Gotham City: DC's Utopia for the Wicked

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Abstract— Crime exists in all spheres of life, be it political, social, or economical in nature. Literature reflects life, enabling crime to exist even in fictional worlds. The creators of Gotham, Bill Finger and Bob Kane wanted any person in any part of the world to be able to relate to the city and so based Gotham loosely off of New York City but purposefully left it unattached to any other real-life cities. Gotham is a cosmos of evil, a breeding ground for crime, and a haven for the unscrupulous. For years the city has remained unfettered in its quest for corruption and continues to flourish in the hands of criminal masterminds like the Joker, Riddler, Scarecrow, Poison Ivy, and the like. Gotham's police force is the primary body of unprincipled government officers who fail to uphold the law and indulge in deception themselves. In a city like Gotham, the only ray of hope is the city's vigilante, Batman, also known as Bruce Wayne, billionaire CEO of Wayne Enterprises. This paper studies the city of Gotham through a sociological lens as a microcosm that breeds criminal activity, fosters criminal minds, and paves way for the existence of Batman's dual identity as a vigilante and a private investigator.

Indexed Terms-- Crime, behaviour, villains,

I. INTRODUCTION

The DC Universe is a vast and intricate system of complex character arcs with even more complex storylines. Detective Comics or more popularly DC Comics, was created by pulp fiction writer Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson in 1937. DC released the first Superman comic, *Action Comics*, in 1938. The popularity of Superman's character introduced a new genre of comics: the superhero comics. In the years that followed, DC released newer heroes like Batman (1939) and Wonder Woman (1941) (DeForest). Over the years, the DCU has given birth to various interesting personalities. While the DCU is famous for its superheroes, it is equally famous for its villains and anti-heroes. A prime example is the Joker, Batman's infamous archenemy, a villain who set the standard for being evil incarnate. Apart from the Joker, the DCU is home to several other villains like the Riddler, Penguin and so on. These villains did not strictly choose the criminal lifestyle. It can be argued that such a life was forced upon them. It is common knowledge that many criminals are born owing to the circumstances they grow up in. This concept remains true in the DCU, wherein each criminal personality is marked by tragic events that lead them down the darker path in life. These characters are particularly influenced by the city they live in, i.e. Gotham City. A city known for its notorious criminal activity, Gotham City is described as "a nightmare built out of metal and stone" by Superman ("Gotham City | DC Database | Fandom"). It is the home to Batman and the legacy of Bats, all of whom constantly try to reign the city back onto the path of righteousness but in vain. As the years pass, the city's propensity for crime continues increasing despite the measures taken to curb the said infamy.

II. GOTHAM'S ORIGINS

To understand Gotham's present atmosphere, it is imperative to unearth its origins. Gotham's inception can be traced back to an unspecified time many millennia ago. During this time, it is believed that an evil warlock was buried alive underneath an island that would later become Gotham City. It is also alleged that the evil warlock's ethos seeped into the grounds of Gotham which led to the city's notorious penchant for crime ("Gotham City | DC Database | Fandom"). According to Snyder's Batman: Gates of Gotham, in 1840, the city underwent major urban planning that laid the foundation for its development under the guidance of Judge Solomon Wayne and Cyrus Pinkney. Additionally, Grayson's Batman Secret Files and Origins portrays Pinkney's vision for Gotham as a way to scare Gothamites back to the path of righteousness, which is why he designed the city with heavily fortified walls, gruesome gargoyles on building corners and intricately connected buildings. Though the architecture garnered much trepidation

and discomfort from the populace, Wayne and Pinkney felt it necessary and so Gotham's unique architecture remains the same till date and reflects the city's need for the implementation of a strict moral code. By the end of the 19th century, Gotham became a full-fledged metropolis that thrived on crime further exacerbated by poverty. The city gained a reputation for its corrupt government and crime-riddled population and by 1930s Gotham became a haven for crime ("Gotham City | DC Database | Fandom"). Around this time, Mayer introduced famous heroes like the Green Lantern in All-Star Comics, wherein new heroes rose to answer the call of heroism and the Justice Society of America was formed in order to curb the rate of criminal infestation.

III. FACTORS AIDING IN CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

While Gotham's fondness for crime can be allegedly attributed to the influence of the evil warlock, he alone cannot be held accountable for the city's continued proclivity for crime. According to the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council, the causes of crime can be classified into three categories: Economic Factors, Social Environment and Family Structures. The economic factors that instigate crime include the distribution of financial resources, and disparities in such distributions result in poverty. In terms of the social atmosphere, lack of inclusion, equality and social isolation are prime motivators for criminal behaviour. On the basis of familial relationships, lack of attention, love and care are often observed as triggers for acts of crime. These elements play an important role in laying the groundwork for any individual to indulge in an active criminal lifestyle. The aforementioned factors remain true in a fictional city like Gotham City. While every individual is solely responsible for the choices they make, to believe that exterior factors do not play a role in pushing them towards those choices would be grossly unfair to the people they used to be. Society as a whole plays a significant role in shaping criminal minds, and the society in Gotham City is one which thrives on corruption, misery, and poverty. A prime example of crime in Gotham City would be the deaths of Thomas and Martha Wayne, Bruce Wayne's parents. As affluent members of the society, the Wayne family had a sizable amount of financial assets, much to the envy of many unsavoury characters. Though the family was not corrupt in any way, Thomas and Martha Wayne unintentionally became figureheads for the money-minded elite of Gotham. The deaths of Thomas and Martha Wayne, though reimagined in many comic strips, remains unchanged over the years: the Wayne family gets mugged by a man named Joe Chill, resulting in Thomas and Martha's death which is witnessed by Bruce Wayne (Finger and Kane). This horrific event serves as the initial motive for Bruce Wayne to take on the mantle of Batman. The creators of Batman, Billy Finger and Bob Kane do not give much background for Joe Chill but instead portray him as a petty mugger who kills the Waynes in panic after stealing Martha's pearl necklace. It can be assumed that Joe Chill was part of Gotham's less-than well-to-do populace, thereby making poverty the primary factor that incited him to commit such a crime.

IV. LABELLING THEORY OF DEVIANCE

Considering Gotham's criminal history, the Joker is the most famous of Batman's enemies. However, Batman has several other villains who wreak havoc in the city on the same scale as the Joker. Two such villains are the Scarecrow and Penguin. These two criminal masterminds can be analysed under the Labelling Theory of Deviance. The Labelling Theory attributes its origins to sociologist Émile Durkheim in his book *Suicide*, published in 1897. The theory was further popularised by Howard Saul Becker with his book *Outsiders*, published in 1963. Becker states, "The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label". According to the Labelling Theory, any behaviour that differs from that which is common in human society is considered as deviant behaviour, and any person who exhibits such behaviour is labelled as a deviant by the society (4). In *Outsiders*, Becker states:

> Treating a person as though he were generally rather than specifically deviant produces a self-fulfilling prophesy. It sets in motion several mechanisms which conspire to shape the person in the image people have of him. (Becker 34)

The characters of Penguin and Scarecrow are exemplary personifications of the Labelling Theory. In

the case of Penguin, the character was first introduced in *Detective Comics #58*, published in 1941. Penguin's real name is Oswald Cobblepot. Due to his characteristic appearance, avid interest in birds and unconventional fashion sense, Cobblepot was bullied by his peers and was labelled the "Penguin" (Finger and Kane). Despite hailing from a wealthy family, Cobblepot was rejected by them because of his appearance. Owing to his social alienation, Cobblepot grows up as an extremely closed-off individual and soon turns to a life of crime wherein he adopted the moniker "Penguin" (Finger and Kane). Penguin's crimes are always focused on the theme of birds ("Oswald Cobblepot (New Earth) | DC Database | Fandom") and he is extremely skilled at planning them. Cobblepot's identity springs from his childhood trauma. He sees himself as an extension of his bullies' ridicule and relates himself to the bird as which he is labelled. The social stigma and trauma lead him to the path of darkness, giving him an agency to commit crimes. Similarly, the Scarecrow has his origins rooted in childhood labelling. First appearing in *World's Finest #3* published in 1941, Scarecrow's real name is Jonathan Crane. Growing up, Crane was constantly mocked for his lanky and spindly appearance and was labelled the "Scarecrow" by his peers. He had a horrific home life, abused by his excessively religious grandmother after being abandoned by his parents ("Jonathan Crane (New Earth) | DC Database | Fandom"). A primary source of his trauma emanates from his time at the church where he was forced by his grandmother to dress up in a suit that was contaminated by a homemade chemical which was used to fend of the crows (Finger and Kane). Years of abuse and derision lead Crane to learn the ingredients of the chemical used by his grandmother which he would later use in his own crimes. As a result of being a victim, Crane's hatred for humanity increased and he adopted the identity given to him by his bullies: Scarecrow. As the Scarecrow, Crane invests in fear as his foremost element of torture. His weapon against society became what he was labelled as. In this way, both Cobblepot and Crane became victims of humanity by assuming the stereotypical labels forced upon their identities.

V. SUBVERSION OF THE THEORY

In the character of Batman, the Labelling Theory of Deviance is subverted. While Cobblepot and Crane became what society saw them and feared them as, Bruce Wayne becomes what he himself fears the most. No one labels him and he alone is answerable for the person he becomes. Batman's origin story, as mentioned before, begins in the alley where his parents were murdered. Driven by the need for vengeance, Bruce Wayne begins to train himself to kill his parents' murderer (Miller and Mazzucchelli). Wayne leads a double life: during the day, he is Bruce Wayne, billionaire CEO of Wayne Enterprises and during the night, he is Batman, the Caped Crusader who protects Gotham from the shadows. As an elite member of the society, Wayne has access to financial and military resources that aid him in his vigilante activities (Finger and Kane). Furthermore, Wayne's social standing and lack of disparity in his possession of socioeconomic resources afford him the luxury of having morals and ethics. For example, Batman apprehends criminals and operates on the "No Kill Rule" a personal rule that requires him to leave the criminals alive. He is able to adhere to such a rule entirely because of the comfortable lifestyle he leads. Moreover, despite losing his parents at a young age, Wayne grows up under the careful and upstanding influence of his caretaker Alfred Pennyworth, which instils in him the importance of doing the right thing. Additionally, Wayne is surrounded by people on the right side of the law like Detective James Gordon, the only innocent cop in the Gotham City Police Department who helps Batman in clearing the streets. Batman is an expert detective, uncovering crime rings like the Court of Owls, a covert group of Gotham's elite who indulge in criminal activities (Snyder). Along with martial arts, Wayne trains himself in science and forensic analysis; this can be observed in Snyder's Batman: The Court of Owls, when Wayne retrieves the remains of his ancestor and expertly identifies who the remains belong to. Wayne also has advanced technology at his behest which he uses to track down criminals (Snyder). Adding to the resources in his possession, Wayne has exceptional investigative and analytical skills that make him more than just a wealthy entrepreneur. He functions as a private detective and also pools resources with Detective Gordon to keep him informed about the crime that takes place in the city. As a vigilante, Batman has the freedom to cross bureaucratic lines and break protocols that might

otherwise hinder a detective like Gordon in his investigation. Being a vigilante allows Batman the liberty to work on his own, at his own pace and to not have to answer to any authority other than himself. Like this, Bruce Wayne and Batman are indispensable assets in deconstructing Gotham's criminal microcosmos.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the city of Gotham may very well be considered beyond redemption by the general population of the city, but not by Batman. Combined with his physical prowess and strong moral compass, Batman and Bruce Wayne prove to be worthy guiding lights for the desolate landscape that is Gotham. Gotham promotes a soul-crippling lifestyle that motivates its inhabitants to resort to criminal activities as a way to survive. The city's living conditions hamper the spirit of hope and encourages its citizens to take matters into their own hands rather than relying on law enforcement agencies like the GCPD, which is justifiable, since the body of law and order is also a corrupt force. Though villains like Jonathan Crane and Oswald Cobblepot cannot be acquitted of all their crimes and should be held culpable for all their misdemeanours, they are also unfortunate collateral damage in the city's fight for its soul. Their characters prove that in a city like Gotham, not everyone can afford to be concerned about upholding the law and exhibiting a moralistic behaviour. A blessed few like Bruce Wayne are able to pull through simply because of secure socioeconomic resources. At the end of the day, Gotham is an utopia for crime where one becomes what they fear in order to survive.

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