolation. It is this trauma and loss that will be explored throughout this thesis. In a similar manner, many characters have developed surrogate parental relationships, impacting their heroic identities in a very real way.

For many heroes the parental relationship, loss, and subsequent pseudo parental relationships are the reasons for their heroics. This thesis will explore the motivating factors for each hero based on their attachment types with their parents, as well as the significance of any loss they face. The core objective of this thesis is to understand why certain heroes behave as they do, be it craving isolation or their perpetual search for a new family.

While many heroes have iconic, instantly recognisable origin stories, others are more recognisable because of their role as a hero, with their origin being somewhat more obscure, with each hero being impacted in a different way as a result. Many of the heroes discussed in this thesis are superpowered beings, however there are some that will be discussed who possess no superpowers, but are heroes, nonetheless. While each hero has developed a different type of heroism, based off a different origin story, each hero discussed is deeply impacted by the parent-child relationship.

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List of Abbreviations:

Marvel Cinematic Universe - MCU

Spider-Man: Homecoming – *Homecoming*

Spider-Man Far From Home – *FFH*

Captain America: Civil War – *Civil War*

Avengers Assemble - *Avengers*

Avengers: Infinity War – *Infinity War*

Avengers: Endgame – *Endgame*

Kingsman: The Secret Service (Comic Book) – *The Secret Service*

Kingsman: The Secret Service (Film) – *Kingsman*

Kingsman: The Golden Circle – *The Golden Circle*

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Introduction:

The overarching argument within this thesis explores how parents and parental figures impact and shape the identity of the hero. This thesis will explore graphic novel culture as a whole, encompassing not just the written word, but also film and television adaptations, exploring the ways characters have been adapted and updated. One of the common themes within the comic book genre is the loss and trauma that surrounds the parent-child relationship, as seen in even the earliest graphic narratives, such as Batman's loss of the parent circa 1939 (Finger and Fox 1939). Although not every hero will face the loss of a parent or be part of a toxic parent-child relationship, or face trauma and loss within the paradigm of the parental relationship, the hero is certainly impacted by the bonds they share with their parents which alters and influences their moral compass, and as a result it alters their brand of heroism. The difference between the heroes, superheroes, and vigilantes in this thesis in many cases comes down to a matter of circumstance. While they are all motivated by the same thing, the circumstances surrounding their heroics varies. The word hero has many definitions ranging from ancient Greek mythology to simply defining a character in literature (Merriam Webster 2020). The definition used here, however, refers to: 'one who shows great courage' (Merriam Webster 2020). A superhero, on the other hand, is: 'a fictional hero having extraordinary or superhuman powers' or 'an exceptionally skilful or successful person' (Merriam Webster 2020).

Where some fall very firmly into the role of hero, others are more accurately described as antiheroes or even vigilantes. This thesis will explore these parent-child relationships, identifying the connections between certain types of hero, and certain types of parenting and whether or not tragedy occurs in the life of that hero. The most

memorable heroic origin stories are invariably part of this narrative of loss. The most famous or recognisable superheroes have this common theme, with some of the most relatable heroes being haunted by it from their earliest introductions. From Batman to Spider-Man, and countless heroes in between, there is some trauma rooted in childhood that drives them forward, prompting them to don the mask and protect the innocent. For many heroes their motivations and identity as heroes is external to them, created by factors outside of their control.

Although the life of a hero is invariably traumatic in itself, the origin story, their reason to be, is also traumatic, albeit in a different manner. The life of a hero is that of a soldier, fighting battles and wars most mortals could not even imagine, yet for most their traumas begin in some way with their family life:

I would argue that we can expand the ways in which heroes are traumatized by examining experiences away from the battlefield (in much the same way nonactive duty service members can experience PTSD and other sorts of trauma induced difficulties though the contributing factors differ) (Helvie 2012, 147).

While many heroic journeys begin with the tragic loss of a parent, that does not mean parental figures are absent, with some of the most influential parental figures appearing to the characters later in life, often serving as the catalyst for their heroic journey, with some acting as mentors for the heroic secret identities as well as the public persona of the individual.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the impact of these parental relationships – both biological and surrogate and analyse the impact these bonds had on the development of their heroic identities. For the vast majority of heroes, their methods vary greatly. While some are dark and violent, perpetuating the violence they

originally experienced, others focus on being light-hearted in the face of adversity, refusing to be ruled by their anger, bringing some humour into what would otherwise be a very sombre genre. For many heroes the security of the parental bond is what creates the motivation to be a hero. For others it is the sudden loss of that security and the subsequent quest for vengeance, and for some it is the toxic parental relationship that creates a need to protect the innocent. This thesis will explore examples of heroes from a variety of backgrounds, with differing parental relationships, socio-economic circumstances, ethnicities, and even some who inhabit different worlds. Not all heroes' journeys are created equally, nor is the inevitable tragedy in their lives equal. Depending on the type of relationships formed, the ability to form surrogate relationships, and attachment type, each hero will face something different in their origin story.

According to Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park, there are:

two major perspectives on personal relationships. The first, equity theory, views relationships in economic terms and proposes that close relationships – friendships or romances – are established and persist to the degree that both people involved believe that what they are getting out of the relationship is proportional to what they are putting into it (Peterson and Park, 2008, 11).

However, they also argue that for the majority of superheroes this relationship model cannot work, based on the superpowered advantage they have.

The second psychological perspective in personal relationships is provided by attachment theory, which emphasizes the feelings that bind people together and traces them to the initial attachment between infant and mother (Bowlby, 1969). Securely attached infants become securely attached adults and capable of reciprocal relationships... In this area superheroes appear no different than real people (Peterson and Park 2008, 11).

As such, the exploration of the superheroes psyche yields results that are applicable in reality, as well as in the world of comic books. The characters who will be discussed throughout this thesis are: Spider-Man, Iron Man, The Flash, Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan), Vision, Alana and Marko (seen in *Saga*), Kingsman, Batman and various Wayne Family members, the Incredible Hulk, Daredevil, and Cyborg. Each character represents a different origin, parental relationship, or ethnicity, allowing for a broader perspective on the parent-child relationship within the genre. While there are many notable heroes who could be discussed within this thesis, the characters discussed were narrowed down based on parental bonds and diverse representation ensuring a level of intersectionality throughout the project. While there are many properties such as Power Pack, X-Men, or even Superman, that could have been explored, the characters that are actually discussed were carefully selected based on their compatibility both with the topic and in their relationship to each other.

Throughout this thesis two main theorists will be used – John Bowlby and Diana Baumrind. Bowlby’s Attachment Theory and Baumrind’s parenting models (which will be outlined further in Chapter One) explore many aspects of the parent-child relationship that can be applied to the variety of parental relationships seen within the world of comic books. While comic books and their properties are having a surge in popularity, the narrative is still largely centred on the North American notion of the superhero. The heroes that will be discussed throughout this thesis, while set in different cultures and circumstances, are still largely written from a Western perspective, with the majority of comic books used coming from North America or Great Britain. Similarly, the theories that will be used throughout were developed by Western theorists, focusing on Western parenting models. As a result of the heavy emphasis on Western ideals within the theories, and in much of the comic book

narrative that is widely accepted, the two will be used to analyse the development of a Western definition of the superhero specifically, rather than a global idea of what it means to be a hero. Sara Harkness and Charles M. Super argue that ‘parenting is culturally constructed’ (Harkness and Super 2002, 253). Combining the notion of culturally constructed parenting ideologies with the Western notion of parenting presented within the theories, Western narratives will be the focus.

Equally important to explore are the images within the graphic novel. Each slight shift in perspective is vital for the story, changing the point of view of the reader, and focusing on the importance of each panel. The art style can greatly influence the way a story is read. A bright art style has the ability to make the reader view it as something less severe and sinister, while the same story with a more dark and mysterious art style can make the story seem more dramatic. Art style changes perception and opinion in just as many ways as the actual storytelling. The images provide a certain depth that is not always visible in the written word. Because the graphic novel is not a traditional narrative, it is vital to treat the image and text as symbiotic, allowing the reader get a better sense of the story, the character and the emotions that are felt, most of which are not shown in the written word. While the artwork will not be the primary focus throughout this thesis, the images will be discussed where appropriate, as they can often provide insights into the story or characterisation that the written word cannot. That said, the main focus of this thesis will be on the overall development of the hero, rather than the relationship between image and text.

As this area of research is a comparatively new area of research, with a small number of texts researching the superhero narrative through the lens of attachment

theory, this thesis will follow the same approach as those texts. Both Robin S. Rosenberg and Travis Langley have produced texts that explore the development of the superhero from early childhood to adulthood. Rosenberg in particular has produced several texts, either as a single author or as an editor, that have validated the application of psychological theory on comic book characters, using them as a means of allowing the wider population to access complex developmental theories. These texts explore these theories by analysing the characters in their origin stories as realistic people with fully developed histories and personalities. While the characters that will be discussed are certainly not real people, they have been developed by many creators over the course of their histories, and therefore have well-rounded personalities, allowing them to be analysed in much the same way as their real-life counterparts.

Travis Langley's *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* specifically analyses the relationship between Batman, Alfred, and the various Robin characters through the lens of attachment theory. The characters are treated as realistic depictions of people, and therefore the theories are applied to them in the same way they would in reality. Like Langley, Joseph J. Darowski has edited a series of books relating to the superhero, published by McFarland. Each book compiles essays relating to the psychology or development of specific characters. For this thesis *Ages of the Flash* and *Ages of the Incredible Hulk* will be explored. Similarly, Rosenberg's work treats the characters as real beings. This approach will be adopted throughout this thesis. The majority of other works exploring the psychology of the superhero explore the hero in a similar way. The hero is treated as a real being, and the theories are applied in that way. However, the majority of these texts are not coming from a literary background. Rather, they are psychological texts applying the theories to superheroes

in order for the theories to be made more accessible. Nevertheless, it is an effective method of analysis for the characters. Because each character has several dozen creators influencing their story arcs, as well as the cultural context of the particular stories, specific issues will be discussed throughout this thesis, following the same method as the scholars who have researched this topic.

In addition, comics scholars researching different areas of comics studies adopt the same approach. Jose Alaniz, whose text *Death, Disability, and the Superhero* is also explored in this thesis, analyses heroes with disability. To further this research, multidisciplinary texts will be used throughout this thesis, supporting the graphic narrative specific texts. Texts supporting both Baumrind and Bowlby's theories are used throughout this thesis, supporting the overall hypothesis.

Chapter One: A Brief Introduction to the Theories Discussed

1.1 Introduction

Before delving into an analysis of the specific heroes chosen, it is important to outline the theories that will be used to discuss them. The theories that will be discussed throughout this thesis, linking each section together are John Bowlby's attachment theories, linking with Diana Baumrind's parenting models. While the study of the parental relationship within the comic book and graphic novel genre is comparatively new, Bowlby's theory is often used, perhaps due to the relatability and adaptability of such theories. As a result, Bowlby's theory will continue to be used here, with the addition of Baumrind's parenting models. While originally developed to discuss the bonds formed in childhood, they are comfortably applied to fictional characters. Bowlby and Baumrind's theories have many similar elements, with a comparable scale representing the relationship between parent and child, and as a result they work well together in the context of childhood and adolescent development as presented in this thesis. Although each of these theories has been studied and adapted since their inception, the majority of the results have remained the same.

Like any field of study, there are certain limitations with each of these theories. Both primarily focus on the role of nurture rather than nature, and while that debate is certainly an important consideration, many of characters discussed in this thesis are impacted as much by nurture as biology, such as the Flash or Vision. Many of the characters no longer have biological parental relationships, instead they are raised by surrogate parents, parental figures that influence them and shape their identities, but who are nonetheless not their birth parents, removing the discussion about the nature

versus nurture debate to a certain extent. This thesis will not attempt to argue in favour of any side of the nature/nurture debate, rather it will bring to the fore the variety of parental bonds present in the world of the superhero narrative, endeavouring to explore the impact of these bonds on the overall development and wellbeing of the heroes.

Before discussing the theories, it is important to outline the methodology that will be applied throughout this thesis. As stated in the literature review, the majority of texts already exploring this topic apply the relevant psychological theories to the characters as they would and real case study, and so this thesis will adopt the same approach. For the most part, this aids in the accessibility of the theories, which are extremely complex. The first step in the methodology applied here is analysing the correlation between parenting style and attachment type, exploring the influence the parenting style had on the development of specific attachment types. While there are many reasons a child may adopt different attachment styles, there is a correlation between Baumrind and Bowlby's theories, and therefore the first step in methodology was analysing that in relation to each specific character origin story.

The second step in the methodology was exploring behavioural patterns within the origin stories, exploring the correlation between character behaviour and the behaviour patterns consistent with each attachment type. As with their real-life counterparts, the characters explored in this thesis have ever changing personalities, and as a result their attachment types are also flexible. Any character discussed here is likely to have various significant relationships and will often display entirely different attachment traits within each significant relationship. Attachment is not a fixed thing, something else that will be considered throughout. Indeed, a person can display more than one attachment trait at any given time, even within the same relationship. The

theories, outlined below, are flexible, with overlap occurring between different attachment types, leading to certain characters displaying traits from multiple attachment types. Similarly, a parent can display elements of different parenting models at different times, influencing that relationship in a myriad of ways. This is important to consider within the methodology, given the complexity of the themes explored.

1.2 Attachment Theory

Firstly, John Bowlby's Attachment Theory identifies four major attachment types, each one created by the parental bonds shared. Attachment Theory is a psychological model that focuses on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and the impact they have when people are separated. The theory is specific to the parental relationship, with Bowlby ensuring he highlighted the differences throughout. As Hazan and Zeifman note:

Bowlby took care to define the specific type of socioemotional bond to which his theory applied, and to distinguish it from other kinds of social ties. Attachment bonds have four defining features: "proximity maintenance", "separation distress", "safe haven", and "secure base" (Hazan and Zeifman 1999, 337).

As such, the differing aspects of relationships will impact each child in a wildly different manner. The aspects of that theory applied here were developed by Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby in the 1960s and 1970s, although both worked on the theories independently in their early careers (Bretherton 1992, 759). The theory mainly developed in the aftermath of World War Two, where Bowlby observed the mass evacuations and the displacement they led to:

Trying to make sense of the mass child evacuation's long-term consequences, psychologist John Bowlby launched a long line of studies on parent-child bonds. Mary Ainsworth, building on his work, concluded that people have different attachment styles, patterns in how people bond and seek closeness from others (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 4).

Attachment theory primarily explores the relationship between the mother or father and the child, although as it developed it expanded to include other influential relationships. This theory focuses chiefly on the primary caregiver, viewing other relationships as less connected. It largely focuses on the Western tradition of the mother as primary caregiver; however, it does also encompass to a lesser extent different cultural dynamics where there are multiple caregivers, and their subsequent impact on childhood attachments. One of the elements of Attachment Theory is the quality of the relationships. While a child may form an attachment to any caregiver, the quality of these attachments varies. This theory focuses on the impact of parental proximity on childhood development. There are four main classifications of relationships within attachment theory. Childhood relationships are classified as secure, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant, and disorganised. Throughout attachment theory the names of these attachment styles can vary, although the meanings and impacts remain the same: 'Ainsworth originally identified three main patterns: one secure and two insecure styles...Mary Main later added a fourth childhood style, disorganized, for children who lacked any coherent pattern of coping with others' (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 4).

Secure attachments relate to a child who is securely attached emotionally to their parent or primary caregiver, who is visibly upset by the absence of the parent, and who is generally happy to see that parent return: 'The securely attached person shows grief following serious losses, feels anger toward whomever they lost, and

suffers less depression than insecure types. Bereavement leads to greater personal growth among the securely attached, although throughout all the styles, violent death yields more complicated grief responses than nonviolent' (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 5). Secure attachments are created by parents who are sensitive or are responsive to the needs of their child. There are several subcategories of this attachment type that focus on personality and responses. In each subcategory the child is most able to adapt when they are secure in the knowledge that the caregiver will respond: '*Secure individuals* have a positive model of themselves and others' (Newman, Newman 2012, 470). There are some heroes who fit into the category of secure attachment, although they are less frequent than many others. Some characters, such as Batman, will display secure traits with certain figures in their lives, but not others, adding a complexity to his attachment style.

Anxious-ambivalent attachment (also known as anxious attachment or preoccupied attachment) encompasses children who are likely to explore very little, and who are wary of strangers, even when the parent is present, unlike a secure attachment. As Crittenden and Claussen argue: 'Anxious-resistant (or anxious-ambivalent) babies (Type C) are characteristically angry at the mother during reunion, as manifested by rejections of toy offers, pouting or whining, and/or showing prolonged distress despite the mother's efforts to console' (Crittenden and Claussen 2000, 200). When the parent is absent the child is highly distressed, yet there is ambivalence when the parent returns, which is more likely to create an anxious or nervous disposition later in life. This attachment type is likely to lead to difficulty maintaining relationships later in life.

Anxious-avoidant attachment shows children who will avoid or ignore the caregiver, showing little to no emotion when the parent leaves or returns. Crittenden and Claussen once again note: ‘Anxious-avoidant babies (Type A) characteristically avoid the mother on reunion, as indexed by avoiding eye contact and ignoring the mother’s social bids’ (Crittenden and Clausen 2000, 200). Children who display this type of attachment are likely to ignore or shy away from the parent, yet it is theorised that this is simply a way to mask distress. This attachment type is created when there is a history of rejection, and the needs of the child are not met. The child learns that their emotional responses have little impact, and as a result they display little emotion.

Disorganised or disoriented attachment was identified by Ainsworth, who found difficulty in fitting all childhood behaviour into the first three categories. Disorganised attachment is visible in the physical reaction of a child, including tensing muscles when a parent is absent. It is the attachment type that displays the most obvious stress during separation:

Disorganized-disoriented babies display behaviour indicative of fear, conflict, or confusion vis-à-vis their mothers during reunions which can be variously manifested... by sequential or simultaneous display of contradictory behaviour patterns; undirected, misdirected, incomplete, and interrupted movements and expressions; stereotypies, asymmetrical movements, mistimed movements, and anomalous postures; freezing, stilling, and slowed movements and expressions; and direct indexes of apprehension, disorganization, or disorientation (Crittenden and Clausen 2000, 200).

This form of attachment is the most heavily criticised for being too encompassing, not allowing for enough distinction. As a result, it is often considered to be a heightened version of the other attachments, depending on the situation. It is typically seen when

a child who has been rejected multiple times seeks comfort or reassurances from any authority figure yet are uncomfortable with emotional displays.

Attachment theory later expanded to include adolescent and adult relationships, focusing on a variety of relationships, including friendship or romantic attachments. It is these adult attachment types that will be the primary focus for the heroes noted in the introduction, with some inspiration being derived from the earlier attachment styles. The categories for adult relationships were also classified by Bowlby and Ainsworth, and correlate with the classifications in childhood. They are classified as secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. Secure relationships typically show ease at developing emotional relationships, developing from a history of warm, dependable attachments. Secure attachment tends to give people a positive view of the self and of attachments. The remaining attachment types are considered insecure.

People who fall into the anxious-preoccupied (formerly anxious-ambivalent) category crave emotional relationships, yet they are often left unfulfilled because of how emotionally intimate they feel other people are with them. As Newman and Newman argue: '*Preoccupied individuals* have a positive model of others, but a negative model of the self...When one or both partners are characterized by a preoccupied attachment the likelihood of abuse in the relationship increases' (Newman and Newman 2012, 470). People with this attachment seek high levels of approval which can lead to excessive dependency on the attachment figure. This leads to questions of self-worth.

People who fall into the dismissive-avoidant (previously anxious-avoidant) category may or may not desire close emotional relationships, viewing independence

and self-sufficiency as more important. This desire for independence can often appear as avoiding emotional relationships altogether. This attachment style is characteristically defensive, where the person denies needing close relationships. Dismissive-avoidant people often seek emotional relationships with those they view less positively than they view themselves: '*Dismissing avoidant individuals* have a positive model of the self, but a negative model of others' (Newman and Newman 2012, 470).

The final attachment type, fearful-avoidant (stemming from the disorganised-disoriented attachment type), is an attachment style borne from particularly traumatic histories. It is displayed through a discomfort with emotional attachments, and difficulty with trust in relationships. People who display this form of attachment view themselves as less worthy of significant attachments and view the focus of the attachment as having questionable motives. Newman and Newman argue: '*Fearful avoidant individuals* have a negative model of both self and others' (Newman and Newman 2012, 470). However, it is important to note that Attachment Theory specifies that while attachment types early in life shape and influence later attachments, they do not completely determine the outcome. With certain attachment types there is some overlap. However, there are some attachment types in direct opposition to each other. As Newman and Newman note:

The secure and dismissing individuals have high self-esteem; however, they differ markedly in the value they place on intimacy and in their interpersonal style. Secure individuals value relationships and are viewed as warm and nurturing. In contrast, dismissing individuals minimize relationships in favour of self-reliance and are viewed as cold or competitive. The fearful avoidant and preoccupied individuals lack the self-esteem of the secure or dismissing groups. However, the fearful individuals avoid social contact, whereas the

preoccupied individuals try hard to engage in relationships (Newman and Newman 2012, 470).

Similar to dismissive-avoidant people, fearful-avoidant people deny emotions or attachments, suppressing emotions. It is the attachment style that shows the most discomfort in expressing any emotion or affection. Through this expanded model it is possible to see the impact childhood relationships have on adulthood. Characters who have secure attachments as children tend to have the same bonds later in life, while other characters who have a history of trauma tend to distance themselves from other characters, leading a more isolated life. For consistency and coherency throughout this thesis abbreviated names for each attachment style will be used. secure attachment will remain the same, however fearful-avoidant will be described as fearful, dismissive-avoidant will be described as avoidant, and anxious-avoidant will be referred to as anxious attachment. Throughout this thesis, each attachment type will be applied to a different character. Often, characters including but not limited to Spider-Man, Iron Man, or Ms. Marvel will display traits of different attachment types at different periods, or with different periods, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation.

1.3 Diana Baumrind's Parenting Models

Like Bowlby, Baumrind (with later help from Maccoby and Martin) identified four main parenting models. Diana Baumrind focused on the classification of parenting styles and considered there to be four basic elements that shape parenting: Responsiveness vs. Unresponsiveness and Demanding vs. Undemanding. She initially developed three parenting styles to fit these categories. Each parenting model is differently child focused. The final parenting style was later added by Baumrind's

contemporaries, Maccoby and Martin, and is the most negative model of parenting. These models are: Authoritarian, Authoritative, Permissive, and Neglectful. Baumrind believed that parents should neither be focused or rigid nor should they be aloof and should find a balance between rules and affection.

Authoritarian parenting focuses on control, with no focus on warmth. Authoritarian parents are often considered demanding but not responsive. It is a rule heavy parenting style that provides little focus on the wellbeing of the child and is more focused on perception. Authoritarian parenting has lasting impacts on the child. According to Benson and Haith:

An authoritarian parent stresses the importance of compliance, conformity, parental control, respect for authority, and maintaining order. Such parents exercise high degrees of control on and maturity demands from their children; however, this is coupled with low amounts of nurturance and clarity of communication. Complete obedience is expected from children, and authoritarian parents will put a stop to any action the child take to defy them (Benson and Haith 2009, 282).

Children in authoritarian families tend to have less social competence, as they have been given rigid structures without room for personal development. Children from authoritarian families also tend to conform more, and obedience is a primary result. Later in life this leads to complications relating to personal development, as autonomy and decision-making skills have been actively discouraged throughout childhood and adolescence. Benson and Haith further argue that:

The authoritarian parent often discourages the child's autonomy and instead attempts to shape the child to exhibit behaviours and attitudes the parent deems desirable. This strategy could hinder the child's maturation by not allowing the child adequate experience making decisions or taking responsibility for his or her own actions (Benson and Haith 2009, 282).

However not all children from these backgrounds conform later in life, with some rebelling in adolescence or adulthood, and others developing escapist tendencies. These behaviours often continue to adulthood. Authoritarian parenting is high on demandingness, with a tendency towards harsh punishment for disobedience: ‘When children deviate from the strict standards set for them, the authoritarian parent favors the use of harsher forms of punishment than used by authoritative parents’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 282). However, this high demandingness and extreme punishment leads to later issues. This is true for several characters in this thesis, with one of the most demanding parental figures being Vision, creating a complex series of events for his own children.

Where authoritarian parenting focuses on extremes, and is quite a negative parenting model, authoritative parenting is a more balanced approach. Authoritative parenting combines a somewhat firm level of control, but with a lot of warmth: ‘Authoritative parents, however, are careful not to use harsh forms of punishment or restrict their child’s autonomy. Authoritative parents also show warmth, love, and acceptance for their child’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 282). It is a child centred approach, yet it holds high expectations for the child. Authoritative parents are more likely to help children find solutions or overcome issues, regardless of the high standards set. It is a parenting style that allows for some independence but also enforces limits. In general, there is a high level of parental responsiveness and awareness. An authoritative parenting style is categorised by an expectation of maturity and control, with discipline and demandingness evident in the relationship, yet a high level of warmth and encouragement. An authoritative is the most balanced in terms of demandingness and responsiveness:

An authoritative parent exerts firm control over the child, expects maturity, and establishes reasonable guidelines for the child to abide. Simultaneously, authoritative parents make disciplinary decisions by integrating the point of view of the child as long as the parent perceives it to be reasonable' (Benson and Haith 2009, 282).

Authoritative parenting also encourages open communication between the parent and child, creating a more positive, open dynamic: 'Authoritative parenting is like a democracy in which the feelings and ideas of both the parents and the children are recognized and supported' (Benson and Haith 2009, 282). Indeed, the open dialogue allows for healthy, reciprocal communication while not becoming too permissive in its tendencies. As a result, there is a balance between demandingness and responsiveness that creates a supportive environment for the child to grow.

Permissive parenting has very little control but is a very warm relationship. Baumrind considered permissive parenting as the most child-centred model of parenting, yet it is not the most inherently positive. Benson and Haith describe the permissive relationship as:

A permissive parent is described as having a high level of nurturance and clarity of communication, paired with low levels of control or maturity demands. They have little expectation of mature behaviour from the child, allowing the child the freedom to act and choose activities as he or she pleases. Furthermore, the permissive parent rarely governs the child's time schedule and allows children to determine their own bedtime, mealtime, and time spent watching television (Benson and Haith 2009, 283).

It is the relationship where parents are most involved, but where there are few behavioural expectations. Where the authoritarian parent is restrictive of a child's autonomy, 'the permissive parent also often holds the belief that restricting the child's actions in any way might infringe on the child's autonomy' (Benson and Haith 2009,

283). As a result, the permissive parent seldom makes requests or demands of the child, accepting and supporting all behaviour patterns without enforcing consequences: ‘They avoid using punishment, asserting authority, or imposing restrictions on the child, whenever possible’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 283). Instead of discipline or punishment a permissive parent will use reasoning to convey authority. Parents tend to be excessively nurturing, allowing the child to determine appropriate behaviour. This type of parenting leads to impulsiveness. There are few rules or guidelines set out for a child by a permissive parent, and often the parent wishes to be seen more as a friend than an authority figure.

Neglectful parenting (also known as the indifferent parenting style) is categorised by a lack of responsiveness to the needs of the child: ‘An indifferent parent is characterized as being neither demanding nor responsive to the child’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 283). The parent tends to be uninvolved, making few demands, and invests little time or energy into their relationship with the child. Unlike Permissive parenting, they are indifferent, dismissive or completely neglectful, often having little to no knowledge regarding their child: ‘Additionally, indifferent parents fail to implement guidelines or rules to control the child’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 283), however, unlike the permissive parent, the motivations behind this are not encouraging autonomy, but rather a lack of concern. Where permissive parenting is a very child-centric model of parenting, neglectful parenting is the opposite, being a parent-centred method. It leads to impulsive behaviour, but also delinquency. Mental health and emotional development are impacted negatively by this parenting style. It is a drastically different parenting style, not focused on the child’s development.

Indifferent parents fail to set regulations for their children, not because they have the philosophy that it will hinder the child’s development, but instead

because they are too preoccupied with their own life to concern themselves with implementing rules for their children. In extreme cases, indifferent parents could be considered negligent (Benson and Haith 2009, 283).

Although certain comic book characters will have a very obvious attachment style or parenting model within their story arc, others will have a combination of several, making them more complex and nuanced as a character. Similarly, many representations of both attachment types and parenting styles will be hyperbolic, dramatized due to the nature of the genre. Each parenting style and attachment type can be seen in the lives of a variety of comic book characters from *Detective Comics* #33 (Finger, Fox 1939), to present day with characters such as *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson and Alphona 2014), and within a variety of publishing houses and genres. One thing that connects many heroes is the tragedy surrounding their families, or the bond they share with their primary caregivers. The remainder of this thesis will endeavour to explore the variety of relationships within comic books, based on the attachment types and parenting styles, determining the type of hero a character will become because of this. While some heroes choose the life of a hero because of the loss of a parent or guardian, others do it because of the potentially negative relationships they had, with some using the parental influence as a moral compass. While each heroes relationship with their parents will differ greatly depending on the point they are at in their story, the time period in which they were published, or even the writers and artists working on their story at a particular time, Bowlby and Baumrind's theories can be widely applied to gain a broader perspective on the driving force behind certain heroes and the impact their family bonds have.

Chapter Two: Becoming a Friendly Neighbourhood Spider-Man: The Impact of the Absent Parent on Peter Parker

2.1 Introduction

For many comic book characters, the earliest aspect of their origin story revolves around the sudden, often violent loss of a parent or guardian. The absent parent, while a common theme in many origin stories, impacts each hero differently, largely due to the differing parenting styles or types of attachment. This is as a result of both the cultural context of the time in which the stories are created, and the experiences of the creators. The characters, although not real people, are reflective of the ideals of both the creators and the readers, resulting in a well-rounded personality that can carry such complex psychological theory. Due to the expansive nature of the genre, specific issues or story arcs will be discussed, as the numerous, often concurrent arcs would certainly be overwhelming. ‘Comic book characters are variable by nature; their powers, personalities, relationships, and origin stories are rarely static’ and therefore it is important to outline parameters (Tedeschi 2019). Instead, there will be a select number of issues and arcs discussed showing the character in a variety of scenarios, exploring the individual relationships within these arcs. This chapter will discuss the impact of the absent parent on the young Peter Parker and his subsequent progression to become Spider-Man.

While there are now a number of Spider-Man characters (with many seen in *Into the Spider-Verse*), this chapter will primarily focus on Peter Parker, the original iteration of the character due to the scope of the extended ensemble of characters. Peter Parker is one of Marvel Comics’ most recognisable heroes, with several long running

and successful printed series’, and many live action and animated adaptations. Yet he is a character who has faced loss and tragedy, shaping him into the friendly, neighbourhood Spider-Man that has graced the pages of comic books since the 1960s, with his introduction seen in *Amazing Fantasy #15*¹ before gaining enough popularity to have his own series. His story remains largely consistent throughout the decades since his introduction, with generally the same events triggering his metamorphosis in each story arc and adaptation. Each version of the character faces several losses, with the death of his Uncle Ben acting as the catalyst for change in his life. Ben Parker was the primary paternal figure in Peter’s life, and as a result his loss is the most poignant for him.

This chapter will explore the relationships Peter shared with Ben Parker in the comic books, and his relationship with Tony Stark in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), as well as incorporating his relationship with Aunt May both in print and on screen. The Spider-Man story arcs that will be explored are primarily taken from the *Amazing Spider-Man* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe versions of the character, with some slight influence coming from *Ultimate Spider-Man*. For each character discussed in this thesis specific moments in their publication history show the development of various parental relationships, and the emphasis here will be on some of the most prominent relationships in their story arcs. For Spider-Man, the MCU film franchise and *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic book series are ongoing, and as a result the information is correct at the time of writing but is subject to change. However, the vast majority of this chapter – and thesis as a whole – will focus on specific issues in order to ensure the information remains consistent and correct.

¹ Published in 1962 by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko.

2.2 Spider-Man and the Absent Parent

Peter Parker has been an icon of Marvel Comic's for decades. Thanks to long running story arcs, animated television series', and several film franchises, he is one of the most recognisable heroes in Marvel history. Given the extensive publication history for the character, this section will primarily focus on the earliest issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, helmed by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko (Lee and Ditko 2012), as well as the origin story as seen in *Amazing Fantasy #15*. The Marvel Cinematic Universe will serve as the live action adaptation discussed in this chapter, although Spider-Man does have numerous on-screen versions. However, the relationship between Peter and Tony is one of the most poignant and impactful relationships on screen.

From his introduction Peter is portrayed in a certain way, setting a precedent for how he would be viewed as a hero: 'Peter Parker is portrayed as a brainy, shy teenager who transforms into a superpowered man after a radioactive spider bites him' (Rosenberg 2013, 172). Yet this massive superheroic transformation is not the only upheaval in his life. At an early age, before his story even began, he was orphaned, sent to live with his Aunt May and Uncle Ben. Unfortunately for Peter the trauma did not stop there. Not only were his parents killed at an early age, but he faced the loss of his second father figure - Uncle Ben - through circumstances that left Peter feeling powerless, riddled with guilt, and with an unshakeable sense of responsibility: 'Peter decides to use his superpowers for the common good after his actions unintentionally become part of a chain of events that lead to the murder of his beloved uncle.' (Rosenberg 2013, 172). While Peter lost his biological parents at an early age, and this was undoubtedly impactful, it is Ben's death that truly shapes him as a hero. The loss of his biological parents is not truly explored in this first introduction and does not

shape the hero he becomes. The direct influence Peter had in Ben's death means his loss was more influential for Peter as a hero.

Throughout the course of his life Peter has had many paternal influences, though few of them reach the significance of his relationship with Ben Parker. In spite of the significance their relationship holds for Peter, 'the death of Uncle Ben is essential to the story of Peter Parker' (Tallon 2012, 86). Not only does Ben's death ultimately shape the man Peter would become, as fully as if Ben would have influenced him had he lived (albeit in a different manner than Ben would have preferred), but the type of hero Peter becomes is directly influenced by the night Ben died. This section will explore the variety of relationships in Peter's life and show their impact on Peter's development as a hero.

Peter's story was first introduced to the world in *Amazing Fantasy #15*, created by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee in 1962. Introduced as a shy, timid, isolated teenager, Peter is described as a 'professional wallflower' (Lee and Ditko 2012). Even the issue cover highlights the bullying and frailty that Peter Parker experiences (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 *Amazing Fantasy #15* Cover Page Lee, Ditko 2012 © Marvel Comics

The reader is set up to believe that Peter is weak, frail, and at times incapable, believing what the vast majority of characters in the series do, excluding Aunt May and Uncle Ben: ‘The Peter we meet first in *Amazing Fantasy #15* is good at school, unlucky in love, and the unfortunate object of high-school scorn’ (Tallon 2012, 87). Yet this is not the only aspect to his identity. Although this early introduction and impression of the character is important, particularly when considering the target audience of adolescent boys (Tallon 2012), his home life is given equal consideration within the story. While Peter is a social outcast in his high school setting, he is depicted in a loving, stable home, with very evident signs of secure attachment. According to Rosenberg: ‘He is beloved by his elderly guardians Aunt May and Uncle Ben, with whom he lives. In their view, the sun rises and sets around Peter’ (Rosenberg 2013, 173). *Amazing Fantasy #15*, the issue that introduced the world to Spider-Man, was the first appearance of Uncle Ben, and the same issue in which he died, leaving Peter

with the sense of guilt that haunts him throughout his life. It is rare for a superhero to have their introductory issue so focused on their origin story, yet for Spider-Man it has become one of the most recognisable aspects of his identity as a hero. The moment he becomes a hero is forever tainted by the memory of loss. While he gained incredible powers in that issue, he also lost the one father figure in his life that he could consistently rely on: ‘This power has come with an equally great price that he will forever pay: his happiness, peace of mind, and the blessings of normalcy that most of us take for granted’ (Fettinger 2006, 149).

2.2.1 Uncle Ben and the Loss of Childhood Innocence

The day Ben Parker died was the beginning of the end for Peter. Yet the impact of their bond is consistently seen throughout the remainder of Peter’s life. As Tallon notes, ‘The death of Peter Parker’s uncle powerfully shapes his hero ethos and his desire to fight crime’ (Tallon 2012, 86). Without Uncle Ben’s death, it is likely that Peter would not have embraced the role of Spider-Man with such gusto, but the undercurrent of guilt that informs his choices as a hero are firmly rooted in the night Ben Parker died. While many characters face the loss of their parents and guardians, with a few actually witnessing the deaths, it is rare that a hero will play a part in the death of a loved one.

However, Peter is an exception, and is ‘partly responsible for the death of Uncle Ben, so Peter blames himself and feels ashamed, even keeping the secret of how Ben died from his Aunt May for many years’ (Tallon 2012, 87). It is the burden of this secret, his shame, and the secret identity that he carries throughout his publication history, which shape his approach to heroism, informing every heroic choice he makes.

Amazing Fantasy #15 never attempts to save Peter from the burden of guilt, instead making that guilt part of his narrative forever more. There is a moral question surrounding Peter and his involvement in the death of Ben Parker, raising the question of just how much of the burden of guilt is in fact Peter's. While the burglar is the one who pulled the trigger, ending Ben's life, Peter failed to stop him when he had the chance, an act of rebellion and selfishness that he will pay for forevermore.

However, as much responsibility as Peter claims, he is not wholly at fault. As Tallon further argues: 'Is Peter still suffering from an inflated sense of importance when he says Uncle Ben's death is "all" his fault? Is it really the case that Peter's act of selfishness makes him the principal person to blame for Uncle Ben's death?' (Tallon 2012, 88). Although Peter is not wholly innocent, given that he 'initially chooses self over his familial community' (Helvie 2012, 146), he is not wholly responsible either. Tallon argues the possibility of luck playing as important a role in the death of Ben Parker as Peter did. Through a philosophical lens Tallon questions the link between chance and morality, highlighting the complexities surrounding Uncle Ben's death, and the subsequent consequences Peter could never have predicted.

The moments leading up to Ben's death feature a moment of unexpected callousness from Peter. His newfound superpowers have given him an inflated sense of importance, as has his sudden success as an entertainer. It is the first moment in his life that Peter is untouchable, and so he acts as superior as he feels. As the thief is fleeing a crime scene, pursued by a police officer who will never catch him, he passes Spider-Man. While the criminal escapes, Peter and the aforementioned police officer share a brief but significant encounter. Where the police officer is furious, Spider-Man is casually dismissive: 'Sorry pal, that's your job! I'm thru being pushed around – by anyone! From now on I just look out for number one – that means me!' (Lee and Ditko

2012). The dismissal grows when the police officer threatens Peter with an arrest, and Peter turns, walking away saying: 'Save your breath buddy! I've got things to do!' (Lee and Ditko 2012) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Peter refuses to help the police, Lee, Ditko 2012 © Marvel Comics

This deviates greatly from the person seen in the opening pages of the comic book, and certainly deviates from the person Peter is with his Aunt and Uncle, indicating the significance he places on their relationship. However, this is perhaps an indication of the type of hero Spider-Man would become, had these actions not lead to the death of Uncle Ben.

Much of Peter's character is determined by Ben's death, yet it was arguably caused by bad luck. Peter could not possibly have known exactly what would happen when he let the criminal escape, yet that does not assuage his guilt: 'How does luck relate to morality? Can luck change a good action into a bad one, or vice versa?'

(Tallon 2012, 89). The panels that follow the criminals escape show a brief, heartfelt moment between Peter and his guardians, unsullied by Peter's callousness towards other people. Indeed, this scene serves as a reminder of the significance of family in Peter's life, ensuring that Ben's death is as impactful as possible for the reader as well as for Peter. Although he may be unforgiving towards the rest of the world, Peter's relationship with his family remains true. When Peter's unheroic course of action lead to the death of his beloved uncle, one half of the only secure bond he shared, it changed his morality, eventually creating the hero so familiar to readers.

Nevertheless, this is his act of defiance, the one time in his life that nobody is capable of pushing him around. Peter Parker, the weak, bullied young boy may have done what was in his power to stop the thief, yet Spider-Man has no need to take orders, more powerful than any mere thief, and therefore unconcerned with what he perceives in that moment to be trivial. Unfortunately for Peter it is a mistake that he will attempt to rectify for the rest of his life. According to Helvie: 'The death of his Uncle Ben serves as the moment of his being fractured apart from his community and his continual attempt to return that broken community to its original state of wholeness' (Helvie 2012, 149). The death of Uncle Ben, although seen so early in the story, acts as a moral compass for Peter throughout his life. For many heroes the lost parent is their moral compass, that unseen conscience. The bond between Peter and his Guardians is established as a source of comfort in his life from the onset, with Peter himself commenting on the fact that they are 'the only ones who have ever been kind to me! I'll see to it that they're always happy, but the rest of the world can go hang for all I care' (Lee and Ditko 2012). Even as Peter grows to understand the new powers he has developed, he vows to keep his guardians happy, showing the reader that in that moment they are all that truly matters to Peter. Although Peter has developed

incredible powers, his personal life remains the same. It never appears to Peter's mind to use his newfound abilities to further himself socially, instead choosing to remain the same socially isolated version of Peter Parker he was before he got the powers. This reflects the conventions of the genre, with the hero seen as pure of heart. It also serves as the foundation of Peter's character, the young hero suddenly gifted with abilities that could change his life, yet he remains true to himself.

While he undoubtedly loves and trusts his guardians, Peter is also unwilling to burden them with his secret. Perhaps this is so he can use his secret identity to repay them in some way, as is suggested in both *Amazing Fantasy #15*, and its immediate sequel, *Amazing Spider-Man #1* (Lee and Ditko 2012). Or perhaps some part of Peter recognises the dangers associated with the life of a superpowered being and is unwilling to put Aunt May and Uncle Ben (and eventually just May) on the line. Although it is seen primarily in his life as Spider-Man, Ben's influence is present in Peter's personal life and development of relationships. There is strong evidence in the opening pages of *Amazing Fantasy #15* showing the secure bond and healthy relationship between the teenaged Peter and his elderly caregivers. That security is even reflected in his interactions with other students. While they are negative towards him, bullying and isolating him because of his intelligence, he is not afraid to approach them. Although he deems himself to be shy from the very beginning, Peter is willing to ask the same people to be his friends, in spite of a history of rejection.

While aspects of this personality could be attributed to an anxious attachment type, Robin S. Rosenberg argues that it is not at all to do with shyness, but rather the fact that he has very little choice. These are his peers, he spends eight hours a day with them, five days a week. 'Peter Parker isn't shy, it's just that his classmates don't want

to have anything to do with him socially' (Rosenberg 2013, 177). His choices are simple – he can make the effort, or he can accept his social isolation. Rosenberg argues that rather than being shy, Peter is simply a bad fit in his school. When that trust is broken, and the relationships Peter is trying to cultivate are unsuccessful he is angry, resorting to the defence mechanism of plotting a far-fetched, improbable revenge, masking the initial pain of rejection. Yet his secure bond means this rejection – which had clearly happened before – did not damage his sense of self, nor did it damage his relationships with the majority of people in his life:

Assuming Parker is not shy, it's still remarkable that he keeps initiating social contact despite being turned down. Why might he do that? It could be that he's full of self-confidence or that he's socially obtuse (or both). I think it's because, like it or not, Peter has no other choice (Rosenberg 2013, 178).

This may also be true of his attachment type. Although later in the series, sometime after the death of Uncle Ben, Peter displays characteristics of anxious attachment, it is not true of his relationship with Aunt May and Uncle Ben. If he was truly anxious his behaviour would be unpredictable, and in the opening panels where he faces rejection multiple times, he would likely have had a far more extreme reaction. Secure attachment is the healthiest bond created, where the child sees others as helpful or supportive, much in the way their caregivers are. Children with a secure bond are confident, viewing themselves as deserving of respect. It is the relationship that displays the most trust in others. Arguably the parenting style most suited to creating a secure bond is the Authoritative parenting style. While this style is clearly nurturing and affectionate, it also sets out clear boundaries. Although both Aunt May and Uncle Ben dote over their nephew, treating him as though he was their own son, boundaries are set. This is first noticeable when, shortly after Ben's death, Peter attempts to leave

school to support his family. While this would undoubtedly have removed some of the financial burden suddenly felt by Aunt May, she told him unequivocally that the answer was no. Peter protests: ““Aunt May, there’s only one thing to do! I’ve got to quit school and get a job!”” (Lee and Ditko 2012), with May responding: ““No Peter, you mustn’t! Your uncle always dreamed of you being a scientist some day! You must continue your studies!”” (Lee and Ditko 2012). While Peter eventually finds a way of helping Aunt May, he does so while still respecting the boundaries she has put in place for him.

His guilt certainly manifests here and is one of the main reasons he disobeys her in this indirect way, hoping to help her in a way that he could not help his Uncle Ben: ‘But I’ve got to help Aunt May somehow! Wait! With my powers as Spiderman, I can do anything!’ (Lee and Ditko 2012). While the relationship Peter has with his Aunt begins to change after Ben’s death, with Peter becoming more secretive and dishonest about his extracurricular activities, the foundation that relationship gave him remains the same, with a secure, if somewhat dishonest bond remaining. However, it is moments like these that give way to Peter’s more anxious attachment style. Attachment theory and grief regularly work together, with Bowlby having a model of the four stages of grief predating the accepted five step model seen today. For the purpose of this section, and the majority of this thesis, Bowlby’s four stages of grief will be used, relating back to the attachment styles displayed throughout the life of the hero. The stages of grief are:

1. Numbness, shock and denial with a sense of unreality;
2. Yearning and protest. It involves waves of grief, sobbing, sighing, anxiety, tension, loss of appetite, irritability and lack of concentration. The bereaved may sense the presence of the dead person, may have a sense of

guilt that they did not do enough to keep the deceased alive and may blame others for the death;

3. Despair, disorganisation, hopelessness, low mood;
4. Re-organisation, involving letting go of the attachment and investing in the Future (Mallon 2008).

From the moment of Ben's death in *Amazing Fantasy #15* stage one of grief is clear – shock and numbness. Peter is in complete disbelief at the death of his uncle, and even further consumed by the part he played in that death, however indirect that part may have been. Stage two – yearning and searching – becomes clear almost immediately, with Peter's quest for vengeance painfully evident. He aims to catch the killer at any cost, although he had the chance to before and failed. By stage three – despair and disorganisation – Peter has begun to accept the new status quo, beginning to accept that the change in his life cannot be undone. The feeling of hopelessness he feels is evident, culminating in the moment he catches the killer. His entire being has been focused on catching his Uncle's murderer, so much so that the intense focus has prevented him from truly coming to terms with Ben's death.

That is until he reaches stage four – Re-organisation and recovery. In this phase Peter has started to rebuild his life, now with just his Aunt May. He has come to terms with the fact that his primary paternal figure has gone, the second father in his life to leave. He has established new goals – he refuses to let Ben's death be in vain. While the grief he feels is the motivation behind the Spider-Man identity, it recedes into the background throughout his life, rather than being the primary focus. While the grief recedes, for Peter it never truly disappears. Instead of setting goals and establishing new motivations in his personal life, Peter focuses on the world of superheroism, neglecting much of his life outside the mask. As a result, his relationship style begins to change.

While prior to Ben's death Peter had a distinctly secure bond that begins to change. He moves towards the Anxious-Resistant form of attachment. His confidence in relationships wains, he neglects the relationships between his friends, Mary Jane, Gwen Stacy, and even subsequent father figures. Where Peter was confident yet shy prior to Ben's death, he now sticks closer to Aunt May, no doubt fearing the same fate for her on a subconscious level. This anxious attachment continues into adulthood. Peter perceives his relationships as being more fragile, and as a result he often appears to crave the attention of his friends and romantic partners, to the point of destructiveness. While Peter is not an extreme case of Anxious Attachment – where the person becomes unpredictable and irrationally jealous – he does often push his partners away. While he is married to Mary Jane Watson, and had a long-term relationship with Gwen Stacy, these relationships were fraught with insecurities from the onset. The fears and feeling of inadequacy that Peter experiences lead to instances of clinginess, certain amounts of jealousy, and a demandingness that is detrimental to the health of the relationships. To a certain extent, people within the grouping of anxious attachment view love or affection as a means of completing them, fixing their problems, or otherwise being the key to their overall happiness. They crave the security of relationships, and while these attachments might give them the initial sense of security that they crave, it will ultimately fail in creating the sense of peace and happiness they crave.

For Peter, this anxious attachment type is seen not just in the romantic relationships he creates throughout the series, but also in the subsequent surrogate paternal relationships. Throughout his five-decade long history Peter has created a number of pseudo paternal relationships that have had varying levels of success. The problem with Peter creating these relationships is the inherent need he has developed

for them to be successful, resulting in him creating these bonds with people who often are unsuitable paternal figures, with some being downright destructive forces in his life. Yet he can be something of an oxymoron. While he craves these relationships in his personal life, his life as Spider-Man sees him more isolated than many other heroes who have a support network or a team. While there is a certain desire throughout the series for Spider-Man to be a regular member of the Avengers, ‘his stubborn independence and feelings of inadequacy ensure that he remains a loner’ (Fettinger 2006, 150). This feeling of inadequacy stems from the night of Ben’s death and stays with Spider-Man throughout his life as a hero.



Fig. 3 Peter is haunted by Ben’s death, Lee, Ditko 2012 © Marvel Comics

After Ben’s death Peter is haunted, suddenly aware of the value of his powers. In this final panel it is startlingly evident how challenging the role of Spider-Man will be for Peter. The panel (Fig. 3) is grim, predominantly shades of grey and black, with the figure of Spider-Man walking towards the horizon, shoulders hunched: ‘When the reader sees the phrase “with great power comes great responsibility emblazoned across the final panel of *Amazing Fantasy #15*, the painful lesson Peter Parker learns over the course of this short but poignant story of one’s coming of age becomes all too clear’ (Helvie 2012, 146). Peter has acknowledged the grief he feels, accepted the impact of

his actions, and yet he will be haunted by Ben's death and his own selfishness throughout his journey as a hero. This final panel in Peter's introductory story brings that devastation forward into the next issues in the series, ensuring that Ben's legacy is never forgotten: 'And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come – great responsibility!' (Lee and Ditko 2012). As the battle against Ben's killer is now over, Peter fully recognises the repercussions of his actions, and so begins his journey as a hero, a journey to make amends.

The relationship between Ben and Peter comes full circle in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Bendis 2011) story arc featuring the death of Spider-Man. After years of protecting the city, having countless father figures in his life, both positive and negative, and facing personal and professional traumas on a regular basis, Peter's journey comes to an end. Although the end is brief, with this particular arc spanning only six issues within the *Ultimate Spider-Man* universe, and with Ben mentioned very little, it is still one of the most poignant moments shared in their character history. An extra page, although not strictly part of the main story continuity (Fig. 4) features just one panel, surrounded in white.



Fig. 4 Peter and Ben are reunited, Bendis 2011 © Marvel Comics

This panel has become somewhat iconic in terms of the relationship between Ben and Peter. It is the moment Ben and Peter reunite in a version of the afterlife, after years of Peter's struggle to avenge his uncle's death and prevent the same thing from happening to anyone else. The panel shows Ben and Peter, arms around each other, walking into the bright white beyond, with the only words uttered coming from Ben

himself: ‘You did good kid’ (Bendis 2011). While this scene is brief in Spider-Man’s extensive history, and even within the *Ultimate Spider-Man* universe as a whole, it is one of the most significant reminders of Ben’s significance in Peter’s life. Throughout Spider-Man’s publication history the only thing the reader knows about Ben Parker is seen on the night he died, or what Peter remembers about him through his guilt. Here, for the first time, the reader can see the impact Ben’s life and death had on Peter, but also what impact Peter had on him. The body language in the panel shows a father and son, although Peter is now an adult. Their bond never changed, in spite of the years that separated them. For this scene the image is even more important than the written word, showing the edges of the character fading out as they walk, adding a tone of finality to their story. Ben, towering over Peter in spite of Peter now being a young adult places him back into the space of grieving child. Ben’s arm is draped across Peter’s shoulders, a visual representation of their secure relationship. Ben has once again stepped into the role of protector, taking the burden from Spider-Man. Peter clings to his uncle, with one hand holding tight to the back of Ben’s jacket, suggesting a certain amount of grief and desperation to keep him there, to not lose him as he did so many years ago.

Peter died in battle with one of his more toxic father figures – the Green Goblin. Peter’s life has been spent searching for father figures, often finding these father figures in undesirable places, or finding fathers who do not in fact have his best interests at heart. Norman Osborn, who eventually would become the Green Goblin, is one of these father figures. It creates a certain sense of symmetry to Peter’s story – his hero’s journey began because his one secure father figure died, partially because of his inaction. On the other end of the scale his hero’s journey ends as a result of the actions of a man he once viewed as a father figure, although the relationship was

complicated. Although Norman Osborn has yet to appear in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, he has been seen in other live action Spider-Man adaptations where he was equally problematic as a father figure as in the comic books. Here, Norman has escaped from custody with the intent of battling Spider-Man again. With the help of other New York heroes Spider-Man saves his Aunt May, Gwen Stacey, and high school sweetheart Mary Jane Watson. Yet the battle has been too much, and Peter dies in Mary Jane's arms. Peter died saving his family, still a fractured community, from a maniacal father hell-bent on ending his nemesis, and blaming Peter for the loss of his own biological family.



Fig. 5 The death of Peter Parker, Bendis 2011 © Marvel Comics

The story reaches its pinnacle with Peter surrounded by those he had just saved, with Norman Osborn defeated. As Aunt May arrives on the scene, the gravity of the situation becomes clear. When May questions his actions, desperate for her nephew to survive, Peter reassures her: “What did you do, boy? What did you do?” “It’s okay.

I – I did it.” (Bendis 2011). Although Peter knows his time is up, he has made peace with that fact, secure in the knowledge that he has at least managed to do for Aunt May what he could not do for Uncle Ben. As May pleads with Peter, he reassures her, once again reaffirming the fact that he is only Spider-Man to make amends to Ben. ‘Don’t you see... it’s okay. I did it. I couldn’t save him. Uncle Ben. I couldn’t save him... No matter what I did. But I saved you. I did it. I did...’ (Bendis 2011) (Fig. 5). In that moment Peter dies, signalling the end of the Ultimate Spider-Man, but reminding the reader that Peter’s story ultimately revolves around the life and death of Ben Parker. While this moment shows that Peter accepts his own fate because he was able to save May, it reminds the reader that the reason he strives to save everyone is because he could not save Ben. He did not want to be responsible for the death of another. The story rounds itself out with Ben taking Peter away from it all, once again the only father figure Peter could truly rely on, and certainly the only father figure in his life with no ulterior motives. Although Ben was not physically present during Peter’s journey as a hero his impact is more profound than the father figures Peter adopted throughout his heroic life. Peter spent his life searching for ways to make amends for the death of his uncle, and in the end saving his aunts life was the only way he felt he could. The story between Ben Parker and his nephew is complex, fraught with emotion and tension, and in the end displays the same secure relationship in death as it did in life.

2.2.2 Tony Stark, Peter Parker, and the Struggle for Secure Attachments

The Marvel Cinematic Universe began in 2008 with Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man*. Sommers argues that ‘Comic books are no longer the dominant medium for the popular

consumption of these heroes and villains who had once populated the twelve- and fifteen cent monthlies. Today comic-book characters are far more culturally prominent within cinema multiplexes' (Sommers 2012, 188). As the medium representing superheroes began to change, so did their representations and relationships. From the moment Tony appears on screen his Avoidant attachment style is evident. He is uncomfortable with displays of emotion, remaining stoic when those around him break down. He deflects serious situations with humour, a defence mechanism he struggles to shake throughout the entirety of his time as Iron Man. There is a discomfort with connection, with Tony keeping everyone at arm's length, from his father figure – Obadiah Stane – to his closest friend Rhodey, and his eventual paramour Pepper Potts. He also struggles with alcoholism, using it as a means of escapism, another tool he uses to keep his friends and family at a distance. Very few people see Tony in a truly vulnerable state, particularly in the early days of the character. Tony developed this attachment style due to the complex relationship he had with his father, something explored throughout the Iron Man films, as well as in several Avengers ensemble films. He also kept his distance from people after creating the Iron Man suit as a means of protecting himself:

Tony Stark, a multimillionaire inventor and manufacturer keeps his own heart beating after a land-mine explosion in Vietnam by constructing Iron Man's armor, a cross between a life support system and a single-passenger tank that prevents him from stripping from the waist to go swimming or (presumably) go to bed with one of his many paramours, lest his chest plate give his secret away. Being a millionaire playboy-inventor-superhero doesn't get much more tragic than that (Young 2016, 22).

While the origin story may have been altered and updated in the MCU the crux of Tony's identity remains the same. As noted in chapter one, there is a propensity for

the Avoidant person to associate connection and vulnerability with pain, and even weakness. Although Howard Stark – Tony’s father - was physically present for much of Tony’s childhood, emotionally they were distant, with Howard himself displaying certain Avoidant tendencies. When Nick Fury asks Tony what he remembers about his father in *Iron Man 2*, the answer is bleak, typifying the avoidant parent-child relationship: ‘He was cold. He was calculating. He never told me he loved me, never even told me he liked me’ (Favreau 2010). Although Tony attempts to remain aloof, it is clear to the audience that he is vulnerable. His relationship with his father caused that, impacting his relationships forevermore. While this section will not go into great detail on Iron Man’s relationship with his own father, instead focusing on his role as a father figure to Peter Parker, it is important to acknowledge the complex relationship he had with his own father before analysing his relationship with Peter. Although Howard Stark died long before Tony became Iron Man, the father-son dynamic informs the way Tony treats Peter from the moment they meet.

While Tony is a classic Avoidant personality, Peter is the inverse of that personality, displaying traits from the Anxious Attachment type. This is one of the aspects that is clearly seen in both the comic books and in the various film franchises. Peter craves connection, fearing the loss of relationships after losing so many father figures in his formative years. Yet the desire for connection also comes with the fear of rejection: ‘With the increased emphasis on friendship and peer acceptance comes the risk of peer rejection and feelings of loneliness’ (Newman and Newman 2012, 295). While the distance between Tony and his father created an unwillingness to open himself up emotionally, the unresolved guilt and grief in Peter’s life, compounded by the weight of the secret he carries, creates a desperate need for him to cultivate a successful paternal relationship with Tony. *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo and

Russo 2016) introduces the young hero to the MCU, with Tony seeking him out under the guise of offering him a scholarship. His real motivations are recruitment to join his team of superheroes. While the introductory scene is brief, lasting only a handful of minutes, it deals with an immense amount of Peter's history, as well as introducing the notion of Tony Stark acting as a father figure. This moment is complicated for the characters, partly due to Peter's age. As Allen and Land note:

Adolescent attachment behaviour appears at first glance to depart sharply from patterns of attachment behaviour seen at earlier ages. Adolescents often appear to be engaged in an active, purposeful flight *away* from attachment relationships with parents and other parental attachment figures (Allen and Land 1999, 319).

However, due to Peter's anxious attachment he quickly drops any pretence, quickly willing to see Tony as a mentor and potential father figure. One of the most poignant aspects of that scene occurs when Tony asks Peter what his motivation for being a masked hero are. Although the scenario regarding Uncle Ben has yet to be addressed in the MCU, it is hinted at in this moment: 'When you can do the things that I can but you don't and then the bad things happen they happen because of you' (Russo and Russo 2016). In spite of the raw emotion Peter displays, in this scene the avoidant aspects of Tony's personality come to the fore. He glosses over the subject, not pressing Peter any further, resolutely ignoring Peter's obvious emotional response to the subject. The divide between their personalities is clear, yet they have an instant, obvious connection. While Tony never indicates any desire to be a father or father figure within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there have been moments when the character has shown his softer paternal side, even before he meets Peter.

Harley Keener appears in *Iron Man 3* as a young boy there to aid Tony on his journey, as Tony struggles with the life of a superhero, one who has made enemies and who has put his loved ones in danger. Although Tony is the quintessential avoidant personality, *Iron Man 3* (Black 2013), shows his slight change in personality, with him displaying certain anxious tendencies. This is particularly obvious in relation to Pepper Potts, whom he deems to be the one person he cannot live without. This possessiveness and dependence on a relationship as a symbol of happiness is a blatant sign of anxious attachment, signifying a change in Tony, most likely due to the many near death experiences he has had since the first time he donned the Iron Man armour. In fact, in his interactions in this film, it is possible to see just how much of his identity has become linked to the armour. As noted by Alaniz: ‘Two functions are woven together: the role of the costume as a narrative device (giving Iron Man the power he needs to fight villains) and its role as a sign of identity (to wear the costume to become Iron Man)’ (Alaniz 2014, 14). As his dependence on the Iron Man armour grew, his attachment type shifted. Yet he does not display these signs consistently. With Harley and Rhodey, he is the same avoidant person, deflecting tension and emotional situations with humour and sarcasm. With Pepper he has allowed a certain amount of vulnerability, although even this vulnerability has its limits. Yet it shows the depth and complexity of attachment theory. A person can fit into multiple attachment types over the course of their lives, depending on the relationships they form later in life, as well as the early childhood relationships they experienced. Perhaps this is the reason he is able to create the bond with Peter that he was not able to create with Harley. And perhaps it is also due in part to Peter’s need to create relationships. Harley, although similarly lacking a father figure, does not harbour the same guilt, nor does he crave the connection of a surrogate relationship.

The bond seen between Peter and Tony continues to grow, with much more seen in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts 2017). *Homecoming* happens in the aftermath of *Civil War*, and as a result the anxious aspects of Peter's character are very clear. From the moment he appears on screen his need to keep Tony as a father figure is evident. Peter's first appearance consists of a video montage he made of his brief moment as an Avenger. Happy Hogan, Tony Stark's long-suffering colleague and friend, acts as chauffeur to Peter, with Tony nowhere to be found, albeit for good reason. When Tony does appear, he is creating a distance between himself and Peter, obviously uncomfortable with the sudden connection, vulnerability, and responsibility. Although Tony does praise Peter, it is in the context of creating an alibi video for Aunt May, protecting Peter's secret identity. The praise, while genuine, is presented in a way that does not leave Tony vulnerable. Tony's avoidant attachment is palpable and extreme, with even a simple hug from Peter being rejected and explained away. When Tony leans past Peter to open the door, Peter views this as a sign of affection, initiating a hug. Tony rebuffs this, pointing out that he is simply opening the door.

This unwillingness to create a physical connection is a blatant marker of Tony's avoidant attachment, reinforced by the dialogue that follows: 'That's not a hug. I'm just grabbing the door for you. We're not... we're not there yet' (Watts 2017). While Peter craves connection, and therefore interprets this action as a positive affirmation, proof of their bond, Tony repels the idea of being a father figure, and even the notion of being a proper mentor to Peter, encouraging Peter to not do something because Iron Man would: 'Don't do anything I would do. Definitely don't do anything I wouldn't do. There's a grey area in there, that's where you operate' (Watts 2017). While Tony appears aloof, he is also acutely aware of his own folly, and although he

cannot quite convey it to Peter, he wants him to be more of a hero than Tony perceives Iron Man to be. Although Tony is aware of Peter's desire to be a hero, and to join the Avengers, he keeps him at a distance because of this. Tony is all too aware of the price the life of a hero claims.

This is the last moment of contact they have for an extended period, with Happy acting as the point of contact for Peter on the Avengers. Although Tony is reluctant to have Peter join the Avengers, he is sending somewhat mixed signals to Peter, giving him an advanced suit but refusing to mentor him. The next scene skips ahead, two months after Tony left Peter. Peter's anxious attachment is particularly strong here, with dozens of messages sent to Happy highlighting Peter's availability to do whatever Tony needs him to do. Peter craves the attention Tony is unable to give, and so he dedicates himself to becoming a friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man, a superhero on a smaller scale. However, this quickly goes against Peter when villains that are too powerful for him to deal with alone become an issue. Frustrated with Tony and Happy's distance and seeming lack of approval and mentoring, Peter acts alone, unwilling to attempt to make the connection again. With anxious attachments, people often develop mistrustful feelings towards the people they are connected with, feeling unworthy and with a need to prove themselves. This is certainly the case for Peter Parker, who uses these supervillains to become a fully-fledged Avenger and prove his worth to Tony. In the midst of Peter's second fight with his new enemies, he finds himself in mortal danger, luckily rescued by the Iron Man armour. However, while the Iron Man armour is present, Tony himself is not, creating a physical distance as well as an emotional one. While Tony is physically absent, and emotionally distant, he does allow himself to feel worry and anger towards Peter and show disapproval. Yet with

Tony's attachment type this worry turns to demandingness, with Tony ordering Peter to stop playing the hero.

However, even within this moment of demandingness Tony's concern for Peter is clear: 'Forget the flying vulture guy. *Please*' (Watts 2017). While this moment in the film at first appears innocuous, it is also hugely important for the growth of Tony Stark, showing his ability to convey emotion in order to protect, even at the risk of vulnerability. Unfortunately, when that vulnerability is exploited, even accidentally, Tony retreats, once more becoming emotionally distant. When Peter questions Tony's unwillingness to see him fight the Vulture, Tony retaliates with the age old: 'Because I said so' (Watts 2017), further reinforcing the divide he has created with Peter. Yet, even within this conversation there are hints about the real connection he shares with Peter. Indeed, although Tony himself has had no contact with Peter in several months he is able to reference moments that were relayed by Peter to Happy (or more accurately Happy's answering machine). While Tony has avoided cultivating a relationship with Peter, he also cares enough to ensure he is protected. While this is something that works for Tony, it again sends mixed signals to Peter, with Tony's initial vote of confidence in the young hero getting confused with the anger now being displayed. Tony himself appears confused, torn between his anger towards Peter and his desire to see him succeed, even offering to use his connections to get Peter into a good college before ending the call without another word.

As *Homecoming* progresses Tony's affection towards Peter becomes more obvious, yet it manifests in a way that infuriates Peter as it seems to minimise Peter's supernatural abilities. This becomes more frustrating for Peter when he discovers a tracking device in his suit, compounded further when he discovers his suits capabilities are hindered by the training wheels protocol, a protocol put in place to ensure Peter

was competent before giving him access to the suit's enhancements. However, for someone with an anxious attachment style this apparent rejection and demeaning of their abilities is detrimental, prompting Peter to hack through the training wheels protocol, rejecting Tony's attempt at concern. While the removal of the training wheels protocol gives Peter a sense of accomplishment, and certainly aids him in his battles against the Vulture (the film's primary villain), it will also create an inevitable rift between Peter and Tony, given Tony's discomfort with vulnerability, and Peter's need for approval. While Peter uses the new capabilities in the suit to save his classmates, having inadvertently put them in harm's way, he avoids Tony, unwilling or unable to justify his actions.

Nevertheless, the two share a brief but touching moment, once again showing the audience Tony's affection for Peter and his desire to keep him safe. After Peter saves his classmates Tony uses video calling to congratulate him, something he is blatantly uncomfortable with, unable to make eye contact with the camera, although he cannot see Peter. This unwillingness to make eye contact while appearing vulnerable highlights Tony's avoidant attachment again, yet his willingness to praise Peter shows his desire to act as a mentor and father figure, however uncomfortable he may be. In this moment Peter is made aware of Tony's reason for being distant - Tony acknowledges the flaws in his paternal relationship with his own father, and their impact on Tony's ability to give praise: 'My father never gave me a lot of support and I'm just trying to break the cycle of shame' (Watts 2017). This scene is an important moment for Tony, and in turn it is important for Peter, although he does not know it yet. Peter remains aloof, trying to distract Tony from the villainous scenario playing out around him.

Unfortunately for Peter, this aggravates Tony who in this moment is trying to be a confidant for him, finally willing to develop that bond. This moment, while important in their relationship, has come at a bad time for Peter who has made questionable decisions as a hero in a bid to rebel against his would-be mentor. Moments after this exchange Peter finds himself once again in the middle of a life or death situation, struggling to save the lives of innocent civilians because for Spider-Man the death of an innocent is too much to bear. The struggle ends when Iron Man shows up to save the day. Tony's anger is palpable, yet it is more about the deceit and the unnecessary danger Peter put himself in rather than any other mistakes Peter made: 'If somebody died, that's on you. And if you died, I feel like that's on me' (Watts 2017). While Peter has been acting like a hero, he has been doing it without thinking of the consequences for those he would leave behind. Tony's worry and fear are exposed to Peter here, and in spite of his belief in Peter, Tony forces him to take a step back and evaluate what he is doing.

Peter's heroics have been shaped by his paternal relationships, first with Uncle Ben, and now with Tony Stark. Yet he struggled too much to be Iron Man, not realising that he could be his own kind of hero. As the relationship appears to break down, Peter reinforces his desire to be like his mentor: "I just wanted to be like you" (Watts 2017), with Tony distancing himself further: "And I wanted you to be better" (Watts 2017). Tony once again brings to the fore the role of the father, wanting his surrogate son to achieve more and be more than he ever could. However, that does not stop him being the authoritarian, taking away the super suit, reminding himself of his own father. 'If you're nothing without this suit then you shouldn't have it' (Watts 2017). While Tony is reminded of his own father here, it serves as a lesson for both Tony and

Peter. Their relationship is imperfect, and they are both adapting, yet they cannot always succeed.

As the film enters its final act, with the notable absence of Tony Stark, Peter seems to retreat away from the Spider-Man identity, and instead focuses on repairing the relationships he had before donning the mask. However, hanging up the mantle of Spider-Man is short. This gets Tony's attention once again, leading to their final meeting of the film, and the moment that shows Peter's progress as a hero and someone who has developed an anxious attachment style. Tony attempts to reconcile, brushing everything aside. Here Tony also acknowledges his own potential role in that development, as a true mentor to Peter: 'With a little more mentoring you'd be a real asset to the team' (Watts 2017). Tony is aware of how much his mentorship means to Peter, as well as how much becoming an Avenger means, and so this offer is his way of making peace with Peter without ever having to admit fault. What he did not expect, given Peter's anxious attachment is the rejection of this offer. Peter's journey has taken him in a new direction as a hero, and he has become someone who wants to help the individual, not just the majority.

While their attachment styles may be at odds, the relationship between Peter and Tony proves surprisingly beneficial, showing each the merits of differing attachment styles. The progression of their relationship is seen again in *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo, Russo 2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo 2019), albeit a brief moment in the latter film. *Infinity War* and *Endgame* serve as the culmination of the entire franchise, tying up many storylines, and providing insight to the new players in the franchise. The relationship between Peter and Tony in *Infinity War* has progressed, the pride and vulnerability displayed in *Homecoming* benefitting

and changing them both. With Earth once again under attack the familiar heroes jump into action, Peter included this time. One of the first things he does is save Tony's life, going to him for instruction before anyone else. The dynamic has changed since their last outings, with Tony viewing Peter as more capable than before, trusting his judgement but still wanting to protect him. As their heroics take to the skies Tony is acutely aware of Peter's vulnerability, having clearly considered this before. He despatches a new and improved Spider suit that is more adaptable, allowing Peter to survive the high altitude, and the potential fall back to Earth.

This concern is obvious, yet is conveyed as natural and pragmatic, showing the subtle ways an avoidant personality type can show they care. While Tony clearly believes in Peter, he still has a huge protective side to him, deploying a parachute to bring Peter back to Earth and away from the fight. However, Peter is still desperate to please Tony, and stays on the ship, much to Tony's dismay. The reason for Tony's anger (particularly when Peter blames him for boarding the ship) harks back to *Homecoming*, when Tony acknowledges Peter's death would be his fault. This is one of the most prominent moments where Tony shows his vulnerability: 'Avoidant defences, which may be sufficient for dealing with minor stressors, may fail when people encounter severe and persistent stressors' (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007, 203). Tony is acutely aware of the impact such a loss would have on him and is unwilling to have any more blame placed on him. It is another reminder to the audience about just how far Tony and Peter have come.

A further reminder about their growth can be seen when Tony trusts Peter to come up with a plan to save fellow hero Doctor Strange, showing the trust he has developed in Peter in a short space of time. The story progresses quickly in this film, with Peter being made an Avenger after all, although Tony pretends it is not significant

to prevent himself being seen as vulnerable, in spite of knowing how much it would mean to Peter, showing that in spite of their growth, they still have much to learn from each other. While the battle wages Peter and Tony rely on each other, until the most poignant scene in the movie – the snap. The snap is the name given to the destruction caused by the main villain, where half of all life in the universe ceases to exist. Thanos – the villain of the movie – uses an infinity gauntlet and infinity stones (elemental stones that could destroy the universe) to destroy half of all life in the universe. As characters turn to dust, ceasing to exist, Tony and Peter (on an alien planet with a handful of other heroes) see the majority of people around them turn to dust. While the majority of characters disappear without a word, seemingly unaware of what is about to happen, Peter’s heightened senses mean he can feel his impending death: ‘Mr Stark? I don’t feel so good. I don’t... I don’t know what’s happening... I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go sir, please. I don’t want to go. I’m sorry’ (Russo and Russo 2018). Tony tries to reassure Peter, but they cannot escape the inevitable. Peter, even in the moment he is dying, knows what this will do to Tony. Tony will carry the guilt for Peter’s demise forever, although so many other heroes died that day. The death of Spider-Man was more than Tony could cope with. This type of emotional response is typical of those with avoidant attachment. According to Mikulincer and Shaver: ‘This conclusion is consistent with Bowlby’s (1980) idea that avoidant people’s segregated mental systems cannot be hidden from conscious awareness indefinitely, and that traumatic events can resurrect distress that had been sealed off from consciousness’ (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007, 203).

It was the death of Peter Parker that impacted Tony more than anything and gave him the motivation to fight in *Endgame*. *Endgame* followed on in the immediate aftermath of the snap, with Tony eventually returning to Earth, distancing himself from

the Avengers, and starting a family with Pepper Potts. He has grown into the role of fatherhood, yet the loss of Peter still haunts him. When the other heroes discover a way to bring everyone back Tony resolutely refuses, turning them away. That is, until he looks at a picture of Peter. From that moment on Tony is willing to do whatever it takes to bring Peter and the other fallen heroes back, at any cost but the life of his daughter. Tony joins the Avengers once more, risking everything to bring the heroes back. Although it is the Hulk who snaps his fingers to make them return, without Tony it would never have been possible. The joy for Tony is short lived as he sees the heroes, including Peter return. Thanos is once again overpowering them, until Tony makes the decision that will alter the MCU and Peter Parker forever. Tony makes the ultimate heroes sacrifice, using the infinity stones himself, destroying Thanos but killing himself in the process. For much of Tony's life his goal has been self-improvement. This is particularly evident throughout the series as his suits change, constantly improved by technological advancements:

According to attachment theory, defensive self-enhancement indicates that a person has been forced by frustrating social experiences to cope with life's difficulties without adequate mental representations of attachment security and has had to struggle to maintain a sense of self-worth... This is the fate of avoidant individuals..., whose compulsive self-reliance and reluctance to rely on other people encourages them to inflate their positive self-views and deny or suppress negative information about themselves (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007, 160).

While Tony undoubtedly knew the toll the infinity stones would take on him, his attachment style, self-reliance, and sense of superiority allowed him to make the decision, nonetheless. As Tony lies dying on the battlefield Peter Parker is once again struck with guilt, having been resurrected in *Endgame* with the other fallen heroes. He

was unable to protect Tony, as he was unable to save Ben. While Tony harboured the guilt for Peter's death, Peter harbours the guilt for Tony's, repeatedly apologising, likely imagining Tony's death occurred as a result of Peter's failure much like Ben's death did. Peter has now lost the only father figure he has for a third time, and yet again this was indirectly linked to his actions. However, the film suggests that Tony knew where this battle would lead, recording a holographic will for his family, explaining his actions and the need to protect: 'That's the hero game. Part of the journey is the end' (Russo and Russo 2019).

The final chapter of Peter and Tony's relationship can be seen in Jon Watts 2019 film *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (which will be abbreviated to *FFH*). Directly following the events of *Endgame*, *FFH* shows the struggle to return to normality after the events of the previous films. Characters who had died in the snap have returned to the same place they were before, though the world has moved on since they disappeared. At the same time, they mourn the heroes that died for them. In the opening scene an *in memoriam* video is displayed, paying tribute to the fallen heroes – Tony Stark among them. Iron Man is the primary focus in this video, the hero who sacrificed himself to save the world. As Peter walks by, resolutely not looking at the screen, there is Iron Man artwork on the classroom walls. Although Tony has died his presence is still so strongly felt in Peter's life, yet Peter does not acknowledge it at first. Aunt May, and Peter (as Spider-Man) hold a fundraiser to help those who were brought back in *Endgame*, with Aunt May sharing an amusing anecdote about her own return. However, while Aunt May is at ease in front of this crowd, Peter is uneasy, likely suffering from some type of PTSD or stress related disorder following Tony's death. As Shear and Shair note: 'Anxious attachment is associated with higher levels of distress and more difficulty coping with stress' (Shear and Shair 2005, 263).

Witnessing Tony's death followed by the struggle to reintegrate with the world is undoubtedly a complicated stress factor for Peter.

The dynamic between May and Peter has shifted since *Homecoming* which saw May discover Spider-Man's secret identity. While May is questioning him about his heroics, she also questions him about the mundane, blending his life as a hero with his life as a teenager. The dynamic further changes when Happy Hogan joins the scene, hinting at a potential role for him as the next father figure in Peter's life: 'There is a prevalent idea that grief is the process by which one detaches from a lost loved one in order to free up energy to reconnect with a new attachment figure' (Shear and Shair 2005, 260). Although Peter may need to grieve in order to view Happy as his new mentor, he clearly struggles with the notion of replacing Tony, and is immediately bombarded by the media, positing him as the next Iron Man. While Peter is likely to have thought about what will happen the Avengers now that so many had fallen, it is unlikely that he ever considered himself as the next Iron Man. As one reporter put it, they are big shoes to fill. Peter's fear, reluctance, and grief manifests, finding himself face to face with another Iron Man mural, only this time he does not shy away from it. He is unable to see through his grief that he may be the next Iron Man, not yet viewing himself as worthy.

The scene quickly changes, not focusing too closely on Peter's grief. The strong emotions that were displayed shift to humour with Aunt May referencing Peter's extrasensory perception as his "Peter Tingle" (Watts 2019), a humorous reference to Peter's so-called Spidey sense, something that is familiar from the comic books but had not fully been acknowledged in the MCU until now. Again, this shows the progression in their relationship. Where Peter was terrified of her finding out in *Civil War*, now she can joke about his powers. However, even this scene is tinged with

some sadness Peter closes his suitcase, sans suit, revealing the initials BFP etched into it, an homage to Uncle Ben. Although Ben is Peter's primary reason for being a hero, he has yet to be seen in the MCU. As Peter boards the plane to Europe, along with the rest of his class, it is clear that his goal is to forget the life of a hero for a brief moment. Instead, he focuses on the blossoming romance he has with MJ that is seemingly foiled by newcomer Brad, a character that seems to exist to heighten Peter's feelings of inadequacy. As Peter is left feeling insufficient, Tony's face appears once again, this time in the guise of an inflight movie – Heart of Iron: the Tony Stark Story (Watts 2019). It serves as a reminder of his grief, but also makes Tony an ongoing part of Peter's most challenging moments.

As they disembark the plane it is clear that Peter cannot escape the role of Spider-Man, with Aunt May having packed his suit, further highlighting the change in their dynamic. As the one constant presence in his life, and the only consistently secure relationship he has. This once again highlights the change in their dynamic while ensuring the audience recognizes May's supportive nature. This harks back to the original comic books where both May and Ben were unwaveringly supportive of Peter, not least in his life as a hero. Again, this scene is followed by an appearance of Iron Man, this time in the form of a mural at the airport in Venice. Although Peter does not seem to see this, Iron Man follows him. His presence (and therefore Peter's grief) is inescapable: '...Grief intensity was greater with a greater degree of attachment to the deceased and among those with anxious ambivalent attachment style' (Shear and Shair 2005, 260). Because of the strength of their relationship, Peter's grief looms over him, presented to the audience in a very visual way. In this moment it appears that Peter will have a quiet, normal school trip. However, he struggles with feelings of inadequacy. When Venice is attacked, Peter springs into action nonetheless, and when

Mysterio shows up and seemingly saves the day, Peter's efforts go unnoticed, but it is once again clear to the audience that he is not a hero for glory. Instead, he is a hero because it is what he believes to be right.

This battle further highlights the progression in the relationship between May and Peter. While in the previous movies it is likely that May would have feared for Peter's safety, insisting on his return to New York after such a battle (as is seen in *Homecoming* when she encourages him to run the other way at the first sign of danger), here she encourages him to stay, confident in his abilities to fight something none of them truly understand. This scene simultaneously hints further at the progression of a relationship between May and Happy, further hinting at Happy's potential role in Peter's life. Although Happy has been surrounded by superheroes for far longer than May, she appears to have adjusted to the idea much more quickly than he did, perhaps because of the security of her relationship with Peter. Even when the situation is more than any of them can handle, May is confident in Peter's abilities.

Peter's trip is further complicated by the arrival of Nick Fury, recruiting him once again to save the world. However, for Peter this time it was different, with his insecurities present in their interactions. This is helped somewhat by Fury giving Peter a gift, something that Tony left for him. Tony left his glasses – seen in *Infinity War* and *Endgame* – with the message that 'uneasy is the head that wears the crown' (Watts 2019), along with a teasing note about how Peter would not understand it because it was not a *Star Wars* reference. While it is a brief scene it again ensures that Tony is to the fore of Peter's mind. Immediately after this Mysterio is introduced to him by Fury. Peter, a scientist like Tony, reacts to the potential of a multiverse with enthusiasm and technical observations that Fury and his team fail to understand, and a feeling of judgement passes between them. However, Mysterio steps in, encouraging Peter:

‘Don’t ever apologise for being the smartest one in the room’ (Watts 2019), setting up a positive relationship between the two from the onset. Mysterio becomes one of the many characters that help Peter pick up the pieces of his life. Mysterio’s sympathetic backstory, not dissimilar to Peter’s, ensures that he becomes a trusted ally, a potential successor for Tony. When Peter refuses to join the mission, Mysterio defends him even when Fury tries to push him. Peter fears his identity being discovered, although there is more to his fears than that.

When Fury forces Peter’s hand, complicating Peter’s trip further, Tony once again becomes present in Peter’s life, through his glasses. When Peter opens the gift, he finds a note showing Tony’s confidence in him: ‘For the next Tony Stark. I trust you.’ (Watts 2019). Tony has left Peter in charge of all his weapons protocols, a sign of utter trust and faith in the hero Peter could become, yet Peter is still so caught up in his grief and feeling of failure that he does not see this. According to Cundy: ‘Our attachment patterns lay the foundations of unconscious beliefs about ourselves, and expectations we hold of other people and relationships’ (Cundy 2018). Peter craves a mentor, believing he is a better hero with one. He views Tony as the ultimate hero, someone he can never be equal to. In this moment it seems that Tony believes he is the greatest hero, with a pun surrounding the glasses. The artificial intelligence in the glasses is named Edith, an acronym of ‘Even in death I’m the hero’ (Watts 2019). Yet there is more to this scene than what remains of Tony’s ego. It harks back to *Homecoming*, the antithesis of the training wheels protocol. Where Tony had done his best to control and minimise Peter’s abilities in a misguided attempt to protect him, here he has given him control over a multimillion-dollar AR tactical system (Watts 2019).

Much like in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, Peter is focused on his own grief. It is ‘the story of a young boy who struggled to come to grips with what he perceived as a tragedy of his own making’ (Helvie 2012, 146). He is consumed with guilt and grief, and is unable to see the change. Where Tony did not trust Peter’s abilities then, he views him as his replacement now. It is a bittersweet moment in the film, one that shows the audience all that could have been in their relationship, had Tony not sacrificed himself. While a certain amount of this relationship progression was present in *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, *FFH* reinforces Tony as a father figure for Peter. While Tony may have been distant, his parenting style changed. He was no longer the authoritarian parental figure. It was a slow progression, but Edith’s presence suggests that Tony had become a more authoritative parent, high in demandingness as he always was, but now equally high in responsiveness, rewarding Peter’s efforts. He gave Peter Edith trusting Peter’s progression as a hero enough to know he will work inside the moral parameters that have been instilled in him both by Tony and by Ben, May, Happy and all the other parental figures in his life.

As the film progresses, and Iron Man’s legacy continues, Peter subconsciously seeks out other paternal figures. Much like with Ben’s death, Peter harbours guilt regarding Tony, therefore making him more vulnerable to the influence of negative father figures as well as the more positive influences. Shear and Shair have suggested that, depending on attachment type, grief can increase between 4 and 18 months after loss, opening that person up to more vulnerability.

Those who were high on attachment anxiety, regardless of the level of attachment avoidance, had higher levels of grief at both time points. Additionally, grief intensity increased between 4 and 18 months, in the high

anxiety group while those with low anxiety did not experience more grief over time. (Shear and Shair 2005, 260).

Mysterio appears to set himself up to take on the role of father figure, acting as a confidant for Peter when Fury does not believe in Peter. Mysterio relates to him, discussing the realities and costs of heroism not often seen by others. While Mysterio is just coming to prominence as a hero here, Peter has been at the front line of battle many times, already jaded by the life he leads, feeling guilt even about that. Yet Mysterio comforts him. ‘You’re not a jerk for wanting a normal life, kid’ (Watts 2019). While Fury does not yet see Peter as a hero, Mysterio appears to, bolstering Peter up when he needs it. He is reminiscent of Iron Man, a somewhat stoic hero that attempts to protect Peter, although it is of no benefit to him. Peter trusts him in the same way he trusted Iron Man – completely and immediately. Because Tony had his best interests at heart Peter believes Mysterio does too, and so Mysterio quickly takes the place of superpowered father figure. While Mysterio is presenting himself as a positive father figure, this serves to highlight Peter’s propensity for choosing father figures without much consideration.

Eventually joining Mysterio in battle, Peter witnesses another father figure sacrifice himself in battle, although this one survives: ‘Whatever happens I’m glad we met’ (Watts 2019). This moment reflects Iron Man’s once again bringing to the fore Peter’s guilt at the loss of so many father figures, cementing Mysterio as a paternal influence in Peter’s life. Believing Nick Fury’s questions about his capability, compounded by those feelings of inadequacy and guilt, Peter believes Mysterio to be the best fit. Peter’s anxious attachment type is prominent here, as he takes little care in choosing his next mentor. Indeed, Peter is so sure of Mysterio that he reinterprets the message Tony left for him with the glasses, now believing that Tony was not in fact

dubbing Peter as the next Iron Man, but rather trusting Peter to find the next Iron Man. However, the scene is suspicious, with Mysterio clearly manipulating Peter to get the glasses, reinforcing the notion that Peter chooses mentors who do not always benefit him, much like Norman Osborn. Where Peter confides in Mysterio regarding his belief that he owes it to Tony to be a hero, Mysterio makes it seem that Peter should take a step back. Tony wanted Peter to be better than even he was, yet the events of this film have compounded the notion that he could not be, and so he hands over the glasses to Mysterio, something that seems to be of his own volition, but in actuality it is a vulnerable teenager with an anxious attachment being manipulated by a negative mentor.

Immediately after Peter hands Mysterio the glasses, seeming freer than he had at any other point in the film, the figure of Iron Man looms over him one more time, an omen for what is to come. Mysterio immediately shows his true colours, dropping the illusion, both literal and metaphorical, revealing himself to the audience as the true villain, seeking revenge against Tony Stark. Despite his flaws, Mysterio has genuine affection for Peter, regretting the position he has put him in. Nevertheless, regardless of his affection for Peter, he is willing to kill should Spider-Man get in his way, somewhat harking back to Norman Osborn's relationship with Peter. As he figures out Mysterio's plan, realising the betrayal, Peter sinks further into that feeling of guilt. Mysterio uses this guilt, viewing it as a weakness: 'You are just a scared little kid in a sweat suit' (Watts 2019). In Mysterio mentally sends Peter back to the moment in *Homecoming* when he believed all hope was lost, when Tony had taken the suit back and the Vulture was about to win. He also plays on Peter's vulnerability, mocking his survivors' guilt: 'If you were good enough maybe Tony would still be alive. Deep down you know I'm right' (Watts 2019). Muris et al describe the feelings of guilt and

shame as: ‘feelings of tension, remorse, and regret over inappropriate or bad behavior in the real or imagined presence of other people. As such guilt and shame have been labeled as prototypical moral emotions that guide compensatory behaviors in case condemnable social actions have been conducted (Tangney and Tracy 2012)’ (Muris et al 2013). Peter, already burdened with historical guilt, is made to feel responsible for Tony’s death, as though his behaviour was inappropriate. While Ben has yet to be discussed within the MCU, meaning the true significance of Tony’s death for Peter is not known, Mysterio understands enough of Peter’s character to use his anxious attachment against him. Peter, so desperate to fill the void that Tony left, shows Mysterio the vulnerabilities in his character. From his earliest inception in *Amazing Fantasy #15*, Lee and Kirby’s influence on the character is clear. In spite of the many metamorphoses the character has gone through, this heightened sense of shame and guilt has lingered. Although it has been argued that Peter feels this guilt unnecessarily, or that it comes from an inflated sense of importance, it remains one of the defining characteristics seen in every iteration of the character. While it would be disingenuous to posit that his attachment type is solely responsible for Peter’s feelings of guilt, the impacts of guilt and shame on a character are profound, reflecting real-life psychology. As Muris et al note:

This is most clear in the case of shame, which has been consistently found to be positively associated with a wide variety of psychological symptoms including anger and aggression.[...],depression [...], post-traumatic stress disorder [...], anxiety disorders [...] The relation between guilt and psychopathology is more ambivalent. On the one hand, there is literature indicating that high levels of this self-conscious emotion are maladaptive, and that this is especially the case when it is experienced in an obsessive, ruminative way or fused with feelings of shame (Muris et al 2013)

Mysterio uses the vulnerabilities Peter showed to defeat him. Because of his attachment style Peter was willing to confide in Mysterio without hesitation, yet Mysterio, like Tony, displays avoidant attachment, albeit far more volatile and harmful to those around him, traits seen in the fearful attachment type. This, perhaps, indicates why Mysterio needs to prove his worth to the world and have retribution for Tony's offences. Tony the hero, Mysterio the villain. The definitions for these characters are blurred, with Tony displaying less than noble tendencies and Mysterio desperately wanting to be seen as the hero. However, unlike Iron Man, Mysterio falls too far into the category of villain to be the hero he wishes he was. Indeed, in his battle with Peter he shows the grotesque image of a broken, decomposing Iron Man/Tony Stark hybrid, a rather on the nose interpretation of the idea that Tony's death haunts Peter.

As Peter finds himself in more trouble than he can handle he calls the one person he knows he can rely on in a situation like this – Happy Hogan. As Happy arrives the heightened emotions that Peter has felt throughout the film culminate in the most poignant scene in the film. As Peter confesses his mistake Happy listens with a compassionate ear: 'I thought he was my friend, so I gave him the only thing Mr Stark left for me' (Watts 2019). In actuality, Tony left Peter with so much more than the glasses, but they are gradual lessons to learn. Peter confesses his grief to Happy, perhaps the only other person who would understand except Pepper Potts: 'I really miss him. Everywhere I go I see his face. The whole world is asking who will be the next Iron Man, and I don't know if that's me.' (Watts 2019). In spite of his achievements, Peter focuses on his mistakes, compounding the interwoven feelings of shame and guilt, and in turn he does not yet see himself as a suitable successor. Yet again, Happy is the one to comfort Peter, reminding him that nobody could live up to Tony Stark, not even Tony himself. Like Peter, Tony was his worst critic, the one

person held to a higher standard than anyone else. Yet Peter was perhaps the only person Tony viewed as worthy: ‘The one thing Tony did that he didn’t second guess was pick you’ (Watts 2019). It is the most poignant moment in Peter and Happy’s relationship, both struggling with the loss. Even more impactful is the fact that Happy is willing to set his own grief aside in order to help Peter, perhaps hinting at his own relationship style. Arguably Happy has a secure attachment style and displays traits of an authoritative parent. ‘Authoritative parents tend to rear children who are socially responsible, competent, self-assured, adaptive, creative, curious, independent, assertive, successful in school, friendly, cooperative with peers and parents, and generally happy’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 290). Therefore, he does not need this moment to be about him, but rather focuses on Peter’s relationship with Tony: ‘I don’t think Tony would have done what he did if he didn’t know you were going to be here after he was gone’ (Watts 2019). It is this moment that Peter begins to come to terms with his potential, in a scene that pays homage to Tony in *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008), complete with AC/DC playing in the background. As Happy looks at Peter with pride and his own grief, Peter uses Tony’s distinctive holographic technology to design a suit, strongly reminiscent of the sequence of events in *Iron Man* showing Tony design his own suit: ‘Children of authoritative parents are better equipped to cope with life stresses and less likely to succumb to peer pressure due to the competencies authoritative parents have instilled’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 290). Here Happy has built upon the skills that Tony had given Peter, allowing Peter to embrace his role as the new Iron Man rather than succumbing to Mysterio.

Happy is the motivator here, the one person who Peter can count on, protecting Peter’s classmates while Peter tries to save the world, buying time for Peter although he is not a superhero. Where Mysterio recognizes that Peter is a good person, he views

that as ‘such a weakness’ (Watts 2019). Happy, on the other hand, views it as his greatest strength. As the events unfold and Peter defeats Mysterio, Peter’s life returns to some semblance of normality, with Happy further reinforced as the new father figure when Peter confronts May and Happy about their relationship, perhaps signalling the roles they will have in the future of the MCU. As Benson and Haith note: ‘Another important aspect of authoritative families is that they incorporate the opinions of both children and parents during family discussions’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 290), ensuring Peter feels heard in every aspect of family life. Peter could be a truly great hero with the right guidance. However, his tendency in both the comic books and the films to choose inadequate father figures inhibits his ability to fully reach his potential. According to Fettinger: ‘If only he hadn’t lacked a positive male role model to show him the way. Sadly there have been too few George Stacy’s [sic] and Ben Parker’s [sic], and too many selfish and manipulative Norman Osborn’s, Miles Warren’s, and Ezekiel Sims (and even well-meaning but misdirected Tony Starks)’ (Fettinger 2006, 162). Although Tony Stark was undoubtedly well meaning, and did benefit Peter in many ways, his actions often had as many negative repercussions as positive. On the other hand, with Happy’s newfound role perhaps he will become the father figure that Peter needs. While Tony’s death shocked the characters to their core, his presence is felt throughout *FFH*, seen in murals, Edith, and even Happy. Yet as Happy becomes a more prominent part of Peter’s life, Peter becomes a happier person and better hero.

With so many influences seen in Peter’s life, his character has become a complex web of attachment, grief, and guilt. While Peter struggles throughout his life, both on screen and in print, these struggles ultimately create a hero who is capable of cultivating warm, secure relationships as well as relationships that are damaging,

dangerous, and oftentimes lead him into trouble. While Aunt May is an important character in Peter's life, the paternal relationship, having seemed lost to Peter so many times, is something that he craves again and again. With an anxious attachment type, an overdeveloped feeling of guilt, and a rigid sense of morality, Peter is one of the most recognisable and relatable heroes for a reason. His tragic, sympathetic backstory was enough to cement him as one of Marvel Comics' most iconic heroes, and with the growth of the many film and comic book series' in recent years, it is likely that Peter will remain that way for years to come.

2.3 Conclusion

For most of his publication history Peter Parker has searched for the same thing. He craves a secure paternal bond to replace the ones he lost as a child. The most influential relationship he had was the one he shared with Ben Parker, yet his extreme sense of guilt means he is constantly searching for something to replace this bond. While Ben shared a secure relationship with Peter, his unnatural, dramatic death changed Peter. As he developed a more anxious attachment type, Peter became indiscriminate in who he saw as a father figure, often to his own detriment. However, he was so desperate to find someone to protect in the way he could not save Ben. This can be seen in his heroism, where he is reluctant to put anyone in danger, even when they may be trying to cause him harm. It is equally obvious in his relationship with Tony Stark. Although Tony is distant, Peter craves his approval. Equally, Peter tries to save him, feeling the same burden of guilt over Tony's death that he did over Ben's. Spider-Man is a hero consumed by his guilt and sense of responsibility. As much as Peter craves a father-figure, and even at times a team, he is a character fated to be a hero alone.

Chapter Three: Barry Allen – Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Hero

3.1 Introduction

Barry Allen has graced the cover of comic books for decades, spanning the pages of standalone comic book storylines as well as joining the Justice League. It is his sympathetic back story, in particular after the events of the *Flashpoint* story arch, that has made Barry Allen such a beloved character. Like many other popular superheroes, Barry had early tragedy that helped shape him into the hero he eventually would become. This section will primarily focus on the *Flashpoint* story arc and its successor, the New 52 arc, and its influence on the Flash's development. Like so many heroes in modern culture, the trauma faced at such a young age is what gives him purpose as a hero.

This chapter will discuss the impact of the biological parent-child relationship, and the subsequent surrogate relationships the characters develop on the life and heroic style of Barry Allen. It will explore the motivating factors in his life, focusing on the impact of their family lives on his need to save people. Because he lost his parents at such a young and impressionable age, this chapter will explore the surrogate relationships he formed, and how these relationships progressed from simply being seen as friendships or work relationships, to becoming that of a parental figure and child, as well as the implications of these relationships. This chapter will focus on *Flash: Rebirth* (Johns and Van Sciver 2011), *Flashpoint* (Johns and Kubert 2012) and *Road to Flashpoint* (Johns et al 2012) and the *New 52* (Manapul et al 2013 – 2017) depiction of the Flash, and the relationships he develops between parental figures and his own father and mother.

The *New 52* Flash story arc is recent, allowing opinions to change on a constant basis, as each volume is released. Taking this into account, this chapter will explore how Barry copes with his childhood trauma, the methods he uses to cope, and the subsequent relationships he develops, as well as the ways in which opinions can be formed and changed over the course of time. Throughout the series he is learning about his past along with the reader. Each separate narrative has a new perspective on the story.. It was a wave of comic books focusing on 52 of DC Comics most popular characters, including the Flash. As it is such a recent publication, it gives a new history to each character, allowing readers old and new a chance to get to know a character from the very beginning of release. On the other hand, in the earlier story arcs in this chapter, there is an entirely different perspective from that of the *Flashpoint* storyline, in which Barry is given the chance to have a life with his mother

3.2 Loss and Trauma in the Life of Barry Allen

The most consistent part of Barry Allen's origin story, and one of his most defining moments, is the death of his mother. Nora Allen was brutally murdered in both *Flashpoint* and *New 52*. In spite of the many writers and artists who have helmed the stories including Geoff Johns and Francis Manapul, none changed this pivotal moment in the life of the hero. Nor has the impact it had on Barry changed, shaping him as much in the newest incarnations of the character as they did in the original publication. In each of the chosen story arcs Professor Zoom (also known as the Reverse Flash) is Barry's main rival. The antithesis of Barry, Reverse Flash is a villain from the future possessing super speed to rival Barry's. Reverse Flash became so obsessed with the Flash is he that he is determined to destroy him, killing Nora as a result.

This is an event that Barry witnessed, fundamentally changing him forever. Henry Allen, Barry's father, is then framed for the murder and sent to prison, leaving Barry orphaned and virtually alone. However, throughout his life Barry has always believed in the innocence of his father, going to great lengths to prove this innocence, with varying levels of success. Eventually his efforts lead him to work for the Central City Police Department as a forensic analyst, using his expertise to try to solve the cold case, consistent in both *Flashpoint* and New 52. Nora is murdered, and Henry is accused of the crime, sent to prison, with Barry as the only person who truly believes his innocence. The depiction of Henry in New 52 more aggressive than in previous incarnations that will be discussed in this chapter, with his relationship with Nora being a more volatile one than before. This is due to Nora seemingly wanting a separation of sorts, as seen in *The Flash Volume 1: Move Forward* (Manapul et al 2013). It creates a less obviously innocent Henry, forcing the reader to view Henry less as the doting husband and father, and more as a potential killer, not influenced by previous depictions. Nevertheless, Barry still believes in his innocence, struggling to prove it. In fact, the cold case file becomes something of a consistent motif throughout the New 52 story arc. Having had both parents ripped away from him in such quick succession has taken Barry a lifetime to come to terms with. It has meant that, in his lifetime, he has adopted several father-figures, not all of whom had his best interests in mind.

The relationship between Barry and his mother is not seen very often within the standard storytelling, as her death happened long before Barry became the Flash, but the flashbacks and discussions between other characters offer ample insight into the earliest bond he experienced, and the one that would have a lasting impact on his life. The Flash displays secure attachment in relation to his mother, which is discussed

in Kevin Durkin's *Developmental Social Psychology: From Infancy to Old Age* and characterises itself as the child having the ability to explore and create at the initial absence of the mother without displaying any distress. Yet when the mother leaves for a second, more prolonged period, distress is shown, and comfort is sought:

They are likely to show distress when the mother leaves for a second time..., and they reduce play and exploration at this point. Upon the mother's second return they go to her for comfort, they calm down relatively quickly and can then resume play (Durkin, 1995, 94)

Although the Flash displays these characteristics, he is never able to seek comfort by a mother returning, and thus uses this lost relationship to propel himself forward and search more for his mother's killer. His relationship, once so secure, was ripped away in an instant, leaving a young Barry reeling. According to Durkin, the quality of the relationship impacts the ability of a child to explore and create during the absence of a parent. Although Nora is gone, one of the few permanent deaths in the world of comic books, like Uncle Ben or Bruce Wayne's parents, there is still a certain amount of security after her departure because Barry had always had such a close, secure bond with his her. While he knows she will never return, she remains a constant presence in his life, while he searches for her real killer. She is perhaps more influential to Barry than Henry in the New 52 story arc, although Henry remains alive and within reach. The case file he peruses frequently might be the only tangible connection he has to his mother, but it allows her to have enough of a presence in his life to keep him grounded.

The type B child, securely attached, child seems to use the assurance of the relationship as a base from which to investigate and experiment. If there is a threat, the child knows that she or he can return to a reliable, supportive caregiver. The relationship enjoys periodic interaction with the caregiver, but

the very security of this relationship affords scope for independent activity and discovery, both cognitive and interpersonal (Durkin 1995, 95).

Immediately the reader is aware that, although Nora is not present, she is a vital character in Barry's life. Indeed, it is her death, and Barry's continued need to prove his father's innocence, that led to the series of events resulting in Barry's powers. While Nora may not be as directly linked to the heroism as characters like Alfred or Uncle Ben, she is an integral character in the development of the heroic persona, nonetheless. She and Henry may not be as present in the moment Barry becomes a hero as many parental figures, but they are ultimately the reason he gains his heroic abilities. Indeed, the same need that drives him to prove his father's innocence also informs his decisions as a hero. His morality, the drive he has to be an honest hero, stems as directly from the night his mother died as Spider-Man's need to be a hero stems from his inability to save Ben.

As he is secure in the relationship he had with his mother as a child, he has developed the ability to keep moving forward, exploring and growing, while still searching for answers. The relationship he has with his father, however, is almost the complete opposite. From the moment Henry Allen is introduced to the reader it is clear that while Nora was an obviously secure relationship for Barry, this relationship would be somewhat more ambiguous. Not an inherently neglectful parent, Henry has created a distance between him and Barry, although it is hinted at throughout that this distance is to protect Barry. The relationship, while not neglectful, hints at an avoidant attachment style on Henry's part, although Barry craves the connection. An authoritarian relationship is suggested, although it is seen through the eyes of a young Barry, and so the narrator is unreliable. The night Nora was murdered by the Reverse Flash altered the paradigm between Barry and Henry, although Barry believes in

Henry's innocence. While his mother died an innocent victim, his father has spent his life in prison for the crime (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Barry and Henry's relationship, Manapul 2016 © DC Comics

This imbalance in their relationship is something that continues into Barry's adult life, with Henry being unpredictable in spite of Barry's best efforts.

Regardless of Barry's belief in Henry's innocence, there is still a mark left by the prison sentence. Due to this breach of trust at such a young age, in spite of the insatiable need to prove his father's innocence, Barry spent a large part of his formative years building new parental relationships with father-figures, and thus his relationship with his father is damaged, perhaps beyond repair. Each time Barry visits the prison and sees his father, he leaves with a more cynical point of view than the one he had before. This is largely because of the damage done after Nora's murder, and Henry's refusal to accept Barry's help. Henry Allen, in the New 52 version of the Flash, is volatile, damaging the relationship he has with his son in ways the mother-son relationship was never impacted. In his formative years Nora Allen was Barry's guiding light, while Henry often resented Nora, bickering and arguing, with Henry instigating these spats, and Nora trying to protect Barry, shielding him from any negativity. As Nora died when Barry was just a child, the memory he had of her was

preserved. However, this can make Barry something of an unreliable narrator. As the memories and flashbacks are from his perspective, and the memories formed in childhood can be warped or inaccurate, it makes the dynamic between Barry and Henry even more complex. Nora is viewed as the perfect mother, flawless in every way, yet Henry is seen as an antagonist on several occasions. While Henry is clearly not innocent on these occasions, it is possible that Nora was not as perfect as Barry perceived, but rather that the security of the mother-son relationship prompted Barry to view her as the innocent party.

Regardless of what belief Barry had in his father's innocence, there would always be a small, niggling doubt regarding his father and the relationship he had with him that would tarnish the relationship forevermore. The relationship Barry has displayed regarding his father is, at times, a resistant one. The young version of Barry seen through flashbacks shows a child troubled by the turmoil between his parents, powerless to do anything and unsure of which side, if any, he should be on. It is evident that he sees the trouble they face and is often pulled away from his mother by his father. Yet when his father is accused of a heinous crime, he instantly wants to protect him and prove his innocence. While Durkin's study relates to the mother specifically, the same traits can be perceived regarding the father, based on Bowlby's original hypotheses. There is considerable distress when Henry Allen is incarcerated, yet when Barry reaches adulthood, he goes through phases of ambivalence and guilt, needing to forget the past, and yet needing to solve the mystery:

These children are more likely to become upset during Episode 2, and tend not to explore at this stage. Their orientation toward their mother is ambivalent; they show considerable distress upon her departures, yet very difficult to comfort upon her return; they rush to her, yet refuse to be consoled and struggle to be put down. They show anger and reject toys. They do not interact very

much with the stranger and interactions with the mother include a lot of brief glances (Durkin 1995, 94).

Although the above excerpt describes the affectational bond between a mother and son, it is possible to apply to the relationship between Barry and his father. Henry, despite his flaws, was ripped from Barry's life, returning intermittently, when Barry would visit Iron Heights Prison. However, this return was never satisfactory for Barry, as they were still separated by the glass trapping Henry. This ineffective relationship forces Barry to seek solace elsewhere, never allowing the bond between them to be healed. The ineffectual return of the father prevents Barry from truly coming to terms with his fathers' fate, making him crave a functional father-son relationship. When Barry is orphaned, he is taken in by Darryl Frye, raised by him, eventually working with him in the Central City Police Department. It is the first substitute father-son relationship that Barry will have and is the most lasting one. This is a strong relationship that, in some ways, replaced the relationship that Barry lacked with his own father. While Henry was inaccessible, Darryl was a constant supporting presence, giving Barry an anchor in his most desperate time. They display traits of secure attachment, with Frye acting as an authoritative, borderline permissive parent, much in the same way Alfred does (Chapter Six). However, the secure attachment is not consistent, replaced frequently by Barry's bouts of fear or uncertainty. It is because of the traumas, and the often poor communication between Frye and Barry, due to different upbringings and experiences, that Barry still searches, unwittingly, for someone to take the role of father and nurturer, someone with whom he has much in common and someone whom he can trust. While Darryl was the father figure he needed as a young child, as he grew and changed, the gap in his life became unsustainable (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 A flashback to Darryl Frye, Manapul et al 2016 © DC Comics

As he grew up, his interests changed, and science became something that he could not share with Darryl. The relationships he develops are, like that with his own father, ineffectual, lacking the depth or honesty that Barry craves. According to Durkin, resistant children 'were less involved in play, were more restless and showed less enjoyment' (Durkin 1995, 96), and when interacting with a father figure, and then removing himself from the situation, that is the way Barry Allen appears. He is, in the moment, content. But as soon as he is removed from the situation, he is restless, his thoughts scattered, and his mood is inconsistent. His focus goes to the day his mother died, bringing back the need to solve her murder and bring back his father.

3.2.1 The Role of the Father in the Life of Barry Allen

The New 52 depicts Barry as less jovial version than previously seen, more consistent with the Flash that was seen post *Crisis on Infinite Earths* or the *Flash: Rebirth* (Johns and Van Sciver 2011) storylines, which will be discussed later in this chapter. While neither of these arcs are integral in terms of the parent-child relationship, they are highlight the hero that Barry is for the modern reader. Indeed, post 2000, Geoff John's overhauled the character, ensuring the character had a distinct identity, differentiating from darker characters like Batman from the onset. The fact that, unlike his contemporaries, that Barry does not fight for vengeance, is significant for his character, a trait that is later shared by Wally West. In the New 52 arcs Barry's powers are not fully developed, and he has not learned to control them. Barry must learn from those around him. His powers are greater than he knows, but he needs someone to propel him forward, forcing him to push the boundaries and discover a new set of limitations. From the onset, the reader can see his relationship with Doctor Darwin Elias, a brilliant scientist that Barry admires greatly. The two develop something of a father-son relationship, despite very little difference in their ages. From the opening panels it is clear that Barry admires Elias, even seeming to view him as a sort of heroic figure. He places Elias in a position of power and authority. From the first moment Elias is introduced, he is shown to be a dominant figure, taking up the vast majority of the first panel. Barry is shown to be at the side of the panel, with Elias being the taller figure, drawing the readers' focus (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 Barry meets Darwin Elias, Manapul et al 2013 © DC Comics

The colour scheme within the panel even suggests his importance, with the majority of the panel being shades of grey or brown, but with his tie being a vibrant green and yellow combination. The colours draw the readers' eye further from Barry and draws the focus to Elias even more, highlighting his importance. In subsequent panels Elias is shown as being slightly separate from the other characters, with him being taller, present but not part of Barry's life. This all suggests a relationship where Elias is the authority figure, although he is quick to praise both Barry and the Flash in separate instances, ensuring Barry feels there is an authoritative relationship that is fulfilling for him. In Barry's eyes, because of this, Elias can be trusted completely. Elias is someone who uses his charisma and intellect to charm those around him. The body language, so to speak, gives the reader clues to the burgeoning relationship between Barry and Elias, before it has even been formed. The perspective of the relationship changes once Barry dons the scarlet costume, becoming his Flash alter ego. Flash

becomes the focus, the iconic red and yellow costume drawing the readers' focus. When Flash is side by side with Elias, emphasis is now placed on the Flash within the relationship, taller and brighter than Elias. He has become the heroic character, and Elias the victim. While in the Barry-Elias relationship, Elias is clearly the dominant force, when Barry dons the costume, he is revered. The Flash-Elias relationship has more balance than the Barry-Elias one. Elias reveres the Flash as much as Barry does Elias. Because of this, when Barry wears the suit, the hero worship is felt equally by each.

Yet as the story progresses, the reader can see just how much of a father-figure Elias is, although much like Peter Parker, Barry is often a poor judge of character in his pseudo paternal relationships. After learning of the supposed death of his friend Manuel, Barry's thoughts are disordered, the panels scattered and hectic, frequently overlapping and intersecting, making it difficult for the reader to follow, and reflecting the difficulty and confusion in Barry's mind. That is, until Elias arrived. The panels suddenly regain structure, an even guttering, less overlapping. Despite the fact that Barry still wears his Flash costume, Elias is seen as the consoling figure, laying a comforting hand on Flash's shoulder. It is gestures such as this, with the emphasis placed on them within the panels, that show the importance of Darwin Elias, whether he is yet aware of his importance or not. It is because of these gestures that Barry trusts him so completely.

While Barry is the focus in the panels, with Elias being smaller, almost in the background, his importance can be seen clearly through the emphasis on Elias's gestures. Barry never questions Elias's motives; never wonders why Elias has taken such a quick interest in him. The next time the Flash runs, he runs straight to Darwin Elias. Manuel (a friend who quickly becomes an enemy) has just shown him something

shocking, the ability to create clones from his own body, and a devastating and confusing battle ensues. In the aftermath Barry needs help, and Elias is his first port of call. Despite knowing virtually nothing about Elias on a personal level, Barry entrusts him with the most secret knowledge of his powers, the inner workings of the speed force, that mysterious force that controls his powers. In the panels where Elias and Flash first begin working together, the size of the panels, the perspective and focus placed on the characters all shows an imbalance in the relationship.

The panels themselves are long, stretched out, showing the significance of the time passing for Barry and Elias. Barry, wearing the red costume, is on a raised platform of sorts, hooked up to any number of machines, while Elias stands back, shouting words of encouragement, but keeping himself at a safe distance. While Barry is the most significant figure in the panel, it is evident that Elias holds the power once again. They are, like before, near but not together suggesting a conflict will ensue or their relationship will fracture. When Flash destroys the treadmill, Elias is unconcerned, utterly excited by the information he may have gained, consumed with the pursuit of knowledge. Barry simply tries to please him, looking for ways to run faster than ever, but needing Elias to help him. His dependence on Elias is most evident here when Elias is unwilling to continue as an authoritative figure. It is difficult for the reader to know whether he is truly helping Barry, or if he wants the knowledge Barry can provide him with. Yet, despite the reservations the reader may have, Barry needs to have a figure he admires in his life, a close figure that will approve of him in a way that he has been unable to have with his own father without the prison bars. Barry's rationality is removed in this case, because of his need for approval. Because he lost his parents at such a young age, he has spent his life trying to find a relationship that

was equal to those he had before. He needed someone who could see his potential, encourage and assist him, regardless of who they are.

The impacts of his relationship with Elias are seen after their experiments, with the panels being more scattered and unfocused when Barry tries to speed up his thought process. When Barry speaks with Patty Spivot, he loses focus, trying to absorb all that he can from a situation, but creating an information overload, whereby he cannot process what he is seeing. In the pages following, the panels are hectic, where the art is giving the impression of rushing, chaos and a disordered thought process. Barry is determined, yet unable to keep his focus, making him less adept in his heroics. Meanwhile, Elias is showing the reader his darker, less trustworthy side, travelling to the desert to study anomalies, using his research on the Flash. It shows that, although Barry clearly trusts and relies on Elias, his motives are not always pure, and that he is, in the end, using Barry's speed to further his academic career. Barry is naive, believing in the facade, but not looking deeper at the motives. In fact, it has been argued that one of the elements of attachment is the ability to process visual cues. Perhaps Barry is unable to process the cues that suggest Elias is an unsuitable attachment figure. As Fraley et al have noted:

One of the fundamental assumptions of attachment theory is that there are individual differences in the way people organize their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in close relationships and that those differences are rooted, in part, in their representations of experiences in past intimate relationships' (Fraley et al 2006, 1163).

While this encompasses romantic relationships, it is also extremely applicable to pseudo parental relationship, as with those seen in the Flash narratives. This study further argues that: 'differences in attachment security are associated with the way in which people regulate their behavior prior to a naturally occurring separation...'

(Fraley et al 2006, 1164). With such a traumatic upheaval in Barry's early life, it is within the realms of possibility that he chooses these figures subconsciously based on his past experiences.

He is so busy trying to prove his worth that he is completely blindsided by the deception. Barry has chosen an unsuitable and unworthy father figure, simply because he has never quite accepted the loss of his family at such a young age, regardless of how much he tries to believe, and let others believe he has. The next time they come into contact it is as though Elias is trying to make Barry feel the burden of guilt because of the impact the speed force has on the world around him, while still trying to learn from it. They move swiftly from the secure attachment type, with Barry reverting back to the more anxious attachment that lead him to trust Elias in the beginning. The relationship is no longer authoritative, instead it sits firmly as a neglectful model. Any last hope the reader had that Elias may become a true secure relationship is lost when Elias works against the Flash, with Manuel and the clones.

It is then that the reader sees just how unfit he is to assist Barry, and how selfish his pursuit of knowledge is. He assists the Manuel's clones in spite of Manuel's supposed villainy, regardless of the negative impact it will have on Barry, Manuel, and Central City as a whole. It is then that Elias's true nature is revealed to everyone, although Flash finds it difficult to comprehend. Flash still views him as a hero figure. While Elias and his motives are undoubtedly questionable, his methods are undoubtedly effective - allowing the Flash to tap into aspects of his powers that he may never have discovered alone. It makes the condemnation of Elias more complex as, despite everything, Elias still did some good for Barry. He pushed him to be a better hero, though not selflessly. Barry's desire to save people stems from the losses he

faced as a child, but the new cynicism comes from the betrayal he felt from Elias. His heroics have adapted based on the relationships he has formed.

In the second volume of the New 52 series, *Rogues Revolution* (Manapul and Buccellato 2013), Barry even risks his own reputation to save Elias's life. Flash has been missing for a number of weeks, returns to find himself demonised, a symbol of hate in the community, rather than the symbol of hope he had once been. The usurpers, led by Darwin Elias, burned effigies of Flash, and scorned the name. Naturally, Barry has an overwhelming feeling of betrayal, felt more deeply because he had trusted Elias with so much knowledge about himself and the Speed Force, and in the end, that trust was wrongfully placed. Despite Elias having turned the entirety of Central City against Flash, Barry still feels the need to save him when he is in danger. This act alone shows the reader the true character of the Flash - someone willing to help everyone, even those who may not have earned his loyalty. Elias and Barry's unusual relationship, however malfunctioning, is vital for the development of Barry as the Flash. Without the influence and assistance of Elias, Flash would never have understood the Speed Force in the way he now does. While the ease of Barry's trust towards Elias must be questioned, the outcome, for the most part is valuable.

Anxious attachment can be clearly seen when Barry interacts with Elias. After Elias' inevitable betrayal, Barry is scattered, unsure of himself and the world around him. In times of crisis, Barry returns to the old case files, searching for something to prove his father innocent. While he had Elias as a father figure, he did not need to search. After the betrayal, and Elias' brush with death, Barry needed the anchor of the casefile. The casefile, for Barry, is something that keeps him in limbo. It both drives him forward and holds him back. It pushes him to solve the crime, yet he is trapped in a time where he was so lost and vulnerable, losing the one secure parent he had, and

forcing him to withdraw somewhat from his life and hone in on something that has become a crutch when life becomes a little bit less bearable, when the troubles he faces become a little bit too much to handle. It is something that is a tangible symbol of his anxious attachment. As Fraley et al further suggest:

Bowlby argued that one of the key control processes in the system is responsible for answering the following question: Is the attachment figure nearby, accessible, and attentive? If the individual perceives the answer to this question to be “yes,” he or she feels loved, secure, and confident and behaviorally, is likely to explore his or her environment freely. If, however, the individual perceives the answer to the question to be “no,” he or she experiences anxiety and, behaviourally, is like an exhibit attachment behaviours ranging from simple visual searching on the low extreme to active following and vocal signaling to the other’ (Fraley et al 2006, 1165).

In moments where Barry feels he has a secure, accessible attachment figure, his need to prove his father’s innocence is less prominent. However, when that is taken away, Barry is active in his search for answers.

Elias is not the only parental figure for Barry. Detective Frye is the person portrayed next as a father figure for Barry. Unlike Elias, Frye actually raised Barry when his father was sent to prison, although he is introduced much later in the series. For much of his life, Frye was the only father Barry has ever known, the closest thing to a secure paternal relationship that Barry has, although Barry’s own attachment type veers more towards anxious. He is the antithesis of Darwin Elias, raising Barry, helping him even when he didn't understand what he was doing, often at great personal risk. Although Captain Frye is a pivotal character in Barry’s upbringing, he is hardly seen in the first volume of the New 52 story arc. He is seen as only the police captain, no hint of the significance of their relationship is shown. It is not until the end of the second volume, when flashbacks to Barry's time after being struck by lightning are

shown, when the relationship is revealed. It is done cleverly, highlighting the differences between the relationships Barry has with his own father and Frye. Barry, while in a coma, has flashbacks to the night his mother was murdered. The reader is shown the aggressive image of Henry Allen shouting at a young Barry, juxtaposed with the worried figure of Frye visiting Barry in the hospital. Although Barry may not confide in Frye, as he did with Elias, about his life as the Flash, he still turns to him in times of crisis.

All the major events of their lives have been shared. When Frye is promoted to Captain, when Barry is still comatose, Frye wants to share it with him:

I've got some news I want to share. Pretty big news, actually...But I need you to hear it. I need my family to hear it. [...] I'm your new captain, son (Manapul and Buccellato 2013).

The need for Frye to share this with his adoptive son shows the significance of the relationship, and how much of a marked difference there is between the significant father-son relationships Barry had in his formative years. In his early childhood, the relationship he had with his father was rocky, insecure and not always nurturing. When Frye took him in the balance changed. Frye took on the role of both mother and father, providing Barry with the strictness of his father, and trying to show the compassion of his mother as well. While Frye did not necessarily understand Barry, he was always supportive, as subsequent flashback sequences show. Frye, in his essence, was a beat cop, while Barry flourished in an academic setting. This should have given him more in common with Henry, a doctor, but instead he was more at ease with Frye, due in no small part to their proximity, while Henry was always on the fringes, losing out on seeing his son growing up because of spending his time in Iron Heights prison.

Although Frye does not figure significantly in the initial issues, it becomes clear how significant a character he is in Barry's life, someone who never tried to force him down a certain path, but guided gently, as well as he could. The way Frye and Barry interact is, in many ways, reflective of the relationship he had with his mother. But because he did not have the security in his initial father-son bond, he is constantly searching for security, while simultaneously avoiding it. It is because of this lack of an initial bond that Barry searches constantly for a stable relationship yet remains a reluctant participant. The relationship between Frye and Barry is, for a moment, questionable. Barry visits Henry in prison, and later so does Frye. It is made clear to the reader that Henry and Darryl have an old shared secret about the night Nora was killed, with neither wanting Barry to know the truth about who killed his mother. Henry is willing to suffer life in Iron Heights to protect his son from whatever knowledge they both deem too horrific for him to know. It gives the reader cause to question the previous actions of Henry, and the conclusions that were made about his role as a father in Barry's life. Even behind bars he tries to protect his son, something that is unexpected when juxtaposed with the harsh, angry image shown in the flashback sequences. Yet it also calls into question the relationship between Barry and Darryl. A huge secret that could possibly hold the key to solving Nora's murder would give Barry peace, yet it is kept from him. It is not yet clear why this secret is being kept, or what impact it could potentially have on Barry and his relationships, but it certainly makes the reader question the validity of the most formative relationships Barry shared.

The DC television franchise has, in recent years, reinforced the importance of Nora's death, Henry's incarceration, and the role of the paternal figure. *The Flash* (CW 2014), a show created by the CW television network, has explored, in its inaugural

season, the relationships Barry develops, the love and loss he experiences, and the ways in which he copes magnificently. In its fifth season at the time of writing, the show delves even deeper into this. Although the stories are not always the same as those in the comic books, the viewer sees some parallels, and some new and fresh ideas brought to the character. Where Barry was taken in by Darryl Frye in the New 52 incarnation, he was taken in by Joe West in the CW adaptation, also the cop that attended the scene of Nora's murder. The major difference is that Joe is Iris West's father.

Iris and Barry were love interests in the original comic book storylines, although in the New 52 arc they are simply acquaintances that share a common interest - she is the crime reporter with him working as a CSI. A recurring theme, as seen in the comic books, is Barry's search for a father-son relationship that fulfils his unmet childhood needs. The relationship Barry has with his father in this does not resemble that of their relationship in the New 52. He has a close, secure relationship with both his mother and father in this incarnation, but it was ripped away, just as in the comic books. Henry, however, is not portrayed as the aggressive father as in the New 52, but as a kind, loving and protective father. This, in many ways, leads to more confusion in Barry's life. The protective and loving father is still present, but removed, isolated from Barry, always stuck behind a pane of glass. Joe was an ideal father figure, supportive as Darryl Frye was, with another supportive figure seen in Iris. The closeness they share as a family is explored repeatedly in the show, yet is often tested, with new elements constantly added, and new challenges constantly set for them. Joe, like Frye, did not always understand the scientific mind of Barry, but he and Iris always tried. Joe would, from the moment he took Barry in, would protect him in exactly the way he would protect Iris. A strongly authoritative parent, Joe is high on both

responsiveness and demandingness, although he still allows Barry time to grieve. His demandingness is rooted in compassion: he has high expectations of his children, but he understands the traumas that Barry has faced.

They shared some of the worst experiences either would ever face, and Joe was for all intents and purposes Barry's father. This was an unshakable bond that is reinforced episode after episode. When Barry discovers his super speed he rebels, quickly returning to Joe when he gets into trouble. As with Frye in the New 52 arc, Barry constantly turns to Joe for support and guidance, which Joe and Frye give, even when they are out of their depth. Outside the team of scientists involved in helping Barry realise his newfound abilities - headed by Dr Wells - Joe is the first person Barry shares his new abilities with, using them to protect Joe from danger caused by other superpowered beings. Despite this obvious closeness, the traumas he faced as a child have caused Barry to seek a father figure that provides the stability and support that Henry had, before he was taken away. Much like Peter Parker, he is indiscriminate in his choice of father figure, making rash decisions that leave him vulnerable to toxic parental relationships. Regardless of Joe's support and guidance, in many ways his job leaves him open to many threats that could take his life at any time, making the bond somewhat insecure.

Barry develops a father - son relationship with Dr Harrison Wells, a brilliant scientist who helps Barry discover the extent of his powers. Wells believes in Barry when nobody else does, encouraging him completely and always guiding him forward. However, this relationship, like the relationship with Elias, is filled with lies and secrets. Wells is actually Eobard Thawne, the Reverse Flash, and Nora Allen's murderer. Thawne hails from the future, a Flash fanatic obsessed with torturing the enemy that has not been created yet. Thawne murders Nora simply because he can.

Yet, despite this need to destroy Barry, Thawne nurtures him as Dr Wells, pushing him to be better, a more suitable opponent. This closeness that they shared makes Thawne's inevitable discovery so much more traumatic for Barry. Thawne grows genuinely fond of Barry, lamenting as much as he was able to, his part in the destruction of Barry's life. His obsession with the Flash destroyed his own life, trapping him in the past and forcing him to create the Flash in order to return home. This complex origin forced the two together. Thawne was stuck in the past if he did not create the lightning storm that gave Barry his powers, yet Barry would not have become the Flash without Thawne's help.

The reasons behind Thawne's actions are somewhat enigmatic, but the impact it has on Barry is life changing. Thawne took Nora's life, incarcerating Henry and isolating Barry in the process, all because of a jealousy that had not yet been created in Barry's timeline. While disguised as Wells, Thawne and Barry shared many adventures, protecting each other as much as possible, cultivating a paternal relationship that on the surface appeared symbiotic, but eventually caused Barry untold grief. Their relationship mirrors that of Darwin Elias, bringing a negative father figure into the space where a positive father still exists. When Barry does not have faith in himself, Thawne has faith in him, knowing exactly what he can achieve and pushing him to do it. Even when Thawne is discovered and imprisoned, he still helps Barry harness his powers. Barry, for his entire life, has wanted to rescue his mother, and Thawne helps him hone his speed enough to travel through time. The loss of Wells as a father figure, upon the discovery of Thawne, rocked Barry's sense of security completely, ripping the understanding, supportive person away and leaving a destructive monstrous presence behind. The need to defeat Thawne was made so much greater because of the bond that had been shared.

3.2.1 The Butterfly Effect – How the Complex Parent-Child Relationship Impacted Barry in Later Life

Iris West was Barry Allen's first love, the only person he ever really connected with. Iris came into Barry's life at a time when he was totally and completely vulnerable, utterly exposed following the death of his mother and the subsequent loss of his father. She became a confidante, someone on whom Barry could always rely. This, on Barry's part, went from friendship to love, albeit unrequited. When a child is faced with so much uncertainty, it is natural to latch on to someone so close to him. In this case it was Iris, the kind girl that took him in when he was scared and helped him throughout his entire life. Barry developed something of an obsession as a result, a type of worship that kept her on a pedestal and romantically at arm's length. The love Barry has for Iris is, in many cases, agape love, described in the Handbook of Attachment as a selfless love. He is unable to tell her how he feels because of his own insecurities, yet he does not stand in the way of her romantic relationships with others. This is seen strongly in the CW series *The Flash*, where Barry wilfully ignores his own feelings in order to ensure Iris's happiness. Because the relationship Barry had with his mother was secure, he appears to have a secure attachment later in life, specifically in his relationship with Iris. As their relationship progresses, with both having different partners at different times in the series, Barry seldom makes advances towards Iris that would appear unwarranted. Unfailingly respectful, Iris is the anchor he has from his childhood, reminding him as an adult that, in spite of the troubles he may face, home will always be a place of hope and security.

Although his mother died when he was only a child, she was by far the most stable part of his life, nurturing and supportive when he needed it most. It is this stability, early on, and the security he felt that has allowed him, in his mother's

absence, to have a functional life while still (metaphorically) waiting for her to return. Yet he has detached enough to be able to live something akin to a normal life: 'Once a separated child has entered the phase of detachment he seems no longer preoccupied with his missing mother and instead to have adapted satisfactorily in his new surroundings' (Bowlby 2012, 69). He became a forensic scientist to solve her murder, and although there are times when solving the crime and proving his father innocent all but consumes him, the security that his mother provided allows him to step back when his relationship with Patty Spivot (seen in the *New 52* comic books) is at stake. He only returns to it in times of great stress in his life, which shows that, although it has taken many years, he has the ability to detach from the crime and exist in the moment, like the child that has the ability to play with his toys in his mother's absence. Yet the Flashpoint storyline shows the reader impact having his mother in his life would have on Barry. The paradox created in this story arc is caused when Barry destroys Eobard Thawne, negating everything he did. Yet it had more far reaching impacts than he could have ever imagined, destroying the world around him. But the relationship he has with his mother in this arc is far more important to Barry as a hero. When Barry wakes up in this new version of Central City, he has no super speed. His father has died, but his mother is alive. They Justice League has never been created, and some of the friends he once knew were the villains, destroying the earth.

While the world of Flashpoint cannot continue, it does bring Barry many moments of happiness. He is able to take his mother to dinner or speak with her candidly about his life as a hero (Fig. 9), something he has never been able to do in his adult life, no matter how many people he saved.



Fig. 9 Barry gets to speak to Nora again, Johns 2011 © DC Comics

His mother dying is the reason he became a hero, however indirectly. His need to solve her murder fuelled him, but in a world where she survived, he no longer needs to be a hero. That is, until he sees the state the world is in, and its imminent destruction. He faces a moral dilemma, and yet again it is his mother that urges him forward, pushing him to be the best person he can possibly be, regardless of what would happen to her. Barry is pushed, yet again, to put the lives of the many in front of his own wellbeing, either emotional or physical. His mother, yet again, is lost to him. But this time there is a difference. He knows her pride and can at least move forward knowing that he is doing the right thing by her. However, this moment is even more complex than Nora's original death. Barry may have been a child witnessing the death of his mother in main continuity, but in Flashpoint he is directly responsible, having to make the heroic choice. The decision quite simply comes down to saving the world or saving his mother. This is made more significant when it is revealed that the Flash himself

created the world of *Flashpoint*, by travelling through time to save his mother, altering the timeline for every hero in the DC universe. While Barry initially blamed his villain for the change, the fact that his need to save his mother created a world that would ultimately be destroyed is far more significant. In this moment, his mother becomes his greatest motivation as a hero, and her death or survival becomes the deciding factor in the type of hero he becomes.

As a hero, Barry knows he must save the world, and in this case he does so with his mother's full support, even with the knowledge that they will never see each other again. Without a secure attachment, Barry would never have been able to make that choice, and likely would have lived the rest of his life in the Flashpoint paradox. While he now knows he can never bring her back, he at least knows that she is proud. It is this pride that pushes him in Flashpoint, as his need to make up for not saving her pushed him in the other story arcs. Similarly, in the CW incarnation, Barry tried to save his mother, creating a paradox and opening the world up to bigger threats. Yet he was able to stay with her as she died, ensuring that she was not alone, and that both knew they were loved. Barry knew that, with or without the costume, she was proud, and he could be a hero. In each case, knowing that she was proud and doesn't blame him gives him a new sense of freedom, allowing him to forge a new path as a hero, without the weight of guilt. His mother still drives him forward, but in a way that allows him to move forward. His relationship with her is the root of his desire to be a hero, and despite the changes in character history and chronology, which is one thing that has not changed.

Unlike the other relationships that have been discussed regarding Barry, to Wally he is something of a surrogate father. Within Geoff John's story arcs Wally is Barry's nephew, while in the CW show, he is her long-lost brother (Jimenez 2019,

151). He too has seen his fair share of tragedy, lacking a strong male role model for much of his life. The Flash and Barry Allen are two separate identities to him in the beginning, and he admires them both greatly, aspiring to be more like each. Wally goes so far as to attempt to recreate the accident that turned Barry into the Flash, granting him speed of his own. He dons the mantle Kid Flash, learning from his hero. In *Flash: Rebirth*, Barry Allen returns after years in the speed force. He is lost and isolates himself from his family. But they stage an intervention, where Wally shows just how much he admires not just the Flash, but Barry as a person. "I didn't hope Barry Allen was the Flash. I hoped the Flash was Barry Allen." (Johns and Van Sciver 2011). This admiration is not something unique to the rebirth storyline, with Wally and Barry sharing a unique bond throughout their history. Perhaps one of the most significant interactions between Wally and Barry, this moment highlights the influence Barry had on Wally's life. When Wally became Kid Flash, and subsequently the Flash, his heroism was directly informed by Barry's own heroism. Wally was a hero based on what he saw in his relationship with Barry. It was Barry's morality, the fact that he was not a hero out of vengeance that taught Wally how to be a hero. According to Jimenez:

"I don't wear this uniform to frighten anyone"...and I don't fight for vengeance". This self-definition is obvious and is deliberate to serve as a counterpoint when the flash faces a grave tragedy in a future story (Jimenez 2019, 154).

Even with the impending tragedy, Wally has deliberately named himself as a hero who does not fight for vengeance, aligning himself morally with the man he views as an idol.

Even in the more recent storylines, both *New 52* and live action there is a special bond between the two. The *New 52* incarnation of Wally West was abandoned

by his father at a young age, raised by an unwilling mother until she disappears (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 Barry becomes a pseudo paternal figure, Manapul et al 2015 © DC Comics He is then taken in by his aunt Iris. Until she introduces him to Barry, the only male role models he had were an absentee father and a criminal uncle. As the story progresses, the reader can see the sense of security he gains, simply from having someone take such an interest in him. In *Volume 6: Out of Time* (Venditti et al 2016), a glimpse of the future relationship between Barry and Wally is shown. Wally died in a car crash, creating a warped, bitter version of Barry, a Blue Flash. When this Blue Flash travels back to that moment, he kills his past self, the one that could not save Wally, and stopping Wally's death. Wally then absorbs the speed force leaving Flash's body, vowing to find Blue Flash wherever he may be in order to stop him ever killing Barry and creating a paradox.

In the CW series Wally is introduced in season two, with him and Barry not seeing eye to eye for quite some time. Unlike in the comic books, this Wally is older, making Barry less of a father figure and more of a brother. However, Wally is rescued by the Flash, never knowing it was Barry rescuing him. Flash sacrifices his speed to Zoom, an evil speedster from an alternate earth, in order to get Wally back. Wally may

not know that Barry is the Flash, but he does know what his rescue cost him. This sacrifice gives Wally a new sense of security, a feeling of belonging, and new meaning. He has someone to believe in and aim to be like. The similarities in their childhoods is what creates a special bond between them. Wally never had a father, and Barry's father was lost to him long before he should have been. Yet they reacted in very different ways. Yet both become heroes, helping society where they can. Wally West becomes Kid Flash as an homage to his mentor, eventually donning the iconic red and yellow costume and taking on the name of the Flash.

3.3 Conclusion

Barry Allen was undoubtedly shaped by the traumas he faced as a child. The repeated upheavals and altered sense of security changed his perspective. He lost his mother to traumatic circumstances, and as a result has felt the need to save everyone. His dual need to move forward with his life and to solve the crime that has been hanging over his head for decades is what fuels his need to be a superhero. In many cases, Barry tried to be a hero long before he gained his superpowers, struggling to balance his need to solve the crime, with living his life. His need to solve the murder leaves him in a permanent state of limbo, searching all the time for the father-son relationship that was ripped away from him at a very young age, dangling permanently out of reach. Although he never achieves a permanent, lasting relationship, save those with Joe and Darryl, he continues forward, searching all the time for the relationships he lost and the answers he needs.

Chapter Four: The Nuclear Family in the World of Superheroes

4.1 Introduction

As has been established in the previous chapters, a dramatic event in the early life of a protagonist is the cornerstone for the majority of superhero narratives. Most heroes come from a background of trauma, the child that saw their parents die, or the child that never knew them. While there are instances where a parental figure will be strongly present in the hero's journey, oftentimes the hero must follow their path alone. This trope has become so synonymous with the genre that the reader often expects this loss, and it is often the main motivator within a narrative. It is the one thing, above all else, that encourages the hero to take action. Few narratives deviate from this background of trauma. Few show the family as a unit rather than something that is fractured. And while narratives featuring superpowered beings, by their very nature, must have drama, it is rare that this drama does not begin with tragedy in the family.

Rarely is a parent depicted as a superhero. Equally rare is the portrayal of a strong, supportive household. Yet there are a small number of heroes that do have that strong family unit, a few who do not have that background of loss and tragedy, or at the very least whose tragedy is not rooted in the loss of the family unit. Kamala Khan, the current Ms. Marvel, did not have a tragic upbringing. Her family is alive and whole, giving her an unusual origin as a superhero. Vision, the Synthezoid hero created by Ultron, desperately sought a traditional family, a human existence, and so he created one. While his origin story may be somewhat violent as the creation of an Artificial Intelligence, Vision is desperate for a normal, human existence. *Little Worse Than a Man* and *Little Better Than A Beast* show the complex dynamic created when a hero

creates a civilian life, made more complicated by the perception Vision has about what it means to be human. Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples created a unique interpretation of the hero's journey when *Saga* was born, redefining certain expectations within the genre. Alana and Marko fought on opposite sides of an intergalactic war but leave that life behind to raise a family.

Although none of these characters would appear to have anything in common, at least on a very superficial level, by looking at the relationships portrayed within their story arcs, they do share certain similarities. They are all equally motivated by protecting their families, where many heroes are motivated by the loss of their loved ones. The impact this has on their professional and personal development is clearly seen throughout the lives of each character. They are a new type of hero, not seeking vengeance, nor are they looking for answers. Their motivations as heroes are simply that of protector, nothing more. Many of the most well-known heroes face the loss of their home, their family and their safety, and they generally this loss happens at a very young age, making it a compelling tragedy. But the heroes discussed in this chapter are vastly different. Many theorists explore the impact the loss of a parent or child has on those left behind. Some explore the strong bonds parents can have with their children, and vice versa.

As with the previous chapter, the theorists that will be used to explore the types of connections between the parent and the child are John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, as well as Diana Baumrind. Both regularly explore the relationship from the perspective of the child. However, the impact of the relationship on the parent will also be discussed. This shift in perspective highlights the different impacts various relationships can have on a character and the development of personality and identity traits. Motivations are different, diverse choices are made, and each hero will have

different priorities. Each character has a very varied backstory, and their heroics are quite mixed, yet they still share a common thread. They have a motivation that links them all within a shared theme. This chapter will explore the similarities and differences surrounding the characters, and the various circumstances surrounding their lives as heroes.

4.2 Who is Ms. Marvel?

Kamala Khan is not like any other superhero in the current Marvel line-up. Among her many achievements, Kamala Khan is also the first Muslim superhero to headline her own series, signifying a shift in cultural perspective within the genre. There is an awareness regarding the importance of diverse representation that that has long been absent in popular culture. While she is still a Western hero, allowing for analysis within the confines of the theories, she represents the changes the genre has seen, a more modern hero. Where the majority of comic book protagonists have historically been white male characters, Kamala's origin story highlights different aspects of American comic book culture. Not just a hero, but a teenage girl facing a host of issues from the insidiousness of institutional and casual racism to the mundanity of high school, Kamala is a hero who represents every aspect of modern life. She is one of the most unique superheroes in the current Marvel Comics line up, as a Muslim American teenager who gained her powers not through trauma, but because of her heritage. '*Ms. Marvel* is significant because it features the first American *Muslimah* heroine as the headline character' (Arjana 2018, 49). The release of the first issue of *Ms Marvel* in 2014 broke Marvel's digital download record, becoming the highest grossing digital

download in the history of the company, largely due to the intersectionality in her portrayal. Intersectionality is defined by Merriam-Webster as being:

the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine and overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individual groups. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the theory of *intersectionality*, the idea that when it comes to thinking about how inequalities persist, categories like gender, race, and class are best understood as overlapping and mutually constitutive rather than isolated and distinct (Merriam-Webster 2019).

For Ms. Marvel, her intersectionality comes not only in the form of being a female hero, but in being a woman of colour representing a notoriously underrepresented group in society. Ernesto Priego argues: ‘Ms Marvel feels to me like a positive step towards the recognition of diversity in superhero comic books, perhaps in a much more mature way than in any of the other recent attempts in other Marvel titles’ (Priego 2016, 2). Due to these layers of intersectionality much of the academic discourse surrounding her portrayal has focused on gender, race, and religion. While these aspects are important to consider when discussing the character, they will be done so in conjunction with discussion relating to the parent-child dynamic. As Miriam Kent notes: ‘Due to mainstream comics’ history of framing women within hegemonic ideologies (Brad J. Ricca 2008), Kamala Khan represents a break from tradition. A major development, for instance, is the publisher’s conscientiousness towards issues around inclusion and intersectionality.’ (Kent 2015).

Indeed, having Marvel Comics new headlining superhero be Muslim woman takes some of the historically hegemonic undertones out of the genre: ‘Such works recognize the significance of female comic book characters in an industry which has traditionally been dominated by men in terms of content, production, and assumed

audience.’ (Kent 2015). Kamala, in many ways, represents a new wave of heroism devoid of the traditional expectations of masculinity. Although Kamala is not the first Muslim superhero to debut in Marvel Comics, she is the first to do so in a way that does not feel quite so stereotyped and largely lacks the influence of the male gaze: ‘What is equally significant is that before the Muslim Ms. Marvel, superheroines coming out of the Marvel company were still the subjects of sexual objectification’ (Arjana 2015, 47). Soorya Qadir whose alter ego Dust could transform her body into dust, was an earlier representation of Muslim women in Marvel Comics. However, her representation was far from being as favourable as Kamala’s, with issues surrounding hypersexualization and stereotyping plaguing her character: ‘However, Dust’s representation is fraught with Orientalist sentiments and a Western male gaze, as has been noted by Jehanzeb Dar (2010).’ (Kent 2015). Yet this stereotyping is largely avoided within Kamala Khan’s narrative, with her body being depicted in a careful manner devoid of hypersexualization.

Kamala is also one of the few Superheroes whose crime fighting ways are not borne from tragedy, and instead often stems from the life lessons she gains from her family. As a result, she largely defies the conventions of the genre. Her backstory is not filled with isolation and loss. She, unlike many of her peers, has a stable home life and a secure family dynamic that is largely unshaken by her life as a hero: ‘As one scholar notes, “she is not traumatised by the death of a loved one, unlike Batman or Spiderman, and she has no interest in violence’ (Arjana 2015, 49). She has a loving mother, father and brother, in a safe neighbourhood where she has security, something many other heroes’ lack. But that is not to say that she does not have her own set of challenges to face. As a Pakistani-American, she must balance both cultures, a task that is made even more complicated when she gains her powers. Kamala must learn to

navigate the conflicting aspects of her heritage, balancing the often-conflicting ideals. She must learn who she is as a hero, and as a person. Her struggles are both the everyday struggle of a first generation American, and the high-stakes struggles of a superhero. While facing this, she is still a typical teenager, struggling with the same banal things most sixteen-year old girls struggle with. In her school life, she is an American, embracing many aspects of Western culture, although she does face adversity. Similarly, at home she struggles. She does not have a wholly Pakistani identity, yet she is not entirely American. She struggles to find the balance between the culture her family came from, and the culture she lives in. As Kent further notes:

Kamala's visibility in the mainstream media thus marks a breakthrough for Muslim women's representation in the West. Her conception originates from a completely different ideological space: Kamala is a Pakistani-American with a Muslim background living in New Jersey, who idolizes the Avengers and writes fanfiction. According to Wilson, a central theme of the book involves Kamala's struggle to reconcile being an American teenager with her family's Pakistani Muslim values (Kent 2015).

Kamala's cultural and religious identity, her awareness of Western beauty standards, and her journey to become Ms. Marvel are intertwined throughout the story arc.

This complicated sense of identity leads to friction within her family, long before she ever gains her powers. And while her parents are supportive of her American side, it is a different way of life for each of them. Her parents are not comfortable with the freedoms American teenagers are permitted, while Kamala is unhappy with the restrictions she feels are placed on her. This dichotomy is reoccurring throughout Kamala's story, although the family dynamic does begin to shift as her powers grow and Kamala begins to accept her multifaceted identity. As the story progresses, Kamala grows in confidence by embracing her heritage more,

rather than lamenting the fact that her beauty, her heritage and her values differ in some ways to her classmates. All of this is hugely influential for Kamala. She manages to incorporate aspects of both cultures into every aspect of her life, including her life as New Jersey's newest hero.

Kamala's story begins with an exploration into the implications of Muslim identity in the life of a Western superhero. The first panels open with Kamala looking at a bacon sandwich, something that seems innocuous, but differentiates her from her peers. Yet this scene also presents many of the different facets of Muslim identity, introducing Nakia – Kamala's Muslim friend. According to Arjana: 'Nakia...is a fellow Muslim. She wears the *hijab* and often serves as the prominent Muslim voice in the series, reminding Kamala of her religious foundations' (Arjana 2018, 49). While Kamala chooses not to wear a hijab either as Kamala, or in her life as Ms. Marvel, Nakia chooses to wear one, showing the different aspects of Muslim identity:

Further, Nakia, who unlike Kamala wears a headscarf, is part of Ms. Marvel's varied supporting Muslim cast. This includes Kamala's strict-but-loveable father, her mother, who remains clueless about Kamala's love of fanfiction, and her pious brother. With these characters, the book diversifies the notion of "the Muslim" as cast members express their faith differently. Islam is not merely a monolith (Kent 2015).

While the scene is a brief introduction to some of the most important characters in the series, it also informs the reader of Kamala's place in her world. The reader is immediately aware of this sense of Otherness that Kamala feels. From there the reader is shown even more differences, with Kamala's Caucasian American classmates, Zoe and Josh, discussing a party, inviting Bruno (Kamala's Italian-American friend), but ignoring both Kamala and Nakia, based on the assumption that their families would

be too strict, highlighting racial stereotypes impacting Muslim Americans from the onset (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11 Kamala is seen as different by her peers, Wilson et al 201 © Marvel Comics

This serves two purposes, showing the reader the lack of understanding by Kamala's American classmates surrounding Muslim culture or identity, and highlighting once again the impact of being seen as different within American society. Bruno acts as an example of being considered different – for Bruno it is due to intelligence – but still being accepted. He is accepted because he shares largely the same white aesthetic as Zoe and Josh, but Kamala and Nakia are seen as both culturally and aesthetically different and are isolated as a result:

Further, the creators are conscientious of attending to familiar topics with regards to women, Islam, and race. In one scene, Kamala's white classmate, Zoe, asks Nakia about her headscarf and references honor crimes. Zoe's comments are clearly presented as annoying and ridiculous, as evidenced by the other characters' facial expressions... Issues around Muslim identity are not up for debate within the narrative—they are naturalized aspects of the characters (Kent 2015).

While this scene sets up the cultural narrative within the story, it also makes sure to not trivialise aspects of Muslim culture, nor does it stereotype. Instead it serves to show the ways religion and ethnic backgrounds influence someone's identity but should not be a means of Othering. Yet when Kamala's family is introduced, there is a sense of being strict or overprotective, prompting Kamala to lie to her parents, and go to the party anyway. However, this perspective is entirely Kamala's own, creating a very obvious bias. She perceives unfair standards and conveys them to the reader. Nevertheless, the reader sees very quickly that Kamala's family are right in this case, in spite of how strict Kamala may believe them to be. Their strictness is presented in a way that juxtaposes itself with the racism experienced by Kamala in her school setting. Although Zoe and her cohorts have been presented within the opening pages as being a negative influence in Kamala's life, Kamala repeatedly tries to befriend them (not unlike Peter Parker's desperate attempts to win over his classmates in *The Amazing Spider-Man*). While Zoe and her friends may feign openness and acceptance in a school setting, they continue to isolate Kamala when she attempts to fit with them. Kamala, however, very quickly comes to realise that she has allowed her family and her heritage to become something to be mocked by Zoe, because she herself is uncomfortable with it. Kamala's journey is slow, and even when she accepts her family and her culture, she still does not accept herself. That is something that changes throughout the course of her story, but the development is organic. She changes as she learns more as a hero. Being Ms. Marvel is something that helps her realise her identity and heritage cannot be separated. Being Muslim, being dark skinned, and being a hero are all intrinsic parts of her identity.

4.2.1 Ms. Marvel and Cultural Heritage

Kamala's identity is often wrapped up in her desire to fit more with American culture, often leading to conflict within her family dynamic. Her ideals of beauty are the blond haired and blue-eyed bombshell, the stereotypical image of the popular girl in American culture. Kamala frequently laments the fact that she does not fit these narrow ideals, subconsciously Othering both herself and her family, further increasing the complexities seen in their relationship. This beauty ideal is seen from the moment Zoe is introduced, with their differences starkly highlighted (Fig. 11). As someone who initially identifies herself as 'brown', Kamala seems to unwittingly reduce herself to a cultural stereotype. Before considering any other personality traits, she is clearly very aware of societal beauty standards and is impacted greatly by the fact that she is not represented in the media she consumes, viewing this as a flaw in herself. 'She is highly intelligent, brave, independent, and has a great sense of humor' (Arjana 2018, 47), yet for Kamala has a complicated relationship with these aspects of her identity. She often rejects aspects of her culture and identity that do not fit with the American ideal, meaning the secure relationship she has with her family is vulnerable in the beginning. Indeed, until Kamala begins to accept her identity her attachment type has the potential to shift to a less secure attachment, which would in turn compromise her development as a hero. As will be discussed further below, Kamala's heroism relies on her family dynamic, meaning the hero she becomes would inevitably be impacted by a change in attachment type.

It is for this reason that when she discovers her powers, she becomes Ms. Marvel, both by name and by appearance. Her idol is Captain Marvel, with fanfiction surrounding her hero, and other Marvel icons being somewhat a bone of contention with her family. Captain Marvel's not quite secret identity is Carol Danvers, the blonde

haired, blue eyed strong and powerful hero. Kamala idolises Danvers for many reasons, including her beauty and her power, as well as her self-assured nature are just the tip of the iceberg. Kamala gains shapeshifting abilities among other powers, and in the beginning, she had to transform herself to look like Carol Danvers in order to use them. She takes on the form of the classic Ms. Marvel, the all-American girl appearance with the stereotypical revealing and sexualised costume. Kamala unwittingly shapeshifts into the blonde former Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers, as she previously expressed that she wants to be like Carol. According to Kent:

Interestingly, Kamala's powers are an externalization of Kamala's inner conflict: if only she could change herself, then she would be happy and fit in. However, she soon realizes that in order to fit in, she would have to compromise her own identity. This crucial development in Kamala's character resonates with issues of assimilation and arguably represents an embrace of her “otherness” (Kent 2015).

Much of Kamala’s journey as a hero is about self-acceptance, and the subsequent acceptance of her heritage. Kamala undergoes a metamorphosis throughout the story, with her Muslim identity informing her heroism, yet it is not something that happens quickly for her. As complicated as navigating the world of superheroes is for her, finding her place in the world as Kamala is equally complicated, yet the two identities inform each other, providing Kamala with many of the answers she was searching for. As Arjana further notes: ‘*Muslimah* superheroes are characterized by their Muslim identity, superpowers (such as shapeshifting, flying, and instantaneous healing of injuries) and at times a deeply embedded theology that guides their heroic actions’ (Arjana 2018, 47). This embedded theology is seen from the Urdu in the panels during her transformation to the impact of her religious education on her heroism. While initially incapable of using her powers while not in the form of Carol Danvers, Kamala

eventually adjusts, accepting that to be the hero she is supposed to be, she needs to embrace her own identity.



Fig. 12 Kamala's cultural heritage and love of heroism is combined, Marvel Comics © Wilson et al 2014

Shortly after Kamala gains her powers something akin to a transformation occurs, where she is faced with her own personal heroes, including Captain Marvel, although the scene takes place entirely in Kamala's mind (Fig. 12). Even the figure of Captain Marvel – although not Captain Marvel herself, but rather the transformative Terrigen gas taking a familiar shape – encourages Kamala to embrace her heritage. The scene is written entirely in Urdu, with little translation offered, forcing the reader to embrace Kamala's heritage, even before she does so herself. The scene, much like

the rest of Kamala's story, is filled with references to Muslim culture, most notably here the figure of the birds, which Sophia Rose Arjana argues are in reference to Attar's birds from *The Conference of the Birds*, signifying human limitations as well as transformations:

This scene in the comic represents Ms. Marvel, a teenager and a superhero, as someone embarking on a spiritual quest, much like Attar's birds. Ernesto Prigo [sic] has argued that we can see this scene as an expression of metamorphosis and transfiguration of both Kamala and Ms. Marvel, where both become something greater than their former selves (Arjana 2018, 48).

It was not until she accepted the fact that she is 'brown skinned' that she became Ms. Marvel in her own right. Accepting her heritage, and how much of herself is tied up in it, was a process for Kamala. If Kamala was to come to accept her heritage and her identity, she must also accept her family for who they are, something that her relationship with her blended heritage makes somewhat of a challenge for Kamala at times. On her journey to become Ms. Marvel it becomes clear to Kamala just how significant the role of her heritage is for her as a hero, making the parent-child relationship here particularly significant. It is not a loss that makes Kamala a hero, but rather the ongoing relationship she has with her family and her broader Muslim community, meaning that as a hero her family has almost as significant an input as she herself has.

Kamala lives in suburban New Jersey, with her parents and brother, with each member of her family representing a different aspect of Muslim identity. There is nothing sinister, nothing extraordinary about them, unlike many families within graphic narratives. They are not rich, nor do they do not harbour government secrets, instances that are frequently stereotyped when representing Muslim people within various forms of media including the graphic narrative. They are an average family, in

an average home, navigating their way through an environment that can harbour hostility towards them based solely on appearance: ‘The supporting characters include Kamala’s parents, who many immigrants would recognize as their own – hard-working, patriotic, and upwardly mobile’ (Arjana 2018, 47). While they do not represent the Western stereotype often expected in the comic book genre, instead adding some much-needed diversity, they certainly represent a secure attachment. Throughout the series they represent a more authoritative parenting style, with high demandingness combined with affection for each family member. Although the parenting style appears to be authoritative Kamala initially interprets a more authoritarian parenting style, viewing little affection and higher demandingness in their relationship. This is clear from their introductory scene where Kamala’s father is portrayed as strict and somewhat distant, yet it quickly becomes clear that this is not actually the case. While both parenting styles have high expectations, an authoritarian parenting style is autocratic, emotionally distant, and high on punishment. Authoritarian parenting has a very strong ‘because I said so’ mentality, unlike the authoritative relationship. The representation of their relationship changes throughout the series, largely because of Kamala’s personal growth.

Kamala’s heroism, like each of the heroes discussed in this thesis, stems from her parents. However, because it does not come from their loss, instead growing as a result of the guidance and support that has been given throughout her life, it is a new heroism. She has a very strong, definite sense of morality which comes from her father teaching her the Quran, showing her the difference between right and wrong (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13 Kamala's father taught her morality through the Quran, Wilson et al 2014 © Marvel Comics

The significance of this image stems from Kamala's realisation regarding her family. Her ethics stem from her family and the relationship they share. The family bond has shaped her morality, creating a hero who is not motivated by tragedy, but by their secure bond. Her father's ethical teachings shaped her worldview, creating a need for her to act as a hero in some way. This image signifies the moment she decided to use her family values in her heroism, acting as the catalyst for change. As Kamala does this, she gains more control over her powers, meaning her secure relationship and authoritative upbringing plays a direct role in her development as a hero.

It also comes from her mother, showing her their culture and traditions, and how to be a good, kind person. Her heroism does not come from a need to fill a void caused by their loss. Her relationship with her father is shown in the beginning to be the stronger parent-child bond. Yusuf could communicate with Kamala, where her mother could not. Although their introductory scene is conflicted, as Kamala struggles with balancing her heritage with her home, finding herself at odds with her parents,

her father bridges the gap. The same can be seen when Kamala struggles with her developing powers, failing to hide her activities from her parents, her father is someone she can rely on. Even when there was tension between them, Kamala always felt she had a connection with him, and could come to him with any problem. That is not to say that the expectations and demandingness are not present in their relationship. Yusef has very strong convictions and high expectations, yet he is democratic. These traits can be seen in Kamala's own heroism. Rather than using violence to solve her problems, many of her battles are fought using her wits and her convictions, a direct result of her relationship with her father. In fact, this is something Kamala herself has noted, referencing the lessons her father taught her about her faith and morality, using these lessons to become a better hero than she would otherwise have been: 'In *Ms. Marvel*, Muslim themes also play a central role, including numerous references to classical Islamic texts' (Arjana 2018, 48). From the moment Attar's birds are referenced to the moment Kamala realises that she can pave the way for a new type of hero because of her father, Islam has played a key role in her development.



Fig. 14 Kamala's relationship with her mother begins to change, Marvel Comics © Wilson et al

2014

As the story progresses, and Kamala adapts more and more to her life as a superhero, her relationship with her parents' changes. When the world is in danger, and she must risk her life to protect it, it is her mother she turns to for comfort. Although her relationship with her father remains unchanged, still as secure as in the first throes of her heroism, it is her mother that Kamala turns to in her hour of need. (Fig. 14) More is revealed here, at the end of Volume 2, about their relationship than anywhere else throughout the series. It shows an understanding between them that had not previously been explored. Ami was previously shown as overbearing and strict, never understanding her daughter and the life she chose to lead. Yet when Kamala chooses to confide in her, Ami is shown to know her daughter so well that she already knew she was Ms. Marvel. The relationship between Ami and Kamala changes drastically here, and the difference between authoritarian and authoritative parenting becomes

obvious. While Ami showed less overt affection in the early part of the series, the pride she has in her daughter's heroism, and the inherent knowledge she had about Kamala's actions shows that while she may be stoic, she was certainly not authoritarian. Although Kamala and Ami have had their differences, and certainly were not always understanding of each other, when Kamala needs support in a time of crisis, it is her mother she turns to, rather than her father. While her father clearly understands her personality, and they share a bond, it is her mother that knows who she is on a deeper level.

4.2.2 Ms. Marvel; Inhuman, Avenger, and X-Man

As the series progresses Kamala does not just have to navigate her American upbringing, her Muslim heritage, or her newfound powers. Kamala has another potential mother-figure that influences her identity as a superhero. Medusa, Queen of the Inhumans, a mother-figure to all with the Inhuman gene, shows her how to understand and utilise her powers to the best of her abilities. It is revealed in *Ms. Marvel Volume 1* that Kamala is descended from the Inhumans (Wilson and Alphonso 2014), but her powers lay dormant until the genes were unlocked by the Terrigen mist. Medusa is not an ever-present parental figure, seen only a handful of times throughout the series. She differs greatly from other mother-figures within the graphic novel genre. She is not overbearing, instead she steps in only when necessary. Medusa guides from afar, with Lockjaw, an oversized canine, who quickly becomes Kamala's trusty sidekick. Where parental figures who arrive after the hero gains their powers act as a guide or a moral compass, present throughout the heroes' journey, Medusa is distant. She very strongly represents the Uninvolved parent, passive and absent for the majority of Kamala's journey. Her expectations are conflicting, with a desire for

Kamala to join the Inhumans, yet with no real desire to be a mentor or to show her how her powers work. While Kamala struggled to accept her Muslim American identity, she seems to have very little difficulty accepting the Inhuman aspect of her history, as though she has come so far in her personal journey by this point that accepting this new aspect of her identity is second nature. Kamala has come to view herself as a hero, no longer transforming herself to fight. While this is true, she also seems to have very little desire to learn more about this new heritage at the expense of her current life.

Like with Spider-Man, certain members of the Avengers act as mentors for Kamala. However, unlike Spider-Man's relationship with Tony Stark, Kamala never develops a close bond with just one member of the team. In fact, although Kamala tries to cultivate a relationship with them, she is often left on the side-lines, a solitary hero much like Spider-Man. The Avengers consists of Kamala's most idolised heroes. They have always shown her that it is vital to do what you can to protect mankind, even before she discovered her powers – including her so-called embiggening (her ability to increase her size), enhanced strength relating to her embiggening, and shapeshifting (Wilson and Alphonso 2014). Carol Danvers is one member of this elite team, and although not exactly a mother figure, she is an idol for Kamala. However, she is a mother figure in much the same way as Medusa. She accepts Kamala's choice to adopt the Ms. Marvel moniker, although is initially reluctant to do even this. As the story progresses, she becomes more willing to see Kamala as a hero, but is also distant, unwilling to guide, and is highly critical, akin to Tony Stark in *Homecoming*. This impacts Kamala as a hero almost as much as the other figures in her life. Danvers is distant, unwilling to become a role model for anyone, although she does offer guidance and advice on a number of occasions nonetheless. In spite of this emotional distance,

Kamala and Danvers have worked together a number of times in the collected volumes, working together to save the planet from complete destruction. After playing a large role in diverting a galactic disaster, Kamala became a member of the Avengers, something that gives her a new surrogate family within the superhero world yet took its toll on her relationship with her own family and friends.

She became so absorbed in fighting crime as part of a team that she forgot about her everyday life, and those who have supported her throughout her life. Kamala still struggles with her identity and her sense of self. While she has displayed a secure attachment type with her family, she craves a family that supports the American side of her identity, believing she will find this in her Avengers teammates. Yet the relationship she has with them is certainly not secure, based purely on a military style hierarchy. Kamala is the hero with the least experience, showing she has much to learn about being a hero and about working in a team. While she has valuable skills, she struggles with finding her place in the Avengers, a direct reflection of her own internal struggles. Spider-Man is perhaps the character who relates most closely to Kamala in terms of their origin story as both were teenagers when they gained their powers. However, Peter was orphaned and at least partially responsible for a guardian's death, whereas Kamala does not have that burden:

Wilson and Amanat created the same situation as Spider-Man, a young kid trying to deal with strict parents, being bullied at school, and being different. The major difference with Spider-Man and Ms. Marvel is that Kamala's parents are strict because they are Pakistani immigrants and her friends are constantly bullied because of their religion (Arjana 2018, 51).

It is likely that these similarities are not lost on Kamala, and so she seeks the company of those she believes will understand her struggles. The development of her

superpowers changed Kamala physically, removing a significant amount of her bodily agency (Arjana 2018, 51), but it did not take away her ability to choose who she wants to have as a mentor.

However, the duality in her identity makes relating completely to someone like Spider-Man even more complex: ‘Her age plays a central role in the series, whether she is looking up to adults (other Marvel superheroes) or rebelling against them (her parents, the Imam at the Mosque)’ (Arjana 2018, 51). Kamala regularly rebels against her family, even as she comes to accept her blended heritage. Despite the secure bond she shares with her family, Kamala will attempt to cultivate a connection with other heroes, simply because they understand the complicated position she is in. One of the most complicated factors regarding her ability to become a fully-fledged member of the Avenger is her proximity to the action. As a New Jersey hero, with much of the action occurring in New York City, Kamala spends the majority of her time on the fringes, unable to compromise her secret identity while simultaneously unable to cultivate the heroic relationships she craves.

However, as Kamala grows as a hero she depends less on the influence of other parental figures, and more on the influence of her own family. For example, the X-Men are a team of mutants that protect the world with their unusual, superhuman abilities, and Kamala holds them in high esteem, much like she does with the Avengers. *Ms. Marvel Volume 2* shows Kamala teaming up with Wolverine, one of the oldest and most recognisable members of the X-Men. Like Carol Danvers, he is not a parental figure in the traditional sense, but he does guide her to the best of his abilities, albeit for a brief time in the series. His significance, however, is not in the length of time he was present in Kamala’s life, but the longevity of the lessons he taught her. He offers encouragement and wisdom, just as he does to the other members

of the X-Men. He is a father-figure in a way, but his loyalties lie with the X-Men and the surrogate children he guides as part of that team. Kamala is somewhat more accepting of the distance between her and Wolverine, perhaps less convinced of his suitability as a paternal influence, or perhaps by this point she is more secure in her relationship with her own family. Nevertheless, Kamala still recognises the value of Wolverine's influence on her heroism. After their adventure, having rescued several people, Kamala reflects on the words of Sheikh Abdullah, a nod to the high regard she has for her religion, in spite of her resistance towards tradition. In this moment Kamala recalls Sheikh Abdullah reminding her that when the student is ready, the master will come:

Kamala's reflection on Sheikh Abdullah (the religious leader at her local mosque) is significant for two reasons. First, it reveals that despite her independent spirit, she recognizes the wisdom in the Islamic tradition. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the appearance of a master and the readiness of the student to learn from him (or her) is symbolized in her relationship with Wolverine, whom she looks up to (Arjana 2018, 57).

Wolverine also seems to believe that Kamala does not actually require his influence in the way she needs the members of the Avengers. Part of the significance of Wolverine's role is the ability Kamala now possesses to not force an unnecessary partnership. While Kamala is certainly reminiscent of Peter Parker, they are not the same. Peter spent his entire life trying to cultivate new relationships, regardless of the quality of the relationship. Wolverine taught Kamala many things in the time he knew her, but he did not have more to teach, given the complicated relationship he has with his own identity and his own heroism. While in the beginning Kamala was searching for somebody to guide her, she is no longer in this position, and therefore she does not need to create a greater bond.

4.2.3 Ms Marvel – a New Hero

Kamala Khan represents a new type of hero, a minority character who has now become a headlining superhero. She comes from a blend of cultures, something that, until her debut, had not been explored in mainstream comic books in any great way. This blending of cultures is what gives Kamala such an unusual outlook. Her dual heritage is never shied away from within the narrative: ‘The characters and storylines featured in *Ms. Marvel* construct a vision of Islam in America that challenges Islamophobic discourse’ (Arjana 2018, 48). Instead of becoming a stereotype, it becomes a clear part of her identity, but not her identity as a whole. It is something that she uses to help guide her. She made her Pakistani heritage part of her heroics, from the more conservative Ms. Marvel costume, fashioned from an adapted Burkini, to the bands on her wrists, and even her decision-making process. She overcomes her internal struggles while facing her foes: “‘Kamala, like other superheroes, has many dualities in her identity. First of all, she has the typical teenage issue of trying to please both the family and her peers, and her identity as a Pakistani-American intensifies this challenge’” (Arjana 2018, 51). While Kamala has served a strong, diverse character her story has not been without its detractors. Nevertheless, the majority of scholarly research surrounding the character has been overwhelmingly positive, appreciating the value of diversity, representing immigrants in a way that is not stereotyped or negative. Kamala subverts the expectations of her classmates, and even her fellow heroes, becoming one of the most important heroes in the current Marvel line-up.

Her relationship with her family, as well as with the superheroes whom she admires, is what makes Kamala such a strong superhero at such a young age. Her entire support network is unparalleled in graphic novels. While there are similarities

between many superheroes, either in origin story or peer groups, Kamala is unique in that she uses her own ethnic background to inform her decisions and make her a better hero. Her family unit, a family of immigrants otherwise reduced to background characters or stereotypes, has become one of the most important and influential family units in the genre.

4.3 Meet the Visions

Where Kamala's family structure is part of her heroic identity, for the Vision the lack of humanity and family is a major driving force in his identity. The Vision is a synthezoid - sentient android - created by Ultron to bring about the destruction of the world. Nevertheless, he overcomes this, ignoring his coding, choosing to save the world repeatedly instead. He becomes a member of the Avengers, a hero despite his complex identity. Yet stronger than this primary coding, even stronger than his loyalty to the Avengers is his desire to be human. Vision craves the typical image of humanity – including the image of the nuclear family. However, this story arc also questions what it means to be a parent, given the questions that arise surrounding Vision's personhood.

According to Bartlett:

Parenthood, with few exceptions, is an exclusive status. The law recognizes only one set of parents for a child at any one time, and these parents are autonomous, possessing comprehensive privileges and duties that they share with no one else (Bartlett 1984, 879).

Although Vision has a rigid idea of what he wants his family to look like, and even act like, he fails to consider what his role in the family will be, beyond holding the title of 'father'. Harking back to a romanticised version of the 1950s, Vision and his family

embody a perpetual state of nostalgia: ‘Vision’s attempts to create a new family tie into nostalgic impulses within our culture but is also a nostalgic impulse as the second volume of *The Vision* series is littered with memories that he attempts to recreate’ (DeDauw 2018). DeDauw argues that the story arc uses the past as a template for the future as ‘the comic underlines the cyclical nature of history and characters’ behaviour’. The Vision has a need to feel what he considers normal, to understand that which is so essentially human. However, although he romanticises the nuclear family, and seemingly the period in which it reached its peak, he does not truly understand it. According to Cutas and Chan:

That children should be conceived *naturally*, born to and raised by their two young, heterosexual, married to each other, genetic parents; that this relationship between parents is also the ideal relationship between romantic or sexual partners; and that romance and sexual intimacy ought to be at the core of our closest personal relationships – all these elements converge towards the ideal of the *nuclear family* (Cutas and Chan 2012, 1).

Vision, it seems, has a broad understanding of what the family unit is, without ever considering his ability to fit that mould. If the nuclear family is comprised of parents romantically involved, and children conceived naturally, then what place could a synthezoid legitimately have in such a family? If Vision created Virginia, and in turn created Vin and Viv, is this as close to a natural birth that a synthezoid can expect? Where the nuclear family occurs through a series of events, beginning with the marriage of two people, and the eventual birth of the children, is Virginia’s creation as wife enough to allow the family to truly be described as nuclear?

Vision craves a place in the human world, yet he does not truly understand the intricacies of humanity, nor does he realise the complicated relationship humanity has with androids and synthezoids. As Voskuhl argues:

Because androids so effectively destabilize our sense of the boundary between humans and machines, and by extension, our sense of our own constitution, they and their histories evoke a broad range of concerns, most significantly, perhaps, those related to the promises and perils of the modern industrial age (Voskuhl 2013, 1).

He covets a family that will allow him a life outside of the Avengers. This is introduced in the blurb for the story arc, before the story has even begun. As King and Walta themselves note: ‘Vision wants to be human, and what’s more human than family?’ (King and Walta 2016). And so, he builds a family - a synthezoid family created in his likeness.

However, given Vision’s own difficulties surrounding humanity and identity, creating a family in his own image is complicated. He creates a wife, Virginia, and two teenaged children - a daughter, Viv, and a son, Vin. There is an extensive amount of hubris evident from the onset, with everything about Vision’s family being a fragment of his own identity. Created in his likeness they each share the same distinctive red hue that immediately separates them from their human counterparts. They share his personality, with different traits attributed to different members of his family. Even their names are derived from his own, claiming them truly as his family. There is something reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1999) within the pages of Tom King’s miniseries. Built in a lab, Vision’s family are fragments of himself: ‘They look like him. They have his powers. They share his grandest ambition - or is that obsession? - the unrelenting need to be ordinary.’ (King and Walta 2016). Indeed, one must question the ethics of such a move by Vision, or indeed if a synthezoid must follow the same moral code as the humans he wishes to emulate. Victor Frankenstein is so obsessed with creating life that the morality of his actions is never considered. Similarly, Vision has become so consumed with the idea of creating

a traditional family dynamic, that his learned morality quickly morphs into a self-serving need to create a family in his likeness. While Vision seeks a family to simulate the human experience, his Frankensteinian behaviour leads him further from humanity, and further towards the realm of monstrosity. Although ‘the horror within *Frankenstein* seemed to depend upon the monster’s actual physical aspect...’, the horror within Vision’s story arc relates not just to visual differences, but the stark personality difference (Halbertsam 2020). Vision is both Frankenstein and Frankenstein’s monster, further reinforcing the notion of the monstrous. As Jack Halbertsam notes:

As a sexual being, Frankenstein’s monster is foreign, and as an outsider to the community, his foreign sexuality is monstrous and threatens miscegenation. Frankenstein’s lonely monster is driven out of town by the mob when he threatens to reproduce (Halbertsam 2020).

If Vision is a created being in much the same way as Frankenstein’s monster, then the fear Vision’s human contemporaries feel is akin to the fear felt by the villagers in the original novel. Following on from the notion of the monster, if Vision is the original monster, then those he creates increase in monstrosity, inciting further fear. Halbertsam further argues that skin is a signifier for the monster, specifically for nineteenth-century monsters. Halbertsam notes:

Skin, I will argue with reference to certain nineteenth-century monsters, becomes a kind of metonym for the human; and its color, its pallor, its shape, mean everything within a semiotic of monstrosity. Skin might be too tight (Frankenstein’s creature), too dark (Hyde), too pale (Dracula), too superficial (Dorian Gray’s canvas), too loose (Leatherface), or too sexed (Buffalo Bill). (Halbertsam 2020)

If skin is a representative of one’s humanity versus one’s monstrosity, then the vibrant red synthezoid approximation of skin certainly increases the notion of the monster,

compounded for Vision's creations. The ethics of a perceived monster creating sentient life are called into question, linking the notion of the monster with the paternal bond.

Within each new member of his family is that same complicated instinct, the desire to be human, to be considered normal, and to be accepted. The story of the Visions initially seems sweet, a Pinocchio style story of a non-human entity struggling to fit in a society that does not truly accept them. This is an illusion, and can once again be linked to Frankenstein's perception. As Halbertsam further notes:

In *Frankenstein* the reader can only imagine the dreadful spectacle of the monster, and so its monstrosity is limited only by the reader's imagination; in the horror film, the monster must always fail to be monstrous enough [...] (Halbertsam 2020).

The idea of the monster is not immediately evident in the story arc, the mere sight of Vision and his family does not strike fear into the hearts of the readers, and yet the actual story focuses so strongly on the otherness of the monster. With a bright, colourful, and cheerful aesthetic, the art style suggests a light-hearted, happy-go-lucky story with a happy ending. The reality is a far darker world than the art style would suggest. It is rare that a modern comic book or graphic narrative would have an art style so at odds with the actual storyline, yet here it serves to enhance the impact this darkness has. While the storyline is dark, shrouded in mystery, the art style is vibrant, filled with colour, lulling the reader into a false sense of security. The four main characters are made of the same bright red metal, making them stand out from their peers from very early in the text. They are on the fringes of society, sentient, with their own opinions and their own minds; sentient but never quite human. The only people that can ever understand these characters are the other members of their family, and

that gives them a unique relationship among the other characters in the genre. They have an inherent interdependence that the others' do not have. While other characters can find a family unit outside of the biological family, there is no such possibility for the Visions. The only family to which they can truly belong because of their sameness is this one, and so they need each other so much more than most.

4.3.1 A Vision of Fatherhood

The Vision: Little Worse Than a Man (King and Walta 2016) introduces the characters on their journey towards their view of humanity, giving that misleadingly cheerful introduction. Yet there is an undercurrent of hostility from the onset, both from the unseen narrator, and from the human characters welcoming the Visions to their neighbourhood. There is a very obvious sense of Otherness presented, with something as simple as cookies becoming a factor in their isolation (Fig. 15). Where two neighbours offer a plate of cookies, seemingly a welcoming, neighbourly gesture, they do so in a way that ensures that the reader understands their opinion of this new synthezoid family, regardless of how many times Vision helped save the world. In the opening pages two side characters bicker about the personhood of the Visions, establishing the monstrous from the onset, with one woman at least accepting them as more than machines, while the man believes they are robots, barely more sentient than a toaster. (Fig. 15) The question of Vision's status as an Avenger is also introduced, with a disapproval for the creation of a synthezoid family made known from the onset. This sentiment is echoed throughout the series, both by those in power and by the Visions' neighbours.



Fig. 15 The notion of personhood is questioned, King, Walta 2015 © Marvel Comics

The relationship between father and child is entirely new to Vision. Although Vision craves a familial connection, he was created and had no emotional connection with his creator, Ultron (who was in turn created by Hank Pym, again reflecting that Frankensteinian theme). Vision has no framework for what it means to be a parent, and so the relationship begins as one that is purely mathematical, built on the expectations Vision has of what family means. Initially it seems to be a stunted relationship for him, lacking any real bond. In spite of his longing for a family, he has no experience of familial interactions, and therefore has no understanding of how to act, something that is true in his role as an Avenger as well as a father. Vision's limited knowledge on family dynamics stems from his life in a superhero team, incompatible with the typical family relationship.

Within the nuclear family it has been argued that the father is responsible for the introduction of gender roles for both male and female children (Johnson 1963), yet this is something that Vision himself never learned, making it a complex educational process. While the notion of the nuclear family has been subject to much debate and criticism in recent years, particularly related to the lack of LGBTQ+ representation, the archaic notion of the nuclear family and specific gender roles is something that Vision has not quite escaped:

It is identification with the *father*, in the sense of internalizing a reciprocal role relationship with the father, which is crucial for producing appropriate sex role orientations in both males and females. In order to see how women might learn their sex role by identifying with the cross-sex parent, it is necessary to define identification, following Parsons... as the internalization, not of a total personality or of personality traits, but of a reciprocal role relationship that is functional at a particular period in the child's development (Johnson 1963, 319).

While the notion of enforced gender roles is subject to much criticism today, because Vision romanticises a time in which the nuclear family was at its peak, the way Vision views family creates a need to look at the gender roles within the nuclear family, and how they are associated with the paternal relationship.

The relationship Vision has with Vin and Viv begins in a formulaic manner, with their behaviour suggesting that they believe this is what is expected, rather than interacting in a natural way. However, the way they behave appears oppressed, following orders for a content, quiet existence. Vision's idea of a family is idealised which further hinders his progression as a father. He sees a generic, happy family with polite children who are unfailingly obedient, with a father who goes out to work, and a mother who tends to the home. It is an outdated idea that quickly falls apart. Already isolated by their appearance and the question of personhood, Vision's family is further

isolated because this behaviour no longer fits with the norms of society, isolating them further as a result. The Visions are entirely logical beings, allowing little room for differing opinions, and it takes a great deal to encourage personal growth, particularly true for Vision himself. Within the first pages, the reader is shown an immovable force, the Vision and his ideals. He is the only superhero in the family, yet he has shared his ideals within his family's coding. It gives them a desire equal to Vision's to be heroic, to help those around them. His children look up to him and seek his approval because of this. Because they are synthezoids navigating a very human domain their relationship style changes throughout the course of the text, forcing the family dynamic to change also.

Vin and Viv are coded as teenagers, and as a result they face even more struggles. Being a teenager is a tumultuous time but being a synthezoid teenager is undoubtedly even more challenging. Not only do Vin and Viv need to navigate their schooling, they must do so while trying to convince the world that they belong, that they are normal, and most significantly, that they are not dangerous. The Frankensteinian elements of the story are reflected here, with both Vin and Viv being perceived as monstrous because of their origins. Much like Frankenstein and his monster, there is a complex relationship between father and child. The humanity that Vision desperately craves is more achievable for Vin and Viv. Viv, in particular, integrates herself into her environment, learning and adapting. She is, perhaps, the most likely person to achieve the humanity they all crave had she not been hindered by her upbringing. Romanyshyn argues that the story of *Frankenstein* is also a foretelling of the descendants of the Monster:

The first of his kind but not the last, Victor Frankenstein's Monster is a kind of being who continues to face us with questions about what constitutes being

a human being. In his specimen body, which is the blueprint for Victor Frankenstein's work, the Monster is a paradox (Romanyshyn 2019). Following on from this analogy, when Viv displays moments of humanity, she removes herself from her inhuman creator, but is still bound by the ideals that were instilled in her, limiting her ability to break away from this monstrous perception.

Things do not always go to plan for them, and they often do more harm than good. They try to find a place in the world of education while using their incredible, innate gifts, trying to emulate their father, and his ability to use his powers in everyday life without consequence. This ability does not transcend into their reality. In their world there is no room for superpowers, yet they have the need to be heroes. They are already at a disadvantage, not yet having the social skills necessary to easily navigate teenage life. As the story progresses, they each start to find these skills, yet the problems are still present. Their every mistake is forever etched in people's memories. In the beginning their relationship appears to be high in demandingness while responsiveness is absent. Vision appears to be a very authoritarian parent, with the expectations of maturity and conformity clear from the onset. There is no room for personal growth. Vision is of the belief that he is providing his family with the nurturing they need, yet he displays more authoritarian tendencies than he seems aware of. The effects of this are seen consistently throughout the series, with both Vin and Viv suffering socially, while Virginia becomes more isolated. According to Benson and Haith:

The effects of authoritarian parenting are less positive than an authoritative upbringing for European American youth. Children reared by authoritarian families tend to depend on their parents (especially girls), be more submissive, less socially adept, less confident, less intellectually curious, and less committed to achievement in comparison with children reared in authoritative homes (Benson and Haith 2009. 291).

These negative impacts are clearly seen in the lives of Vin and Viv are isolated by their peers, fail to understand social cues, and as a result become both shy of and hostile towards their peers. Where Viv once had the potential to integrate somewhat into human society, the rigidity in her upbringing has not allowed this, never allowing her to break away from the monstrous role that was inadvertently created for her.

On many occasions they react with violence, failing to understand the consequences of those actions and the limitations of the human body: ‘Furthermore, children reared by authoritarian parents often exhibit hostility and shyness toward peers and show higher levels of aggression’ (Benson and Haith 2009, 291). This is seen throughout their education, and even in their home lives. Where normal human interactions would allow a person to learn and adapt, this cannot occur in the Vision household, and so they are all forced into the same patterns with no room for growth. The events that show the impact of a high demandingness, low responsiveness relationship are intensified by the family’s inability to process what is occurring in their daily lives. While Vision is clearly an authoritarian parent, he is this way because he had no clear model of fatherhood, and so he is learning as he goes, seemingly basing his parenting style on the familiarity of the Avengers team hierarchy. This leads to further problems for Vin and Viv, where the perspective on synthezoid classmates echoes the opening panels. When their personhood is called into question, as are their rights to study, they react in a harsh, unchecked manner, further isolating them and raising questions of personhood. Had Vin and Viv an authoritative parent in either Vision or his wife, Virginia, they would be better equipped to handle social situations. However, the authoritarian nature of Vision, coupled with the permissive (borderline neglectful) parenting style that Virginia displays leads to complications in the development of the child.

However, it is not just Vin and Viv who are impacted by this relationship. Vision himself is impacted by much of the authoritarian relationship. Although created by Ultron before the beginning of this story arc, the rebellious nature that Vision displayed as the child in that relationship is also quite clear for Vision here, as the father. This is, perhaps, one of the main reasons he is an authoritative parent. Arguably Ultron could be seen as an authoritarian parent, and although Vision rebelled, turning against his creator to become a hero, the negative impacts of such a parenting style lingered. While Vision and Ultron certainly did not have a traditional father-child relationship, and Vision is largely uninformed about what fatherhood means, this is likely the reason he has such a high demandingness in his approach. This can be seen in instances throughout the series where Vision demands a normal human existence based on what he believes to be the mundane aspects of humanity. For instance, *Little Worse than a Man* highlights this in a scene where, although they have no need for food, the family sits around a dining table to discuss their day, an attempt on Vision's part at creating a natural rapport that emulates what he perceives as family bonding. This continues as a theme, and the family gathers there in times of stress as well as to bond as a family (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16 The dining room is central for the family, King, Walta 2016 © Marvel Comics

However, the family struggles with even this simulated bonding experience, unable to comprehend the need for it. Virginia struggles more than the others here, destroying the table in a moment of frustration (Fig. 17), displaying more human emotion than Vision himself ever does. Yet this scene also serves to break the façade Vision tried to create. The table was a symbol of the humanity they would never achieve, and Virginia destroyed it. While Vision is struggling to be seen as human, forcing his family to follow on the same path, Virginia displays human-like emotions, unseen by her husband. Although Vision remains cold and aloof, Virginia displays very strong signs of mental health issues, prompting the reader to once again question the divide between man and machine.



Fig. 17 Virginia destroys the dining room table, King, Walta 2016 © Marvel Comics

4.3.2 Virginia: A Tragic Hero

Vin and Viv find the transition far easier than their mother. Virginia struggles to adapt to her new, humanoid life, often misjudging situations, leading to disastrous consequences. It is something that she struggles with throughout the story arc, yet her entire family remains completely oblivious to her plight. From the onset the reader is shown Virginia's difficulties in adapting. She, more than any other member of the family, has difficulties with social interactions. She cannot fathom the Vision's obsession with being human, nor can she understand her role in their family. Like Vision, Virginia has the desire for a family, but her desires do not translate into being

human. In the nuclear family, the early development of the child is attributed to the mother, whereas the later stages are attributed to the father. However, because Vin and Viv were created, not born, the role Virginia would have played is diminished somewhat, removing her sense of purpose, giving her a crisis of identity. According to Johnson:

The possibility we are suggesting is that it is the next identification, with the father, coming after the stage of infantile dependency on the mother, which is crucial for appropriate sex role learning in females as well as in males (Johnson 1963, 320).

Where Vision had a warped father figure in Ultron, although he was not a typical father, it gave Vision some sense of perspective. Similarly, the Avengers have acted as a surrogate family to Vision, giving him some sense of familial hierarchy.

Prior to this story arc Vision had a romantic relationship with Scarlett Witch, something else which gave him a greater perspective on human interactions. On the other hand, Virginia has no frame of reference for what it means to be a mother, or what it means to be human. Vin and Viv have a distinct advantage in their position in the family, where the father figure, although authoritarian, still provides some guidance for them. Virginia is left to figure out her path alone. Virginia has no defined role, unlike the other members of the family, and even her role as mother within the nuclear family (when defined by the natural, biological parameters outlined above) is called into question. The nuclear family, and the synthezoid family call into question the very definition of what makes a parent. McCandless notes:

The question ‘What makes someone the parent of a child?’ is at once straightforward and complex. Straightforward because we often have what we feel to be a ‘common sense’ or ‘intuitive’ response. This might be with respect to individual parent-child relations – ‘Z and Y are X’s parents’ – or it might

relate to a more generalized normative standard – ‘the woman who gives birth to you is your mother’ (McCandless 2012, 13).

While the parameters for parenthood within the nuclear family are clear, Virginia’s role within the family only gets more complex as the narrative continues.

Where Vin and Viv leave for large periods of time for schooling, and Vision spends much of his time as a liaison for the Avengers, Virginia spends much of her time alone. She does not wish to be more human, but instead wants to embrace her own identity. She is a synthezoid, not a human, and this struggle against her identity is something that drives her slowly insane. She begins as a reserved woman, unsure about her place in society. She is aware that society will never quite accept her, given her complicated origin story and questions surrounding her personhood. She is not a superhero; therefore, she cannot work the way Vision does. She is not a teenager; she cannot go to school. She has no apparent skillset that would make her essential in the workplace, nor would she be accepted as an employee. She would not be trusted. This knowledge is detrimental to Virginia, yet it is something that no other members of her family are forced to cope with in quite the same way. Although the other members of her family face the same obstacles, they are not facing them alone.

It is her interactions with the humans in the story that shows the reader just how far removed from the idea of humanity she is. She has no concept of her own strength. She has little interest in interacting with other people. Simply put, they bore her. And so, she is left alone, day after day, to ponder her own existence. It is this isolation that makes her emotionally distant with her children. Without the ability to create a proper emotional connection with them, she becomes a neglectful parent. That is, until their home is attacked. With Vision absent, and evidence of Virginia slipping

away from reality already shown, the attack by the Reaper (a villain in the story) is that real catalyst for change.

Virginia kills the Reaper, without ever second guessing herself, asserting herself as the protector of the family, breaking away from her expected role as mother and housewife. She was protecting her home, and her family. The Reaper hurt her children and the latent maternal instincts kicked in, overshadowing any and all regard for human life that she had up to that point. And when it is all over, she realises the damage she has done. She tries to cover it up, causing even more harm in the long run. She keeps the information hidden from Vision, instead burying the body herself. Little does she know she is being watched. This fleeting moment of supposed madness (although it is arguably a form of self-preservation) does not have to be the norm for her, she has done her duty as the family protector, and her family is safe. Until they are not safe anymore, with new threats arising regularly, as is the life of a hero. The thing Virginia fails to grasp is the unpredictability of life, and the adaptability necessary to navigate it. The Vision, and even Vin and Viv adapt in small ways, showing small glimpses of humanity. Virginia is never capable of doing that. When she feels threatened, her inherent response is to attack first, ask questions later. That proves detrimental for her entire family and causes a chain of events that ultimately leads to their destruction.

While the nuclear family itself may not be an inherently negative thing, the approach Vision and his family have to it is what causes their problems. By viewing the nuclear family as the ideal, regardless of whether or not this ideal is achievable for Vision and his family, is ultimately what leads to their undoing. While Virginia descended slowly into madness, Vision covered it up, insisting on the hegemonic, patriarchal idea of family that he had romanticised. Regularly referring to Virginia as

‘wife’, Vision succeeds in removing whatever tentative connection to personhood Virginia had, after already removing her reason for existence – that of being a mother. The destructiveness of the Vision’s is a direct result of the misinformation regarding the role of the family, as well as the constant attempt they make to fit into a world that is not truly theirs and will never truly accept them. As such, their story was doomed from the beginning, setting Virginia and her children up for failure at the hands of a father who did not truly understand what he wanted from a family.

4.4 *Saga* – Introducing a Traditional Family Unit to an Atypical Setting

Saga (Vaughan, Staples 2012), written by Brian K. Vaughan and illustrated by Fiona Staples, is an unusual narrative for many reasons. It does not follow the pattern of a traditional superhero narrative. Nobody wears a cape or a mask, nor are they superpowered beings. Yet, in their own way, they are heroes. It is a narrative specifically written for older readers due to the violent and sexual aspects of the story arc, and there is a very gratuitous element that cannot be ignored, intertwined as it is with their heroism.

The narrative centres on a young family, navigating a galaxy that would see them all dead. Alana and Marko are hunted, having come from different sides of an everlasting war between Landfall (a planet) and Wreath (its moon). They are considered traitors, and their baby is seen as a monster. Ultimately the narrative revolves around their growth as a family amid absolute peril. While there are storylines that see a father as the lead figure and a hero, the ones depicting a mother in the same role are few and far between, with many of the mother figures discussed in this thesis acting more as a moral compass or an absent motivator than a hero in their own right. Even the narrative style allows for the reader to glean something new, as it does not

follow the typical method of storytelling. It is told from the perspective of their baby, Hazel, looking back on her life, and the lives of her parents, friends and extended family. Yet it gives a keen insight into who her parents were, not just as parents, but as soldiers, protectors, enemies, and friends. Having the story narrated in such a way shows not only the impact being a parent had on either Marko or Alana, but also the impact their heroics had on the development of the child. While the majority of this thesis explores the impact of the parent-child relationship on the development of the child, this section follows a different pattern. Instead it focuses on the impact parenthood has on Alana and Marko, as seen from the perspective of the child. A space epic, *Saga* tells the story of two people at opposite sides of a never-ending war trying to find their place in the universe while protecting their child from those who would see them dead. With a story reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare 2000), albeit in the form of a space epic, Alana and Marko are heroes fighting for their family rather than for society.

4.4.1 *Saga* – Parenthood as a Dangerous Occupation

The very first panel opens with Alana giving birth to Hazel in a dingy garage, guarded by Marko, cementing the theme of parenthood from the onset. While most heroes who become parents do so long after they have been heroes, it is the first thing the reader will learn about Alana and Marko. (Fig. 18)

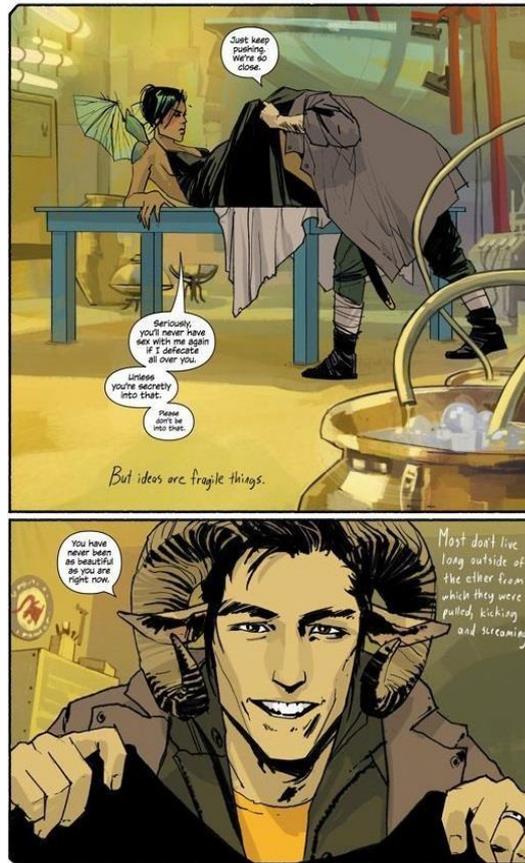


Fig. 18 Alana gives birth, Image Comics © Vaughn, Staples 2012

Their entire identity is initially based on them being parents, and while some of their past is explored throughout the course of the comics, it is still through the lens of parenthood. It is virtually impossible to view them separately given the narrator. Even these brief glimpses into their past lives are narrated by Hazel. Even more uncommon than this portrayal of parenthood is the graphic depiction of the birth. It is not something that is shied away from in *Saga*, while in many other narratives, even pregnancy is kept out of the panels, often considered to be a taboo. Yet here it is embraced, showing the reader aspects of the characters personalities that would not have been seen before. Alana is shown as vulnerable, giving birth in an unsafe place, hunted by her people and without anyone to really guide her. Yet, even though she is vulnerable, her strength is shown. It is shown in the way she copes with the pain, and

in the way she wants to protect Marko from the gruesome sight that she imagines birth to be (Fig 3.8). Marko, on the other hand, is being strong here, because he needs to be, but there is a certain vulnerability to his character which becomes evident when the garage is attacked. He wants desperately to protect his family, yet he made a vow never to wield his weapon again. That is something that almost destroys him. He is faced with an impossible choice. Should he kill the men hunting his family, and have their blood on his hands forever? Or should he be killed himself, in the hopes that his family would escape. It is his role as a father that makes it such a difficult decision. As Julian et al note: 'Parents provide a safe haven to their child in times of distress or threat, and a secure base when the child is able to venture out and explore' (Julian et al 2018, 141). Before Hazel is even born Marko will act as her protector, as will Alana. Without a child to consider, he could have sacrificed himself without needing to consider protecting anyone else, and even though Alana is a capable warrior, she is a mother who gave birth mere minutes beforehand. Alana's apparent passivity here (although short-lived) is borne from a desire to protect her new-born child.

While Alana is generally crude and harbours anger, Marko is passive and kind. The traditional gender roles are reversed, with Alana being depicted as the warrior, even with baby in tow. Marko, on the other hand, is highly skilled in combat but is reluctant to fight, and it is this passivity is what drew Alana to him in the first place. She was a Landfallian prison guard, he was a conscientious objector from the Wreath army. Although they did not speak the same language, they shared a bond. While Alana is a loyal soldier, following orders with enthusiasm, she is also an idealist. She reads novels, something that is not favoured among her people or Marko's. A romance novel telling of two people on opposing side of a feud is the first thing they truly connect over, something that gave them the courage to run from their people, to be

happy together. Yet as their relationship developed it became clear that they were a family in crisis, despite the strength of their relationship. Given this crisis, the impact of trauma on the family is an important consideration, although it is seldom overtly discussed within the narrative. However, according to Julian et al:

at the core of young children’s early experiences are their social interactions with their caregivers. Infants experience their environment through the lens of their relationship with their caregivers and depend on their caregivers to scaffold their cognitive, social, behavioural, and physical development (Julian et al 2018, 133).

While Alana and Marko seldom discuss the traumas in their lives – generally too busy experiencing it – it undoubtedly impacts Hazel’s development, given the fact that children learn to see the world through their parents.

4.4.2 Saga and the Representation of Motherhood

The role of the mother in *Saga* is particularly poignant. It is the first thing that the reader is introduced to, and as a result it is one of the most defining factors in the entire story arc (Fig. 19).



Fig. 19 Alana breastfeeds Hazel, Image Comics © Vaughn, Staples 2012

It is so ingrained that the reader hardly stops to think about Alana was before motherhood. The way the pregnancy and birth are introduced allows for a natural relationship to form, between the reader, the mother, and her child. It is not a forced topic, but instead is woven throughout the story in such a way that makes the reader acutely aware of the fact that there would be no story without this baby. The mother's body is something seldom discussed in modern media. While a pregnancy is generally difficult to disguise, it is often hidden, kept out of frame. Yet Alana's pregnancy subverts this notion as she is repeatedly shown as pregnant, and even then, is shown as a protector. Her hand is often depicted as resting protectively over her unborn baby. Yet during her pregnancy, and even the birth, Alana is quite a selfish character with the focus during the birth is what is happening to her body, rather than the baby. Before Hazel is born, Alana is not yet a mother, in spite of her protectiveness. She cannot yet understand or appreciate motherhood and is far from a perfect maternal figure. It is not until she has finally given birth and sees her baby for the first time that she really understands what motherhood means for her.

She is a changed person in an instant. Hearing her baby cry and seeing her there changes something within Alana. She is no longer that selfish character focusing solely on her own feelings. As Bess Pallares notes: 'Something in Alana has shifted, and it will impact the whole narrative moving forward because, in fact, two new characters have been introduced: Hazel and her mother' (Pallares, 2015). Up to that point, Alana had been so caught up in what was happening to her, that she had been vocal since she was introduced. Until she sees her baby, Alana continues to speak, while Marko is silent. But when she sees Hazel, there is silence for the first time within the graphic novel. Alana was shown first as someone so focused on and vocal about their own needs, but the moment she sees Hazel she realises she is a mother and everything

changes. Now Alana serves as a secure base for Hazel, something that will continue throughout the story arc:

Ainsworth noticed how infants, once mobile, commonly use mother as a base from which to explore. When conditions are favourable they move away from mother on exploratory excursions and return to her again from time to time (Bowlby 2012, 132).

Because Alana is a secure base for Hazel, even in these early moments, the reader gets a sense that Hazel will be protected no matter what.

The peace they share as mother and daughter is short-lived. They are attacked, but this time Alana has a new priority. She is no longer fighting for her own life, nor is she fighting for the life of her husband. She now has this innocent child to protect, and instead of engaging in any battles that could harm the new-born, she uses her own body as a shield. Alana has wings, but she cannot fly. The impression is given that it had never been something that impacted her before, because the cost of not getting away would not have been so great. Again, in the space of just a few panels, Alana has changed. Her momentary joy at seeing her baby is replaced by a fierce, primal need to protect her. And she does this, any way she can. She is unable to fly and unable to fight, and instead uses her own body as a shield, keeping her daughter out of harm's way in the only way she can. Instead of being the focus of the panels here, Alana is drawn in a somewhat incomplete style. The focus is what she is doing to protect her child, rather than who she is. They are still one entity, blending together in the artwork seamlessly. According to Pallares:

The art again provides an additional layer to these events, as in nearly every panel Alana's face is obscured or only roughly sketched, even as other characters are fully illustrated. What is important about Alana in each panel is the portrayal of her body melded nearly seamlessly with Hazel's. She does

not exist as an individual character in the scene, and the visual syuzhet [sic] of the art makes it clear that her purpose—to protect Hazel—is paramount to her unique identity (Pallares, 2015).

In just a few pages, Alana has gone from being a somewhat selfish character, solely focused on the changes she was facing, to a character rendered silent by the onslaught of emotion she felt, and now is a character using her own body to save her daughter's life. The fact that they are almost inseparable, and that so much of her identity has suddenly become focused on Hazel's protection, shows the impact motherhood has on Alana. Her heroics may previously have been selfish, saving her own life and the life of her husband, but now they are selfless. She is a hero because she needs to protect the innocent child she brought into the world.

When they finally escape, Hazel remains tightly in her mother's arms, still a very definite part of her mother's identity. The body language between the characters is one of the most defining characteristics, something that can best be shown through the graphic novel medium. Hazel is tucked away, swathed in protective layers, and cradled in Alana's arms. She is protected in every way possible, as her mother and father risk everything. Alana sets out to protect Hazel, even from things she cannot see. There is a supernatural element in this story that impacts the relationship between mother and baby. They are followed by ghosts, both literal and figurative. The physical ones seem imposing and threatening, and Alana readies herself for battle with an entity that she cannot see, or even touch. But instead of being a foe, another child is introduced. Isobel, the gory ghost of a teenaged girl caught up in the war latches on to the family, bonding herself with Hazel, and becoming an integral member of the family. She also becomes someone else Alana needs to protect. Hazel's life is now irrevocably intertwined with Isobel's, at only a few hours old. They each will only live

as long as the other. This complicates Alana's experiences further, given her personal traumas and fears for her safety. Julian et al once again note:

When caregivers are faced with parenting in the context of their own trauma, it can be considerably more difficult to co-regulate their young children and provide sensitive and nurturing care that young children need. Caregivers who have experienced trauma may be struggling to manage their own emotions and may be triggered by their child's emotions and behaviour (Julian et al 2018, 133).

Where Hazel is mere hours old, and this struggle is not something Alana is prepared to face entirely yet, she now essentially has two children to raise while struggling with her own emotions. The body, in particular the female body, is something that is seldom explored in the comic book medium in a multi-purpose way. The male body is largely seen as a tool in their crime fighting, an entirely utilitarian thing. The woman's body is largely seen through a male gaze, an object that is seen as sexual rather than powerful, regardless of the heroics of that woman. Yet *Saga* subverts these preconceived notions. Alana uses her body to her advantage, regardless of the situation. The woman's body is presented in many ways throughout the story. Alana is a wife, a mother and a soldier, and her body is depicted differently for each purpose. As a wife there is a sexual component to the relationship. Yet her body has changed since becoming a mother. Alana focuses on the changes she perceives as negative. It is entirely new to her. Her body is not the same thing she has known for so long, and instead she must learn about its new aspects. Now it is not only a tool within their marriage, it is a weapon and a shield, used in any way that is necessary to protect her family. Her body is multi-purpose, not just an object of desire, but battle ready at all times. Motherhood altered it, but instead of reducing Alana's abilities, it instead added another layer, a new function to an already powerful thing. There is no denying the

interdependence between Hazel and Alana. Their bodies are now forever connected: ‘Hazel providing an identity for Alana as a mother and Alana providing her body as protection and sustenance’ (Pallares, 2015).

Yet as Hazel grows, Alana's body is forced to change once again. Where Alana is frequently depicted as the breastfeeding mother, the narrative surrounding her is somewhat different to the other characters discussed in this thesis. Where the majority of heroes discussed are presented as the child, Alana is introduced as the mother, giving the reader a different perspective on her heroism. There is a newfound pressure for Alana to have a career, as well as raising her child, as well as an ever-present undercurrent of judgement. And while Alana is jovial about it, there is still an awareness that she no longer has autonomy over her own body. She has a child to consider, and other people will have an opinion about her ability to raise Hazel, whether or not it is warranted, or even welcome. Alana herself speaks of the dreams she had before she became a ‘lactation machine’ (Vaughan, 2015). The way this conversation is written is slightly at odds with the way it is shown through the art style, further highlighting the contradictory opinions held by everyone around Alana. She is shown sitting in the middle of a room, breastfeeding Hazel, as though she is somewhat on show, exposed in many ways. It also reinforces the fact that Hazel and Alana are very much a unit, developing a secure attachment style from the very beginning.

Alana’s representation steadily changes after this. Hazel is growing, and the next volume shows her as a toddler, no longer in Alana’s arms. Alana has joined the Open Circuit, an acting troupe, to provide for her family, however, this has taken an unprecedented toll on her family and their relationships (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20 The representation of Alana's body changes, Vaughn, Staples 2014 © Image Comics

Hazel is now closer to Marko, who is mocked repeatedly for being a 'househusband' (Vaughan, 2014). The reader sees Alana in a new light. She is absent, a career woman struggling to balance work and family, so caught up in her hectic life that she does not initially see the changes in her relationships, particularly with Hazel. It comes as a shock, on several occasions, to realise there are things about her daughter that she does not know. While Alana was still firmly rooted in a secure relationship with her daughter, Hazel viewed it differently, moving from a secure attachment with her mother to something more avoidant. There is devastation when she realises that her daughters most treasured possession is a toy that she has never heard of, based on a game that she played with her father. It is at that moment that Alana realises just how much she has missed so that she could provide for her family. It perfectly highlights

the sacrifices many parents make in order to provide for their child. When a parent works full time, they miss out on the fundamental development of their child, and oftentimes that can cause a change in the parent-child attachment.

However, it is not just Alana's work ethic that has caused a rift. It is her newfound drug abuse that ultimately destroys the relationship she has with Marko. While Marko is feeling a certain sense of inadequacy due to his inability to provide financially, he is more prone to anger. When Marko discovers Alana's drug use, he lashes out, but Alana sees no issue with her addiction, viewing Marko as the real issue. She forces him to leave, inadvertently causing Hazel to lose her father, at least temporarily. Through the haze of anger, both Alana and Marko caused harm, but neither expected it to have such long lasting or far reaching results. This one again highlights the difficulties associated with raising a child while in a battle with one's own demons. Alana is unable to cope with the stressors in her life, and as a result she acts in a way that is not in the best interests of her child: 'Because caregiving behaviours are related to a caregiver's experiences, and associated with children's outcomes, trauma-exposed caregivers and their young children are considered at higher risk for later difficulties' (Julian et al 2018, 133). Although in the first issues of the story Alana and Marko appeared to be an unshakeable team, at least for the sake of their child, the fact that their entire life has become embroiled in this trauma created strain. It was inevitable that something would happen to damage their relationship, and in turn impact the child.

As the story progresses, Hazel's representation changes. While, in the beginning, Hazel is sometimes seen with other members of her family, when danger is near, she is in her mother's arms. Her mother is her protector, her greatest ally. This

is the case from the very beginning. Although Marko is the more sensitive character, Alana is Hazel's guardian, made even more protective by the bounty hunters, armies and princes, all clamouring to claim her life. For the first three volumes of *Saga*, Hazel is rarely out of her mother's arms. In the fourth volume everything changes. It is her father who is now her protector, and as a result, there is some distance between Hazel and Alana. It is a subtle shift, as Hazel is now a toddler, but it is there from the beginning of volume four. Alana is largely absent, and therefore, Hazel has lost some of the bond that she shared with her. When Hazel is scared or sleepy, she searches for 'Ponk Konk', the aforementioned toy she treasures, given to her by her father. When they are under attack in Marko's absence, Hazel does not rush to her mother's side, instead her cries for Ponk Konk get more and more frantic. It is not until Alana grabs her child that they are reunited, and even then, the body language has changed. They are no longer seamless, with Hazel struggling somewhat, and unhappy about being in her mother's arms. Hazel, once secure, now displays traits of avoidant attachment. According to Benson and Haith:

Elevations in insecure infant – mother attachments (i.e. insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent resistant attachments) have been reported in several studies of depressed mother – infant dyads. Further, when mothers' depression is chronic and severe over the infant's first year, infants are at risk for developing insecure, disorganized attachment to their mothers, which some attachment theorists cite as the most insecure of all of the insecure attachment classifications (Benson and Haith 2009, 307).

Their interactions now suggest distance and anxieties that were not present before, reinforcing the notion of trauma.

This contrasts strongly with the previous depictions of Alana holding Hazel. Initially Hazel seemed to be almost like another limb for Alana, but now there is no

natural connection between the two. They have not shared that connection since Alana began her work on the Open Circuit, and so both she and Hazel have lost a large part of their ability to connect. At the same time, it is clear that the love they share is still there, most notably on Alana's part. Her maternal instinct is at war with her guilt for not being present enough in her child's life. She is unable to protect Hazel to the same extent as she was before. And while Marko is absent, searching the galaxy for his family, it is Marko that Hazel wants to protect her. That rift slowly changes again, as the story progresses. When Alana protects Hazel from the Resistance (a faction of those hunting their family), Hazel clings to her in a way that mimics her early childhood. But it is not exactly the same. While, in the beginning, Hazel would cling to her mother long after the danger has passed, she no longer does so. When she feels they are safe she does not search for the protection again, and instead moves away from Alana. Their bond has grown stronger again, but it will never be quite the same. And although a large amount of that change is due to Alana's absence, part of it is also due to Hazel growing up. She simply does not need the same levels of protection as a toddler that she did when she was a new-born.

Later in the series, after a brief reconciliation between Alana and Marko, Hazel and her parents are separated, with Hazel being taken to an unmarked facility for Wreath captives, and Marko and Alana searching the galaxy for her for several years. Although not much of this time is portrayed in the comics, the impact the absence has on Alana is clear, as is the impact it has on Marko. It has put a very obvious strain on their relationship. Although the love they share is clear, the physical element of their relationship is gone due to the stress of their fractured family. The knowledge that their child is somewhere in the galaxy, in an unknown situation, prevents them from having any real intimacy. Instead, the emotional bond is explored. This suggests that they

have developed an anxious relationship type with each other, suddenly lacking the confidence and security in each other. According to Baldwin: ‘Those who display an anxious style tend to develop models of themselves as being misunderstood, unconfident, and underappreciated and of significant others as being typically unreliable and either unwilling or unable to commit themselves to permanent relationships’ (Baldwin 2018, 51). Even when Hazel is absent, she has a powerful impact on her family. The majority of the sixth collected edition shows Hazel in this facility, while her parents search for her. It comes to an end when they finally find her and bring her back to their ship, although it is a bittersweet ending. There are many people within this facility who had to be left behind, including Klara, Marko’s own mother. Although there is a reunion, there is still a sense of loss for the characters. While there is this sense of loss, it is juxtaposed with the sudden revelation that Alana is once again pregnant (Fig. 21).

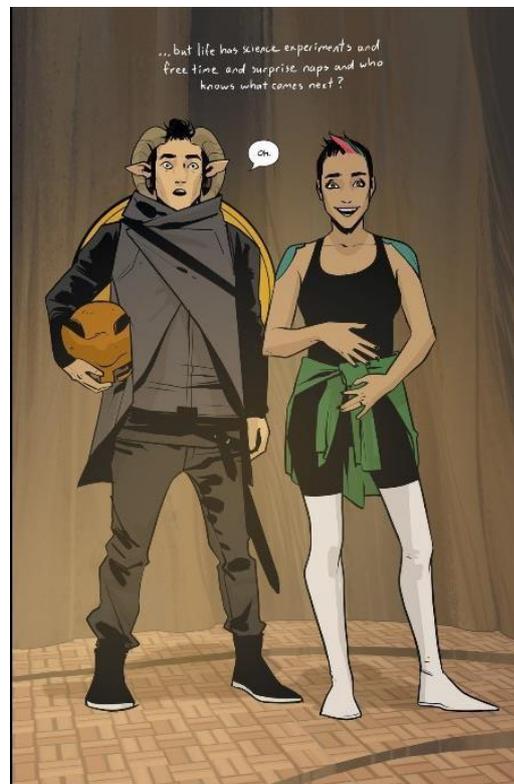


Fig. 21 Alana and Marko face parenthood a second time, Vaughan, Staples 2014 © Image Comics

There are a huge number of mixed emotions for both Alana and Marko. Hazel was their miracle baby, the child who was lost to them for so many years, and who they must get to know once more. And now there is a new element, another child that could tip the balance. They struggle with telling Hazel, unsure about upsetting her when there is still so much they do not know. Hazel is having to learn her place in the family once more, as well as coping with the sudden loss of everyone she grew up with. It is an upheaval that both Alana and Marko are painfully aware of. The opening of Volume 7 of *Saga* shows this impossible struggle, where Alana and Marko debate over the need to tell Hazel she will be a sister, while being aware of the implications this sisterhood will have for her. They struggle with the unknowns, still hunted by those who see them as traitors and abominations. Hazel herself will be hunted, having disappeared from the facility without a trace. There is a new sense of discontent within the text, with the added element of new threats within their ship. A Wreath soldier and Prince Robot IV (a Landfallian ruler formerly hunting Hazel and her family), are both on the small rocket, and although they do not pose an immediate threat, while there is still something to be gained from Alana and Marko, there is still a sense of foreboding for the reader. They are once again faced with protecting an unborn child. For Alana, her body will undergo drastic changes once again. Her body, like when she was pregnant with Hazel, is suddenly a shield and a vessel outside of her control.

Although it was something she experienced with Hazel, it is not exactly the same. Her body is not the same and she is not the same. And as a result, her pregnancy will not be the same. Now she not only has to protect her unborn baby, she has to protect her estranged daughter too. And although they now have a small group of people willing to protect Hazel, Alana is still in danger, even from the people living on her ship. Yet the practicalities do not sink in for her straight away. Instead it is

Marko who is the rational one. He believes it is best to tell Hazel after she has reintegrated into their family, rather than when she is already feeling like something of an outcast. She is a hybrid, knowing from the very beginning that her life would be in danger, and yet for a short time, she was safe. That safety has been ripped away from her once again, and in the process, she lost her grandmother, her teachers, her friends, and the surrogate family that protected her secret, at all costs. She is, once again, hunted. As a result, she has developed a very avoidant attachment style, grieving and distant even from her immediate family. While she was in the facility, she developed a sense of understanding, a knowledge of the way that society worked, but that knowledge cannot be applied to her current situation. Within hours of her apparent rescue, she is in mortal danger once again, with her family forced to land their ship on a comet, filled with people who would kill her simply because of her lineage. It is not a place her parents wish for her to go, but there is little choice. And so, once again, after so many years in confinement, Hazel must not only learn how to be part of this family once again, but she must learn how to live with being hunted, facing her mortality in a new and real way. And although there was a level of secrecy surrounding her life in the facility, she was not in any real danger as long as she kept her identity secret. Now, regardless of where she goes, she is known, and she is hunted.

While Alana is clearly focused on her excitement, and what she perceives to be happening to her body and her family, Marko has become far more cynical, and is instead looking at the dangers of having another baby. He is focused on being a warrior and has lost a large amount of the kindness and sensitivity that defined his character. Instead, the loss and constant battle for their safety has hardened him, making him resentful as well as fearful. He now has another person to protect, and he is a character that is hugely paternal. His instincts as a father motivate him to be a better person every

day, and this is particularly prominent in Volume 6, when he is closer to Hazel than ever before. Throughout the series there is a growing sense that Marko needs to be a father who provides and protects, adopting the stereotypical hypermasculine notion of paternity.

Saga shows that it is not just the child that is impacted by the parent-child relationship. It is inevitable that the parents also face changes. These changes are greater than either Marko or Alana, or even the secondary characters anticipated. Marko always yearned for fatherhood, while Alana knew the risks involved with bringing a child into a galaxy filled with war and violence. Hazel may have been unplanned, and even an inconvenience before she was born, yet after her birth, Hazel becomes the primary focus. Her family would do anything and sacrifice everything in order to protect her. While the story is largely about a family struggling to find their place in society, it breaks from the conventions of graphic narratives. It explores themes that the majority of mainstream comics have yet to even begin to discuss. The way parenthood, and motherhood in particular, is portrayed allows the reader to see a perspective that is not simply a background character, while the main focus is on the character with the cape. Here the parent is the hero. And the varied representations of the same topic within this text make it clear that parenthood is many things to many people, and there are no two experiences that are the same. Even within the same family, the experiences one parent has will be entirely different what the other experiences. Where *Saga* really differs from its contemporaries is in its ability to convey the complexities of changing attachments as a result of wartime conflict.

4.5 Conclusion

The thing that connects each of these characters is the notion of the nuclear family, flawed and complex as it often is. While this chapter is not necessarily to suggest that the nuclear family is an unrealistic model, it is suggesting that the approach to the nuclear family is often complex and damaging. While Kamala eventually accepts her family, and subsequently herself, the journey there was fraught with difficulty. She became comfortable with her superpowers as she developed a more secure relationship with her family. While she was conflicted, her powers seemed alien to her. As she became a more confident Muslim woman, she grew into her role as a hero. Vision, on the other hand, had such an idealised version of what the nuclear family should be that it ultimately caused the downfall of his creation of it. The notion of the family is something that Vision craves, yet it is a false ideal for him. Vision can never have the human family he craves, and any family he has fails to reach his ideals. Alana, Marko, and Hazel represent a different type of family, not fitting the traditional definition of the nuclear family, but perhaps still embodying many of its traits. Although they do not represent the stereotypical spandex clad heroes of the American comic book, they are heroes in their own right, fighting consistently for their family life. Each heroic journey starts with the family, and for these characters it ultimately ends with the family as well.

Chapter Five: Social Class, Hegemony, and the Heroes Journey

5.1 Introduction

The father-child relationship is presented in a vastly different light than the maternal relationship within the comic book genre. Although the representation is not the same for every father or father figure, there are some motifs that are repeated throughout the genre. While Cabrera et al argue that in general parent—child relationships show: ‘more similarities than differences between mothers and fathers’ (Cabrera et al 2014, 337), there are a number of notable differences within the medium. Mothers take on the role of nurturer, leaving fathers free to become role models in more physical aspects, encouraging the child to be physically active. According to Cabrera et al: ‘Early research stressing differences between parents noted that fathers are more likely to tease their children...engage in rough-and-tumble play...encourage risk taking’ (Cabrera et al 2014, 337). However, while fathers tend towards the physical aspects of raising a child, this often means they tend to be: ‘less engaged and sensitive’ (Cabrera et al 2014, 337), highlighting the impact of these differences on the father – child relationship very early on. This more physical relationship shows through in a number of graphic novels, where the father figure plays a role in the creation of the heroic identity in a much more practical manner than is seen with the mother–child relationship. While mother figures in the graphic novel are traditionally shown to teach compassion and morality, father figures are seen to teach practical skills that lead to their abilities to fight as heroes.

The Bat-Family (Langley 2012, ch.12) with Batman as the eventual patriarch, highlights how the child, once helpless, becomes the father figure himself,

encouraging other young orphans to follow in his footsteps. Batman graphic novels provide a unique insight into the father–son relationship in particular, and the variances that can occur even within the same family unit. Several generations of patriarchs are seen, with each relationship being vastly different from the last. Both Alfred and Batman serve as patriarchs, while there are a variety of characters that serve as the children in the relationship. Batwoman, although bearing the name of a Bat-Family member, is separate from the group, and thus her relationship with her father is shown in a different light, albeit still impacting the development of a hero. Unlike the majority of the other within the Batman ensemble cast relationships, Batwoman’s relationship with her father shows the father-daughter relationship in a typically patriarchal world. *Kingsman* (Millar et al 2014), both on screen and in print, delves into the notion of what happens when there is an absence of a stable father figure, and how the child changes as one is introduced. Neglect and abuse are prominent themes in the print and film versions of the story, long before any caring figures are introduced. Each character is influenced greatly, either by the absence or constant presence of a father figure. Yet each develops in a completely different way, becoming a different type of hero.

Even characters within the same family, growing up with a similar background, develop as heroes in different ways, having a unique identity as a hero. While the majority of the relationships in this chapter will discuss the relationships between father and son, with Batwoman being the exception, each relationship is vastly different, suggesting that there is more impacting the relationships than gender stereotypes: ‘Differences between maternal and paternal behaviour likely reflect individual differences determined not only by biology, but also by family structure, education, cultural beliefs, and values’ (Cabrera et al 2014, 338). So, while the relationships often include similarities, the relationships are quite varied overall.

Each of Baumrind's parenting styles has a different impact on childhood development, with each being differently child centric. Authoritarian parenting favours control, while having little warmth. Authoritative parenting is based on medium control, but with a lot of warmth in the relationship. Permissive parenting has very little control but is a very warm relationship. According to Baumrind, people who adopt this style of parenting are the most child-centred, yet this is not inherently the most positive style of parenting. The final parenting style that was added was focused on neglectful parent – child relationships. The parent-child relationship impacts the hero in a variety of ways. Both active parents and absentee parents play a role in childhood development. These parental figures can each be seen throughout a variety of graphic novel story arcs, impacting the development of the hero, and impacting their motivations for being a hero. Each hero, as a result, has a different motivator, and different experiences as a hero. While those with a supportive father figure may have a stronger foundation as a hero, others have a stronger motivating factor. And other characters may become heroes through circumstance, aided by their father – figures. The impact of these varying father – child relationships will be explored in this chapter, with an aim to analyse how various relationships, as well as circumstance can impact the development of heroic identities and motivations.

5.2 Creating a Kingsman

Much like *Saga*, *Kingsman* is not a traditional superhero narrative, instead following the theme of a spy narrative. However, it is included in this thesis because, like *Saga*, it provides an interesting perspective on the parent-child relationship. The *Kingsman* series offers a unique perspective on the father – son relationship. Both the graphic

novel series and the film series will be discussed in this chapter. *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (Millar et al. 2014), henceforth referred to as *The Secret Service*, explores a multitude of familial bonds, with the most notable bond being that of the father figure. The spin-off film series (referred to as *Kingsman* (Vaughn 2014) and *The Golden Circle* (Vaughn 2017) respectively) portrays many of the same relationship. Unlike the other texts discussed in this chapter, *Kingsman* shows the impact of both a very positive and very negative father figure on the same child, at different points in that child's development. It features prominently the impact of toxic parental relationships, specifically the impact of toxic or hegemonic masculinity on the development of the child. Masculinity here is defined as primarily being: 'assertiveness and self-protection' (O'Brien 2009, 34), focusing particularly on stereotypical dominant or aggressive traits. While the concept of hegemonic masculinity is often heavily criticised, many characters throughout the series display these stereotypically defined masculine traits. As Connell and Messerschmidt note: 'The concept has also attracted serious criticism from several directions: sociological, psychological, poststructuralist, and materialist... Outside the academic world it has been attacked as... "an invention of New Age psychologists" determined to prove that men are too macho' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 830). While there is still debate and controversy surrounding the notion of this masculinity, *Kingsman* successfully uses representations of this masculinity to represent Eggsy's family. There is also an intersection between the idea of hegemonic masculinity, and the nature/nurture debate. While Dean was the primary influence in Eggsy's life, he is not the most significant. Other characters, most notably the collection of Kingsmen agents featured in the story arc, have adopted a suave and sophisticated manner, becoming stereotypical gentlemen. Seeing characters who have developed this persona gives hope regarding Eggsy's fate, knowing that he eventually

will join the ranks of the Kingsmen. The graphic novels and film series explore the impact of two very different father figures, one who shares a biological connection, and one who shares proximity. And while the story does not attempt to answer the nature/nurture debate, it does show the impact of two very different people on childhood development, as well as bringing into focus Baumrind's theories on child centric parenting styles.

Equally, it shows a hero from an entirely different economic background, devoid of superpowers. Unlike the majority of comic book storylines discussed in this thesis, *Kingsman* is a British comic book, featuring a very different hero. While American comics are currently some of the most well-known narratives, British comic books have a legacy of their own. As Chris Murray puts it:

British comics have a long history. Depending on your definition of 'comic', this is one that goes back to at least the medieval period, or started to emerge in the eighteenth century, gradually maturing into what would now be recognised as a comic in the early nineteenth century (Murray 2017, 44).

Not just a comic book series that focuses on the British hero, *Kingsman* highlights the possibility of a hero born into different socio-economic circumstances. Some studies suggest that the social class a child is raised in has more to do with their development than the skills of the parent or guardian (Sullivan et al. 2013), yet Jack has been able to break away from the expected role. Characters, such as Batman, who lack superpowers traditionally have the wealth to sustain the life of a hero. Yet Eggsy, and even Jack, lack the means to overcome their situations in the way Batman, or the other team members did. While the Wayne family was affluent enough to train and become vigilante's, Eggsy did not have that choice. Instead, Eggsy becomes a government employee, something that separates him largely from many other heroes,

who act outside of the law. According to Sewell, social class has been defined as existing: ‘in all societies some system of social stratification exists whereby the members of society are differentiated into subgroups or classes’ (Sewell 1961, 340), yet the roles within each society vary. While characters from Eggsy’s early life are irrevocably part of the structure of his social class, Eggsy and the Kingsmen are not. While social classes here are strongly defined, the roles a person has in that society are not: ‘Persons in the society can be more or less located in the stratification system in terms of the characteristic social roles they play’ (Sewell 1961, 340). Initially it appears that Eggsy is very much rooted in the violence and crime of his social class, he begins to move away from that, creating a new identity for himself, while still recognising his origin.

5.2.1 *Kingsman* Graphic Novels

The Secret Service follows the protagonist, Eggsy, on his journey from troublemaking youth to international superspy. Embracing a distinctly different style to the other narratives in this thesis, *The Secret Service* embraces a style that has become synonymous with British comic books. Murray perfectly describes the British comic book industry as in terms of Millar’s predecessors and contemporaries:

The huge success of Moore, Gaiman and Morrison, as well as Jamie Delano, Peter Milligan and a host of British comic artists, such as Dave Gibbons, David Lloyd, Brian Bolland and Cam Kennedy, paved the way for more British comic creators to enter the previously impenetrable American comics industry, and the new generation of upcoming writers, spearheaded by Garth Ennis, Warren Ellis and Mark Millar, certainly lived up to this reputation...which

pioneered an influential high-octane blockbuster superhero style that became known as ‘widescreen’ action (Murray 2017, 50-51).

While *The Secret Service* is certainly a high-octane action film, one of the most powerful aspects of the story is the parallel that can be drawn between the relationship Eggsy has with Dean, an abusive and manipulative stepfather, and the contrasting relationship he has with his uncle Jack. Although Jack is distant in the beginning, he becomes a caring father figure, keen to teach Eggsy, and to remove him from such a damaging environment. While many of the characters discussed in this thesis have a dramatic backstory, filled with unnatural tragedies Eggsy’s story takes a different format, focusing completely on the ordinary aspects of human existence. Eggsy is introduced, living in a chaotic household, where he is considered to be an outsider. Due to the representation of hegemonic masculinity, which shows: ‘how adult personality was a system under tension’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832), the hierarchy is fragile, often leading to irrational outbursts. Yet in spite of this, Eggsy’s background does not have the same dramatic flair of the backstory in the traditional superhero narrative, where supernatural elements or vivid murders are scattered across every page. Nevertheless, that does not make it any less traumatic or impactful for Eggsy. Many of the questions about his past remain unanswered. The reader never learns about Eggsy’s biological father, nor of any other father figures that may have played a role in Eggsy’s development, although their negative impact is hinted at: ‘How many wasters have you moved him in with over the years?’ (Millar et al 2014) (Fig. 22).

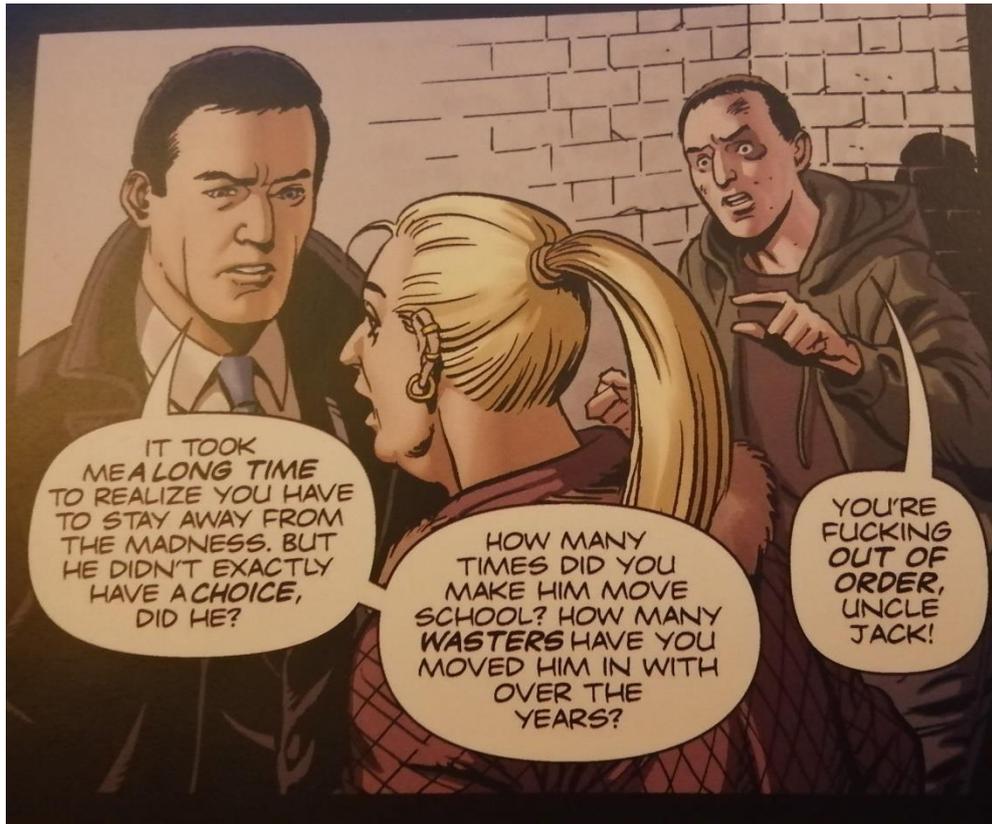


Fig. 22 Conflict is shown between Jack and Eggsy, Millar et al 2014 © Image Comics

Because of this the reader can only infer from his relationship with Dean, and his relationship with his mother as to the nature of past influences on Eggsy's development. Eggsy's past is never explicitly discussed, barring a few sparse references to his crimes that took place before the story began. Instead, the characters focus on the moment, neither looking towards a better future, nor looking at the impact of the past. This once again deviates from the traditional comic book narrative, where the past defines the characters' actions in the present. Yet while analysing the impact of the social hierarchy as well as the development of each character, the past is a vital element. Without understanding the past, and inferring meaning from the subtle hints provided, Eggsy's development as a character has less meaning and poignancy for the reader.

The destructive situation is presented immediately, when Dean is shown to be verbally abusive towards Sharon, Eggsy's mother. This abuse hints at physical and emotional abuse, but it is not explicitly shown due to Eggsy's arrival. Although it is a very brief scene, and overall Dean is seldom seen in the remainder of the story arc, it is nevertheless poignant and impactful. The effects of this brief scene linger and are seen every time Eggsy interacts with Sharon. The reader is led to believe this is a pattern, rather than the first occurrence, yet this is never explicitly stated.

The representation of the relationship between Dean and Eggsy is inherently negative from the onset. Everything in the panels highlights the tense relationship they share. Much of their introductory panels are filled with dark shading and indistinct artwork, with only Eggsy's face free from it, highlighting the differences between the characters personalities. Almost immediately Eggsy, although raised in this abusive environment, steps in to stop Dean, highlighting a desire to break away from the cycle. He struggles with his desire to protect her, yet it seems clear that he was never truly shown how to. Even Sharon perpetuates the cycle of abuse, permitting Dean to be a negative influence, and in many ways she is a negative influence herself. While the relationship between Dean and Eggsy is undeniably negative, the parent-child relationship, when dealing with the same gender, can impact the relationship of the other parent: '...gender {both child and parent} and dispositional characteristics may influence parent-child relationships and their effects on both the other parent and the children' (Cabrera et al 2014, 338). While Sharon's relationship with Eggsy does not have the same animosity that his relationship with Dean does, it has been impacted by that animosity, nonetheless. Although this scene depicts Dean's negativity towards Sharon, and eventually Eggsy and Ryan, it is clear that Sharon represents the negative aspects perceived in their social class as much as Dean does. When Eggsy is shown to

be concerned, her reaction is to shrug him off, defending Dean's actions in spite of Eggsy's discontent: 'Gary, for God's sake! They're only having a laugh.' (Millar et al. 2014) (Fig. 23).



Fig. 23 Criminality is shown in the household, Millar et al 2014 © Image Comics

Sharon moved quickly from the fearful woman in the first number of panels, and became an enabler instead, perhaps due to the fear she feels for herself and her children.

Eggsy seems to have an inherent sense of morality, yet it is clear from his introduction that he is unable to rationalise his desire to protect his family with what he has learned from the environment he has grown up in. It is one of the earliest indications in the story arc regarding the impact such a negative father figure had on Eggsy's development, and on his ability to follow his instincts. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been linked to the execution of crimes, something that Eggsy has clearly been influenced by. While Eggsy attempts to rebel from this notion,

he views himself a victim of circumstance. Because Eggsy has witnessed hegemonic masculinity in conjunction with criminality, the two are somewhat intertwined for him. The primary male influences have displayed these stereotypically aggressive, violent traits and applied them to the world of criminals.

The concept also had influence in criminology. All data reflect that men and boys perpetrate more of the conventional crimes – and the more serious of these crimes – than do women and girls. Moreover, men hold a virtual monopoly on the commission of syndicated and white-collar forms of crime (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 833).

This criminality is something that follows Eggsy, negatively reinforced by his perceptions of social class. While Eggsy and Dean clearly have no affection for one another, each still influences the actions of the other. While Dean has little respect or admiration for Eggsy, he clearly perceives Eggsy as an antagonist and an outsider, something that is also clearly seen in their introductory panels. Eggsy, on the other hand, views Dean as an inept father figure, rebelling against him constantly. This comes through in Eggsy's complete disregard for the law in the following panels. While he seemingly attempts to distance himself from Dean and the negative influence he has, Eggsy ultimately resorts to the same criminality that Dean follows. According to Connell and Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity is not the sole influence on criminality, with 'football "hooliganism" and white-collar crime' being the most dominant forms in England (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 833). And that 'hooliganism' becomes an outlet for Eggsy. A disregard for the law is clearly encouraged among his family because of this perception of masculinity, excluding Jack. Sharon says little about the interactions between Dean, Eggsy, and Ryan. This allows Dean to make the decisions regarding what is perceived as entertainment, while

Eggsy views it as neglect. However, in spite of his views Eggsy is powerless to protect his young brother, Ryan, who is encouraged to: ‘make daddy another doobie’ (Millar et al, 2014), once again reinforcing the idea of hooliganism or white-collar crime as an impact of hegemonic masculinity and culture. Eggsy’s disdain is clear, yet he follows the same patterns in his own life, doing what he believes is expected of him due to his circumstances.

Regardless of the hegemonic masculinities displayed through Dean and his cohorts, it is clear the parenting style he favours is the fourth, neglectful style. While it could be argued that these characters are a victim of circumstance, with social class and generations of negative parenting models impacting their development, it is also important to note that Eggsy faced the same circumstances and did not let them define him. Baumrind’s negative parenting model explores a vastly different aspect of parenting to her previous models, with this model being the least child centric. This can be seen not just in his treatment of Eggsy, but in Eggsy’s brothers’ treatment as well. It is because Eggsy’s brother is so young, he possesses a naivete that Eggsy does not, which could cause irreparable damage when combined with negative parenting styles. Even though Eggsy was older when Dean became an influence in his life, the negative parenting style combined with the stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity explored through Dean’s characterisation, the impact on Eggsy’s life was profound.

However, that all begins to change when, frustrated with seeing Eggsy take such an unnecessary path, Jack intervenes. No longer content to use his connections to bail Eggsy out of whatever trouble he is in, Jack now feels Eggsy needs to learn responsibility and be held accountable. This is seen clearly when Jack is once again asked by Sharon to help Eggsy, who had stolen and destroyed a car: ‘I’m sick of my Fraud Office card getting abused. It’s time he got his act together and started taking

some responsibility for himself' (Millar et al 2014). The contrast between Dean and Jack is immediate. Still benefiting from a patriarchal society, working in a male – dominated field, he lacks the active aggression that is clear in all of Dean's interactions. And while there is some criticism for any character receiving: 'the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing complicit masculinity' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832), Jack lacks the passivity that would class him as truly complicit. While he may not be overtly masculine in the same manner as Dean, he promotes a different masculinity that deviates from hegemony. This was not viewed as a positive by Eggsy at the onset, who simply viewed Jack as an absentee role model. Initially Eggsy resists Jack's influence, so conditioned by the traumas and expectations of his early life. Eggsy, through years of trauma, has developed a level of bitterness, even towards his uncle. Still, Jack is able to show Eggsy a different perspective of masculinity and fatherhood, one that lacks the oppressive and violent nature of the hegemonic: 'It was perhaps possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading towards an abolition of gender hierarchies' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 833).

As he slowly becomes part of this less oppressive masculinity, Eggsy quickly falls into the rhythm of training. The trauma and abuse Eggsy faced in his past quickly faded, and a determined, somewhat trigger-happy future Kingsman agent came into being. That being said, while the focus is no longer on the abuse, the impact of his origins are clear. While the other trainees have been raised in upper-class England, and have developed a certain snobbery, Eggsy is the opposite. This further highlights the isolation, and the sense of Otherness that is present throughout Eggsy's life. He is too gentle and kind-hearted to fit into the world of criminals he was raised in, yet he lacks

the knowledge to be part of the elitist upper classes. Nevertheless, he persists, inherently determined, with a desire, however unknown to him, to be a hero. Circumstances of birth are not the defining characteristics of a hero, something that Jack taught Eggsy through Kingsman training: 'You're smarter than you think you are boy. Why do you always dress and talk like a mugger? Being poor doesn't mean you have to conform to all the stereotypes, you know. I grew up on that housing estate.' (Millar et al 2014). By showing a character who had the same opportunities in life as Eggsy, and highlighting the different paths available, Millar et al have highlighted the ways in which hegemonic masculinity and social class can play a role in the lives of the character without determining their fate.

Jack, unlike Dean, recognises this heroism in Eggsy, and possesses the means to nourish and nurture it. As the arc progresses, Eggsy loses the criminality, but gains other traits that have been associated with hegemonic masculinity, but that also call into question the very definition of hegemonic masculinity. As Connell and Messerschmidt note: 'Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). The traits Eggsy learns while becoming a Kingsman agent are as important and impactful as those he learnt as a child under Dean's influence. Jack's tutelage highlights the multitudes of definitions available when exploring the concept of masculinity, and the impact of the father. While Jack's influence is not the same as it would be, had Eggsy been a young child, it is certainly very visible. From the onset the resentment Eggsy feels due to Jack's absence is clear. Yet Eggsy's need for approval is also evident. Although he resents Jack's absence, and the subsequent way he entered Kingsman training, Eggsy strives for success, hoping to gain Jack's approval, and to become something more than a

statistic (Fig. 24). He is beginning to display some traits of anxious attachment, although he has primarily appeared as an avoidant type.



Fig. 24 Eggsy is shown to have ambition beyond his circumstances, Millar et al 2014 © Image Comics

The relationship Jack and Eggsy share is beginning to fall into the secure category, something that Eggsy had never experienced. As Hannah Hamad notes: ‘Holmlund writes that... “For men of all races and classes, the roles they are expected to play often revolve around fatherhood”’ (Hamad 2013). Jack is someone supportive who has come from the same background, yet who overcame his circumstances. Eggsy begins to trust Jack in a way he could never trust someone Dean, or even his own mother. Eggsy begins to show less anxiety when Jack is present, and when he is absent, secure in the knowledge that he now has a father figure who truly supports him. This is most evident when Eggsy is mocked by the other trainees, simply because of his place of birth. While there are moments when Eggsy wants to leave, Jack’s obvious disappointment stops him from doing so. Instead, he follows in his uncle’s footsteps, quickly surpassing the other trainees. This determination is the first sign that Eggsy is moving away from Dean’s shadow and is embracing the new life Jack has created for

him. From there, Dean is quickly forgotten about, and Jack becomes the primary paternal influence. Both Jack and Eggsy grow as people, influencing each other beyond the set trainer/trainee relationship expected in the Kingsman training ground. And although even this is something that Eggsy is mocked for, he does not shy away from it.

In spite of the very positive influence Jack has, Eggsy's early influences are not erased. While his Kingsman training requires discipline and an ability to follow orders, Eggsy rebels, a leftover habit of his upbringing. Although these moments are a hindrance as a Kingsman, it does not have the same level of negativity as it did before he began his training. Authoritative parenting, embodied by Jack, has impacted Eggsy enough that, while he is still prone to irrational outbursts and poor decisions, those decisions are not rooted in the same place. Previously, his rash decisions were rooted in criminality. Now his rash decisions are coming from a place of wanting to do good, but not knowing how. This is something that slowly begins to change, due to the influence of an authoritative parental figure. Authoritative parenting is characterised by responsiveness and high demands. Authoritative parenting exerts firm control over the child and expects maturity, and Eggsy begins to flourish under the care of an authoritative parent, who treats him with respect and maturity, and expects the same in return. The change, although slow in the beginning, has a rapid acceleration after Jack's death. While Jack is no longer present, his influence is clearly seen. Eggsy develops a need to seek revenge, yet he does this in a manner that pays homage to Jack's legacy, rather than reverting to his previous methods (Fig. 25).



Fig. 25 Eggsy's growth is clear after Jack's death, Millar et al 2014 © Image Comics

Had Eggsy not developed that secure relationship with Jack, his reaction after Jack's death could have been volatile and unpredictable, prompting him to return to the world of hegemonic masculinity and criminality.

5.2.2 *Kingsman* Film Adaptations

The film adaptation of *Kingsman* deviates from many aspects of the original plot, including the interpersonal relationships. It looks at the role of the gentleman spy in a far more satirical manner, yet the relationships are shown in a more serious light. In spite of the changes, Eggsy himself presented to the audience in an almost identical manner. Eggsy once again lives in a damaging environment, and Dean perpetuates the cycle of abuse. *Kingsman* here, in many ways, shows a greater impact of Dean's relationship with Eggsy's mother – here known as Michelle –, and his subsequent parental influence over Eggsy. His introduction hints not just at physical abuse, but also sexual abuse, emotional abuse, as well as child neglect or child abuse. Eggsy's

introduction is very similar to that in the graphic novel. He futilely attempts to break the cycle of abuse he finds his family in. The scene that introduces the characters hints at various forms of abuse, as in the original story. Yet here it expands beyond the emotional, verbal, or even physical abuse, as well as the neglect of a child. It also hints at sexual abuse, showing Dean forcing himself on Michelle, and even inviting his friends to join, while Eggsy and a young baby are in the room. It is clear that it is a power play, with Dean exercising his perceived authority over Michelle, Eggsy, and the unnamed child. While the scene is brief, and is never referred to again, it serves as the foundation for many of the events that follow, harking back to the first scene of abuse in *The Secret Service*.

This scene serves as a brutal introduction to the characters, yet it allows strong opinions to be formed from the onset. Eggsy shows an immediate desire to stop the cycle of abuse, yet it is clear here that it conflicts with his need to obey his mother's wishes. The nature of their relationship not only impacts Eggsy within the family unit, but it will undoubtedly impact him in his everyday life. Studies suggest that those from a neglectful household often display lower academic prowess and suffer psychologically. However, certain studies also highlight the overlap between such parenting styles on the development of a child. In one such study dividing groups of children, focusing on the child from authoritative homes. As Lamborn et al note:

this group reports significantly higher academic competence, significantly lower levels of problem behaviour [sic], and significantly higher levels of psychosocial development than adolescents from authoritarian, indulgent, or neglectful households. With respect to internalizing symptoms, however, the results indicate that whereas adolescents who describe their parents as authoritative report fewer psychological and somatic symptoms than those in

neglectful homes, their reports do not differ significantly from adolescents in either authoritarian or indulgent homes (Lamborn et al 1991, 1057).

While this study suggests that the different parenting styles do not necessarily denote specific developmental issues, it acknowledges the overlap and correlation between psychological issues and family. While Lamborn et al have highlighted the overlap, they have also highlighted the significance of the neglectful parent, and the impact on that child's development:

Consistent with our predictions, students who describe their parents as neglectful report the poorest outcomes across all four sets of dependent measures. On every outcome, the neglectful group is significantly worse off than the authoritative group. Adolescents in neglectful homes, however, do not differ significantly from those in authoritarian homes on those outcome variables that are strongly tied to self-confidence (self-reliance, perceived social competence, and perceived academic competence) (Lamborn et al 1991, 1058).

Although the child in the neglectful home suffers far more than other children, the fact that they do not suffer more in terms of self-confidence is particularly significant in Eggsy's life, allowing him to become more flexible and accept a new parenting model.

A child develops their opinions and knowledge about the world through the family unit. According to Ebrahimi et al: 'Within the family environment, a child acquires the initial attitudes toward the world, develops mentally and physically, learns how to communicate, acquires basic norms, and eventually forms his own attitudes and ethics' (Ebrahimi et al 2017, 1064). Eggsy's reaction here is similar to the reaction shown in the graphic novel, yet overall it is a more damaging environment for him. This new representation of abuse adds gravitas to Eggsy's hatred of Dean, and everything he stands for. Unlike *The Secret Service*, Eggsy's hatred is not omitted, nor is the violence faced left unseen. Due to the different nature of the genres, there is an

inherent difference in the representation, and film allows more development. Nevertheless, as with the graphic novel storyline, Eggsy proceeds to lash out, stealing his stepbrother's car and soon becoming involved in a police chase.

It is this lashing out that eventually leads to Eggsy becoming a Kingsman agent. Yet, while the criminality that Eggsy displays is largely tied to the hegemonic influences combined with the negative perception of social class, as has been influenced by the neglectful parenting style, it is important to note that other parenting models can also create behavioural issues. Lamborn et al also note: 'Finally, adolescents who characterize their parents as neglectful are not significantly different from those who characterize their parents as indulgent on measures of behavior problems, engagement in school (grade point average and school orientation), self-reliance, or somatic symptoms' (Lamborn et al 1991, 1058). Unlike the graphic novel, the agent that gets him released from prison is not his uncle. Instead, it is a man with whom Eggsy had no real connection. Harry had worked with Eggsy's father, also a Kingsman, and as a result, Harry believed he owed a debt. As a result, the relationship between Harry and Eggsy is inherently different to the relationship between Eggsy and Jack. Harry is introduced to the audience as the suave, sophisticated gentleman spy, reminiscent of the classic James Bond, Illya Kuryakin or Napoleon Solo personas. The relationship between Harry and Eggsy is fraught with tension in the beginning, largely due to the class and culture differences between them. While Harry clearly exudes sophistication and poise, Eggsy embodies the aggression that has become expected of him. While Harry views Eggsy as wasting his potential, and a layabout, Eggsy views Harry as a snob, judgemental, and born with a silver spoon. Yet the things that seem to separate them in the beginning quickly fade away when there is a threat. Eggsy

quickly becomes awed by Harry when Harry defends Eggsy, skilfully defeats Dean's gang in a bar fight, in a way that seems effortless, still reflecting the classic spy motif.

Dean's excessive, violent nature is shown immediately after this scene. While there was violence in the fight between Harry and the gang, there was something fluid and elegant about it. On the other hand, Dean is a completely chaotic character, showing brashness and vulgarity, and to a certain extent a clumsiness in his fighting. He brandishes a cleaver at Eggsy, pinning him to the wall, while Michelle cries in the background, and he demands to know about Harry Hart, yet Eggsy says nothing. Eggsy's denial of knowledge pushes Dean further into a chaotic rage, until Harry's voice comes through a hidden microphone, replacing the chaos with a sudden fear. While Harry was cool and collected, not taken by surprise in the bar, Dean is easily startled. This further highlights the differences between Dean and Harry, and their relationship with Eggsy.

The violence displayed towards both Eggsy and Michelle in this scene creates an extremely problematic dynamic, as Eggsy is once again the witness to Michelle's abuse, and is in danger of becoming a victim himself. According to Peled: 'Enabling children of abused women to maintain a positive relationship with the perpetrator is extremely complex in the light of potential danger for women and children and the conflicting needs, interests and rights of different family members' (Peled 2000, 25). However, while Eggsy has been forced to remain around the perpetrator of this abuse, his relationship is far from positive, denoting a particularly complicated dynamic. While Michelle is the primary victim shown, Eggsy suffers greatly, exposed to explosive behaviours that have the potential to cause severe issues later in life. As a child from an abusive home, Eggsy has a strong emotional response, as well as the

physical response to violence. Fear and even guilt are common responses for the child living in an abusive household. As Peled notes:

Children of abusive men grow up terrorized, witnessing violent, rigid, and sometimes self-destructive behaviours, and they are exposed to negative and limiting role models. Their prolonged exposure to woman abuse presents them with great challenges. These children may be living with a secret, getting entangled in parental conflicts, feeling loneliness, terror and fear, experiencing instability and discontinuity following separations and moves, suffering from economic difficulties typical to female single-parent households (Peled 2000, 26).

Eggsy has been exposed to violence from an early age, fearing Dean's wrath, less for his sake than his mother's but he nonetheless experienced fear. However, this scene is perhaps the first that indicates Eggsy has something to fear for himself. Finally able to flee, Eggsy does not look back to the household that caused him such traumas. It is a seminal moment for Eggsy, something that reflects the budding secure relationship as seen in the graphic narrative. While Eggsy does not yet trust Harry, the early signs of the secure bond are evident. The hegemonic masculinities that Eggs was exposed to have been replaced with more positive influences. As David Morgan argues:

I would wish to argue that the rhetoric of experience continues to play an important part in the construction of modern masculinities; it is not simply a residue from some more traditional or prerational era. Men appropriate experience as well as reason although it is likely that these understandings or constructions of experience are different from those experiences associated with women and with femininity (Morgan 1996)

Eggsy's changing experiences are tantamount to his development as a Kingsman agent, ensuring the hegemonic upbringing is overshadowed by the development of the secure relationship.

While Dean remains largely unseen in *The Secret Service* after Eggsy's departure, *Kingsman* sees more of the character, and a greater impact of the hegemonic masculinity he displays. From that moment forward, Dean features far less in Eggsy's life. Instead, he leaves to train with Harry Hart, beginning their improvised father-son relationship. Unlike Jack, who was largely absent in Eggsy's training, Harry plays a major role and the pair develop a quick bond. It is because of this bond, and Harry's subsequent injury that motivates Eggsy in his Kingsman training. While the other trainees, as in the graphic novel, are from a different social or economic class to Eggsy, he has a different set of skills that propel him forward. While he is again mocked by the other trainees, he is less impacted by it in the film, having a greater support in Harry. Even when Harry is injured, the support he receives from Merlin in Harry's stead carries him through. Eggsy has a desire to achieve – and to prove his worth - that shows up much sooner in the film, leading Eggsy to be one of the top candidates when Harry wakes up. One of the major benefits of the authoritative parenting style is morality. Benson and Haith argue:

The authoritative parenting style leads to the development of mature moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, and high self-esteem. Children of authoritative parents exhibit low amounts of internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety and externalizing behaviours such as antisocial behaviour and substance abuse (Benson and Haith 2009, 290).

Although initially uncertain about his place as a Kingsman, Eggsy quickly sheds these uncertainties, and even his anger begins to decrease as he finds himself in a secure home, bonding with a father figure keen to teach him skills that will benefit Eggsy throughout his life.

The pride Harry shows for Eggsy is distinctly paternal, and serves as a connection to Eggsy's biological father, which was lacking in the original storyline.

Harry's pride was reflected in Eggsy's happiness at seeing his mentor wake up. This is reminiscent of John Bowlby's research into the absentee parent, when a parent leaves and returns. While Harry was never physically absent, there was an emotional void, which is filled when Harry wakes up. Focusing on the theory of attachment, there is a: 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' (Elliot and Place 2004, 3), which is why, even in his absence, Harry played a vital role in Eggsy's development. Authoritative parenting teaches: 'the child to develop self-reliance by providing necessary controls that a developing child needs while still granting appropriate amounts of autonomy' (Benson and Haith 2009, 290). While Harry was a massive influence throughout Eggsy's training, he also stepped back, allowing Eggsy to learn to rely on himself. Part of why Eggsy worked to achieve is because of the influence Harry had, and his desire to make him proud. Attachment theory focuses on the child forming a bond with a caregiver as a means of survival, and that is reflected in the relationship between Harry and Eggsy. Yet it is not just Eggsy who benefits from this relationship. Harry gets to repay a debt he has carried since Eggsy's father sacrificed himself to save Harry's team. It is because of this that Harry is so willing to help Eggsy. However, it is not this that grows the relationship. They develop an incredible amount of loyalty towards each other, and towards the Kingsman agency, which continues to grow, until Eggsy fails the final test. Eggsy was willing to risk his own life for the chance to be an agent, but he was unable to risk the life of an innocent dog to do so. It is this scene that leads to Eggsy questioning everything about Harry and their relationship. And although Eggsy was successful in the majority of his training, anger and resentment came to the fore when he comes to the realisation that Harry is the reason he grew up with Dean, rather than his biological father.

As Eggsy comes to terms with Harry's actions, he is forced to confront his own failures as he watches Harry die, murdered by Richmond Valentine. Eggsy finally recognizes the important role Harry played in his life, the only positive father figure he truly remembers. While the role of the authoritative parent has already been discussed throughout this thesis, the impact of an authoritative parent when it is preceded by a neglectful parent, changes the impact on the attachment type Eggsy develops. While he was originally mistrustful, viewing Harry as someone who could not understand him, after his death Eggsy spends the remainder of the film finishing his work, paying homage to the father figure that benefited him so greatly, even reflecting him in the final scene. Much like in *The Secret Service*, Harry's death pushes Eggsy forward. The resentment he felt gives way to guilt at Harry's death, encouraging him to succeed as a Kingsman, and uncovering the corruption that had rooted itself in the organisation. Like Jack, Harry acted as an authoritative parent, and the result of his death was the same, providing Eggsy with a new sense of identity, not rooted in his socioeconomic standing. A positive father figure, both in the graphic novel and the film series provided Eggsy with the skills he needed to overcome the stereotype and become a hero.

The Golden Circle follows the aftermath of Harry's death, exploring Eggsy's grieving process and the eventual return of the father figure. Given Eggsy's relationship with Harry, a secure attachment is evident within this sequel. Although Eggsy mourns Harry, he does not search. Instead, he continues in his footsteps, rebuilding the Kingsman Agency with Merlin, and the other agents, following the loss of agents in the first film. Eggsy's costuming pays homage to Harry, ensuring that the audience never forgets the father figure that brought Eggsy here. The sequel shows the more thorough destruction of the Kingsman Agency than the previous film, with all

other agents lost within the first part of the film. As a result, Merlin and Eggsy are forced to venture overseas to the Statesman Agency, the American counterpart. Throughout this sequence Eggsy has not sought Harry, trusting the skills that Harry taught him to rebuild Kingsman with Merlin's help.

However, Harry is quickly re-introduced, albeit with one caveat. Harry has amnesia, not recognising Eggsy or Merlin in any way. This proves more devastating to Eggsy than Harry's death, resulting in some rather dramatic spy repartee between the Statesmen and Eggsy. Witnessing Harry's supposed death, then finding Harry alive but with no memory shakes Eggsy to his core. With Harry's death there had been a tone of finality, a grieving process, and growth. With the realisation that Harry is alive, the time Eggsy spent readjusting is suddenly undone, bringing the grief back to the fore. As the relationship Eggsy and Harry displayed was secure, while Harry was believed dead, Eggsy was freely able to move on, growing as a Kingsman agent. Studies of secure attachment in children and adolescents highlight the ability of the child to behave in a confident manner. Secure children and adolescents are able to: 'clearly communicate positive, *as well as negative*, feelings toward the parent. Anger and distress are readily resolved or soothed' (Bergin and Bergin 2016, 227). While Eggsy experienced grief, he was eventually able to follow in Harry's footsteps. However, upon Harry's return, Eggsy's world became more complicated.

While Eggsy is once again forced to save the world, Harry regaining his memory has become a massive priority for the characters within the film, linking the idea of trauma and memory loss. While the characters attempt to use their own attachment to Harry to jog his memory, it is trauma that will eventually do it. It is Eggsy who eventually succeeds in bringing Harry back, forcing him to relive the most

traumatic part of the Kingsman training for them both – shooting a dog. While Eggsy failed his training because of this moment, Harry succeeded (although the gun was filled with blanks). Yet it remained a point in Harry’s past that he struggled with. As Harry returns, Eggsy’s secure attachment becomes immediately obvious again. Case studies relating to attachment type show that the child: ‘when reunited ... show delight and readily go to their parent and are quickly soothed... Anger and distress are readily resolved or soothed’ (Bergin and Bergin 2016, 227). Eggsy has once again found comfort in his mentor, yet for some time the roles appear reversed as Harry relearns many aspects of his day to day existence. Now missing one eye, much of the combat that he excelled at in the first film is now a struggle for him, leaving him vulnerable to attack and requiring Eggsy’s protection.

While the remainder of the film continues as a hyperbolised spy movie, the reintroduction of Harry Hart brought Eggsy immediately back to the role of the child grieving for the father figure. While the roles are reversed to a certain extent, as Harry returns to peak fighting form, he and Eggsy are portrayed more as equals on the battlefield than that of a trainer and trainee relationship. Harry’s return serves to reinforce the secure attachment that Eggsy has developed, as well as to highlight the growth that has happened since Harry’s death. Eggsy has moved completely away from the hegemonic ideals that Dean purported in the first film, becoming the embodiment of the gentleman spy (albeit with a few moments that remind the audience of his roots). Although in both the print and film versions of the story Eggsy begins with an abusive, damaging father figure, he is not defined by this. All it took was for someone to show Eggsy another alternative away from the aspects of his upbringing that caused his behavioural issues. It seems that all Eggsy truly needed was someone to believe in him and to show him an alternative path, leading him to become one of

the most unusual heroes, not one who wears spandex and flies, but one who saves the world, nonetheless. Like many hero narratives, Eggsy's is a story of overcoming. Unlike characters such as Spider-Man or the Flash, Eggsy is not coming from the same place of loss, although there was tragedy in his life. Unlike those heroes, he was not directly linked to the loss, although it is no less impactful. He overcame an abusive household, a life of criminality, and a mentality surrounding his socio-economic circumstances that suggested he had no other options. While he faced adversity throughout his story, Eggsy persisted. He traversed the odds, succeeding where only a positive father figure believed he could.

5.3 Life in the Shadows; How the Bat-Family Copes with Loss.

Like Eggsy, Bruce Wayne is one of the few heroes devoid of superpowers who stands out in the world of comic books. While in Eggsy's world superpowered beings do not feature, for Batman they are an everyday reality that he must face as a mortal. His origin story is among the most famous, and like Peter Parker and Barry Allen, his is one of the few that features a permanent death. Unlike Eggsy, however, the father figure that cared for Bruce from the moment his parents were murdered in Crime Alley was far from hegemonic and neglectful. Alfred Pennyworth, the butler who served Bruce's parents, now acts as a father figure, raising Bruce through his own grief at the death of his friends. Although Alfred is not Bruce's only father figure – with Len Wein noting that: 'for an orphan, this guy has a lot of father figures' (Langley 2012, ch. 12) - he is the most significant. Bruce's origin story creates some of the most complex issues surrounding attachment, given its extreme darkness. The murder of Martha and Thomas Wayne may be one of the most traumatic origin stories in comic book history, with Thomas and Martha dying at the hands of a mugger as Bruce watches, helpless

(Finger and Fox 1939). However, much like Spider-Man's own origin of grief, it served as a catalyst for change. According to Rosenberg: 'The seed of Batman's existence begins with the murder of young Bruce Wayne's parents; within days of their deaths, young Bruce swears to avenge their murders by "warring" on all criminals for the rest of his life' (Rosenberg 2013, 13) (Fig. 26).



Fig. 26 Young Bruce swears to avenge his family, Finger, Fox 1939 © DC Comics

This is a bold statement for someone so young to make, yet one cannot help believing that Bruce means exactly what he says. His origin story issue shows ‘Wayne spending his young adulthood acquiring the skills needed to fulfil his vow. He becomes physically and mentally ready’ (Rosenberg 2013, 14) (Fig. 27).

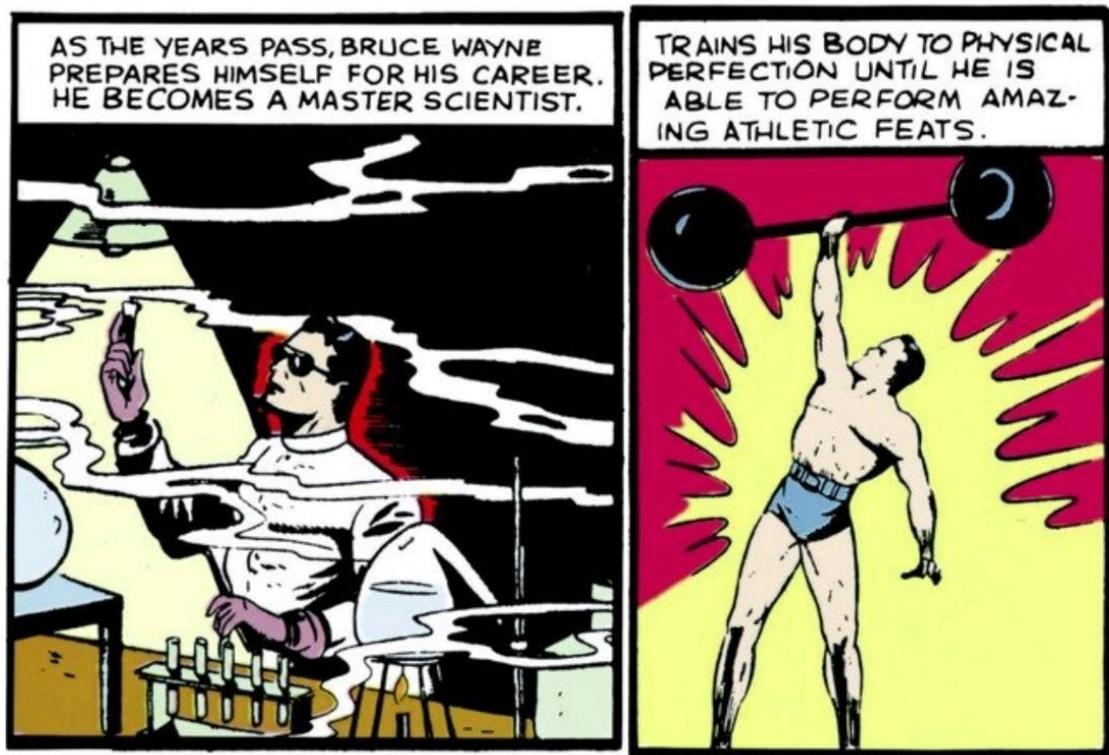


Fig. 27 Bruce trains himself to become Batman, Finger, Fox 1939 © DC Comics

Batman is one of the most believable heroes. In a world where everything is possible, where men can fly and aliens exist, he persists. When compared to his superpowered counterparts – Superman and Spider-Man, he still fits comfortably in the world of superheroes. According to Langley:

He’s the superhero with no superpowers, the one we can most easily believe might inhabit our world. While his secret identity is the most fantastic of the three, one charmingly handsome billionaire living in a grand mansion on top of a vast cave, versus two nebbish newspaper employees, that fantastic wealth

helps us accept his masked identity as something that feels real (Langley 2012, ch. 1, para.2).

Having witnessed the murder of his parents at a young, vulnerable age, yet having his own life spared unleashed something within Bruce that he would spend his entire life trying to understand (Fig. 28).



Fig. 28 Bruce admits he spends his entire life trying to exterminate criminals, Finger, Fox 1940 © DC Comics

Bruce fails to process his grief, sending it to the deepest recesses of his mind. Again, this is reminiscent of Spider-Man, although their methods as heroes are perhaps the inverse of each other. As a child he has a metamorphosis, developing a dark, mysterious personality. While his change in personality is extreme, it is not unfounded.

Rosenberg argues:

Is such a transformation really possible? Can life's events fundamentally alter someone's character? Yes, in several ways. Bruce Wayne's subsequent vow to avenge his parents' deaths...is typical of the desire to "do good" that happens to people who survive a traumatic event (Rosenberg 2013, 14).

Bruce struggled to find meaning in his parents' deaths, and so he finds a way to make sense of it. However, this is a side of Bruce that is not public knowledge. As he grew from that young, frightened boy into a man harbouring guilt and grief, Bruce created a public persona, one that would no doubt have been expected of him had his parents survived. In the public eye he acted as the playboy, the philanthropist, the businessman: 'When his mask is off, his persona is that of Bruce Wayne, millionaire playboy' (Rosenberg 2013, 12). He appears light-hearted and carefree as the rich playboy. That said, even in his public persona he attempts to do some good – mostly through the creation of a charitable organisation -, although it pales in comparison to his work as Batman. Yet as soon as he returns to Wayne Manor all pretence fades away. His sacrifices do not go unnoticed by him, nor are they unseen by Alfred.

5.3.1 Alfred Pennyworth, Bat-Family Patriarch

Alfred is perhaps the only person in Bruce's life who sees him for who he truly is, both as Batman and as an ordinary man. Alfred has been there from the moment Bruce was born and stays through the darkest periods in Bruce's life, and as a result the only consistent attachment Bruce has is with him. While he is not the only paternal figure seen in Bruce Wayne's life, he is certainly the most consistent, and the one who has Bruce's best interests at heart. According to Langley: 'In the comics, Gordon works with Batman, Alfred helps out in the Batcave and maintains the Wayne Manor household, and Fox ties Bruce to his parents' charities and business' (Langley 2012,

ch. 12, para. 15). However, the relationship they have does not necessarily fall into the category of secure attachment, as much as they each might like it to, although it is the closest to a secure relationship Bruce has:

Bruce Wayne shows characteristics of both secure and dismissing-avoidant attachment. For someone who so values his independence and self-sufficiency, he has spent a lot of time learning from mentors, teaming up with other crimefighters, training apprentices, and relying on the assistance and cooperation of a police commissioner and family butler. He cycles between dealing only with those last two and working with a sprawling, extended Bat-Family (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 6).

Bruce is deceitful and Alfred knows this, although neither of them ever seem willing or even able to change that. Although Alfred was a stable father figure throughout Bruce's life the trauma faced by Bruce was more than either of them could overcome, and so Bruce has developed a more avoidant attachment type, although he does display many characteristics of secure and fearful attachment too. Fearful attachment types display many similar traits to avoidant attachment, although they crave relationships more, and as a result can be more unpredictable, often volatile. Bruce, although flawed, does not have this volatility although he does crave relationships because of the secure aspects of his attachment style. This need to cultivate relationships can be seen when Bruce acts as a father figure to the myriad of Robin characters, adopting youths who have had similar traumatic occurrences in their lives to Bruce. Where he differs from characters such as Tony Stark and even Eggsy is that while he craves connection, he keeps it at arm's length out of fear or a belief that he cannot have it. He has developed this attachment type because of the extreme levels of upheaval and trauma seen in his early childhood. While many of the other characters discussed in this thesis have faced trauma, Bruce's is distinct, one of the most significant traumas in the genre. Like Peter Parker, Bruce feels a sense of guilt. He survived when his parents did not, and much

like Peter he has a sense of responsibility surrounding their death. In later story arcs, including the Christopher Nolan film franchise, Bruce insisted on leaving the theatre, and as a result he feels the same guilt and responsibility as Peter, spurring him to protect his city. Unlike Peter, however, Bruce had no prior connection to the criminal, nor did he possess the ability to stop him, yet the guilt remains a permanent fixture, likely because of survivors' guilt.

It is unsurprising, given this complexity, that Alfred is Bruce's one trusted ally. Nevertheless, there are curiosities and inconsistencies surrounding their relationship. What makes Alfred accepting of Bruce's extracurricular activities? In what reality would any father figure accept that their son is acting as a vigilante, putting himself in danger, acting outside of the law, all while wearing a mask. As Langley notes:

When and how does Bruce tell Alfred, "I want to sneak around in a mask – lend me a hand?" There's no definitive account of this because it probably happens by degrees. The mourning boy says he wants to go into law enforcement. Nobody's going to put down that dream. By most accounts Bruce is college age before he concludes that dispensing justice in Gotham's corrupt climate means he must operate outside the law (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 17).

Alfred is likely to have been unsuspecting of Bruce's true motivations until it was too late. However, given the attachment type, and the generally authoritative parenting style (occasionally veering towards permissive) that Alfred appears to have adopted, it is unsurprising that he aids Bruce in his endeavours, no matter how dangerous they happen to be:

Alfred's parenting style (his general approach to childrearing) is mostly authoritative (not authoritarian), encouraging his surrogate son's independence

with warmth and nurturance, and verbal give-and-take, while also exerting authority, enforcing rules, and making maturity demands (expectations of age appropriate conduct) (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 18).

This is further complicated by the fact that, in spite of their close bond, Alfred is still in Bruce's employ, creating a distance that would otherwise not exist in their relationship. Likely a challenge to navigate in the beginning, the two found a balance that worked for Bruce's upbringing: 'Difficult as it may be to imagine Alfred telling Bruce at 10 or 11, "No, you may not," Bruce's social competence and self-control suggest that Alfred found ways to place limits and exert discipline' (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 18). Alfred also leads by example, with his energy and attitude to work becoming something that Bruce can look up to, undoubtedly something that influenced Bruce's own drive when it comes to protecting Gotham as an unknown hero. Alfred gets very little recognition for the work he does, even from Bruce himself. Nevertheless, Alfred is willing to remain virtually anonymous because he knows the value of his role. He cares for Batman while Batman cares for Gotham. As said by Drohan:

Taking no part in the notoriety of Bruce Wayne or Batman, Alfred certainly doesn't do it for the fame. Rather, we're astounded at his humility, for although Alfred is surely aware of the vital role he plays in the Dark Knights forays, he asks for no praise. Instead he remains so humble that on the same day that he changes the tires on the Batmobile, programs Wayne Manor's security systems, and reinvents Batman's utility belt he'll happily clean toilets as if there were no difference between the tasks (Drohan 2008, 184).

Alfred requires no praise, content in his role as the unseen advisor. Bruce Wayne may be the face of a company, and a billionaire, but he is also dismissed by the media as a playboy. Batman is dismissed as a vigilante, hunted and reviled as much as he is revered. Yet, like Alfred, he has become accustomed to the lack of praise, not needing

or wanting the praise of the city he protects. While Alfred had an authoritative parenting style, it is equally likely that he simply allowed Bruce to grow, showing him the way forward rather than forcing his hand.

However, despite Alfred's best efforts, Bruce still has a certain amount of impulsivity and demandingness to his personality. He is used to getting his own way, regardless of what may in fact be the best option for him. It is likely that Bruce's parents employed a permissive parenting style, giving Bruce a sense of entitlement that is seen throughout his publication history, in spite of the obvious self-control he has: 'The fact that Bruce is accustomed to getting his own way might suggest that Alfred and Bruce's birth parents before him preferred to risk erring a little on the side of permissiveness' (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 18). Although Alfred undoubtedly was more of an authoritative figure, it is equally clear that there were instances of permissiveness. This parenting style is consistent throughout the various Batman publications and can be seen throughout Bruce's life. While Alfred is the only person Bruce will listen to, he also knows when it is time to let Bruce figure things out alone. However, according to Drohan: '...at no point do we think of him as some kind of naïve disciple of the bat. Alfred is too confident and self-assured to be that kind of man. In fact, he spends most of his time chastising Bruce for his recklessness, showing that his only concern is for his master's well-being' (Drohan 2008, 184). Where Alfred may be a permissive parent at times, he is unafraid to let Bruce know how he truly feels. Although Bruce routinely chooses to ignore Alfred's advice, shrugging off his concerns, Alfred reiterates the point on a regular basis, nonetheless, further reminding the reader that he is a father figure that has the best interests of his son at heart, especially in the face of mortal danger.

In Batman's vast publication history, comparatively few comics explore the immediate aftermath of Thomas and Martha's deaths. Instead they are centred very much in Bruce's adult life. While there are moments where their relationship is mentioned, and certain story arcs do feature Bruce's early, pre-Batman years, the majority do not. However, the Fox television interpretation of Bruce's early life *Gotham* and the novel *Batman: Nightwalker* (Lu 2018) by young adult writer Marie Lu both explore the earlier aspects of Alfred as a father figure. *Gotham* (Fox Broadcasting Company 2014) is an interpretation of Gotham city in the wake of the Wayne murder, and there is a heavy influence on the relationship between Alfred and Bruce growing from that of employer and employee to that of a father and son. This section will discuss the immediate aftermath of the Wayne's deaths rather than the extended series content, focusing on their earliest interactions as father and son.

The version of Alfred seen here is somewhat more complex than other iterations of the character, showing his personal history as an army veteran more clearly. Where Bruce is angry, seeking revenge on the man who killed his family, Alfred allows him to channel that rage into combat. The series is a gritty and violent interpretation of Gotham City, with both Bruce and Alfred being more violent versions of their comic book counterparts. Arguably this is a more realistic portrayal of the characters and the process of grieving they would have experienced after the death of Thomas and Martha. However, this interpretation of the characters also removes many of the positive attributes that Alfred has, and many of the ones he instils in Bruce. Where the comic book version of performs his duties as though they were his calling, this version of Alfred views them as responsibility and obligation. As Drohan notes: 'Alfred performs his tasks with prodigious energy, both physical and spiritual. His devotion to Wayne reveals his belief in a higher duty, an ethical obligation to serve

another to the best of one's ability' (Drohan 2008, 184). On the other hand, *Gotham* seems to remove that element, in the beginning, showing Alfred as gruff, unwillingly cast in the role of father.

Where the comic book version of Alfred largely views caring for Bruce as his purpose after the death of the Wayne family, *Gotham's* version of the character has a less sentimental approach, frustrated at the initial lack of communication between the two, and the frequent danger Bruce put himself in. It is not to say that *Gotham's* Alfred does not care for Bruce as much as his comic book counterpart. He very likely has the same level of affection for his ward. However, the approach he has when it comes to caring for a child differs greatly from every other version of the character. While this may fit with the grim setting of the series, it makes for a very complicated relationship between them, where the attachment style becomes somewhat more difficult to interpret. The genre Batman resides in has been described by Robert Brian Taylor as "pulp noir" (Taylor 2008, 7). *Gotham* certainly fits this interpretation, with the violence and grittiness harking back to the earliest Batman comic books:

The world Batman inhabits isn't the same fanciful, brightly colored comic book macrocosm of Superman or Spider-Man, at least it shouldn't be, despite several attempts to turn it into one...Batman thrives in a pulp-noir universe, where his acts of heroism are more mundane and yet more titillating – the brutal disarming of a knife-wielding thug, with the snap of a broken bone, deep in the shadows of some Gotham back alley. The characters who occupy Batman's universe can get hurt, even paralyzed – just ask Barbara Gordon. Sometimes they die (Taylor 2008, 8).

The necessity of violence within the world of *Gotham* is certainly brought to the fore here, even in the relationship with Alfred, making the dynamic between them change. While in the comic books it is possible to have Alfred as the content, jovial, sarcastic

character that is so familiar, it does not translate as well on screen, certainly in as grim a setting as *Gotham* presents. To truly fit in the world of pulp noir Alfred must change, acknowledging the impact such a grim world has had on him. Pulp noir is simply a subgenre of noir fiction, defined by Merriam-Webster as: ‘crime fiction featuring hardboiled cynical characters and bleak sleazy settings’ (Merriam-Webster 2019). Pulp noir focuses on the noir genre in an urban setting, often focusing on violent, hard-boiled characters.

However, in spite of the changes in their personalities and approach to their newfound relationship, there is still a lot of affection shown between the two, categorised by Alfred’s willingness to help Bruce (although reluctant at first), and the jibes they make at the expense of the other. According to Kimmel: ‘Their bond is expressed in typical male fashion, in the little jibes that make it clear that affection is being expressed by other means.’ (Kimmel 2008, 167). While Bruce struggles to adapt, Alfred is a secure presence, not forcing Bruce to come to terms with what has happened too quickly, yet not adopting an excessively permissive parenting style. Although much of *Gotham* deviates from the source material, the one constant is the relationship Bruce and Alfred share. Although this Alfred is gruffer than what is usually presented in the comic books, the relationship is unchanged, ensuring that the way Bruce develops is largely the same.

While the accepted idea of Alfred is the gentile, aging butler, *Gotham* deviates from this, showing Alfred’s military history as a benefit to Bruce, channelling Bruce’s anger into various forms of combat. While this would serve as his early training for his role as Batman, it also acts as a form of therapy and a bonding experience. While Bruce grieves, so does Alfred, and the two have been forced together without warning.

Entirely unprepared to raise a child, Alfred uses this combat as a means of bonding, yet it also shows Bruce the rules and limitations that will be set. For the most part an authoritative parent (and certainly not displaying very much permissiveness in *Gotham*), Alfred creates defined rules, although Bruce regularly tests the boundaries. As an authoritative parent is high demandingness coupled with high responsiveness, these rules are reinforced again and again, eventually creating a strong, secure parental bond that Bruce would come to rely on in the future.

One of the most thought-provoking aspects of *Gotham* is the progression the father-son relationship displays, even over the course of the first season. Although Alfred is initially the reluctant father figure, frustrated by Bruce in many ways, he grows, adjusting to his new role. Similarly, Bruce grows, coming to terms with the loss of his parents while simultaneously getting to know Alfred on a level other than wealthy heir and Butler. It also gives the audience a newfound perspective on Alfred's role as a mentor for Batman. While the journey to Batman was gradual, *Gotham* hints that the role Alfred played was much more significant than that of the father figure. Instead, the progression was so gradual that Bruce becoming Batman seems like the obvious step rather than an unnatural ideal. While Alfred has certainly favoured an authoritative style of parenting, making him the only secure attachment in Bruce's life, the journey to Batman inherently allows some permissive moments. *Gotham* certainly focuses on the father-son relationship strongly, unapologetically making it obvious from the onset. While Bruce rebels in the beginning, he quickly finds a place in a family that allows him to move forward.

As Bruce grows within the series, he becomes more reliant on the skills Alfred taught him. Where season one showed an innate ability for Bruce to find himself in

difficult and dangerous situations, often in need of saving by Alfred or Jim Gordon, the later seasons show a more adept hero, someone who carefully calculates his next move, unwilling to put himself or anyone else in harm's way. Season one showed a young, vulnerable boy. His desire to help was obvious from the beginning, yet he did not truly know how. However, as he realises the benefit of Alfred's knowledge, and the benefit this combat training could have for Gotham City, Bruce becomes a more willing student, learning not just what physical skills Alfred could teach, but also what time and patience can achieve. Throughout the series Bruce comes to terms with his parents' deaths, and the knowledge that he will never have an answer. Without Alfred accompanying him on the journey, the outcome for Bruce would likely have been much darker. Alfred allowed Bruce to grieve, while his own grief went unacknowledged, allowing Bruce to become Gotham's greatest hero.

Nightwalker, on the other hand, explores the life of a young adult Bruce Wayne, and the struggle he and Alfred both experience as Bruce begins to explore the Batman identity, finding his feet as the masked vigilante. *Batman: Nightwalker* adds depth and intrigue to a well-known story, allowing the reader to see new aspects of the relationship between Bruce and Alfred that cannot be seen in the typical graphic narrative while removing the familiarity of the relationship between image and text. *Nightwalker* shows a teenaged Bruce beginning his journey to become Batman. From the onset much of the dialogue is between Bruce and his guardian, while much of the prose revolves around Bruce's thoughts and memories relating to Alfred, giving a new, unique perspective of a familiar story. As is typical with Batman's storylines, Alfred serves as the proverbial man in the chair. The first moment he is introduced shows the easy jesting between the two, yet it does not mask Alfred's very real concern about Bruce's safety.

In a scene where Bruce is driving too quickly, Alfred reminds him to slow down. Bruce, in turn, reminds him that: ‘You’re the one who taught me how to drive in the first place’ (Lu 2018, 10). The moment serves as a brief introduction to their relationship within the story, showing the reader the humour the two share. Yet the tone quickly changes as Bruce recognizes that Alfred is aging, and Bruce’s characteristic guilt shines through. As Lu puts it: ‘A few strands of white had started to streak Alfred’s hair over the past few years, and the crow’s feet [sic] lining the corners of his eyes had deepened. Bruce wondered if he was the reason for it. At the thought, he slowed down just a little’ (Lu 2018, 12). While Bruce is headstrong and defiant, he is so within reason, unwilling to cause his father figure too much grief. At the same time, the relationship Bruce has with Alfred is not presented in a way that suggests Bruce is replacing his own father. Instead they are presented as two men doing the same job but at different points in time. While remembering moments in his father’s life, Bruce’s grief is still extremely evident. ‘At the memory, Bruce’s hand tightened against the steering wheel. His father should be here, sitting in the passenger seat and observing the bats with him. But that, of course, was impossible’ (Lu 2018, 12). The security of his relationship with Alfred is clearly juxtaposed with his unfulfilled relationship with his father, ensuring that Bruce never truly recovers from the traumas of his past. This ties in with the research Bowlby undertook regarding loss and attachment:

Probably all of us today are keenly aware of the anxiety and distress that can be caused by separations from loved figures, of the deep and prolonged grief that can follow bereavement, and of the hazards to mental health that these events can constitute (Bowlby 2012, 99).

As Bruce thinks of his father his view of Gotham changes, remembering the glamour of the life the Wayne's had lived. Yet as a teenager Bruce is faced with the harsh realities of his corrupted city: 'With his parents at his side, he'd only seen the good' (Lu 2018, 12), yet even with Alfred raising him, the toxicity of the city was unavoidable for him. The moment Bruce's childhood ended – as his parents were murdered – signalled the end of Gotham as the secure base. Although Bruce often displays secure attachment, the notion of the secure base does not necessarily appear evident. In childhood the 'secure base support and supervision were investigated in an effort to understand the sensitivity-security link by identifying important domains of care that may impact the child's secure base behaviour organization' (Benson and Haith 2008, 38). Gotham itself remained largely the same after the Wayne's deaths, yet Bruce's relationship to it is the complex issue. While the city was as grim prior to his parents' deaths as it was after it, Bruce saw a version of the city that was better simply because his parents were there. After their deaths, the city changed, impacting Bruce's perception.

The references to Bruce's parents continue as the story progresses. With a charity gala reminiscent of Bruce's parents' glamorous functions on the horizon, Alfred struggles with his emotions, recognizing so much of Martha Wayne in her son. Yet these recognitions do not take away from Alfred's role as father figure, with Bruce referring to him as his guardian no fewer than eighteen times throughout the course of the novel. Because Alfred was, and remains, an involved parent the relationship they share is stronger than what would otherwise have been experienced. As said by Beaton et al:

We have argued that the large literature on father involvement supports the idea that more involved fathers are more active coparents. Studies also clearly

demonstrate a positive association between fathers' psychological well-being and their involvement with their children (Beaton et al 2013, 234).

Although in this case Alfred is the sole parent, the benefits remain the same.

Both Bruce and Alfred are secure at least some of the time, something that is particularly evident before Bruce dons the cowl. Much of Alfred's sense of security comes from his knowledge he prepared Bruce for life as Batman, although he may not have realised it at the time. While Bruce does not neatly fit into the category of secure attachment, he displays enough of the traits for Alfred to find security. According to Beaton et al: 'A father's sense of psychological well-being may also be connected to his family of origin experiences. Studies based on fathers' retrospective reports of childhood have shown how secure attachments for fathers are associated with securely attached infants' (Beaton et al 2013, 234). The relationship Bruce and Alfred share suggests this is a learned behaviour for Alfred, indicating that he had his own positive attachments that he can in turn pass on to Bruce. However, their attachment is not entirely down to parenting style, with much of the relationship being a product of Bruce's personality and temperament. Linking back to Bruce's complicated sense of attachment, this has influenced the relationship as much as Alfred's own attachment type: 'Recently, researchers have discovered how child factors play a pivotal role in influencing supportive coparenting. We suggest four areas that might be especially fruitful: gender, age, number of siblings, and child characteristics (e.g., temperament)' (Beaton et al 2013, 234-235). With Bruce's growing need to avenge his family, and the perpetual undercurrent of grief and survivors' guilt, there was only so much Alfred could do to cultivate a secure and loving father/son bond.

One of the most important aspects of the relationship shared between Bruce and Alfred is the sense of optimism it gives Bruce. As Langley puts it: 'Batman is, in his own way, oddly optimistic. He believes in love. He believes in warm, trusting

families who deserve better than to suffer at the whims of the dangerous minority’ (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 7). While the mugger who murdered his family appears to have taken everything away from him, there is certainly a great deal in Bruce’s life that is positive: ‘The mugger who taught him bloodshed adds to Bruce’s education about life without erasing the lessons his optimistic parents already imparted’ (Langley 2012, ch. 12, para. 7). In fact, although the murder of his parents certainly altered Bruce, impacting his ability to form meaningful relationships, his bond with Alfred is a beacon of hope from the night his parents died. Alfred was there before the mugger struck, and he remained long after. He created a safe place for Bruce in a time when the bloodshed he witnessed could have been even more consuming, damaging his perception of relationships, people, and even his city beyond repair. As it stands, Alfred was able to remind Bruce that there is still good in the world, that not everyone he meets will have the same negative intentions. As a result, Bruce searches for those positive relationships, although he often finds them in less desirable places. Much like Spider-Man, Batman finds father figures in those who do not serve his best interests, often finding himself as an enemy of those he once called friend, and those he once viewed as a father figure.

However, the one father figure he always returns to is Alfred. Alfred shaped Bruce into the man he became, and for better or worse Alfred remains the one constant in Bruce’s life. While Bruce is unable to maintain other relationships throughout his time as Batman, not even with those to whom he is a father figure, Alfred is the one with whom he has an unbreakable bond. While it would appear that Batman is the focal point of the family, the founder of Batman Inc., and the backbone of the family, Alfred Pennyworth is arguably the true patriarch of the family, the one person that

every member of the family relies on, and the person who gave a scared, orphaned child hope.

5.3.2 Batman, the Father Figure

While the relationship between Bruce and Alfred is iconic within the genre, Bruce himself acts as a father figure on many occasions. The Robin character has had various incarnations throughout Batman's extensive publication history. First introduced in 1940 (Finger, Fox 1940), shortly after Batman himself was introduced, Robin has been a staple in the world of Batman ever since. While some have had a more noteworthy relationship with Bruce than others – with Dick Grayson being the prime example – Bruce has acted as a father figure to many over the years. These relationships have been varied, with some meaning a great deal more to Bruce, and others having a more profound impact on the child. Although many relationships could be discussed here, the primary focus will be on Dick Grayson – Bruce's first surrogate son, Damian Wayne – the current Robin and Bruce's biological son, with a brief nod towards Jason Todd – the Robin who was arguably impacted the most by Bruce's own insecurities. While there have been other Robin characters – both male and female – Dick, Jason, and Damian have the most profound impact on Bruce as a father, and, indeed, Bruce has the most notable impact on them.

However, in spite of their skillset, there is an ethical question surrounding the role of Robin in Batman's life. While the dynamic duo is certainly iconic, is it acceptable? As DiGiovanna notes: 'But no matter how familiar and right it sounds, you may ask yourself: is it really okay for Batman to train a young boy to be Robin in order to send him out to fight dangerous criminals?' (DiGiovanna 2008, 17). However, the answer to this question is complicated. Given Bruce's own traumas, and the

traumas faced in their own lives, they each see parallels. Bruce is a father figure for them, regardless of whether or not they believed they were searching for one. More complicated still is the fact that Bruce does not seek these characters out. In the majority of cases these characters come to him.

‘Batman never sets out to recruit any partner. The partners each want to work with him. Each has been a youngster who already possess the skills to combat or commit crimes, along with a personal grievance against evildoers.’ (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 1) (Fig. 29).

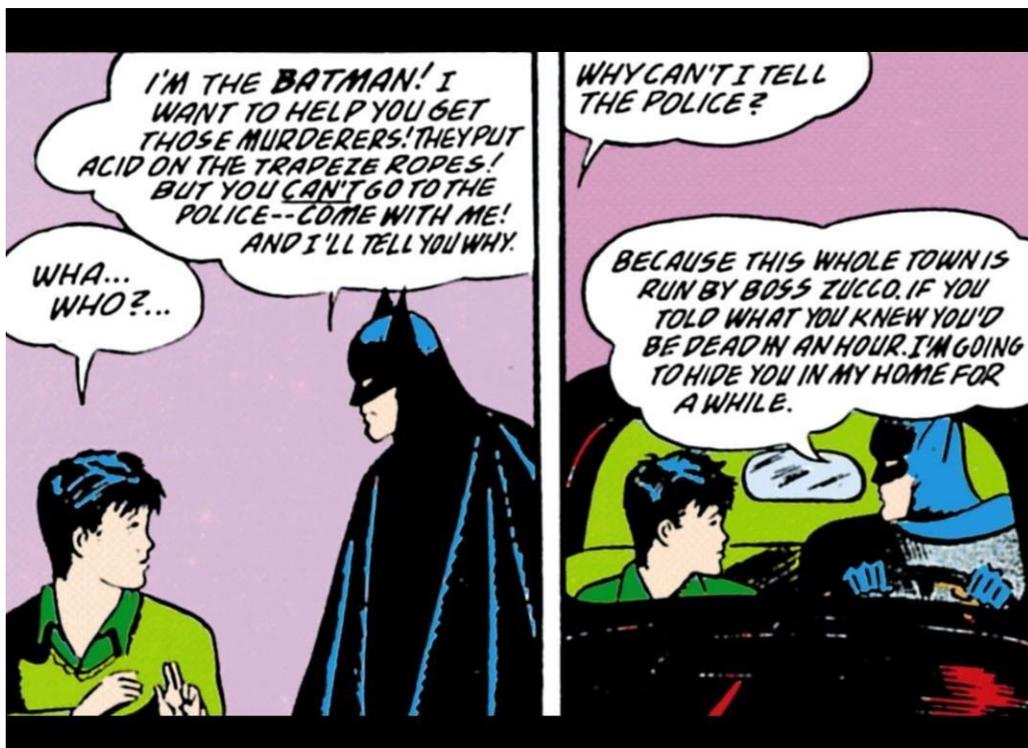


Fig. 29 Bruce becomes an unwitting father figure, Finger, Fox 1940 © DC Comics

Batman seeks vengeance, and as a result he finds himself with sidekicks who are destined to follow the same path, at least initially. While some Robin characters maintain that need for vengeance, Dick Grayson does not. He wants revenge on the person who cost him his family but is not consumed in his quest for vengeance in the same manner as Bruce.

Dick has been a regular feature in Batman comic books for decades, becoming enough of a hero in his own right to headline his own series on several occasions, particularly after he steps away from the Robin persona, adopting a new name - Nightwing. His origin came about because of Batman writer Bill Finger. As Langley discusses:

The original answer to “Why Robin?” is that Bill Finger quickly tired of writing Batman’s thought balloons. He wanted Batman to talk. Whenever he works alone, Batman is silent and more violent. Short on candid interactions with others, he can seem as distant to readers as he does to the criminals he intimidates. The alternative, revealing all his thoughts and feelings through thought balloons, can expose the mystery man too much. A partner provides the balance to reveal his nature as needed while still maintaining his mystique (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 2).

Because the comic books were originally targeted towards young boys, it made sense to have Batman’s partner be a young boy, someone the reader could relate to. Named as an homage to Robin Hood to give the reader a sense of heroism from the onset, Robin as a person’s name implies humanity rather than superpowers (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 3). However, in spite of his humble beginnings as a sounding board for Batman, the character of Dick Grayson became an icon in his own right.

The death of Dick Grayson’s parents echoes the traumas faced by Bruce, making Dick the natural choice for a sidekick (Fig. 30). His acrobatic skillset further cemented this. Yet Grayson came from humble beginnings, an acrobat in a travelling circus. However, His origin story echoes Bruce’s own, yet what followed highlighted their differences. His parents, like Bruce’s were murdered in front of him, sabotaged in a trapeze stunt:

In *Detective Comics #38*, to intimidate a circus owner into paying protection money, gangsters tamper with trapeze ropes so they'll break during acrobats John and Mary Grayson's "death-defying" triple spin. The Flying Grayson's plunge to their deaths before the collective eyes of their son, Dick, that night's entire audience, which happens to include Bruce Wayne (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 4).



Fig. 30 The similarities in origin story are clear, Finger, Fox 1940 © DC Comics

Where Alfred took Bruce and became his father figure. Bruce did the same for Grayson, undoubtedly seeing so many of the similarities in their stories. However, where Alfred was largely an authoritative father figure, with bouts of acting as a permissive figure, Bruce struggled with his role as a father, generally being an authoritarian father. In their first outings as superhero and sidekick the relationship

between Bruce and Dick seems to be that of an authoritative figure. However, through the years, as the storylines returned to the dark, grim tales they were in the beginning, that relationship changed. Bruce progressed to become high on demandingness, low on responsiveness. He expected great things from Dick from a young age, without offering support in the way Alfred did. In fact, much of the support that Dick receives comes from Alfred. Bruce is avoidant here, unwilling or unable to put himself in a position of vulnerability, even for a child who is in the same situation he found himself in as a child.

One of the most notable differences between Bruce and Dick is their humour. Where the loss of his family made Bruce resistant to people, seemingly afraid of his own happiness and suffering greatly from survivors' guilt, Dick retains his sense of humour, perhaps using it as a defence mechanism. Unlike Bruce, Dick aims to find the humour in every situation, often using his quick wit in the midst of violent battles with Gotham City's various supervillains. It is likely that the relationship Dick had with his parents before their death is a contributing factor to this. Although their relationship is not explored in the same way Bruce's is, the reader can piece together the type of relationship they had based on Dick's memories of it. It is likely that Dick had a secure relationship with his parents, akin to the relationship Barry Allen had with his mother, allowing him a certain amount of security in his later life. Similarly, Dick does not seek out other parental figures, secure in the relationship he had with his biological parents, and content in the relationship he has created with Bruce, Alfred, and even subsequent Robin characters. Like Barry, the loss of his parents impacted Dick greatly, but it did not take away from his ability to grieve and move on. This suggests that the relationship Bruce had with his own parents was perhaps less secure, indicating that his parents were less present in the relationship than Dick's. Another reason Dick

maintains his jovial personality is the sense of closure he is given. While Bruce may not seek these youngsters out, he also does not completely discourage them from using their abilities to aid him. Initially he is reluctant to have Dick join him; however, he also does not take much persuading, in true comic book fashion. They come to an agreement in just a few sentences, seeming to have everything suddenly figured out. Batman has a vendetta against the criminals of Gotham city, and the Robin characters each possess a skillset that he can hone to aid him in his quest, seldom stopping to think about the morality of what he is doing. In fact, this is noted in *Detective Comics* #38, when Bruce is training Dick: ‘Training progresses quickly for the boy, who has been doing acrobatics since he was four years old, with Bruce acknowledging that Dick “could probably teach me a thing or two,”’ (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 5). Like Batman, Robin has an urge to fight on the side of righteousness, given the fate of his family. However, unlike the Wayne’s, the Grayson’s get justice, thanks to Batman and Robin. This closure is something that allows Dick to move on in a way Bruce never could, ensuring that his jovial personality remained. The introduction of the young hero drastically changed the tone of the comic books, with his vibrantly coloured costume in stark contrast to Batman’s own all black ensemble.

In spite of the authoritative, distant parent that Dick found himself with, his own relationship type is surprisingly secure. Having many romantic relationships throughout the years, Dick is secure, not craving attachment as an anxious attachment type would, nor is he avoidant. Instead Dick has one of the most secure approaches to relationships of all the characters discussed in this thesis. This is seen in both his relationship with Barbara Gordon (Batgirl) and Koriandr (Starfire)². While this thesis

² Dick Grayson was in a relationship with Starfire when he was a member of the Teen Titans, and has a longstanding but inconsistent relationship with Batgirl.

will not explore their relationships in depth it is important to note the ease with which Dick cultivates these relationships, yet how secure he is in these relationships that they are not something he forces.

However, the relationship between Bruce and Dick has had its own controversies. In the 1950s concerns were raised about the representation of their relationship and suggestions of paedophilia (Langley 2012, ch. 10). Issues were raised with panels where the two were depicted in a bed together, or other equally questionable scenes, raising concerns about not just Dick Grayson, but all the sidekicks that had followed. The exploitation of young characters within the stories had suddenly become a point of serious debate:

Through the 1950s, the sidekicks appear less frequently, whether because superhero comics in general had lost some of their popularity or because psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* with its insinuations about Batman and Robin's lifestyle raised questions of pedophilia [sic] in readers' minds regarding all these superheroes and their young wards (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 8).

As a result, the characters were separated, with Robin teaming up with other heroes, and Batman becoming a largely solo hero once again. The dynamic has shifted and will never be the same again. The relationship has gone through a number of transformations, leaving Bruce and Dick at odds with each other. Dick has outgrown his role as Bruce's sidekick and ward in the wake of the criticisms surrounding their portrayal. Instead, the characters go their separate ways. In some iterations there is conflict, in others they are family, with Dick Grayson as the child grown now, and Bruce as the proud father. Regardless of the particular story arc, the result is the same. Dick Grayson cannot survive in the shadow of a father figure like Bruce Wayne. There

are many inequalities in their relationship. Bruce is more prone to violence and anger, less secure in his relationships.

Dick, in spite of his similar circumstances, is primarily secure in his attachments, yet is willing to take a step back when necessary. Dick is as skilled as Bruce, yet he seldom resorts to the same level of violence as Batman. Where Bruce is domineering, used to getting his own way, Dick is more free-spirited and adaptable, perfectly suited to a life as a hero, but not a life as a sidekick. Initially content to take the Robin persona on a different trajectory, Dick eventually sheds the title permanently, embracing a new identity that is entirely separate from Bruce Wayne, in turn freeing him from Bruce's personal vendetta's and insecurities. The difference in their attachment style is primarily the reason for the rift within the comic books, with Dick eventually unable to contend with Bruce's stoic nature and unwillingness to connect. While Bruce could easily connect with Alfred, part of that is due to Alfred's willingness to adapt to his adoptive son's ways. Dick, on the other hand, is unwilling to change further.

And so Dick, now known as Nightwing, leaves for his solo adventures, always knowing that Wayne Manor, Bruce, and Alfred are there should he need them, but are not preventing him from reaching his full potential: 'As Nightwing, Dick Grayson is a strong and popular character, fighting crime without the burden of Batman's darkness – in many ways, Bruce Wayne's hopes fulfilled.' (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 11). Nightwing is the embodiment of all the things Bruce could never be. Nightwing is free of the burden of guilt, not trapped by the lack of closure. Nightwing is not held prisoner by the night his parents died because a system failed him. Perhaps if there had been a Batman to take Bruce Wayne under his wing the same could be said of him.

Perhaps closure would have allowed Bruce to finally feel free. Instead, he looks at Dick as the person he could never become.

After the departure of Dick Grayson as Robin, sometime after the controversy surrounding Wertham's reading of the relationship several other Robin characters were introduced. The most recent character to don the mantle of Robin is Damian Wayne, Bruce Wayne's own son. Born into the League of Assassins, Damian is a complicated character from the onset. This unusual upbringing gives Damian a warped sense of justice, something that is startlingly clear when he is introduced to the comic books. Sent by his mother to live with Bruce, Damian favours a much more violent approach to crime fighting. For him it is a case of kill or be killed. There were no second chances in the league of assassins: 'Damian is a deadly little boy. He kills – in fact, beheads – a criminal called the spook and nearly kills Tim because that's how they did things in the League of Assassins' (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 29). Tim Drake was Robin at the time Damian was introduced. From the moment Damian arrived he and Tim were mistrustful of each other. This comes to the fore when Damian attempts to kill Tim in order to take his place as Robin. 'We showed our enemies no mercy. Now that I'm here he doesn't need a surrogate. We killed anyone who got in our way.' (Morrison et al 2014). Damian is willing and able to dispense with anyone he feels is taking his place, making him an incredible complex character, and the antithesis of Dick Grayson (Fig. 31).



Fig. 31 Damian Wayne is introduced, Morrison et al 2014 © DC Comics

Damian is everything Dick is not – aggressive, conniving, vengeful. Damian is certainly the most complex Robin character, the one who grows most as a character. Yet he also highlights the complexity of Batman’s own character, Where Dick lightened the tone of the comics, changing the way Batman behaved as a vigilante, Damian serves to return the comics to their original, darker themes. While there was a large point of Batman’s history where killing was not an option, Damian’s introduction calls this into question, harking back to the original story arcs. While the original Batman story arcs featured guns, murder, and dark plots, the more modern incarnations beginning with Christopher Nolan’s film trilogy (Nolan 2005) refuses to kill. However, Damian is an assassin, trained to kill his enemies, causing friction in the Wayne household.

When Damian arrives on the scene, he does not immediately become Robin. However, when Bruce Wayne disappears, Dick dons the cowl, becoming Batman with Damian as his Robin: ‘During a period when people think Bruce is dead, Dick becomes Batman, 10-year-old Damian becomes Robin, and roles get reversed, with a more upbeat Batman leading a dark little Robin’ (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 29). Again, this alters the tone of the comic, showcasing what Batman could have been had he not been so consumed by his grief. However, it is not as fulfilling a relationship for Damian. While Damian is a trained assassin, he is still a young boy craving the attention and approval of his father. His goal is to become the Robin to Bruce Wayne’s Batman (although he works well with Grayson, not viewing him as a threat in the same way he does Tim). As he trains with Bruce, he adapts to life in Gotham City, gaining a new perspective on what justice is. He eventually learns not to kill, instead following the (often flawed) justice system of Gotham: ‘Loath as Damian is to admit any weakness, he pines for his father’s attention. When Bruce returns to Gotham, the time comes for Batman and son to fight crime together, with Batman in the position of needing to temper both himself and his newest Robin’ (Langley 2012, ch. 10, para. 29). Bruce learns as much from Damian as Damian does from him. They grow together, informing each other’s decisions, becoming better heroes because of it.

While the surrogate relationships Bruce has in the interim impact him in many ways, the relationships between Bruce and Dick, and Bruce and Damian highlight the progression of the character. He is no longer an entirely selfish being. Instead he is willing to put his son first, not immediately accepting him as Robin. Although Damian is determined to become the next Robin, with his resentment of the other characters evident (although the relationship between Dick and Damian does change). Like Dick, Bruce did not seek Damian out, however he was more reluctant to put him in harm’s

way, having learned harsh lessons from his previous sidekicks. Because of Damian's upbringing, Bruce's original approach to parenting would be ineffective. Damian displays avoidant (although he does have both fearful and anxious tendencies) attachment, having had a largely authoritarian and even neglectful upbringing. With Damian's early parental influences including his mother – an assassin, and his grandfather -Ra's al Ghul – the head of the League of Assassins – it is unsurprising that Damian has developed a wariness of other people.

While Damian has traits that are from three attachment categories, the primary attachment type he displays is avoidant. Much like Tony Stark, Damian avoids displays of emotion, preferring to keep even his closest friends at a distance. However, much like Peter Parker, Damian also craves stable relationships, but is unable to cultivate these relationships in a way that would create security in his life. In terms of the fearful aspects of his personality, Damian views himself as somewhat removed from those around him, often viewing his peers as beneath him. While those with fearful attachment often have a negative view of the self and of other people (as noted in chapter one), Damian has a somewhat inflated sense of pride in himself, he views the majority of people he comes into contact with as being beneath him, unable to match him in skill or experience. While characters like Dick Grayson and Tim Drake match his skill level, it takes Damian an excessive amount of time to trust them, nonetheless. Where his anxious tendencies are particularly obvious are in his need to have Bruce's approval, no matter the cost. The relationship Bruce develops with his son highlights his growth as a person, not just as a superhero. Finally able to show affection and accept it in return, Bruce has become the version of himself that was

hinted at throughout his publication history. Still a complex character with many issues that cannot be solved by Damian's arrival, Bruce nevertheless has grown as a person.

Although Batman has acted like a father figure to many, one person refuses to join his band of renegades. One of the family members living outside the immediate circle is Kate Kane, also known as Batwoman. Unlike the majority of the other ensemble characters, Kate was not raised by Bruce, nor does she view him as being particularly significant. However, like Bruce, Batwoman's heroism stems from an origin of trauma. She chooses to live on the fringes of the collective, there only in name, but not truly part of it, because that is where she is most successful as a hero. Although Bruce attempted to recruit her for Batman Inc., she remains a solo hero, a member of the family by name alone. However, while she is not directly a member of the collective, her own family relationships are complicated, as is the trend with the Dark Knight and his comrades. Kate, a wealthy socialite by day, is plagued by a tragic history. Both her mother and her twin sister were murdered in front of her by a crazed supervillain, while she was left alive. Like Bruce, she donned the persona that was expected of her – the wild socialite, familiar with the part scene in Gotham City. Yet in reality she uses her family wealth to be Gotham City's protector, again echoing Bruce's story. Unlike Bruce, Kate trained in the military, before being discharged under the army's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. Although she had many incarnations before this point: 'her back story was rewritten to depict her expulsion from West Point as an infraction of Don't Ask, Don't Tell' (Race 2013, 53).

While angered by her dismissal, she uses the skills she gained in the military to aid her vigilante justice. She is one of the few openly LGBTQ+ superheroes to headline her own series in one of the major publishing houses, and certainly impacts

her journey as Batwoman. As Race discusses: ‘Although Batwoman was originally introduced as a vehicle for heteronormative matrimony, she was selected in 2006 to be reinvented as a lesbian. By this point, the fervor surrounding homosexuality had settled to a dull roar. The announcement went largely unnoticed and the previously vocal conservative groups stayed quiet’ (Race 2013, 52). Although her story has been updated, and generally accepted, it is not without its controversy, with her writers, J.H. Williams and W. Haden Blackman, leaving in the middle of her series because DC made changes to the character, and would not allow same sex marriage to be depicted (Williams, Blackman 2013). However, it is not just behind the scenes that Batwoman faced controversy and strife.

Her relationship with her father, Jacob Kane, is the only obvious paternal relationship she has, although it becomes increasingly complicated as the story arcs progress. Her father has played a pivotal role in her journey as a hero, with Kate showing him her secret identity almost from the moment she donned the cowl. There is an undercurrent of trust in their relationship that is clear in their interactions, something that seemed unshakeable until the New 52 line-up. From the beginning of *Batwoman: Hydrology* (Williams and Blackman 2012), Kate is not on speaking terms with her father, in spite of a historically healthy and close relationship between the two. The reason for this is slowly made clear – Kate’s sister was alive, turned into a supervillain by her captors, eventually returning to Gotham to destroy it. For Kate, the betrayal was more than she could bear, made infinitely worse by the fact that she, as Batwoman, had to defend the city and stop her sister, no matter the cost. While earlier Batwoman story arcs featured the relationship Kate had with her father before their rift, *Hydrology* shows the fallout of a supposedly secure relationship after Jacob’s betrayal.

While their relationship was secure, that is not to say that Kate's other personal relationships display these traits. In her romantic relationships Kate borders on an avoidant attachment style, frequently finding difficulty in expressing her emotions and confiding in her partner. While much of this is to do with her secret identity, it is made even more complicated by the sudden friction in her relationship with her father, as well as the traumas she faced in her past. Like Batman, Batwoman is shaped by the murder of her family, raised by a father who adopted a parenting style that bordered both authoritative and permissive parenting, not unlike Alfred. However, the security she had in that relationship is taken away. The fallout of this is not unlike what would happen if Bruce discovered Alfred had been indirectly responsible for the death of his parents. Kate's feelings are complex, and as her story progresses her perspective on their relationship continues to change. What had once been a secure attachment type seems to devolve into an avoidant relationship: 'Insecure avoidant [attachments]... typically do not greet the [parent] during reunions.' (Benson, Haith 2009, 307). Where Jacob had been her closest confidant, he no longer remains a constant part of her life, something that impacts the other relationships she forms in her life, reinforcing that insecure attachment.

Batwoman consistently carves out her own path, distancing herself from the male driven narratives that came before her. She even goes so far as to distance herself from her father, as she deems fit. Like the majority of female heroes, her name and legacy are derived from a male hero, forcing her to establish herself as a hero in her own right. While throughout the series Batman attempts to recruit Batwoman, she refuses to be forced to join Batman Inc., nor does she wish to have someone else determine what she can or cannot do as a hero. As Jorgensen and Lechan put it: 'Females do not rely on male counterparts or romantic partners for their emotional

well-being, but rather gain power through personal effort' (Jorgensen and Lechan 2013, 278). In spite of wearing Batman's logo on her suit, Batwoman is a distinct heroine, unencumbered by the rules Batman enforces. She has become a hero, separate from Batman and his cohorts through her own volition, unwilling to be identified as simply another part of Batman's team: 'Female characters should not identify themselves by their relationships to another person but rather by their own traits... Instead of being a victim of circumstances and the actions of other characters, the female protagonists are active in the decision making and the plotting of the story' (Jorgensen and Lechan 2013, 279). Batwoman is not complicit in her dehumanisation, instead forcing the reader to see her not as an extension of Batman, but as her own being. Nor is she seen as defined by her relationship with her father. While the relationship between Kate and Jacob is impactful, it is not all consuming, failing to define her in her role as Batwoman. Although the complicated relationship they have continues to impact her, it never changes the hero she is.

5.4 Conclusion

While each of these heroes are wildly different, some having a recruitment agency, others having great wealth, and some simply having tenacity, they are each impacted by a largely the same factors. The paternal relationship and socio-economic circumstances are the driving forces in each of their narratives, creating heroes that are wildly different on the surface, but at their core display many of the same traits. The majority of these heroes' search for a father figure, often finding them in the wrong places. Others struggle to break away from the negative circumstances that make them a hero. Yet each character has an adaptable personality, with their

attachment type changing as they develop, generally for the better. Nevertheless, the most important aspects of their heroes' journey is the search for a father figure that can create the bond they have been missing, even if it means choosing the wrong father figures.

Chapter Six: Childhood Trauma and the Development and Portrayal of Mental Illness in the Incredible Hulk

6.1 Introduction

The impact of a negative parental relationship can be a complex thing in the world of comic books. Many heroes develop their desire for heroism based on the morality instilled in them by one or both of their parents or guardians. Yet for others, the relationship can be so complex and damaging that their heroism becomes an act of defiance. The parental relationship (including biological and adoptive parents), while generally positive, encouraging, and safe, is not that way for every hero. Some heroes are so damaged by their parental relationship that being a hero – or perhaps more accurately an anti-hero -, and protecting others becomes the only form of solace available to them. The Incredible Hulk³ has been negatively impacted by the paternal relationship. The Hulk can be seen as a visual representation of mental illness caused by a childhood filled with trauma and abuse.

This chapter aims to explore the impact of the parent-child relationship on both the mental and physical wellbeing of the child, and the need they have to become a hero as an act of rebellion. While the previous heroes have been impacted mentally by the parent-child relationship, the Hulk differs somewhat due to the duality of the identity, a physical as well as mental representation of that relationship. A hero's morality and motivations are generally complex, regardless of that parental relationship model. Adding such a complicated relationship, and such a significant fallout to that relationship adds another layer of complexity to the hero's journey. In

³ Originally published in 1962 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

the case of Cyborg (Chapter Seven) and the Hulk, their disability is directly related to their parental relationships, meaning their autonomy and identity are never truly their own. This chapter will discuss the development of the hero in relation to a negative paternal relationship, as well as the representation of illness in a strongly ableist medium. For both the Incredible Hulk and Cyborg their disability becomes their biggest strength.

6.2 The Hulk as a Physical Manifestation of Mental Illness Borne from Childhood Trauma

Since his debut in the early 1960s, the Incredible Hulk has been one of Marvel Comics' most recognisable heroes, in part due to his distinctive green hue and formidable size. His popularity has been helped in recent years by the growth of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Yet the early, pre-Hulk days of his alter ego - Bruce Banner- are seldom explored, either in print or on screen. While in many adaptations it is considered common knowledge that Bruce Banner had a turbulent relationship with his father, this relationship is never fully explored, nor is it discussed in relation to the Hulk. The challenging father-son relationship is often alluded to, rather than overtly stated, particularly in later incarnations where knowledge of the origin story is assumed. For the purposes of this chapter, because of the changes in later incarnations, the original series will be used to discuss the origin and development of the Hulk. For clarity, it will be specifically issue #312 (Mantlo and Mignola 2016) as the origin story of the Hulk, although other issues will be discussed to corroborate the findings in this chapter, as has been done in previous chapters. By doing this, the chapter will highlight many of the fundamental issues in the paternal relationship within the comic books.

The Hulk as he is presented within the MCU will also be discussed, drawing a comparison between their representations. The Hulk is seen as having no connection to Bruce's father, seemingly coming into existence after the family relationship has devolved and is beyond repair.

The Hulk's story arcs also largely fail to reconcile the relationship between Bruce Banner and the Hulk, often treating them as extensions of the same person, rather than two separate identities. This is particularly prominent when Bruce and the Hulk interact with other characters, most notably Bruce's mother within the comic books, Black Widow in the live action incarnation, and Betty Ross in both adaptations. Bruce is feared because the Hulk is unpredictable. When Bruce is engaging with other characters there is a subtle undercurrent of fear linking back to the Hulk, never separating their identities, in spite of their very different personalities. On the occasions that they are not viewed as the same person, the Hulk is largely viewed as a mindless, uncontrollable, mysterious entity, fuelled purely by rage, devoid of any other discernible emotion. He is certainly not viewed as human, nor as having the same rights as Bruce, referred to as 'the other guy' or 'the big guy' within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, dehumanising him further.

For the purposes of this thesis they will be treated as two separate and distinct identities; Bruce Banner, the troubled scientist, and the Hulk, the misunderstood hero. The Hulk is often depicted as having inferior intelligence or self-control, being entirely controlled by his basic, primal instinct, and considered to be nothing more than a giant green monster fuelled by rage. However, there is certainly more to him than meets the eye, as is evident in many of his more recent comic book story arcs, as well as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, most notably Taika Waititi's *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi 2017), and Anthony and Joe Russo's *Avengers: Infinity War*, which will be discussed

further below. Many origin stories depict the Hulk as a character who originates when Bruce is an adult, due to exposure to Gamma radiation. However, *The Incredible Hulk #312* shows that the identity of the Hulk, but not the physical form, may have been there since Banner's childhood. This notion will form the basis of this chapter, asserting that the Hulk identity and the Banner identity are equal, co-existing personas, in a way other superheroes are not. While characters like Batman or Spider-Man have their differing personas, they are not separate identities co-existing. Rather, they are an extension of the same identity.

The analysis of the parent-child relationship becomes more complicated when discussing the Hulk, largely due to his supposed absence during Bruce's childhood. The Hulk, although visible in childhood in the issues discussed in this chapter, there is no interaction between the Hulk and the Banner family, creating a complexity in the attachment type the Hulk will eventually develop. Although the relationship between Bruce and his family usually fits the standard parenting models, albeit as a complicated and damaging relationship, the relationship the Hulk shares is second-hand. He never shared an emotional bond with either parent, and therefore the impact of the relationship is different. While he may have had a certain connection with them, based purely on proximity, they never knowingly interacted with the Hulk. Without a direct relationship, Hulk fits neither within Bowlby's theories nor in Baumrind's the same way the other characters within this thesis do. While the majority of characters within this thesis fit neatly into one of Bowlby's four types of attachment, or Baumrind's parenting styles, as detailed in chapter one, the Hulk is more complex, with his relationships adapting and changing throughout the life of the character. This itself helps create a complicated identity. The fact that Hulk has no parental bond of his own means that, while there is still clearly an impact, it becomes harder to unravel. The

identity of the child, and eventually the adult is influenced in a myriad of ways by the parent-child relationship. When the Hulk is present during childhood, he is in the background, protecting Bruce but not interacting with anyone himself. Therefore, he lacks the social influences of a typical child. His personality has to adapt to Bruce's trickledown emotions as a result. Whatever emotions Bruce is experiencing, Hulk experiences on another level, without the ability to express them. The emotions that Bruce cannot or will not face are passed to Hulk, undoubtedly leading to the raw anger he is known for in his early adaptations. An unhappy childhood meant that

Bruce's dominant emotions were anger and sadness throughout his childhood, meaning the Hulk felt these without any means of processing them. These fraught emotions are largely due to the negativity of his father. Raised by an abusive father with severe alcohol dependency, and the knowledge that he was viewed as a monster, the paternal relationship is complicated and damaging from the onset.⁴ These emotions were, for the most part, the only emotions that Hulk was exposed to. As a result of this, he lacks the capacity to cope with emotion in general. According to Sayers:

Emotionally, the Hulk persona originated from Bruce's abusive relationship with his alcoholic father, Brian Banner. As an adolescent, Bruce imagined the Hulk character to console the mistreated youth with the promise that "the Hulk will smash them all" (Sayers 2006, 89).

This creates a complex narrative and identity for both Bruce and Hulk from a very early age.

⁴ Seen throughout the 1962-1999 series, it is particularly evident in #312 when Bruce's childhood is discussed.

This chapter will explore the childhood of Bruce Banner and the profound impact it had both on the character of Bruce and on the creation and development of the Hulk identity. The Hulk will be viewed here as a metaphor for mental health. While physical disabilities are not unseen within comic books and are occasionally tied to the parent-child relationship, as is the case with Cyborg or even Daredevil, mental illness seldom has the same ability to be explored through image. Mental illness cannot generally be represented the same way a physical disability can be, yet the Hulk stands as a visual metaphor here for mental health issues created by the neglectful parenting model. The Hulk will be viewed as a physical manifestation of mental illness, serving as that visual representation. This section will explore the relationship between childhood trauma and the development of cognitive or psychological disorders. Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is a complex branch of mental health, categorised by: ‘disturbances of memory and identity..., the on-going coexistence of consistent...separate identities’ (Kluft 1996). Banner and the Hulk perfectly encapsulate the notion of separate yet co-existing identities. The parent-child relationship is to the fore here, with Banner’s childhood trauma directly influencing the Hulk’s own identity. Both Bowlby and Baumrind’s theories are applicable here, showing the crossover between familial bonds and mental health. Yet DID is not the only mental disorder that the Hulk can be seen as a metaphor for. With frequent outbursts and an uncontrollable rage, the Hulk can be seen as a metaphor for Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED), which is characterised by unpredictable bouts of rage (Mayo Clinic 2018). While Bruce Banner is generally portrayed as mild mannered and softly spoken, the Hulk is entirely controlled by rage. As soon as Bruce feels any rage, the Hulk takes over. This chapter will explore why the Hulk persona

was created, and how it eventually became a metaphor for mental illness, as well as how the Hulk can fit into the broad definitions for each illness.

6.2 .1 The Hulk as a Physical Manifestation of Dissociative Identity Disorder

'Dissociative disorders are characterized by the disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control and behaviour' (American Psychiatric Association 2013). DID is a complex disorder, often not recognised within the medical community⁵ (The Scope 2019), largely due to the difficulties surrounding diagnosis or beliefs that it is another form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Sinason 2011). Dissociative disorders can develop in response to trauma in order to keep difficult memories at bay. DID is 'characterized by a) the presence of two or more distinct personality states or an experience of possession and b) recurrent episodes of amnesia (American Psychiatric Association 2013). DID specifically is characterised by switching to alternate personalities or identities. Those with DID may 'experience discontinuities in identity and memory that may not be immediately evident to others or are obscured by attempts to hide dysfunction. The dissociation between these identities is more distinct than other illnesses that present in a similar fashion, such as schizophrenia, although there are some similarities in the diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

⁵ As discussed in an interview by Dr Jason Hunziker for The Scope, University of Utah.

Those with dissociative identity disorder experience: ‘a) recurrent, inexplicable intrusions into their conscious functioning and sense of self...b) alterations of sense of self...c) odd changes of perception’ (American Psychiatric Association 2013). This can include voices, dissociated actions, speech, intrusive thoughts, emotions and impulses. One of the most distinct characteristics of DID (formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder) is the fact that each identity can have a unique name and personal history, and even unique physical attributes such as a change in voice or the need for glasses.

‘DID was called multiple personality disorder up until 1994, when the name was changed to reflect a better understanding of the condition – namely, that it is characterized by a fragmentation or splintering of the identity, rather than by a proliferation or growth of separate identities’ (Psychology Today 2019). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) highlights the possibility of diagnostic variations dependent on culture and circumstance (American Psychiatric Association 2013). When diagnosing DID there are five criteria that should be met. According to DSM-5 these are:

- (i) Disruption of identity: two or more distinct personality states;
- (ii) Recurrent memory gaps in everyday events or personal information;
- (iii) clinically significant distress or impairment in various areas of your lives;
- (iv) disturbance that is not the cultural norm;
- (v) symptoms that are not attributed to other illness or substances (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

This chapter will explore the ways the Hulk and Bruce Banner fit these criteria in print and on screen.

Although Bruce Banner may represent many stereotypes of Western culture, his circumstances do not fit the norm. On a superficial level he is part of the nuclear family, however his life is far from idyllic. DID and other dissociative disorders 'are frequently found in the aftermath of trauma' (American Psychiatric Association 2013), something Bruce faces not just in his adult life, but throughout his childhood too. These traumas begin with an abusive father, and the loss of his mother, and continue into adulthood when he is damaged by gamma radiation and transformed into the Hulk. Even after the manifestation of the Hulk, Bruce faces traumas. However, these traumas are shared more by the Hulk. Part of the burden of these traumas is taken on by the Hulk⁶. While there are many perspectives and opinions on DID, this chapter will focus specifically on the most widely accepted interpretations of the illness, including the hyperbolised Hollywood interpretation. While this may not be the most medically accepted notion, it is the version of the illness that is most recognisable, and that is most fitting to the more extranormal elements of the Hulk's character. The exaggerated nature of the illness, showing distinct transformations rather than a slow shift in identities is seen time and again in film, most notably in the film *Sybil* (Petrie Sr. 1976)-starring Sally Field as a woman presenting with multiple violent identities-, is one of the earliest and most recognisable interpretations of DID. Similarly *Split* (Shyamalan 2016) has created a warped, extreme view of what DID is, with the name of the original identity acting as a magic word to keep other identities at bay, and incredible physical transformations are seen regularly. Misinformation and exaggerations such as this, while damaging to those with DID, have helped create this mass perspective on the nature of the disorder. This perspective creates a recognisable

⁶ Seen in Issue #1 (1961) and again in #312.

diagnosis for the Hulk. While the nature of comic books means that the criteria are taken to extremes, the Hulk fits into the Hollywood version, and even the clinical version of DID.

The impact of DID is widespread throughout a person's life. It impinges on every facet of their being, from an association with other mental health problems, to an inability to form or sustain meaningful relationships (American Psychiatric Association 2013). This is seen in many of the Hulk's story arcs and is equally true in the *Avengers* film series. Due to the complexity of the disorder, diagnosis is considered unreliable, and therefore much of the information currently available argues its very existence. Much of the literature argues that it is not solely childhood trauma that causes DID, and that childhood cases are not reliably reported (Piper and Merskey 2004, 592). This section will argue that the identity of the Hulk existed in some form since birth due to the excessive trauma combined with Bruce's altered DNA, but the identities diverged due to the abuse faced in early childhood. Bruce Banner and the Hulk, much like the protagonists *Sybil* and *Split*, display incredible transformations when dormant identities come to the fore. *Split* details one of the most ambitious, yet complex and troubling adaptations of DID in recent years, while *Sybil* serves as the bedrock for these adaptations. However, both also highlight the complexities of life for the identities that are not the primary identity, something which is only recently being explored in the Hulk's storylines. The physical and mental wellbeing of each identity is explored through psychotherapy in *Split*, while *Sybil* also diagnoses DID through extensive therapy. On the other hand, the identity of the Hulk is seldom considered beyond being adept at causing wanton destruction at a moment's notice. The Hulk has certainly not been given the same level of consideration as Bruce. The

violent way in which the physical presence of the Hulk developed may be, in part, responsible for this.

The opening panels of *The Incredible Hulk #312* (Mantlo, Mignola 2016) depict a time of great stress in the lives of the Banner family – the birth of Bruce. Both the image and the text work together to create the tension within the family from the onset. While Bruce has yet to appear within the panels, the relationship he shares with his father is already cemented. Brian Banner makes it clear that he does not want a child, and that Bruce's existence is nothing more than an inconvenience to him, so extreme that he is willing to risk the life of his child before Bruce is even born (Fig. 32).



Fig. 32 Brian's disdain for his child is clear, Mantlo, Mignola 2016, © Marvel Comics

Where he believes his unborn child may endanger his wife's life, Brian Banner is willing to sacrifice Bruce, although there is nothing in the panels to indicate that his wife is in mortal danger. Although the panels highlight the difficult labour, it is not so dangerous to give the hospital staff reason for concern. There is an element of fear early in the panels that foreshadows everything yet to come. Before Bruce himself appears in the panels there is an antagonistic atmosphere directed towards him. There

is an unprecedented level of hatred towards him, a misguided attempt by his father to hide fear. The relationship father and son share here is complicated, with Brian Banner believing his work with atoms somehow damaged his cell structure, contributing to the difficulties faced by his wife in childbirth. Rather than confronting these fears he turned his anger on Bruce, creating a toxic environment from the onset. Aside from the sense of violence and aggression present from the very beginning, there are overt suggestions of alcoholism and abuse (fig.32). These hints, so early in the text, suggest the insidious nature of the paternal relationship seen within this story arc. This sets up the theme of trauma and abuse that will later lead to Bruce and the Hulk's separate identities.

Bruce, from the moment he is introduced in the panels, experiences trauma. 'Birth may be the first traumatic experience that a human being may encounter and that some babies enter the world in at best a surprised and at worst severely shocked state of being' (Wilkinson 2012). Bruce's birth was presented as a particularly traumatic occurrence, both for him and his family, with both Bruce and his mother in mortal danger. The visual presentation of trauma in this scene, combined with the element of fear brought to the fore by Brian Banner's outbursts helps cement an atmosphere of fear and loathing early in the first panels in the story. Brian is portrayed as a morally repugnant character, so the reader is compelled to sympathise with Bruce before he is introduced. That viewpoint does not change as the father-son relationship develops. With Bruce's first visual introduction comes visual representations of the impending trauma; the panel is dominated by the word 'monster', as Brian's fear manifests to overshadow the child (fig.33).

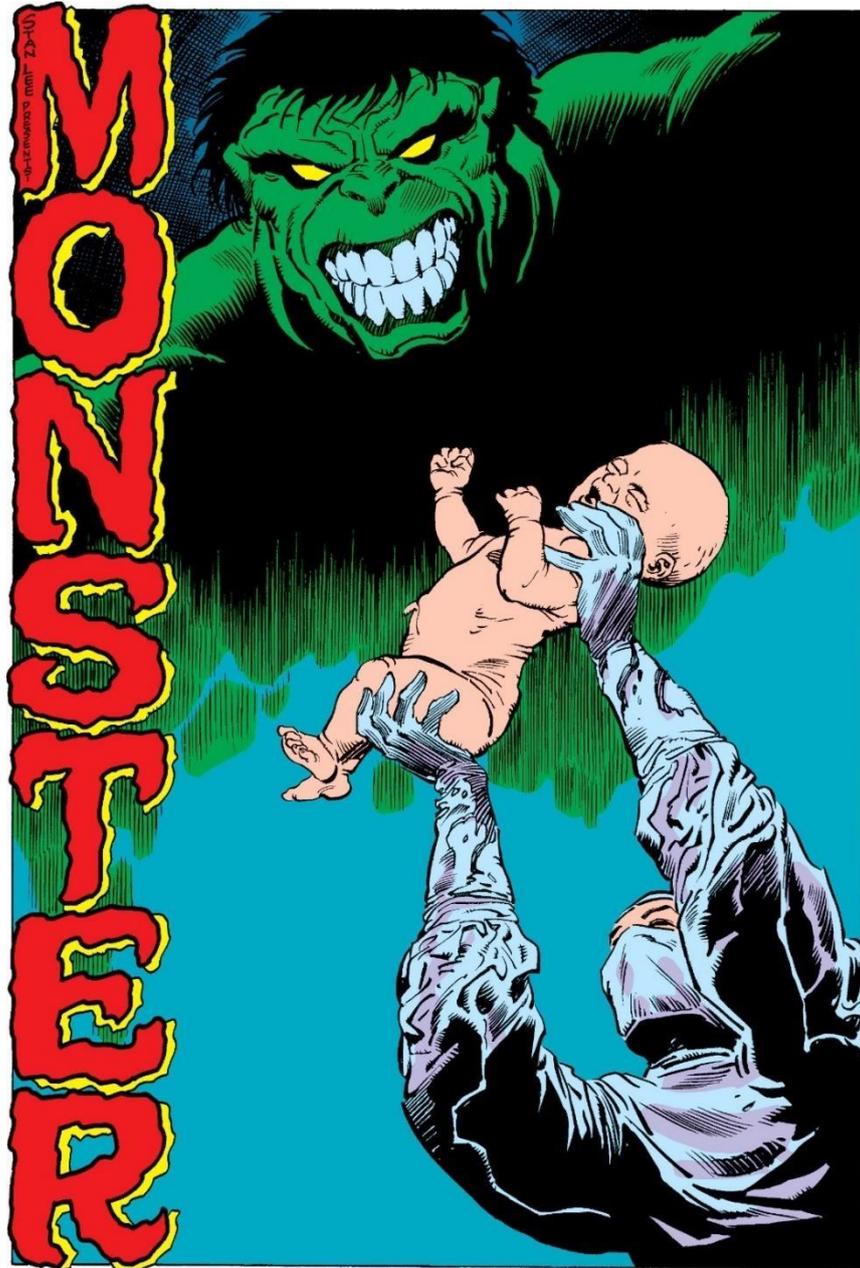


Fig. 33 The notion of the monster follows Bruce, Mantlo, Mignola 2016 © Marvel Comics

The monstrous theme continues throughout the storyline, an insidious fear for Brian, and eventually Bruce. While Bruce may be unable to process those traumas at a young age, his mind creates a contingency – the Hulk. The Hulk is the antithesis of Bruce, stronger than him physically and even mentally, although Bruce is presented as the more intellectual character. This fits with both the criteria for multiple identities existing and clinically significant distress. The level of abuse faced by Bruce created

a level of distress significant enough to create the Hulk. The identity of the Hulk is created to protect Bruce from the traumas his father would inflict. Yet that means the identity of the Hulk must absorb incredible emotional trauma, just as he will have to absorb the Gamma radiation in adulthood. This trauma is the key to understanding the Hulk, both in print and on screen.

From the moment Bruce is introduced, as a baby in a crib, the Hulk is present. There is a green outline surrounding Bruce, suggesting that while he was not physically present from the onset the Hulk was a latent identity lying hidden somewhere within the mind of Bruce, still present for the traumas that his father would inflict. In the beginning the outline is faint, hardly noticeable at first glance. Yet, the outline becomes stronger and more distinct as the storyline progresses. While the youngest portrayal of Bruce may not need as much protection, as he grows and understands the traumas he is facing, the Hulk becomes more important within the panels. The figure of the Hulk is ever present, growing with Bruce, and adapting to face the traumas Brian will inflict. The Hulk from the onset serves as a visual representation of the unseen side effects of trauma. While in the beginning he is simply an outline, as the story progresses Hulk absorbs more of the trauma, growing his outline beyond Bruce. While on the surface Bruce may seem unaffected, the Hulk tells another story.

The relationship model that Bruce has with his father is not initially clear. It does not fit neatly into Bowlby's anxious-avoidant relationship model (Durkin 1995) as many other traumatic relationships do, yet it is the most fitting model. An Anxious-Avoidant relationship type is characterised by an eventual suppression of emotions, and while Bruce displays a certain amount of repression, his emotional state is never

suppressed enough to fit completely within this model. A child with this attachment type learns quickly that emotional needs will not be fulfilled and will possibly be met with abuse. While there is a certain amount of emotional ambivalence as Bruce grows up and enters adulthood, his initial interactions with his father do not show the same response. He wants to connect, not yet understanding the fear fuelled rage that his father expresses on a regular basis. His relationship with his mother, on the other hand, is much clearer. He displays a secure attachment with her, able to explore and learn even in her absence, confident in the knowledge that she will return, from any absence, regardless of how long she was gone. Secure attachment, according to Durkin, is characterised by this comfort in the parental relationship, even in periods of extended absence.



Fig. 34 The separate identities become clearer as Bruce grows up, Mantlo, Mignola 2016 © Marvel

Comics

The juxtaposition between the relationships is most clearly seen during the Christmas scene. While his Guardian doll – the toy Bruce’s mother gave him as a baby- watches,

Bruce explores. Although Bruce is aware of the risk, he is not yet fearful of wrath. He is confident that his mother will protect him (fig. 34). His father's unbridled rage, so extreme that they lead to attempted murder of Bruce's mother by his father, shocks him. It is the first time in Bruce's young life that he is aware of the disconnection between their relationships. Yet, even at this young age he begins to rationalise his father's actions, while the Hulk takes on the burden of experience. While the relationship between father and son here does not always fit neatly into Bowlby's theories, it fits perfectly into Diana Baumrind's neglectful parenting style. While many relationships discussed in this thesis are less than desirable, few reach the neglectful level that Brian Banner achieves. It is, perhaps, one of the most toxic and damaging relationships faced by a comic book character. Much like the impact of Bowlby's attachment theory, Baumrind's parenting styles impacted Bruce's development throughout childhood and early adolescence.

John Bowlby's theories on attachment can be related closely to the topic of DID. In fact, during a clinical supervision in the late 1980s, John Bowlby was shown drawings by abused children, pinpointing within these drawings those children who had developed multiple identities: 'Dr Bowlby could see that the patient who drew the pictures had Dissociative Identity Personality' (Sinason, 2011). Where this particularly relates to the Hulk is in his own rendering. The representation of Bruce and the representation of the Hulk are entirely different, creating a visual binary. This visual representation of their distinct, separate identities allows the reader to see the Hulk and Bruce as separate personae rather than the same person. A fragmented, neglectful relationship in early childhood has the potential to impact cognitive function. As Bruce grows from infancy to early childhood, the anxious-avoidant relationship he shares with his father becomes more prominent, yet his secure bond

with his mother also grows stronger. In this case it is possible that the trauma his father inflicted prompted a more secure bond with his mother, regardless of how present she is in his life. It is because of his mother that Bruce is able to develop strong bonds later in life, in spite of all he faced in his youth. However, the abuse Bruce faces does not end with his father. Instead his caregiver, Nurse Meachum continues the abuse while Bruce's parents are out of sight. The cycle of abuse between Nurse Meachum and Bruce is heavily reflective of the paternal relationship depicted in each panel, meaning Bruce is only free from abuse when in the presence of his mother, deepening that secure bond. While his mother is powerless to stop the abuse, often a victim herself, she is able to act as a form of solace, comforting and protecting to the best of her ability. While Nurse Meachum and Brian represent the monstrous, Rebecca represents purity and kindness, something that Bruce continues to carry with him.

Bruce comes to view Nurse Meachum and Brian as being equally as monstrous as they view him. Although this is something that is depicted from Bruce's infancy, it becomes more challenging for him as he grows, understanding hatred and fear more. In his infancy Bruce views his abusers as physical monsters, disfigured and horrifying to Bruce. While Bruce was viewed as a monster by his father and his nurse, they reflect the terrifying monstrosity he sees in them. However, as he grows into adulthood, he sees that the monsters are more human and less supernatural, understanding what monstrosity really is in his life. Separating humanity from the monstrous in early childhood serves as a way to deflect the reality of his situation. The way Bruce visualises his abusers as physical monsters reflects the visual representation of the Hulk in later life, also serving to rationalise the trauma. While Bruce can rationalise abuse from monsters as a child, he cannot rationalise it from his own caregivers. This perpetuation of abuse once again brings the Hulk to the fore, with Bruce requiring

protection from the Hulk. This is ultimately damaging the mental health of the character from his earliest days. In fact, while there initially was not a noticeable difference between the Hulk's expressions and Bruce's, as they age, and the abuse continues the Hulk displays more anguish and fear while Bruce's expressions remain largely neutral, as though the Hulk is taking on trauma, leaving Bruce protected from the majority of it. This discrepancy in their expression is the first real sign that the Hulk is in fact a separate entity, and not a figment of Bruce's imagination. Bruce, at this time, seems largely unaware of the Hulk's presence, instead viewing his protection as coming from his 'guardian' doll when his mother is absent. A gift from her, it is a tangible connection to his mother in her absence. This is a very obvious way both Bowlby's attachment theory and Baumrind's parenting models come into play. For each aspect of these theories applied, the child is somehow secure in the absence of the parent.

While there is an awareness of a protector, Bruce is unable to determine or rationalise the source of this protection. The visual change in Bruce and the Hulk's expressions, creating an obvious rift between the identities is perhaps the first indication of the role the Hulk will adopt. While the guardian doll serves as a protector on a metaphorical level, the Hulk will become a physical protector. While he has been present since birth, his role progressed naturally, as did the disparity between the characters and their identities. This also shows that, although Bruce first accepts his awareness of the Hulk when he is a physical manifestation, the Hulk existed in a very real way before he was given a physical form. While the Hulk may not, in early childhood, have the ability or desire to become the dominant personality, as he becomes more and more fuelled by rage, his identity becomes clearer.

Bruce, and subsequently the Hulk are viewed as a monster by Brian. Before Bruce is born, Brian views the foetus as an abomination (Mantlo and Mignola 2016). After the birth he is seen as an inconvenience that slowly progresses to monster. Brian, so consumed by jealousy and hatred, attempts to murder Bruce to ‘correct his mistake’ (Mantlo and Mignola 2016). Brian subscribes to an archaic notion of marriage and masculinity akin to *Kingsman*’s Dean, believing his wife should pay attention to him, and to him alone (Fig. 35).

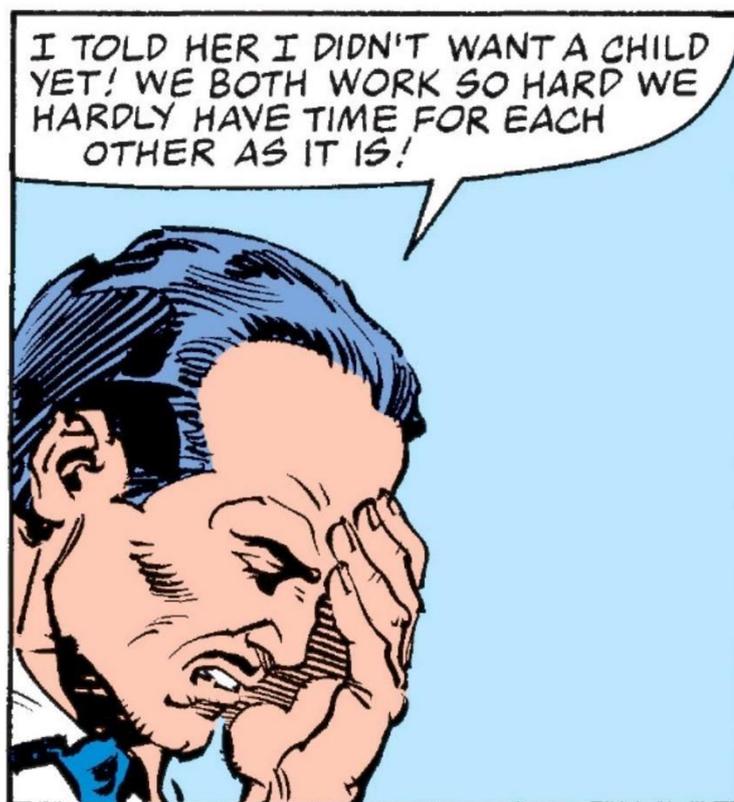


Fig. 35 Brian blames Bruce for taking his wife’s attention, Mantlo, Mignola 2016 © Marvel Comics

This is inherently hegemonic, and Brian’s masculinity becomes increasingly hegemonic and aggressive, damaging his relationship not just with Bruce, but with his wife. Yet it is also clear that Brian views Bruce as a reflection of his own monstrosity. He becomes desperate to eradicate any signs of his fallibility. Once again, Bruce is protected emotionally by the Hulk, and physically by his mother. Yet the damage is

enough to create a fragmented, dissociative identity. Each instance of abuse now drives the identities further apart. The traumas Bruce faced in early childhood are far greater than those faced by many of his contemporaries, and his identity has become intertwined with these events. While this is the last instance of abuse shown before Bruce reaches adulthood, it is one of the most significant moments in his life. While other instances are alluded to later in the text, this is the most significant for Bruce before the death of his mother. Until that moment Bruce, and subsequently the Hulk, viewed Rebecca as an infallible saviour, yet the paternal relationship has warped the relationship between Bruce and Rebecca, creating a distance that would never be repaired.

The damage inflicted by Brian can be seen in Bruce's teenage years, although the Hulk is less to the fore here. There is a time jump in the comic panels, and the reader learns that Brian Banner had murdered Rebecca in front of Bruce, causing untold upheaval to his life. While the impact that has on the Hulk is not discussed, there is a change in the way the character is portrayed. The outline now always appears fearful and angry, rather than adopting the more neutral expression in times of peace, as in his childhood. Now Bruce is a reclusive student studying at Science School, an elite school for gifted young scientists. The distress he experienced as a child has created a social impairment that does not fit the social norm. He is considered an outsider, even among the peer group society places him in. The outcome of the distress once again reinforces the potential for DID. In school he begins to adopt a fearful-avoidant attachment style, created by the relationship he had with his father. This attachment style is borne from particularly troubling and traumatic backgrounds. For many it is the natural progression from the early anxious relationship. As a result of this attachment type Bruce isolates himself from his peers, instead focusing on his

work. Yet in doing so he also isolates the Hulk. This, in part, is why the Hulk has taken much less of a prominent role in Bruce's teenage years. While Bruce avoids creating any bonds with his peers, the Hulk's role is significantly diminished. That is not to say that Hulk does not have a role here. There is still a certain amount of abuse faced by Bruce, through bullying by his peers. His elevated intelligence, even by the standards set in science school, isolates Bruce in much the same way his childhood did. Although the damage is not necessarily the same, it is still profound for the young scientist. Yet, while the Hulk displays obvious anger at this, he is powerless to change it.

Bruce displays a fear of repercussions that stems from his early years of abuse and trauma. Fear and anger are no longer the domain for the Hulk alone. Bruce himself is all but consumed by a rage bubbling beneath the surface. Although the Hulk is primarily motivated by rage, Bruce is less at home with the emotion, struggling with his ability to process it and overcome. While the Hulk has a desire to protect Bruce, and display his own unpredictable anger at the situation, Bruce displays a controlled anger that is clearly a result of his anxious relationship with his father in childhood. The fearful personality he now displays is simply the adult version of this childhood attachment. As Bruce moved from childhood to early adulthood, those lessons stayed with him, eventually evolving into a teenager and young adult that struggles with displaying any emotion, for fear of repercussions. Hulk, on the other hand, never had the opportunity to create an anxious relationship style, and instead is fuelled by pure emotion. He is the primal instinct within Bruce Banner, where Bruce himself is controlled and rigid in his personality.

The anxious relationship itself is not solely responsible for the Hulk's creation. While the relationship was traumatic enough to create a separate identity within

Bruce's mind, it was not enough to make the Hulk come forward and make himself known, and certainly not enough to create the physical being. Instead the Gamma Radiation that Bruce was exposed to brought the latent identity to the fore. While the Hulk's identity was present, it was submerged. Bruce was always in control. However, the Gamma Radiation proved too traumatic for Bruce, causing the Hulk to take over, causing a traumatic situation in itself. While the representation of the Hulk's identity is fitting with a cinematic version of DID, it is still problematic in its portrayal. Many representations of DID focus on a violent, unpredictable theme, and the Hulk is no exception. Mental illness is still largely stigmatised, and many still seek to disprove the existence of DID. By portraying a character with a dissociative disorder as violent and unpredictable, it can take away some of the credibility of a portrayal of DID. Hollywood, at its core, seeks to shock rather than focus on accuracy. An accurate portrayal of a person with DID would not sell tickets, lacking the dramatic flair seen with the Hulk and even *Sybil* and *Split*. These representations simultaneously glamourize and stigmatise mental illness. This view of any mental illness can cause detractors to view it as a fictional thing, created by a person for a multitude of reasons.

While some mental health professionals view DID in the way Hollywood does, showing distinct, separate identities with their own histories and physical traits, others view it as a more conscious form of protection. Dr Jason Hunziker, Utah University, (The Scope 2019) views DID as displaying similarities to PTSD or other mental illnesses, rather than the dramatic physical and mental shift Hollywood favours. That said, even well-known and more widely understood illnesses like PTSD are still stigmatised by society. A lack of understanding and acceptance is seen in society, fuelled by the negative dramatizations rampant throughout the film and television industries. Hunziker, and many others, view DID as a deliberate dissociation from

trauma, and are sceptical about the existence of actual separate identities within the same mind. However, it can also be argued that this is true for the Hulk. When placed in traumatic situations, Bruce Banner can choose to become the Hulk. This is seen particularly well within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While Bruce wishes to avoid the Hulk coming to the fore, he can call him out when the need arises. It is Bruce's extreme emotional control that renders him able to bring forward the Hulk at will, uttering the lines: 'That's my secret Cap. I'm always angry' (Whedon 2012) before unleashing the Hulk. This carefully controlled anger is something strongly reminiscent of #312, where rigid emotion is shown. Instances like this are seen from first standalone film, until the most recent ensemble film, *Avengers: Infinity War*. While for much of the time Bruce is able to call the Hulk to the fore, the Hulk is also shown to develop as a character, no longer the mindless, chaotic entity, but is instead a fully formed identity.

From his first ensemble film, *Avengers Assemble* to *Infinity War*, the Hulk and Bruce show a marked progression, both in their acceptance of their separate identities and their willingness to communicate. The first film shows an unwillingness on Bruce's part to share his mind and body with another identity. He both fears and loathes the Hulk, taking on a similar role to Brian. As a result, he tries to harm the Hulk, even at his own expense, describing suicide attempts that the Hulk foiled: 'Individuals with dissociative identity disorder typically present with comorbid depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-injury...They often conceal, or are not fully aware of, disruptions in consciousness' (American Psychiatric Association 2013). From *Avengers Assemble* it is evident that there is some level of depression and anxiety felt by Bruce, with his suicide attempts discussed freely. The theme of monstrosity is also seen here. When Black Widow attempts to recruit Bruce Banner he discusses the 'other guy',

acknowledging that there is another person, but not acknowledging that he is another identity within Bruce, as though acknowledging the existence of something supposedly monstrous within him is somehow a flaw in Bruce's design. Yet Bruce questions SHIELD's motives, wondering why: 'Fury isn't after the monster' (Whedon 2012).

Following the pattern of Hollywood's portrayal of DID as dangerous, the Hulk is feared, even by Bruce. The unpredictability and volatility of the character means that because Bruce cannot always control him, in spite of the extreme control Bruce has over his emotions. Bruce wants to destroy the Hulk as a result. While he is now aware of the Hulk's existence, he is not always aware of what the Hulk does, reflective of the dissociative amnesia that categorises DID. When Bruce is conscious again there is a level of confusion. Nevertheless, he is able to call the Hulk forward with apparent ease, simply by honing and controlling his anger, reflecting the printed comic books. A teenaged Bruce was fuelled by a carefully controlled rage, much like the adult Bruce portrayed in the films. This is a common theme for the majority of the following films. His teammates work to bring Bruce back to the fore after the Hulk has taken control, and Bruce in turn uses the Hulk to protect the world, with varying levels of success.

This changes in *Thor: Ragnarok*. Prior to the events of this film, Hulk has left earth, feeling the need to protect the planet both from himself and the Hulk. As a result of a traumatic journey through space, the Hulk has become the primary identity. He has spent a number of years adapting to being the primary identity, showing a broader spectrum of emotions as a result. Due to the nature of this development, when it comes time for Bruce to come to the fore, the Hulk is reluctant and fearful. Bruce, on the other hand has no recollection of the last number of years, having become the dormant

identity, displaying signs of dissociative amnesia. Bruce's memory loss is not just that he has forgotten the events that occurred. He never knew what happened to begin with. Bruce has lost a large chunk of time, part of his life and struggles with the knowledge that somebody else lived for him. While the Hulk was the primary identity, Bruce was lost. This is unlike the comic book version of the character where, although not present, the Hulk is ultimately aware of what is happening to Bruce, and when the Hulk is in control, Bruce has a certain level of consciousness. He seldom knows specifics but has some recall. Now, however, the Hulk is no longer content to be called forward only when there is danger. This becomes even more prominent in *Infinity War*, when the Hulk refuses to come forward in Bruce's time of need, evidently angry that he was once again pushed to the side, unwilling to put himself in harm's way without any gratitude or reward. Yet this is also the first time that Bruce has been willing to engage with the Hulk, acknowledging the need to discuss where they go from there. Bruce acknowledges the Hulk as a living entity, and rather than trying to bury the identity, he wants to engage with him. There are now two identities that have lived in the world and experienced that freedom, and neither wants to be hidden away.

Regardless of how DID is interpreted, either in Hollywood or by mental health professionals the Hulk fits to some extent to each version. Both Hollywood and mental health professionals agree, to some extent, that identities are created in order to protect a person (The Scope 2019). The Hulk is there to protect Bruce. Even in childhood, the presence of the Hulk's identity shows Bruce's ability to shy away from traumatic situations, whether consciously or otherwise. While the Hulk was there, Bruce was not alone in the traumas he faced, somewhat mitigating the psychological impact of such a traumatic past while never negating it. While the Hulk may be seen as a version of DID, Bruce is largely considered to be well adjusted without any other mental illness

being part of the discourse. As isolated as he became, the Hulk was there as some unseen, hidden support. Bruce himself does not appear always to understand or want the Hulk, but he is there, a constant yet unknown presence. Over time Bruce learns to live with the Hulk, yet he never truly comes to terms with the situation.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe attempts to reconcile their identities in later films, but it is not truly possible. Bruce views the Hulk as a separate being, and as of now is unwilling to change his perspective. If the Hulk is a metaphor for DID, then Bruce never accepts or rationalises his mental disorder, instead running from the possibility that he is in some way not whole, with the potential to become as monstrous as his father convinced him he would be. In spite of his fears, and the ingrained belief that he is somehow monstrous and unnatural, Bruce willingly becomes the Hulk for the good of the masses. While he is unwilling to rationalise his fragmented identity, he is willing to use it to his advantage should the need arise. The Hulk is often a conscious choice, called forward when the situation is too traumatic. He is, perhaps, a way for Bruce to distance himself from traumas that he is unable to face, both physically and mentally. However, given the extreme, aggressive nature of the character as well as the dramatic physical changes, the sensationalist Hollywood idea of what DID is appears to be the most fitting. While Bruce, over the course of his lifetime, fits easily within the criteria for diagnosing DID, he is sensationalist at his core. The overall representation of the Hulk and Bruce Banner fails to acknowledge the complexities of DID, nor does it treat such a disorder with any sensitivity. Instead it creates a polarising view of Bruce and the Hulk. Bruce, in many ways, never reconciles the Hulk as being a separate being, instead viewing him as a flaw in his own makeup. There are many instances where Bruce simply has no recollection of events where the Hulk was present, with these occurrences lending themselves more to the

idea that the identities are separate, both physically and emotionally, and are drastically different. Whatever the view of DID held, sensationalist or medical, the Hulk is an identity created to protect. According to Sayers: ‘The Hulk, who thus began as a projection of Bruce’s powerlessness, eventually manifested after prolonged and chronic stress who could assert his power and dominance. Within Bruce Banner, however, there remained a struggle between the two irreconcilable and split-off facets of Banner’s personality – the Hulk disdains Banner’s timidity and emotional suppression, whereas Banner loathes Hulk’s brutish rage’ (Sayers 2006, 89).

6.2.2 Hulk Smash: The Hulk and Intermittent Explosive Disorder

While the Hulk is a strong metaphor for DID, fitting the five diagnostic criteria in some way, that is not the only mental illness that can be seen throughout the character’s history. Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED) is something that can also be seen within the character. IED is characterised by the Mayo Clinic (2018) as repeated sudden episodes of impulsive, aggressive, and violent behaviour. The aggression displayed can be either physical or verbal, and often displays as sudden bursts of temper, akin to a temper tantrum from an infant. ‘The impulsive (or anger-based) aggressive outbursts in intermittent explosive disorder have a rapid onset and, typically, little or no prodromal period. Outbursts typically last for less than 30 minutes and commonly occur in response to a minor provocation by a close or intimate associate’ (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Through both print and film, it is clear that the Hulk can be triggered by comparatively banal and inconsequential things. Intermittent Explosive Disorder, much like DID, has certain diagnostic criteria that must be met. These are:

- (i) Recurrent behavioural outbursts. A failure to control: (a) Verbal or physical aggression which occurs on average twice a week over a period of three months, and where said aggression does not result in injury or damage; or (b) Three behavioural outbursts involving damage or destruction involving physical injury within a 12-month period;
- (ii) The magnitude of the aggression is disproportionate to the provocation or stressors;
- (iii) The recurrent aggressive outbursts are not premeditated and are not designed to achieve a tangible objective;
- (iv) The outbursts caused marked distress in the individual or impairment in interpersonal relationships and work life.
- (v) Chronological age is at least 6 years old.
- (vi) The aggressive outbursts are not better explained by another mental disorder and are not attributable to any medical condition or substance abuse, and are not attributable to any medical condition or substance abuse. (American Psychiatric Association 2013)

The Hulk is a complex character, and throughout his history he has presented his violence in a myriad of ways. Many of these ways can easily be attributed to IED, fitting comfortably within the diagnostic criteria. Like DID, IED can be seen in *The Incredible Hulk #312*. However, instead of looking for the signs in childhood, it is not until the physical presence of the Hulk manifests that IED is truly visible. While his childhood played an obvious role in the development of IED, the IED itself was not present in childhood. When the Hulk is a physical form, acting as Bruce's rage, then the symptoms of IED become clearer. While the triggers for Bruce's IED certainly stem from his childhood and early adult life, it is not until Bruce faced the gamma radiation that his life was altered. This physical change for Bruce is forever associated with fear, pain, and betrayal, culminating in one emotion - rage. It is unsurprising that

in moments of fear or pain that the Hulk comes to the fore, bringing forward an often unnatural and extreme rage. The rage the Hulk acts on is often excessive, unwarranted by the often-minor scenarios. Although one criterion for IED requires a lack of damage to people or objects for diagnosis, a second, more fitting criterion exists. As noted in *DSM-5*:

Criterion A2 defines infrequent (i.e., three in a 1-year period) impulsive aggressive outbursts characterized by damaging or destroying an object, regardless of its tangible value, or by assaulting/striking or otherwise causing physical injury to an animal or to another individual (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

The Hulk is considered volatile, unpredictable, and highly dangerous. His aggression is destructive, causing untold damage to cities. *Avengers Assemble* shows the impact this destruction had on Bruce Banner, showing him living an isolated life, quietly helping others, aiming to never bring the Hulk forward again. His introductory scene depicts Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) attempting to antagonise Bruce enough to bring the Hulk forward. Yet she also has a backup team surrounding her, aware of the threat to life that the Hulk's rages can pose. When the Hulk does eventually make an appearance, the destruction is immense and expansive. Confined aboard a Helicarrier, the Hulk has the ability to cause untold destruction, and nearly succeeds. Initially the rage is turned on everyone on board, be they friend or foe. Eventually Bruce is able to control his anger to some extent, channelling it towards his attackers, rather than anyone in the vicinity. The explosive and dangerous nature of the Hulk's outbursts, and the intermittent causing fear and destruction, regardless of the relationship between the Hulk and those he hurts. While there is some control attempted, the volatility of the Hulk persona is too much for Bruce to control. Even Bruce fears his

rage. In spite of the destructiveness of the Hulk, the most important aspect of his volatility is the impulsive nature of his outbursts. As Haycock notes:

A key factor in the diagnosis of IED is not whether someone or something was injured or damaged, but that the outburst is explosive, the result of impulsive as opposed to planned aggression... Bruce has had at least three unplanned explosive outbursts of anger during which he has destroyed property and assaulted others over the course of a single year. He would also meet this criterion if he had only verbal outbursts on average a couple of times a week over a three-month period (Haycock 2016, 103).

Bruce has, on many occasions, proven that he can meet the criteria for IED regardless of how his outbursts impact those around him. While his outbursts in later films become more controlled and as a result are less destructive, they still take an emotional toll on the characters surrounding him, and as a result he still fits within the niche of IED. While *Black Widow* may not fully understand the intricacies of IED or Bruce's particular anger control problems, she is aware of the destructiveness of them, and of the team's potential ability to manipulate Bruce's anger.

The moment that Bruce Banner becomes the Hulk for the first time, both in the comic books⁷ and on screen⁸ (Letterier 2008), is a scene fraught with fear, anger, and confusion. It is the first time Bruce himself is shown to have a lack of control over his emotions (Fig. 36).

⁷ In this case that moment is from #312

⁸ Letterier's *Incredible Hulk* film starring Edward Norton.



Fig. 36 Bruce transforms into the Hulk, Mantlo, Mignola 2016 © Marvel Comics

While in his childhood he faced many traumas, his emotions were never depicted as being in any way unstable. In his teenaged years Bruce is depicted as having a rigid control over his emotions, even when mocked and harassed by his classmates. Yet this rigidity in his emotions may also have contributed to the eventual development of IED. The Hulk may seem like a sudden development for Bruce, but the emotions he felt, while kept in check, were certainly not new. However, he no longer could keep control over them. When he was exposed to gamma radiation, he was no longer able to control his emotions in the same way, leading to regular outbursts.

Yet before these outbursts even occur, Bruce is faced with the knowledge of his sudden illness. Unable to rationalise or understand it, Bruce struggles, becoming angry at the mere idea of the Hulk. He equates the Hulk with monstrosity, as his

father ingrained in him from an early age. Yet this can be a vicious cycle for Bruce. His anger brings forward the Hulk, yet the Hulk makes him angry. As described by Mantlo in *The Incredible Hulk #267*, the Incredible Hulk is:

Caught in the heart of a Nuclear Explosion, victim of Gamma Radiation gone wild, Doctor Robert Bruce Banner now finds himself transformed in times of stress into seven feet, one thousand pounds of unfettered Fury –the most powerful creature to ever walk the earth – the Incredible Hulk! (Mantlo and Buscema 2016)

The Hulk here is described as nothing more than a mass of pure rage, a monster in the eyes of many, and certainly a creature to be feared. Yet because the Hulk is seen as pure rage, he cannot be seen as a separate identity. He is simply an extension of Bruce Banner, transformed by the Gamma Radiation.

Bruce's IED is easily recognised in film as well as in print. The MCU film franchise has created a version of the Hulk that is not only engaging and easily accessible for both long-time fans and newcomers, but he fits the criteria for IED well. From Edward Norton's introduction to the character, to Mark Ruffalo's current stint⁹, the ease at which the Hulk fits the criteria for an IED diagnosis is clear from the onset. While Norton only had one outing as the Hulk, his film formed the foundation of the character within the MCU, also giving credibility to the theory of an IED diagnosis. While *#312* provided an insight into the early childhood events that lead to the eventual development of IED, Norton provides a greater insight into the development of the rage filled persona, and the immediate ramifications of the Gamma Radiation for Bruce Banner. Within this film, the toxic, neglectful paternal relationship is alluded to, although not thoroughly explored. However, the allusion to the trauma Bruce faced

⁹ Norton starred in Letterier's 2008 film. Ruffalo took over the role in Whedon's 2012 *Avengers Assemble*.

within that relationship is significant enough to relate his subsequent Hulk persona, and the IED metaphor to his childhood experiences. Norton's film shows Bruce Banner and the events that led up to the creation of the Hulk, as well as the ramifications directly after his first outings as the Hulk. Much like the end of *#312*, Bruce was accidentally exposed to Gamma Radiation, bringing forward the Hulk persona. Yet, unlike in *#312* where his deep emotional response to the Hulk is seen, it is his anger that is to the fore here. The exposure to Gamma Radiation, combined with his fear has brought on this feeling of rage and hostility that becomes synonymous with the character of the Hulk.

One of the aspects of IED that can be seen is the excessive anger displayed when it comes to loved ones. Betty Ross is the inadvertent catalyst for the Hulk's rage on several occasions. Any time Bruce views her to be in danger or believes that someone is attempting to cause her harm, the Hulk intervenes. While Betty herself is not the cause of the Hulk's rage, she is the catalyst. Irrational as it may be, even the slightest hint of danger surrounding Betty can send Bruce into a rage. One scene in particular, towards the end of the film, shows General Ross - Betty's father - trying to prove the Hulk is a danger. It is not until soldiers grab Betty that the Hulk becomes a threat, desperate to protect her. While the intentions of the Hulk were purely to protect Betty, he caused untold destruction that eventually put both himself and Betty in more danger. It is this irrationality in behaviour patterns that makes the representation of IED so dangerous. A violent outburst, while not necessarily directed towards a loved one, can cause emotional or physical harm to them, in spite of motivations. It is this inevitable harm that has caused Bruce to flee on numerous occasions, first at the end of *The Incredible Hulk*, and again at the end of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. The Hulk does this to protect the women he loves - Betty and Black Widow. This sudden

upheaval may be a temporary solution to Bruce's anger problems, where he can learn to control it, it also causes untold damage to his emotional wellbeing, as well as to those he leaves behind.

Within the comics it is clear that Brian is paranoid and jealous of Bruce's intelligence, and his relationship with Rebecca. The abuse witnessed and experienced in Bruce's younger years created a man that is: 'subdued, soft-spoken, and mild-mannered – until he becomes angry. When he loses control, he rages, roars, and strikes out at people and things in an uncontrollable manner' (Haycock 2016, 102). Bruce rejected any emotional response, largely out of a fear of his father. He both feared the repercussions of his actions, and the possibility he would become the monster his father feared he was. His entire life has been overshadowed by this one notion, leading Bruce to believe that he is a monster. The Hulk is a physical manifestation of the anger Bruce feels, but that anger was present long before the Gamma Radiation hit. Bruce was able to bury that emotion and channel it into his work, isolating himself from his peers and not forming strong emotional bonds. Further credibility is given to the theory of the Hulk merely being another side of Bruce's personality – his rage personified – in issue #267. In this comic book reality is altered. Glorian, an apprentice shaper of worlds, alters the mind of Betty Ross, showing her: 'the smiling image of Bruce Banner "free of the horror men call the Hulk." He takes her hand and tells her, "There, Betty Darling! Isn't that better? Isn't the dream always better than reality?"' (Smith 2015, 156). This section can be interpreted in a number of ways. It can, on one hand, be seen as the entire identity of the Hulk being removed, fitting with an interpretation of DID. On the other hand, it can be seen as a metaphor for the rage Bruce feels disappearing. Bruce has more control over his emotions, and therefore the Hulk is no longer needed. Without the excessive rages of the Hulk, IED is not seen. However,

later in the comic *Glorian* shows the reader another scene, one that once again cements the idea of the Hulk simply being Bruce's anger in a physical form. According to Smith:

Transported into the Hulk's mind, we see him at his family dinner table, visiting with his mother and father. He is the green-skinned Hulk, not Banner, though he is dressed in an untorn t-shirt and his parents seem to feel there is nothing unusual about his appearing this way (his mother addresses him as "Bruce") (Smith 2015, 156).

Such a setting, while completely removed from what the reader later discovers, lends itself to the idea that the Hulk is nothing more than an extension of Bruce, his anger portrayed in a very visual way. While this can be seen to contradict the idea of two separate identities, as seen with DID, it does lend itself to a diagnosis of IED. As it is an alternative reality, rather than the canonical one seen in later issues, the reader must suspend their belief when interpreting the Hulk and his identity here. Yet, for a perspective on IED, it is invaluable. The recognition Bruce receives from his mother as the Hulk is validating. Unlike with DID, the Hulk is not an identity who can disappear when Bruce is no longer angry. He is present, a part of Bruce at all times. While the physical changes are not always seen, the mental aspect of IED is always present.

While the Hulk's aggressive transformation is hyperbolic, that type of impulsive aggression is certainly not limited to the pages of a comic book. In fact, IED is noted as a common psychiatric disorder. IED is particularly common in people below the age of forty. As a young scientist Bruce is transformed into the Hulk, displaying symptoms of IED at a very early age. IED is more: 'common in people with a high school education or less. The disorder seems to be more common in the United States than in Asia or the Middle East' (Haycock 2016, 103). While Bruce is

recognised as a genius, and has more than a high school diploma, he also faced many challenges and tragedies that may have contributed to his development of IED.

Throughout the life of the Hulk comics, and within the film franchise, Bruce experiences these routine violent outbursts. For Bruce, or more accurately the Hulk, these outbursts are predominantly physical in nature. The Hulk is largely silent, excepting a number of monosyllabic utterances. Bruce, while more loquacious, is also less prone to violence, either physical or verbal. Much like DID this disorder can be caused by a variety of factors, such as environmental, genetic, and physical brain chemistry. Much like DID, IED can have drastic, long-lasting implications on one's ability to form meaningful connections. Many of the risk factors are also quite similar to DID. A history of physical abuse or other mental disorders can lead a person to develop IED. This section will explore the development of IED due to a lifetime of trauma.

Within the comics the Hulk is seen primarily as an anger fuelled embodiment of rage. Yet it is also clear that this rage stems from Bruce Banner's traumatic past. This section will explore the impact of the Hulk's rage, viewing him not as a separate identity, but as an extension of Bruce's own anger, a metaphor for the moments when he can no longer contain his rage. IED typically displays itself as sudden outbursts of rage, far greater than a situation requires. While Bruce may be mild mannered and gentle on an everyday basis, the Hulk comes to the fore when he feels the situation requires it. Yet the rage depicted often outweighs the original trigger. The majority of cases of IED stem from a household that displayed frequent violent behaviour, generally with physical and verbal abuse as a common theme. *The Incredible Hulk #312* clearly depicts extreme violent behaviour, and Bruce both witnessed this violence and was a victim himself. Yet the genetic component may also be a factor for

Bruce. Brian feared the genetic abnormalities his atomic research could have created for him, and as a result he feared the impact they would have on his son. The Hulk, seen from Bruce's infancy, would indicate the genetic abnormality Brian feared being present in Bruce. It is not impossible that the excessive rage and violent outbursts Brian displays from the onset could have been passed to Bruce. Brain chemistry and serotonin production in those with IED is often another factor when considering the potential of a diagnosis. When Bruce was exposed to Gamma Radiation it is possible that his physical brain chemistry was altered, along with his ability to transform into the Hulk. People with multiple traumatic events in their past have an increased risk of developing IED. There is a potential link between the violence in Bruce's past, and the exposure to Gamma Radiation that created this violent side to him by increasing his risk factors. In fact, it is likely that on some level Bruce is impacted by all three factors, physical, environmental, and genetic. As a result, it is unsurprising that the violent outbursts he displays have such a profound impact on his life.

Those with IED, due to their unpredictable nature, often struggle to maintain a consistent work schedule. This is certainly the case for Bruce. While he is recognised as a brilliant scientist, he is also considered volatile and dangerous. The sheer destruction caused by his 'hulking out' has, on numerous occasions, caused him to flee from the law. His issues surrounding his work life and personal safety also hinder him in his interpersonal relationships. In both the comic books and film franchises Bruce has significant issues in maintaining relationships with the women in his life. Betty Ross, the long-time significant other in the Hulk franchise, and Black Widow, his romantic interest in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, are eventually lost to him because of the unpredictability of the Hulk personality. While neither Betty nor Black Widow are given a choice, Bruce feels the need to protect them from himself and the Hulk,

taking away their agency in order to do what he feels is best. This in itself is unpredictable in nature. Neither woman expected Bruce to leave, fleeing the law and abandoning those who need him in the process.

Even his relationships with his teammates, notably Tony Stark is fraught with tension. While the first Avengers film shows Tony with an inherent fear and distrust of Bruce, owing solely to his reputation as an easily angered being, their relationship slowly changes. *Age of Ultron* shows the progression to like-minded scientists keen on exploration. This film ultimately led to the breakdown of the Avengers, with the Hulk leaving in a moment of anger and fear. The Hulk by now has relapsed into a moment of depression and anxiety following the events of the film. His instinctive reaction is to flee rather than face the consequences of his actions, something that his anger and irrationality decided. Fits of rage that tie in with IED are irrational in nature. Having a prolonged outburst, as the Hulk often does, can only increase this irrationality. In *Age of Ultron* Bruce struggles to control the Hulk more than ever. His anger is closer to the surface and more palpable than before, leading to more danger for his teammates and innocent bystanders. As a result, Bruce leaves, causing upheaval in the lives of his teammates, and in the heat of the moment he does not consider the ramifications of his actions. Bruce leaves with no plan set in motion, working purely on impulse. This impulsive nature, combined with the unpredictable outbursts make Bruce incredibly dangerous in this moment. The next appearance of the Hulk in *Thor: Ragnarok* shows the Hulk to the fore on a constant basis. The angry, unpredictable persona is dominant, and Bruce struggles to regain control and reconcile the things he has seen in his past.

In this prolonged period of anger, Bruce was somewhat lost. He struggled to regain control of his anger, and later struggles to get angry when the need arises. He is unable to bring the Hulk to the fore again. IED can lead to the development of other mental health issues, as with those suffering from DID. This in turn can lead to depressive episodes and suicide attempts. As stated above, Bruce attempted to destroy the Hulk at the risk of his own life. The traumas superheroes face on a daily basis leads to untold mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. When your superpower is your mental illness, it is only a matter of time before more symptoms make themselves known. The Hulk/Bruce Banner now likely suffers from depression, anxiety or even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Bruce's inability to control his anger, and his subsequent inability to make himself angry suggests that there is more to the mind of Bruce Banner than has been reasonably explored. While the inability to transform into the Hulk in *Infinity War* is played for laughs, for Bruce it suggests a serious, underlying issue. While the Russo brothers have suggested that the Hulk refuses to come forward, angry at Bruce for only bringing him forth to clean up messes – which fits with the notion of the Hulk as a separate identity – it can also mean that Bruce is suffering from another undiagnosed mental illness. The more he tries to bring the Hulk forward, the more challenging it becomes for him. It is a struggle for Bruce, now facing a war against Gods without the safety net of his anger. Yet, in spite of the intended humour of the piece, the darkness of the obvious metaphors for mental illness are seen. As of this moment those mental health issues have yet to be explored for the Hulk, as they have for Iron Man (*Iron Man 3*) or Thor (*Thor: Ragnarok*), but it is likely only a matter of time before the identity is more thoroughly explored within the MCU. The Russo brothers are seemingly aware of the importance of the Hulk and Bruce's mental health, not just for themselves, but for their entire team too. While IED is a

recognised mental condition on its own, it can also link back to a variety of other mental health disorders, most notably personality disorders or disruptive behaviours. As a result, it is possible that the Hulk can display traits of both IED and DID, making him a perfect example of the impact of childhood trauma on the development of mental illness.

Endgame heralds a change in the way the Hulk is presented. Bruce Banner, tired of the constant struggle with the persona of the Hulk (as either a metaphor for DID or IED) transforms himself one last time with gamma radiation, becoming a hybrid of the two. Possessing the intellect of Bruce Banner, and the strength, size, and colour of the Hulk, he has now gained control over both identities. The audience is shown that Bruce has finally accepted the Hulk as part of him, coming to terms with the complexity of his situation, and finally realising the benefits of the Hulk, rather than focusing entirely on the negatives. By embracing the identity of the Hulk fully, Bruce was able to ensure that the identity was something that would benefit him, as well as society. With the complications Bruce saw with calling the Hulk identity forward in *Infinity War* Bruce recognised, for the first time, how vital a role the Hulk played in Bruce's world-saving endeavours. While Bruce may have joined the Avengers because of his scientific prowess, it is the Hulk identity that made an impact, strong enough to fend off multiple enemies, destroy alien ships, and scale buildings with ease. This new hybrid identity played a bigger role in *Endgame* than either would have solo, from dabbling in time travel, to being the only member of the team strong enough to wield the infinity stones and survive. While the Hulk would certainly be strong enough to wield the stones, without Bruce's intellect he would not have been able to. Yet the question of whether or not this is an entirely new identity could be argued, as the new Hulk behaves in a way that neither Bruce nor the Hulk would have

before, with the joke even made that: ‘I liked you better as either of the other guys’ (Russo and Russo 2019). This new Hulk seems to have adopted the intellect of Bruce, but is uninhibited like the Hulk, allowing for rash and dangerous decisions to be made, but also allowing for moments where there is focus and planning. Regardless of the implications of this new identity, the essence of the character remains the same. Bruce Banner and the Hulk remain heroes in every sense of the word, willing to sacrifice themselves to save those who were lost.

One of the most significant elements of the representation of mental illness in comic books and other forms of popular culture is the ability for that representation to benefit those with mental illness. Characters such as the Hulk, so often stigmatised as being brutish, dismissed as purely being the brawn of the operation, now have the potential to help readers understand and rationalise their own mental health. *Using Superheroes in Counselling and Play Therapy* (Rubin 2006) not only explores the representation of mental health and mental illness in the comic book genre, but also explores its real-life applications. Specifically, Rubin’s collection focuses on the development of children with psychological ailments, and their ability to connect with their favourite heroes. Heroes’ matter, not just because of the morality seen within their stories, but because of the meaning and significance a reader can gain, simply by seeing themselves represented. While comic books have made efforts in recent years to represent race and gender, the representation of physical or mental disability is lacking. While assumptions can be made, nothing in the comics is overtly stated, leaving the reader to create their own interpretation. Rubin’s research explores the ability people share to use superheroes as a form of rationalisation. As Rubin notes: ‘Of the various theories, tools, and techniques available to the therapist, one of the most powerful resources for self-understanding, growth, and healing may well be

fantasy' (Rubin 200, 3-4). A young Bruce Banner is shown to use fantasy to rationalise the abusive situation he found himself in. While Bruce himself lives in a fantasy world, he also creates a fantasy, an escapism that helps him come to terms with his life and his own limitations. While he never uses these fantasy scenarios to rationalise his own mental health, he does use it to rationalise the most traumatic scenarios in his life, akin to those discussed by Rubin. Although it does not overtly state within the comics that the Hulk or Bruce Banner have any form of mental illness, they still work as agents of change for their readers.

6.3 Conclusion

The Incredible Hulk is a complex hero with themes that stretch far beyond the average superhero narrative. While the vast majority of characters discussed in this thesis are the product of trauma, none have the ability to show the mental impacts of this trauma in the same way the Hulk can. His unique superpowers give the readers a perspective on childhood trauma and mental health in the world of comic books that no other character can. His transformations are dramatic, often in times of trauma where the Hulk is more physically suited. While the Hulk displays traits of both Dissociative Identity Disorder and Intermittent Explosive Disorder, he displays different traits in different adaptations, meaning he can be seen as a representation of mental illness in almost every incarnation. While there are many more story arcs that fit this notion of mental illness, both his original print introduction and his current on-screen persona draw parallels in the way mental health is perceived. The Hulk, while a strong metaphor for DID and IED, is not searching for a pseudo paternal relationship, unlike many of his peers. Instead, he shies away from the idea of the parent-child relationship altogether.

Chapter Seven: Disability, the Superhero, and the Paternal Relationship

7.1 Introduction

Where mental health representation in comic books is largely metaphorical, there are a number of characters who represent physical disability. Although representation of physical disability is still a minority, there have been a few heroes that have been classed as having some degree of disability, either as integral part of their origin and powers, or gained later as a result of their heroism. As a visual medium, comic book are much more adept at representing physical differences in their characters than mental differences, albeit often in a manner that feeds into ableist stereotypes. Disability and comics studies has a complicated relationship. With only a handful of disabled characters represented in a positive light, many of whom are not featured prominently within franchises and lack developed storylines, the characters that are prominently representative of disability become that much more important. DC Comics' Cyborg, and Marvel Comics' Daredevil represent characters with varying levels of physical disability, yet that is not where their similarities end. Both characters are portrayed with complicated paternal relationships, and both are in some way prompted to become a hero based on the actions of their fathers.

While they are part of the minority in comic book representation, to a certain extent they are also redefining the notion of the hero. Traditionally speaking the role of the hero was dominated by a very stereotypical character – the white, able bodied American male. Cyborg, an African American former star athlete turned disabled superhero, brings a layer of intersectionality to DC at a time when Black superheroes

were few, and far between, and suffered stereotyping as a result. Blacksploitation (Alaniz 2014) was a common problem when Cyborg first became a hero, although Cyborg himself does not fall foul of this as often, which will be discussed further below. Cyborg: ‘introduced race into the discussion of disability in the genre’ (Alaniz 2014, 49). Daredevil, on the other hand, represents the story of Irish American immigrants struggling to achieve the American Dream, and is suddenly disabled in an accident. According to Young: ‘He lacks the augmented strength of his peers...; like Batman, he had to train his body to be stronger, faster, and more agile than those of his enemies’ (Young 2016, 21). As one of the only comic book characters with a vision impairment, Daredevil represents the most idealised aspects, as well as the perils of the American dream. His story is as much about adapting as it is about overcoming, if not more so.

This chapter will discuss the role of disability within the world of comic books, as well as the impact it has on the progression of the father-son relationship. For both Cyborg and Daredevil their relationship with their disability is impacted by the paternal relationship. The paternal relationship for each character is complex, made more so by the development of their respective disabilities later in life. Much like the Incredible Hulk, the heroics and type of justice the characters pursue are directly linked to the role of the parent in their early childhood, and the characters are often more closely linked to the role of an antihero, showing questionable morals and motives for their actions. Both characters have something of an overcoming (relating to their respective disabilities) to their stories, something disability studies theorists have called into question. Despite this sense of overcoming, both characters become heroes because of their disabilities, not in spite of them. It is Cyborgs cybernetic enhancements that allow him to fight the most feared villains, just as it is Daredevil’s

blindness that makes him the man without fear. For these characters disability is not a weakness as it is for many disabled secondary characters, and while there is a sense of overcoming in their stories, it is not overcoming their disability in a way that is traditionally seen. Instead they overcome the obstacles placed in front of them by society, and even by themselves. They overcome the limitations the word disability has placed on them, redefining what it means to have a physical different, and earning their place among the most famous heroes. Cyborg, in particular, must overcome these self-created obstacles which initially prevented him from being a hero.

7.2 Daredevil – Becoming the Man Without Fear

Matt Murdock is one of the most unusual heroes in the Marvel line-up due to his origin story. While, like the majority of heroes discussed in this thesis, his life is filled with tragedy, he is also one of the few represented with a disability. As José Alaniz puts it:

The first Marvel Silver Age series devoted to a prominent “disabled superhero” Daredevil...tells the story of Matt Murdock, who as a boy is struck by a radioactive canister which both blinds him and enhances his remaining senses to superhuman levels, compensating for his lost vision with a fantastic “radar sense” (Alaniz 2014, 69).

His debut as the world’s first blind hero in 1964 was certainly unusual, given the ableist nature of comic books that lingers even today. Since his creation there have been several incarnations of the character, each with a more complicated history than the last. This chapter will focus specifically on the 1964 introduction to the character, created by Bill Everett and Stan Lee and continued by Frank Miller, focusing specifically on the paternal relationship and the role of disability. For Matt and his

father – aging boxer Battlin’ Jack Murdock - the role of disability and the role of fatherhood are closely linked, impacting their relationship.

Miller’s reinterpretation of the character altered some key aspects of the paternal relationship, and therefore will not be the primary focus. While the outline of the origin story in each arc is largely the same – a child blinded by chemicals, the paternal relationship and its impact on Murdock’s motivations changes. The relationship between Battlin’ Jack and his son shifts drastically in Miller’s retelling, impacting Matt’s development greatly. This chapter will largely explore the ways in which Daredevil adapts to life as a man without sight, and the role of his father in his heroic journey. When discussing a character with as much significance as Daredevil, specifically in relation to the world of disability studies, it is important to consider definitions surrounding disability. Merriam-Webster defines disability as: ‘a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person’s ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions’ (Merriam-Webster 2019). While this definition may be applied to Matt Murdock in his everyday life as a lawyer, it certainly cannot be applied to his alter-ego, and therefore has been called into question regarding its suitability. Donahue argues against the term disability when relating to the superhero: ‘I use the phrase “people with physical impairments” rather than “people with disabilities” precisely because...Daredevil is not “disabled” by his environment, as a disability is defined by the social model of disability’ (Donahue 2016, 80). For the purposes of this section, the term disability will only be used in reference to the public persona Matt creates, while the term impairment will otherwise be used to describe his blindness. According to Alaniz: ‘*Daredevil* presented the most progressive image of disability in superhero comics’ at the time of his creation (Alaniz 2014, 49).

For Matt Murdock, both in Everett and Lee's original story arc, and in Miller's reboot of the series, the paternal relationship is significant both in relation to his heroism and his blindness. While the paternal relationship differs in each arc, there are a number of common themes, including the absent mother figure. While many of the characters discussed in this thesis have absent mothers, the vast majority of those characters have an adoptive mother figure, acting in a maternal manner. Daredevil is one of the few heroes whose origin is almost completely devoid of an obvious maternal influence. Battlin' Jack is Matt's sole motivator, provider, and moral compass. As Alaniz notes: 'After the death of his father at the hands of the mob, Murdock devotes himself to fighting crime in his public identity as a successful trial lawyer and in his secret identity of Daredevil, hero of Hell's Kitchen' (Alaniz 2014. 69). It is established from the moment Matt dons the Daredevil costume in issue one that his father is his reason for becoming a masked hero. This is seen in both the Everett/Lee arc as well as in Miller's reboot. It is rare for a superhero to display their motivations so blatantly, yet Matt is open about it from the onset. His earliest motivator is revenge.

The opening pages of Lee and Everett's 1964 introduction to the character shows his first attempt to bring criminals to justice – those criminals being the men who were responsible for his father's murder. Displaying impressive gymnastic abilities, coupled with a billy club (a weapon Matt has fashioned for himself), and frequent references to Daredevil's heightened senses, his attempt pays homage to his father not just because of the people he is fighting, but because he is displaying this skillset in the gym his father fought in, bringing the life and death of Jack Murdock to a neat conclusion. Jack's death came about due to his need to make his son proud, at any cost. Jack wanted more for his son than the violent life of a boxer, with the primary discussion being the focus on education. Much of the dialogue between Matt and his

father focuses on the disparaging view Jack held of himself, viewing his lack of education as a detractor. In the early issues of Daredevil, and in Miller's later reimagining of the character, this is one of the most common themes. According to Young: 'Jack, a self-proclaimed "uneducated pug", sits in an easy chair with his hands on Matt's shoulders and makes him promise to earn his living with brains, not brawn' (Young 2016, 24). It becomes an irony in Matt's life that he is seemingly unaware of. In his quest to avenge his father and change his city, he moves further and further away from his promise, to the point where he seemingly only uses his law degree to further Daredevil's missions.

Equally ironic is the need Jack conveys, to use his brawn in order to further Matt's education. Lacking the finances to send Matt to university without making a deal with the Fixer, Jack's need for Matt to be more educated than he was, and to have more opportunities, eventually led to his undoing, creating the need for Daredevil. Despite Jack's intentions, his death leads Matt down a dangerous path filled with vengeance and entering him into a world far more deadly than the one Jack inhabited. Jack's gung-ho approach to education combined with the over the top, corrupt circumstances of his death create a complex, often flawed morality for the young Matt Murdock. Yet, while this first act of heroism is an act of vengeance, it opens the broader world of vigilantism up to Matt. Both his relationship with his father and his relationship with his visual impairment informed his brand of heroic justice, prompting him to clean up the mean streets of Hell's Kitchen, while still maintaining his integrity and his secret identity. Although heroes like Batman or Spider-Man have the same motivations in their heroism, the actual methods of heroism vary. While Batman is stoic and isolated, Spider-Man is a more social hero, with his alter ego using his fame for profit, and Daredevil seeks the same results in his everyday life as he does when

seeking justice as a masked vigilante. Even his first outing as a hero is somewhat removed from what is expected. Although Spider-Man may have sought vengeance over the murder of his uncle Ben, his primary paternal influence, the methods they chose varied. According to Young:

If Spider-Man's origin emphasises Peter Parker's moral motivation for becoming a costumed crime fighter via its twist ending, Peter's realization that a thief that he did not even attempt to stop went on to murder his uncle, *Daredevil* #1 begs a different question of superheroic ethics: What punishment does the criminal deserve for killing the hero's father figure, and who decides? (Young 2016, 25).

While Daredevil and Spider-Man may be two of New York's most famous heroes, with similar, preventable origin stories, the main difference between them is not their superpowers or impairments. It is the morality instilled in them by their now absent father figure, and the path they take to honour them.

While Daredevil is known as the man without fear, he literally scared his villain to death, a type of justice he may not have expected, yet one that provides Matt with the closure he may never have otherwise gained. Even as a lawyer, Matt was powerless to stop the Fixer. As a vigilante, he stopped not just the criminal activities, but his life as well. In his early story arcs, Daredevil is very much controlled by the Comics Code Authority¹⁰, and as a result the stories that follow the death of the Fixer tend to be less violent, fitting more with the Comics Code Authority's expectations. They are colourful stories that primarily focus on Matt using his brains, just as his father wished, interspersed with brief instances of violence, none of which reach the heights of the first issue. While comic books and superheroes by nature have a certain level of

¹⁰ The Comics Code Authority was responsible for the censorship of certain themes within the comic book industry.

violence, the Comics Code Authority made certain that a hero with such a blatant bloodlust had no place in mainstream comic books, leading to somewhat watered-down storylines: ‘There was plenty of space in the Marvel line-up for a misunderstood hero like Spider-Man or a bickering family like the Fantastic Four, but no place for a cold-blooded vigilante’ (Young 2016, 26). Although the paternal relationship within Daredevil’s origin is rooted in the binary between education and violence that is perceived by Jack, the Comics Code Authority meant the aspects of the father-son relationship that created the most prominent aspects of Daredevil’s ‘blind justice’ (Young 2016) were not explored in subsequent issues.

As a result, to truly understand Daredevil’s motivations, it is vital to look at the connection created between Jack and Matt, long before Matt was blinded, and Jack was murdered. In Lee and Everett’s Daredevil the father-son relationship is central to the story long after Jack’s death. It is evident even when the paternal relationship is not discussed, evident in Matt’s fighting style as well as in his ability to pause, retreat, and plan, as well as in the moments he uses his education and experience as a lawyer to stop himself going too far. In the early days of Matt’s heroism, it is his father’s moral compass that leads him to pursue a dream of a better Hell’s Kitchen, and to take criminals off the streets. While the relationship between Jack and Matt is shown primarily through infrequent flashbacks, it is no less impactful on Matt as he navigates his new life as a lawyer by day, hero by night. According to Jenkins: ‘The continued attachment to the father implies an oedipal trajectory but also invokes Freud’s notion of the primal father, where the memory of the father becomes invested in a totem object after death.’ (Jenkins 2013, 222). The need to avenge a death is not a new trope within comic books, exemplified by the vast majority of characters discussed in this thesis. The absent parent acts as a motivating factor, bringing John Bowlby’s theories

once again to the fore. Much like Barry Allen and Peter Parker, as discussed in chapter two, Matt Murdock is consumed by the absent parent in a way that makes them irrevocably part of their identity. While characters such as Batman are also consumed by loss, the way their heroism takes them draws a different conclusion. Their heroism is anger based, long after vengeance has been sought. While Daredevil has the potential to be consumed by anger (particularly in Miller's work), for the majority of his time as a hero in Hell's Kitchen, he pays homage to the man who raised him, bringing the recurring motif of boxing and acrobatics as well as education into his heroism, reflecting Battlin' Jack's role as both a boxer and a parent.

By embracing the physical aspects of boxing with the education that was so important to Jack, Matt's heroics are distinctly reminiscent of his father. However, this constant homage brings to the fore the question of masculinity and inheritance. While Matt did not follow directly in his father's footsteps, there is an acknowledgement of his impact, and the idea that this is something that has been passed down to Matt. As Jenkins notes: 'Superhero narratives frequently employ Freudian frameworks in narratives concerned with masculinity and inheritance' (Jenkins 2013, 222). While Matt had an ingrained sense of morality, it was not the only trait passed to him by Battlin' Jack. While Jack instilled in Matt a drive for education, he also inadvertently taught him the value of perseverance, even in the face of adversity. While Matt, as Daredevil, is in mortal danger, this tenacity links back to the tenacity his own father showed in the ring, the same tenacity that cost Battlin' Jack his life: 'After the death of his father...Murdock devotes himself to fighting crime in his public identity as a successful trial lawyer and in his secret identity of Daredevil, hero of Hell's Kitchen' (Alaniz 2014, 69) yet it is difficult to pinpoint who exactly Matt Murdock is. He has successfully created multiple personas in order to successfully live out his double life,

but that has come at a cost. Much like the Incredible Hulk, there is a duality in his personality, but for Daredevil it serves as a means of protecting his identity rather than as a means of protecting his very existence. The Daredevil persona is a direct reflection of Jack, embracing the violence of his Hell's Kitchen upbringing. Matt Murdock must then be seen as timid, meek, and someone who could never possibly be mistaken as the masked vigilante who haunts the criminals of Hell's Kitchen. Matt: 'seems driven to be anyone but himself' (Alaniz 2014, 77), and while this is the perfect way to create a superheroic alter ego, the price is Matt's own sense of identity. He sacrifices himself, becoming a shadow of his father, the one thing Battlin' Jack did not want.

Daredevil #-1 (Kelly 2015), a prequel story, offers a glimpse into the relationship between Matt and Jack, as well as the impact Matt's impairment has on the lives of both characters. While the majority of the series focuses on flashbacks to Matt's childhood, this is one of the only times the reader gets a glimpse at the adult relationship shared between the two, and how that also impacted Matt's heroism. The brief story tells of the moment Matt leaves home, leaving Hell's Kitchen for State University. Jack is rambling in the opening panels, anxious for the unknowns that Matt's future holds away from him. This is a far cry from the brash, somewhat aggressive version of the character seen in issue#1, giving further insight into the paternal relationship and the impact it had on Matt.

Matt, on the other hand, appears irritated by his father's ramblings, eager to prove his ability as an independent student, although he appears to struggle with his frustration. It seems that this moment may divide the characters, with Jack not understanding his son's perspective, and Matt unable to appreciate his father's concerns. Yet the visual impairment stands in the way of each character in the beginning. Jack is limited by what society classifies disability as being, viewing Matt as

weak and frail. Matt, on the other hand, is burdened by his secret abilities, unwilling or unable to tell his father that he is as capable as a blind man as he was as a man with sight. As a result of these oppositional perspectives, the two are depicted at odds with each other frequently throughout the issue. Jack is unwilling to admit his concern, while Matt unwittingly protects his secret identity. It is not until the ableism of the 1960s (Alaniz 2014), and indeed the ableism of the comic book industry as a whole, comes to the fore that Jack's concerns are shown to both the reader and to Matt himself. During a welcome seminar Matt is singled out by the Dean as a 'handicapped student' (Fig. 37), reinforcing the narrative that disability is a very public thing.

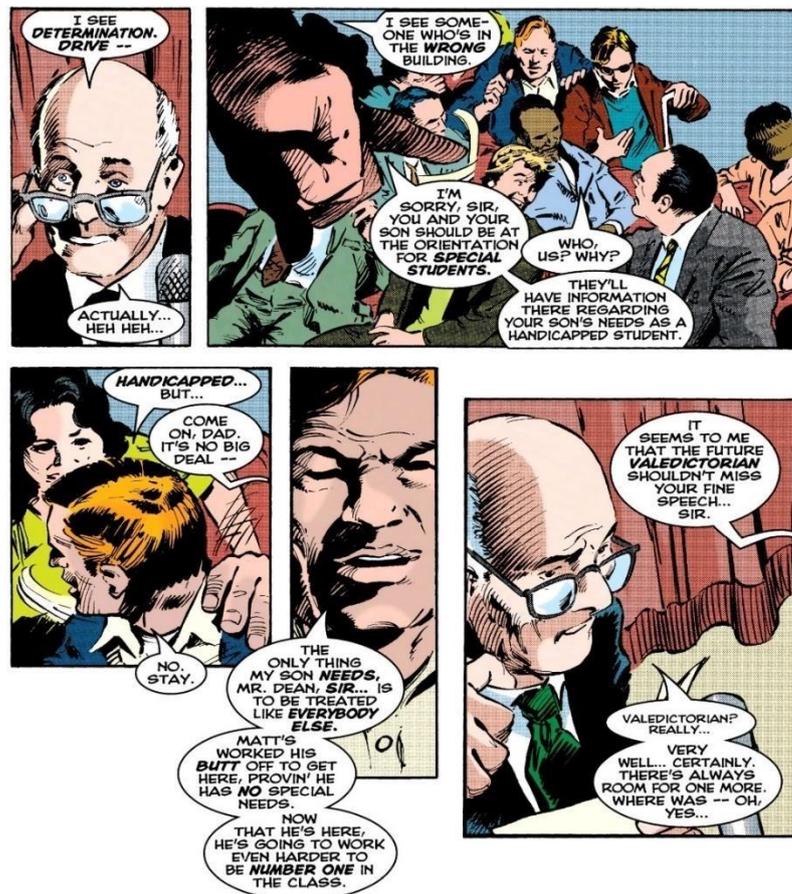


Fig. 37 Disability is seen as something public, Kelly 2015 © Marvel Comics

While the blindness is Matt's impairment, the Dean treats the visual signifiers of that disability as some kind of assumed consent to comment on it. However, it is this

moment that introduces the concept of differently abled within the series. Jack introduces the concept that Matt is capable in spite of his blindness, not hindered because of it, even dismissing Matt's own protests. While he narrates this to the Dean, his actions in the beginning of the issue told the reader a different story. This moment is the first time it is indicated to the reader that Jack sees Matt as capable of surviving on his own, contrary to what is indicated in the opening panels. Jack, while unable to process the emotional aspect of his son's departure for college, is at least able to recognise on some level the ability he has to integrate with other students, excel in his academics, and not be labelled by a narrow societal view on what disability and impairments mean.

However, in spite of the positive intentions on Jack's part, and the positive message he introduced and reinforced, it creates tension between the characters once again. Matt, rather than viewing it as a positive reinforcement and a vote of confidence, views it instead as an added pressure. Where Jack's intentions were pure, Matt now has a reputation to uphold that was created by his father, before he ever got the chance to carve out a path for himself. This follows on from the reputation created for him in Hell's Kitchen, as Battlin' Jack's blind son, mockingly called a Daredevil – a name he later embraced. While Matt struggled to carve out an identity for himself, he was overshadowed by the legacy of his father: ““Hey, Matt, I was just lookin' out for you-” ... “Sure dad... And maybe on Monday you can go to classes for me, too...”” (Kelly 2015). Matt, while aware of the fear his father is feeling, his own anger and even bitterness takes over, highlighting Matt's need to step out of his father's shadow and create his own path, and his own legacy.

Once again Matt attempts to assert his independence, while Jack aims to protect his son from the prejudices and dangers of the world, albeit in a manner that asserts

certain limited types of independence. It is somewhat contradictory and imperfect, no doubt influencing the Daredevil identity, giving Matt an urge to assert himself long before his father's death. While Jack's intentions are noble, they remove Matt's agency within that scene, and in many panels to follow, once again reinforcing the controversial idea that those with impairments are reliant on the able-bodied people around them to give them a voice. It subtly reinforces the ableism seen within the comic book genre as a whole, yet the reader is acutely aware of the abilities that Matt does possess. This makes for a rather uncomfortable situation for the modern reader, and the security of the paternal bond can be called into question here. Jack, perhaps unintentionally, is acting as an oppressive force in Matt's life, causing an eventual need for rebellion. Indeed, Jack is portrayed as a jovial, well intentioned if bumbling father, yet the impact of his actions is detrimental, limiting Matt in a world where he does not need to be limited. Jack does not necessarily adopt one parenting style, often displaying an authoritative and even authoritarian parenting style. He is strict with Matt, even before Matt lost his sight, further complicating their relationship.

Not only does this issue bring to the fore the paternal relationship, but it acknowledges the absent mother figure. Unlike many other instances in his publication history, here the dialogue acknowledges the death of his mother, showing Jack's vulnerability and fear at how he raised Matt (Fig. 38). One of the most significant aspects of Daredevil as a character is his ability to use his brain far more than his brawn, something instilled in him by his father in this issue.



Fig. 38 The role of the mother is seen briefly, Kelly 2015 © Marvel Comics

This is one of the few moments where Jack is portrayed as completely vulnerable, all bravado lost. While he may largely be presented as a brash, gruff boxer, *#-1* shows a different perspective. While Lee and Everett largely show Jack as an absent figure, or show him limiting Matt's personal growth, this issue highlights the fear and vulnerability that he feels, as well as his guilt surrounding Matt's blindness.

The one point in this issue where an attempt is made to show Matt's abilities is when Matt sneaks out of his dorm, returning to the bar where he was earlier mocked for his impairment, and once again unnecessarily defended by his father. This scene, while highlighting the abilities that Matt possesses, creates an exaggerated image of Matt as a bumbling blind man, clumsily injuring those around him. It is a caricature of the hero Matt would eventually become. While this is done in a very intentional manner, it is also problematic, once again reminding the reader of the ableism that surrounds Matt. However, it also shows the connection between Matt and his father, with Matt crediting Jack for his ability to take care of himself (Fig. 39). This is the earliest chronological moment where Matt credits his father with his abilities, serving

as a foundation for his desire to avenge his father's death and protect Hell's Kitchen in later issues.



Fig. 39 Matt credits his father for his abilities, Kelly 2015 © Marvel Comics

The hyperbolised view of his blindness and incompetence is a narrative that is perpetuated in Matt's life, largely to protect the identity of Daredevil. After all, nobody suspects the bumbling, fragile Matt Murdock to be capable of the great feats that Daredevil performs. This is seen even within the early issues of *Daredevil* (1964)¹¹. While the reader is immediately made aware of Matt's radar sense and increased abilities, the surrounding characters are not. Foggy Nelson views himself as Matt's great protector and is often depicted showing worry and concern for his friend, assuming he is unable to protect himself on the streets of New York. However, this concept was introduced by Jack, protecting his son in situations that do not require it. Matt, as an educated young man, is capable of defending himself in an argument, yet is treated as though even this would be too taxing for him, in spite of his chosen career as a lawyer. While the intentions Foggy and Jack, and the majority of typically able-bodied characters display are well intentioned and firmly rooted in the context of the time, for a modern audience it is jarring to know of a character's potential, and to see them reduced to stereotypes regardless of ability. While those around Matt pity him,

¹¹ Helmed by Stan Lee and Bill Everett

and even go so far as to attempt to ‘cure’ his blindness, Matt embraces it, accepting it as part of his identity, unwilling to sacrifice his radar sense (Fig. 40).

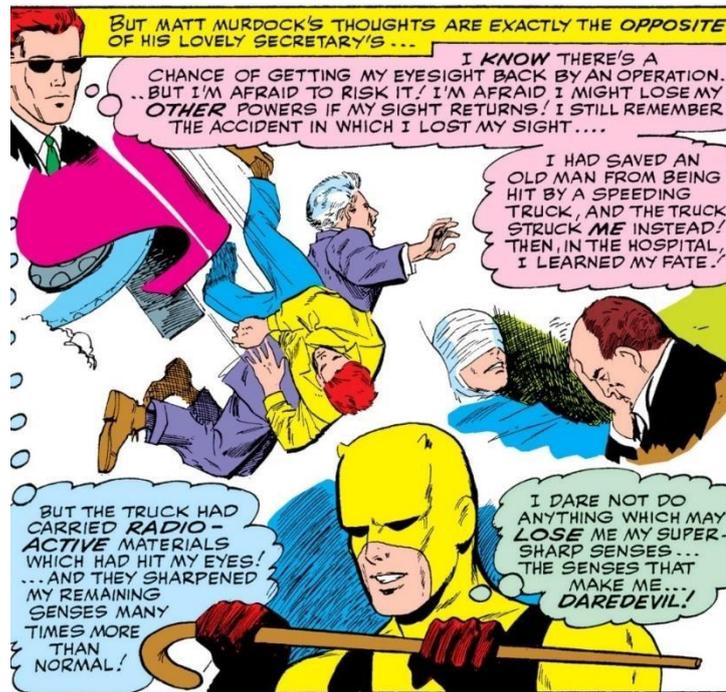


Fig. 40 Matt is unwilling to lose the Daredevil identity, Lee, Everett 2010 © Marvel Comics

This radar sense, combined with the need to need to avenge his father’s death, is what makes him Daredevil, and losing that would cost him a major part of his identity. The first issue of *Daredevil* (Lee, Everett 2010) deals with the origin of Daredevil, as well as the death of Battlin’ Jack. While death and revenge are key concepts in the inception of Daredevil’s identity. Yet the role of grief is diminished here far more than in many comic book origins. While grief and vengeance are strong motivators for Daredevil, the majority of the grief is discussed in one panel with Foggy Nelson, Matt’s best friend and business partner. While Foggy is well intentioned, the manner in which Matt’s grief over the death of his father is treated is unnatural, dismissed before he ever has a chance to process it. This undoubtedly leads to the extra lengths that Matt goes to in order to avenge his father and protect Hell’s Kitchen. Throughout the franchise, Matt takes extreme measures, stemming from the first moment he dons the mask and becomes Daredevil to seek revenge.

The relationship between Matt and his father is complex, and often ambiguous. Issue #1 showcases an anxious bond on the part of the father, afraid to let his son out of his sight lest he lose him forever. On the other hand, Matt displays a more secure attachment, not plagued by the same fears for his safety as his father. Based on Bowlby's attachment theory, Matt displays traits linking him to a secure attachment type. He is confident, self-assured, and trusting. While he is leaving the security of home, and leaving his father behind, he does not have any fear about this. A secure attachment denotes that, in spite of the absence of a parent, the security remains, where the child or adolescent is confident in the knowledge the parent will return, as is seen in the relationship style the Flash displays. As well as Matt's confidence, other aspects of the secure parental attachment are evident. Children and adolescents who display secure attachments with one or both parents generally relate positively to their peers, adapting well to different perspectives and experiences. Matt is shown to integrate well, both in his first introduction to Foggy Nelson in issue #1, and in the main continuity of the series, where it is a prominent feature in his personal life, as well as in his life as a hero. Secure children and adolescents are also competent in classroom situations, which generally continues into adulthood and workplace success. Jack, for his part, sees the potential for Matt to succeed, and while Matt rebels against his new, unwelcome reputation, he himself knows he is capable of succeeding. This is in part due to his enhanced abilities, but more so because of the values instilled in him by his father, and the relationship they shared.

It is because of this security that Matt, even after his father's death, develops new secure attachments. This is primarily seen with Karen Page and Foggy Nelson. While he is secretive with them regarding his heroic extracurricular activities – a common element in the comic book genre – he relies on them, protects them, and is

protected by them as thoroughly as in his relationship with his father. While Foggy was introduced before Jack's death and was a constant feature in Matt's life as he adapted to life without his father, his importance in Matt's life remains significant. While confidence and success are factors in secure attachment, there is also distress when the parent is absent. However, the child is easily comforted, relying heavily on the security of that bond. While Matt is aware that his father will not return, the security and comfort gained from Foggy's presence allows him to progress beyond that stage of grief. Had he not had the secure bond, comfort from Foggy would have had little impact. Karen, on the other hand, is introduced later, when Matt enters the workforce. Initially introduced as part of a romantic subplot, and as someone who sympathises with, and even pities Matt for his blindness, she nevertheless becomes an integral part of Matt's life. In many ways she becomes the motivation in much of his heroics. Where she feels protective of Matt, she feels protected by Daredevil, prompting Daredevil to be a hero for her.

Much like his personal relationships, his approach to heroism is directly informed by his relationship with his father. While issue#1 indicates that the loss of the father figure is directly responsible for the creation of the Daredevil persona, it is seldom referenced after the first act of vengeance. The Daredevil identity is created so Matt can take revenge on the Fixer, but it continues in order to protect the innocent. Daredevil prevents the same fate befalling another innocent victim and spares another child the loss he faced. Matt Murdock, attorney, however, is a direct homage to Jack and the values he instilled in Matt. This again links back to the confidence and success created by the secure bond seen in Matt's early life. Jack believed in Matt, with a focus on education long before Matt lost his sight.

7.3 Cyborg, Transhumanism, and the Paternal Relationship

‘From the fiery depths of tragedy comes the birth of a new hero!’ (Wolfman 2013). This is the first introduction given to the character of Cyborg (Wolfman 2013), ensuring the reader knows exactly the tone his story will have. There will be very little that is joyful or light-hearted in Victor Stone’s origin story. Cyborg, for his part, is one of the most obvious visual representations of physical disability. Half man, half machine, Cyborg has become an icon of DC Comic’s Justice League, even recently making his cinematic debut. Since his debut, Cyborg has been rewritten many times, and is now considered a founding member of the Justice League. According to Curtis and Cardo:

Significant changes relating to race and ethnicity have included a black Captain America, the first Pakistani-American hero in Ms. Marvel, a Chinese Superman and the founding members of the Justice League reimagined to include Cyborg, a black hero created 20 years after the Justice League first appeared (Curtis and Cardo 2017 381).

Cyborg, also known as Victor ‘Vic’ Stone, has a complicated paternal relationship, as is the trend in many heroes’ lives. His life as a hero begins as a direct result of conflict with his father, and a subsequent alien invasion. Unfortunately for Vic, his body was damaged in an explosion, forcing his father to make a difficult decision – save his son at the cost of his body, or let him die. Silas Stone, a brilliant scientist, chose the former, using experimental technology to repair Vic’s body, turning him into a living weapon. As Siebers notes: ‘The ideology of ability requires that any sign of disability be viewed exclusively as awakening new and magical opportunities for ability’ (Siebers 2008, 63). Cyborg’s enhancements can certainly be considered a new opportunity for ability, giving him a distinct advantage over his non-cyborg counterparts.

While the relationship between Daredevil and Battlin' Jack is often complex, changeable, and undoubtedly impactful, it is primarily a positive relationship, providing Matt with the stability and security he needed to become the Devil of Hell's Kitchen. On the other hand, Cyborg has a complex relationship with his own parents, in particular his father. Enhanced and experimented on from an early age, Vic Stone became the prime example within the DC Universe for both the merits and the restrictions of transhumanism. Transhumanism – the concept of enhancing oneself beyond the human form and removing human limitations – is seen consistently throughout Cyborg's publication history. Not only has his mind been enhanced beyond what could naturally be expected, even for those at genius level and the natural suspension of disbelief one has when reading comic books, but his physical form is enhanced to the point where he has become a living weapon. Transhumanism as a concept explores and navigates the relationship between the human body and disability. However, Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1985) is often seen to feminise and fetishize the notion of the cyborg, while simultaneously dismissing the disabled body. This chapter will not seek to look at Victor Stone in relation to this controversy, however it is important to acknowledge the controversies while discussing Vic's transformation.

Much like Matt Murdock, Vic and his father have a complicated relationship with Vic's sudden disability. While Battlin' Jack felt guilt surrounding Matt's blindness, there was no correlation between Matt's impairment and his father. For Vic, on the other hand, his disability and transhumanism are irrevocably linked to his relationship with his father. Silas, being a radical scientist, pushes the boundaries of his knowledge and understanding of the universe. In Vic's tumultuous origin story, he goes to his father's lab in an attempt to confront Silas about the negative, neglectful

model of parenting displayed in early childhood. However, unbeknownst to either Silas or Vic, the lab would face an intergalactic attack, crushing Vic and causing irreparable damage to his body. Once again Vic has become one of his father's experiments, this time in a bid to save his life. However, this raises the question of morality in relation to transhumanism. While the idea of the transhuman or the cyborg appears to be a very futuristic endeavour, there are elements of transhumanism within society today. Both Siebers and Haraway argue the definition of what it means to be disabled, and what it means to be a cyborg. Where a person relies on technological advancements in their everyday lives, often as a result of disability, Haraway argues that this is the first form of cyborg hybridization. According to Siebers:

Our cyborgs are people with disabilities, and Haraway does not shy away from the comparison. Severe disability is her strongest example of cyborg hybridization: "Perhaps paraplegics and other severely-handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices" (Siebers 2008, 63).

Indeed, Victor is rendered disabled and rebuilt, blurring the lines between the ability and the disabled body. Vic, unconscious and dying, was unable to consent to what was, at its core, life-saving surgery. Yet it also broke the boundaries of what could be considered reasonable measures. His body is fused with metal, rebuilding or replacing the damaged limbs. Although the damage was extensive, Vic survived and was able to adapt to his new body quickly – at least physically – and save the day. While the representation of Vic and his enhanced body is currently a hyperbolic view of transhumanism, it is still the body of perhaps the most obviously disabled or impaired character in comic books to date. While certain characters adapt their heroics after being impaired, Cyborg became a hero because of his disability. The two are intrinsically linked, much like Matt's impairment and his role as Daredevil.

One of the first African American superheroes to rise to prominence, Cyborg heralded a new type of comic book hero, not plagued by blackploitation and racial stereotyping like many of his predecessors. He also added a layer of intersectionality as one of the earliest superheroes representing physical disability. While there are now more characters in modern comic books with various forms of disability, including Iron Man, Thor, and Oracle¹² very few of them are representing intersectionality in the same way as Cyborg. Cyborg rose to prominence in the early 1980s as part of the Teen Titans. According to Alaniz:

The first in a miniseries devoted to the origin stories of *New Teen Titans* members (and capitalizing on that series' success), "Cyborg" recounts the biography of Victor Stone, whose scientist parents' research into other dimensions releases a burning slime creature which kills Stone's mother and horribly disfigures him. Stone's father, a weapons scientist, rebuilds his son into a cyborg warrior (Alaniz 2014, 49).

From the onset a complicated legacy is created. Vic has a complex relationship with his family. An authoritarian father, intent on creating the perfect experiment, Silas used his son for experiments long before his body needed to be rebuilt. While Vic was a star athlete, there were limitations placed on him from the moment he was born. While characters like Tony Stark want those in their care to be better than them, Silas appeared to want his son to be a carbon copy of him, a successful scientist not focused on life outside the lab. For Silas, nothing mattered more than his work. The death of his mother and the trauma surrounding his disability and superpowers mean that Vic is perhaps one of the most complicated heroes in DC comics to date. In terms of

¹² Iron Man relies on his suit and arc reactor. Thor's alter ego is Dr Donald Blake, an MD who relies on the use of a cane. Oracle is the alter ego of Barbara Gordon (formerly Batgirl), shot by the Joker. While Barbara could no longer physically fight crime as a wheelchair user, she used her technological prowess to aid other heroes.

disability studies Vic (and many others) are known as borderline cases: ‘whose superpower *correlates* to his or her disabled body’ (Alaniz 2014, 88). It is a simple fact that without the trauma Vic faced, he could not have become a hero in the same way he did. Nevertheless, in spite of being a borderline case, Vic is one of the most intersectional heroes. As Alaniz notes, Cyborg: ‘exemplifies the pitfalls as well as dividends for representing the “borderline” qua racialized supersubject’ (Alaniz 2014, 110). Even when his father is absent, as he is for the majority of Vic’s stories, his presence is felt, not just in Vic’s transhuman body, but in his demeanour. In early representations of the character Vic is stoic, surly, often detached from other members of the team. Vic simply cannot relate to them, often seeming more machine than man: ‘As one of the New Teen Titan’s, Stone’s surly demeanor and misgivings about the traumatic origin of his powers...at times complicate his interaction with other group members’ (Alaniz 2014, 110). His traumatic origin story has given Vic an unwaveringly fearful attachment type. Vic struggles with cultivating personal relationships, particularly relationships that are romantic in nature.

Unable to relate to the other members of his team, Vic often views himself as an outsider, someone on the fringes of the team but not truly part of it. Although *New Teen Titans #1* (Wolfman 2013) opens with the Titans on vacation, with Vic in the middle, it becomes immediately clear that he still views himself as an outsider: ‘Friends... Y’know, we’ve been so busy lately I hadn’t even thought of friends. Though I think when I became this galvanized freak, I lost all my old friends’ (Wolfman 2013). Although the Titans have clearly embraced Vic, he has yet to come to terms with his own fate, lamenting the loss of his life before Cyborg, questioning how true his friends were: ‘True friends... Yeah, they don’t [leave after an accident]. Maybe I just never had any true friends...’ (Wolfman 2013). While Vic is aware on a

conscious level that his parents cared for him, he is also acutely aware of the damage their absence inflicted on him. It appears that the convenience of having a son to experiment on is the primary memory Vic focuses on when he thinks of his childhood, although he is unaware of much of what happened to him: ‘I guess I was handy. They probed me, tested me, wired me up, and God knows what else. Sometimes I thought I was more a guinea pig than a son to them...’ (Wolfman 2013).

As Vic fills his teammates in on his complex childhood, experimentation mixed with family outings, he also discusses the realities of slowly realising the impact of isolation. Eventually Vic craved the outside world, sneaking out just to experience it. Unfortunately for Vic, the sheltered upbringing and authoritarian family gave him a need to please, a desire to connect, and a lack of understanding surrounding human connection. The first friend Vic ever has is Ron Evers, the converse of Vic in every way possible. Where Vic had little knowledge of the world, Ron was street smart, free, and to a young sheltered boy, Ron was undoubtedly representative of the epitome of what Vic believed life should be. This led Vic down a dangerous path, culminating in an arrest for looting. This arrest sparked a fear in Victor regarding his father, yet his relationship with his mother was unshaken. When she expresses concerns over their role in Vic’s arrest, pushing him too far, he rebuffs this: ‘Not *you*, Mom. It’s *dad*. I don’t want science. I just want to do what I want’ (Wolfman 2013). Yet once again Silas asserts his dominance, unwilling to let Vic attend a normal school or interact with people his own age, afraid of what it will do to Vic, and the impact it will have on the experiments. While each of the characters in this thesis has a complicated relationship with their parents or guardians, Vic is perhaps the first to openly hate his father: ‘I think that was the first time I truly felt hate for him. He had dreams, but never once thought that maybe I had some, too’ (Wolfman 2013) (Fig. 41). It is unsurprising

that at an early age Vic felt hatred towards his father, given the authoritarian parenting style coupled with repeated experiments, yet a small glimmer of hope remained with Vic for many years to come.



Fig. 41 Cyborg discusses his relationship with his father, Wolfman 2013 © DC Comics

Schooling became a bone of contention between Vic and his father, with Silas displaying increased demandingness towards Vic, and Vic rebelling against this. Throughout it all, Victor's mother – Elinore – is the only one who questions the morality of their actions. While Silas is irritated by his son, afraid of his behaviour, Elinore is aware of the implications of their actions: 'We've pushed him so hard, Silas, never once wondering if we were doing right' (Wolfman 2013). Yet Silas still laments the fact that Vic will not follow in his footsteps, not satisfied with Vic finding his own

place in the world. In the middle of this familial tension, *New Teen Titans* also highlights the racial tensions prevalent at the time, with Ron being the main focus of this. Regularly depicted in trouble, Ron attempts to recruit Vic for ‘a rumble goin’ tonight with a white gang’, raising concerns because ‘even the cops are comin’ down on us ‘cause we’re black’ (Wolfman 2013).

While Vic attempts to distance himself from this, insisting that it is not his type of fight, the racial tensions within the story, and indeed within society, are too much for him to ignore. While the creators are careful to ensure that none of the Titan’s, Cyborg included, appear racist in any way, the broader racial tension is a major aspect of Cyborg’s origin: ‘I was insulated as a kid and I didn’t grow up hating anyone because of color – but Ron was my friend, and Marcy was my girl’ (Wolfman 2013). While the authoritarian, sheltered upbringing gave him a warped identity, it also protected him from the harsh realities of racial America. As Alaniz states: ‘Cyborg’s origin story... ultimately serves as a parable of assimilation, political moderation, and resistance to the “disfiguring effects of racism – and only secondarily as a narrative about disability’ (Alaniz 2014, 110). However, the gang violence and racial tension that Vic was part of served as yet another wedge between Vic and his father, with Silas effectively disowning him: ‘I swore I wouldn’t call him my son if he wound up this way...and I meant it!’ (Wolfman 2013). One of the most characteristic traits of the authoritarian parent is the unwillingness to let the child explore, make their own mistakes, or experience their own journey. Silas typifies the authoritarian parent to an extreme level.

While much of the relationship issues present between Silas and Victor stem from Silas’s experiments on Victor, Vic used that as a crutch, an excuse to behave negatively without fear of consequence. Indeed, Vic was so used to blaming his father

by this point that he blamed him for the knife attack too. Vic was also confident in his mother's support, so used to her help. This moment was a turning point for them as a family, with Elinore reminding Victor that he had freedom of choice, and here he made the wrong one. They are all finally aware of the anger inside Victor, although he is unable to control it, and they are unable to accept some responsibility for it. By the time Vic was able to reject Ron's violence and hatred (although still influenced by it for a considerable part of his origin) his journey to becoming a hero was already underway. According to Alaniz:

Raised as a lonely prodigy by scientist parents working for both the military and S.T.A.R. Labs, the young Stone latches on to Ron Evers, an Artful Dodger-like juvenile delinquent who instructs him in such vices as smoking, petty theft, and gang violence. Stone's rift with his parents, especially his father Silas, widens as he grows into an athletically gifted young man partly swayed by Evers's racially charged diatribes against "the man" (Alaniz 2014, 111).

As Vic worked to be a better person, his relationship with his father remained unchanged. Conversely, his relationship with his mother remained strong until the day she died, and he was transformed into something more than human: 'Elias [sic] saves his son's life by grafting hi-tech military armor to Stone's skin, transforming him into a man-machine' (Alaniz 2014, 111). However, the moment Elinore died was the turning point in the relationship between Vic and Silas. Silas, having already lost his wife, was unwilling to lose his son, and became consumed by the idea of saving him through his research. While part of his research was interdimensional (the part that killed Elinore and destroyed Vic's body), the other part focused on cybernetic weapons systems, something that Silas adapted to create a superbody. The relationship Vic had with his new, enhanced body was in stark contrast to the relationship his father had with it. Silas rebuilt his son, having a very different opinion regarding the self and the

body: ‘A modern Prometheus my father thought. A latter day Frankenstein was more like it’ (Wolfman 2013) (Fig. 42). Much like Vision, Cyborg brings to the fore questions of humanity, much like Vision, the ethics of Victor’s enhancements are called into question. Like Frankenstein’s Monster, Vic had no option to consent to the enhancements being made on his body, enhanced for scientific purposes far more than for Vic’s benefit. The modern technology that Silas uses to transform his son are not far removed from Mary Shelley’s depiction. As McCutcheon notes:

The modern discourse of technology has a Romantic history: the connotations, inflections, figurative uses, ideological assumptions that accrete around this strictly denotative definition of the word and that supplement its usage and iterations, especially in colloquial speech, take shape as a specific cultural effect of Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (McCutcheon 2018, 11).



Fig. 42 Cyborg wakes to discover his transformation, Wolfman 2013 © DC Comics

While the notion of the monstrous is certainly not something novel within the genre, the Frankensteinian aspect common to both Vision and Cyborg’s stories is somewhat unique. With Shelley redefining the meaning of technology for future generations in

spite of not actually using the phrase, Cyborg's introduction seems to be a direct homage to the original monster. Not only is there a complex, often toxic relationship between Vic and Silas, but Silas rebuilds his son without ever considering the long-term implications for Vic. From societies fear and shunning of the monster figure, to the desire for human connection, Vic's story is perhaps more closely linked to that of Frankenstein's monster than even Vision's was. While Vision is the superhero within his narrative, taking on the role of but Frankenstein and his creation, Vic and Silas have much more strongly defined roles.

Where Silas viewed himself in an almost godlike manner, Vic viewed him as creating a monster. When looking at Stone through the lens of transhumanism or post-humanism, it is also important to consider the criticism surrounding such theories. Popularised by Donna Haraway, the notion of the post-human is often seen as a fetishization of disability: 'Yet the "post-human" approach to disability popularized by feminist Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), has sustained heavy critique by disability scholars who deride its fetishization of technology over the real experiences of disabled people' (Alaniz 2014, 113). With a character such as Cyborg who represents so many underrepresented groups it is important to note the question surrounding the legitimacy of his portrayal as a disabled character. Unlike Daredevil, who is unhindered by his blindness, Cyborg is made more physically capable by his prosthesis, raising the question of the legitimacy of his disability. Siebers further notes:

Haraway is so preoccupied with power and ability that she forgets what disability is. Prosthesis always increase the cyborg's abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. The cyborg is always more than human – and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled (Siebers 2008, 63).

However, in spite of the enhancements his father made, the question of morality is still raised, calling into question the role of the father within Cyborg's story arc.

The moment Vic wakes up to his new body raises the ethical concerns of transhumanism, with Vic once again being his father's experiment. Although Silas was purely focused on the welfare of his son, perhaps for the first time, there is nevertheless the issue surrounding Victor's consent, and Victor's relationship with Silas: 'Stone initially reacts to his transformation into a "freak" with intense horror and suicidal urges. Filled with anger and hatred at his father, he screams, "*Why couldn't you let me die!?!?*"' (Alaniz 2014, 111) (Fig. 42). Perhaps too much had passed between them by this point for Victor to see anything more than malice in his father's actions, and perhaps Silas was so used to experimentation on his son that this seemed like the natural step. In the panels that follow, Vic shows the reader just how much of a struggle his new body was for him. He essentially had to relearn how to be a human. In many ways this ensures that Vic deviates from the stereotypical notion of the hero. He was not suddenly filled with a desire to be a hero simply because he had newfound abilities. Nor was he racially stereotyped as many of his contemporaries were: 'And while "the superhero genre's own conventions can invite a more nuanced depiction of the minority identity"..., minority characters often run the risk of being absorbed into a "generic ideology of the superhero"' (Alaniz 2014, 110).

In the midst of his grief Vic was unable to see his father's perspective, although he later came to realise just how much Silas cared. However, their relationship remained complicated, unable to be repaired completely. The two would never fully understand each other: 'He said nothing. And I hated him even more for that. Of course, I didn't know then how much he cared or how much he really loved me... So I moved to Hell's Kitchen. In a rathole like that, one more Godforsaken loser wouldn't

be noticed' (Wolfman 2013). And still Vic craves intimacy and companionship, despite his perception of himself, eventually finding himself back with Ron, in the midst of yet another criminal plot. Because Vic had developed a fearful attachment type, he fears that loss of intimacy, falling back into old patterns as a result. Yet Vic also has an innate sense of morality which allows him to overcome the misguided sense of loyalty he has towards Ron. It is not until he chooses to stand against Ron that he actually takes the path of the hero. And while much of the controversy surrounding Cyborg's origin story relates to the naïve interpretation of the racial discord in America, with Ron seen as the: 'black-power terrorist cell' (Alaniz 2014, 113), Cyborg himself stands against this. As Alaniz notes: 'In opposing them, Stone casts himself as a heroic figure' (Alaniz 2014, 113). It is a naïve, idealised interpretation of the potential for Vic's character. A considerable amount of this story is seen through the gaze of a white, cisgender, hegemonic male (Alaniz 2014, 113), yet Stone resists in an attempt to herald in the dawning of a new type of hero. Yet this in itself raises issues surrounding the way Vic's family is portrayed. Alaniz further argues:

The story likewise stacks the deck in its depiction of 1970s racial politics, which borders on the reactionary. Stone's flirtation with alternative black culture – he "talks jive" and hangs a "Black Power" poster in his bedroom – is blamed on family dysfunction, the angry posturings of a confused young man. Wolfman's script further reduces the structural injustices of white privilege and inner city violence primarily to the deluded fantasies of the extremist race warrior Evers (Alaniz 2014, 113).

With Wolfman's apparent efforts to minimise the impact of the racial tension he sacrificed the stability of Vic's home life, offering it as a means of creating a sympathetic origin story without further acknowledging the politics of the time. However, moving the primary focus away from racial politics also serves to move Vic

away from the racial stereotyping that other minority characters fell afoul of: ‘Cyborg seems to be a conscious attempt to move past the blaxploitation-era black superhero typified by Luke Cage and Black Lightning, who were “often characterized in their origins, costumes, street language, and anti-establishment attitudes as more overtly than their white-bread counterparts”’ (Alaniz 2014, 113).

While characters such as Luke Cage more closely resemble Ron Evers, and have kitschy catchphrases rather than defined personality, Cyborg does not fall into this trap. While the representation of his family suffered in order to remove him somewhat from this notion of blaxploitation, it also created a more complex superhero. One of the most important elements of the character is his relatability, in spite of his bodily enhancements. By avoiding the pitfalls of stereotyping, he became a much more dimensional, believable character. As Brabant and Mooney note, it is the relatable aspects of a character that appeal to the audience:

‘Saenger (1963) argues that in order to appeal to its audience, the comic strip must reflect the reality of the audience. Although Barcus (1963: 191) suggests that the comic strip “is not a plate glass, high fidelity ‘mirror of society,’ but rather a carnival mirror,” he also concurs that the comic strip is a “major means of conveying information about the culture” (Brabant and Mooney, 1999,114).

Where the majority of heroes discussed in this thesis have an avoidant or anxious attachment type, Cyborg stands out from the crowd with his fearful attachment. According to Feeney: ‘Preoccupied and fearful groups report greater anxiety over relationships than secure and dismissing groups; thus, anxiety over relationships is related to working models of self’ (Feeney 1999, 362). Based on Vic’s relationship with each of his parents, and the subsequent relationships he forms, it is clear that Vic has a complicated sense of identity, particularly as he comes to terms with his

transhuman identity. Vic learned to not expect others to be responsive to him, although it is clear that he still has some hope regarding the people in his life, likely due to the bond he shared with his mother. However, that bond was not strong enough to completely spare him from a fearful attachment type. As Bartholomew et al mention:

Fearful individuals, similar to the preoccupied, do not expect others to be responsive, giving rise to fear and anxiety. However, opposite to the preoccupied pattern of actively seeking support, they inhibit expressing anxiety and asking for support. Instead they deal with their anxiety by maintaining a comfortable distance within their close relationships (Bartholomew et al 2001, 204).

Much of Vic's upbringing showed him experience traumas that act as a deterrent towards seeking help. It is not until he joins the Titans that Vic begins to experience relationships that would allow him to express anxiety without fear of rejection.

It is not until Vic joins the Titans that his relationship with his father begins to be repaired. Consumed by hate, Vic is initially unwilling to listen to his father. However, the other Titan's force him to, and so he begins to understand his father, although that conversation is not shown within the comic book. While Silas was certainly a flawed character, so was Vic's perception of him. 'I – I had let myself hate him for so long – perhaps thinking that because he was my father he should also be an infallible God' (Wolfman 2013) (Fig. 43).



Fig. 43 Cyborg comes to terms with the paternal relationship, Wolfman 2013 © DC Comics

However, once there was an opportunity for open, unbiased dialogue the relationship grew from an authoritarian relationship to a more authoritative one, with Vic seeming to benefit more from Silas's guidance than ever before. As Bartholomew et al note: '[Fearful individuals] can thereby avoid anticipated rejection of their attachment needs by the attachment figure while gaining some indirect support by not alienating the attachment figure' (Bartholomew et al 2001, 204). For Vic, having the other members of the Titan's act as mediators between him and his father removes the element of fear and danger, allowing for open dialogue for the first time in their relationship. Where Vic had previously had trouble conveying his emotions to his father as it generally resulted in conflict, the other members of the Titan's act as a buffer, ensuring that both Vic and Silas benefit from the open dialogue. Part of Vic's fearful attachment has meant that the relationships he did form were not the most secure or beneficial (as is evident with Ron, but also with his romantic interest, Marcy). Nevertheless, the

relationship Vic forms with other Titan's, each of whom has their own complicated origins, allows him to see his father in a new light, opening up the possibility of a healthier attachment type in the future. As Wolfman wrote:

At least because of you, my true friends, I came to love my father... I loved him 'til the moment he died. As I will until I join him. So yeah, real friends... I didn't have 'em while I was growin' up. An' sometimes I get a bit misty eyed 'cause I certainly do have 'em now (Wolfman 2013).

While Vic's issues with his family may never truly be resolved, by finding a group of people who have experienced traumas in the way he has, he begins to come to terms with his early childhood, no longer defined by it.

7.4 Conclusion

Although Matt and Vic share very different origin stories, different superpowers, and different definitions of disability, one thing is clear; both have been impacted by the paternal relationship, their relationship with their impairment, and their father's relationships with their impairments. Where the positive paternal relationship is seen, the hero begins to thrive because of their disability, not in spite of it. While disability is largely seen as a negative in the comic book industry, dismissed and ignored to a large extent, both Cyborg and Daredevil thrive, deviating from the accepted notion of what a hero can be. The hero is no longer synonymous with the able-bodied male, portraying a far more inclusive version of heroism. However, there is still a certain amount of controversy surrounding these characters, since their stories are largely overcoming stories (Alaniz 2014), showing the characters overcoming the perceived limitations of their disabilities and upbringings, ensuring that the narrative does not

too strongly focus on the notion of the disabled body for the superhero, but rather showing the disability as some type of enhancement for the character.

Similarly, the relationship between each character and their fathers can be seen as part of the overcoming story, be it overcoming the grief and loss of the father, or the overcoming traumas within that relationship. While Matt developed more of a secure attachment style, not burdened by the heartache of an authoritarian father figure, Vic is fearful. Yet Matt is the hero who works alone throughout the majority of his publication history, while Cyborg begins to overcome those past traumas in his introductory issue by becoming part of a team, in spite of the difficulties of his fearful attachment type. Daredevil is more dependent on his disability as a source of his identity, yet Cyborg shuns the notion of disability as akin to a personality trait.

Despite the controversies surrounding the representation of the disabled body or the struggles related to the paternal relationship, both Cyborg and Daredevil have developed a strong morality that is unwavering, regardless of the circumstances. While the circumstances surrounding their disabilities is quite different, their refusal to let any adversity limit them is something that makes them both relatable and admirable as heroes.

Conclusion:

For each character discussed in this thesis, the role of the parent is exponentially impactful. For some the secure bond created in childhood has given the child the motivation to protect those less fortunate. For others, it is the loss of the family that is their motivation, and for others it is the impact of the toxic relationship that gives them the desire to be a hero and protect the innocent from the events they could not be protected from. Although each character was created in a different time period, with different origin stories and legacies, one thing connects them – the role of family. For some family is an unattainable thing, yet they still strive for that security. For most the word family is not limited to the biological. Instead they each possess the ability to create a family unit based on their own needs. The family unit within the graphic narrative is flexible and adaptable. Equally flexible is the attachment type each character will adopt. Each character, depicted at different stages of their lives, has displayed a certain amount of flexibility in their attachment. Some have displayed traits of multiple attachment types, highlighting the fact that attachment theory is not necessarily designed as a rigid theory, but rather one that highlights the ever-changing nature of the human psyche.

The importance of the parent-child relationship within comic books cannot be underestimated. Be it a loss of family that haunts the character, the lessons taught to a hero by their family, or the desire to protect their family, each hero is motivated by family. Where the heroes discussed throughout this thesis may seem, at first glance, impossibly different, they are connected by one thing. Every character has a father and a mother, regardless of how present they are within the narrative. The attachments formed in early childhood inform the decisions the heroes will make later in life, both relating to their personal life and their lives as vigilantes. Parenting, like any

interpersonal relationship, is complex and changeable, dependent on a myriad of factors. As Assarsson and Aarsand discuss:

In our data, parenting is described as a multifaceted activity where parents are expected to look after their children's health, wellbeing, mental and physical development, school activities, extracurricular activities and vacations. Parents are supposed to have a general overview and control over dangers and needs in their children's lives, and are responsible for helping them succeed. In other words, being a good parent is being involved in the everyday life of your children (see Lareau, 2003) (Assarsson and Aarsand 2016).

As a result of the variable nature of parenting, it stands to reason that the bonds created are equally multifaceted and changeable.

The more secure the bond created in childhood, the more secure the hero is in later life, generally with fewer surrogate relationships formed as a result. There are some exceptions, such as Batman and Spider-Man, given the highly traumatic circumstances surrounding the loss of their parents and parental figures. However, the impact of the lost relationship can be seen later in life. Where a secure bond was had and the circumstances surrounding loss were not traumatic, secure relationships were formed. Where there was a negative parental figure, the child tends to crave a secure connection which continues into adulthood, informing their decisions as heroes. Heroes who have secure relationships were largely raised by authoritative parental figures, those who displayed a balance between demandingness and responsiveness. Where a parent is child centric, the bond is far more secure, and the child grows into a secure adult.

Similarly, the parenting style proved vital to the development of the child, from their social skills to their confidence, every aspect of their identity is impacted by their parents. Where a child had an authoritative parent, they tend to become more

determined, well rounded heroes, not focused purely on the loss of that parent, but what they can do to help others. Those with authoritative parents tend to be more secure in their attachments with subsequent parental relationships and even in romantic relationships and peer groups. While the comic book genre largely focuses on the hero, with the majority of biological parents only being seen in the origin stories, flashback sequences, or alternate timelines – with some notable exceptions – their presence is felt, nonetheless. While the biological parent is not always seen within the genre, parent figures are a regular occurrence, guiding the hero through their journey from beginning to end. Regardless of attachment type or parenting style, the parent-child dynamic plays a vital role in the development of the hero, creating distinct methods of heroism that reflect the early relationships they had. Without those relationships the depth and meaning found in comic books and superhero narratives would be far less profound. Although the parent is not always seen, they nevertheless create the hero's identity, shaping them into iconic figures that reign over the graphic narrative.

Where the hero has an anxious attachment type, their lives as heroes are impacted, with many consistently seeking out father figures who are at best negative influences, and at worst actively seeking to damage their reputations or destroy the hero. Depending on the demandingness and responsiveness, the anxious attachment can be seen as more or less prominent, which in turn impacts the actions of the hero. Heroes like Spider-Man can display different types of attachment with different people, showing the complexities of the theories. On the other hand, those with an avoidant personality tend to act as solo heroes, often rejecting the connections that other heroes crave, afraid to follow a path that leaves them vulnerable. Yet again this is not something that is applicable to each hero with this attachment type – as is the

case with Iron Man. Similarly, not every hero with anxious attachment will seek solace in a group. Throughout this thesis one thing is clear – no hero is just one thing. They will display traits from different attachment types at different stages in their journey, showing growth in their heroism as well as in their personal lives. The stoic, isolated hero may eventually work well in a team setting, while a secure hero may in turn become wary of those around them, jaded by their line of work.

It is the progression of the heroic identity that drives their story forward. A person's identity is influenced by every person they come into contact with, but it is the parental relationship that influences beyond any other. Some heroes are influenced as much by the lack of parental figures as others are by their constant presence. For many, the simple memory of a parent, or a quest for justice is enough of a driving force to create a heroic identity. It is the legacy of that relationship that makes the heroes journey worthwhile, ensuring that the comic book medium and the heroes journey remains one of the most relatable aspects of popular culture, in spite of the fantastical nature of the medium. Comic book culture works in extremes, yet at its core they are stories about humanity, love, and loss. It is this love and loss that drives the hero forward, saving the world again and again.

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