

Not a Game for Knights: Chivalry, Corruption and God's Lonely Men

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One of the most longstanding traditions of Western literature is the story of the knight-errant, who leaves the court of the king and travels around, performing deeds of chivalry. Even if he is engaged in some larger quest – such as the search for the Holy Grail – it is still incumbent upon him, if he comes upon someone in need, to do what he can to help them. The knight is more than simply a medieval policeman. As the flower of chivalry, he represents all that is best in society; and in his purity, he is rewarded by God with the strength and ability to help others – and even, on occasion, to perform miracles.

This theme has continued to echo through literature to the present day. However, as our world has become increasingly sophisticated, knighthood is no longer such a clear cut matter. So how do we recognise a knight?

He is a man with iron principles. He knows the world is shades of grey, but he lives like it's black and white. There's a nobility in him – a gallantry, if you like.¹

Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "The world is a fine place and worth fighting for." I agree with the second part.²

She cannot abandon the ideals of fealty, chastity, and justice that define her chivalric identity.³

To fight for the right/Without question or pause/To be willing to walk into Hell/For a Heavenly cause.⁴

At the most basic level, a knight is someone who helps people in need, and this tends to be one of the most defining aspects of his personality. He has principles of right and wrong – of honour – by which he lives his life, even if these principles are not shared by the rest of society. Following from this, however, he has few personal connections, and in the end he is always alone.

¹ Gemmell, David. *Quest for Lost Heroes*. London, Arrow Books Limited, 1990, p. 93

² Walker, Andrew Kevin. *Se7en*. 1995.

³Rzepka, Charles J. "I'm in the business too: Gothic chivalry, private eyes, and proxy sex and violence in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 46 (3), 2000, p. 715

A great many American television series have been based around the idea of a lone hero, who travels from place to place. Although the hero may have some overriding quest (the reason for his travels), the focus of each individual episode is the solving of a "problem", so that the people will be able to live "happily ever after", while the hero moves on. A classic early example is *The Fugitive* (1963-1967), in which Dr. Richard Kimble, falsely accused of murder, spends "four seasons on the run - helping people with their problems and searching for the one-armed man, while running before the relentless pursuit of the police detective obsessed with his capture"⁵

Other television series driven by the knight-errant motif include *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957, with an animated version 1966-1969)⁶, *Branded* (1965-1966)⁷, *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-1982)⁸, *Quantum Leap* (1989-1993)⁹ and *The Pretender* (1996-2000)¹⁰. Indeed, it was even the driving force of a children's program, *The Littlest Hobo* (1963, remade 1979-1985):

London is an extremely intelligent, wandering German shepherd who walks into a different place in each episode of this long-running television series, and comes upon people down on their luck or in trouble. London always befriends and helps the struggling person or persons. Then, when his job is done at episode's end, London declines to be the pet of the people he has helped and departs to continue his cross-country drifting.¹¹

Because of its nature, a television series about a knight tends to focus on the individual acts of knight-errantry, rather than the overriding quest, which must remain unresolved if the series is to continue. Other media, however, have the

⁴ Wasserman, Dale. *Man of La Mancha*. 1972

⁵ McKee, Marty. Plot summary for *The Fugitive*. *Internet Movie Database*. [<http://www.imdb.com/Plot?0056757>]

⁶ To the tune of the William Tell Overture, the Lone Ranger, and his Indian companion Tonto, ride through the American West on Silver and Scout, doing good for others, and then riding off as people ask "Who was that masked man, anyway?"

⁷ Jason McCord, accused of cowardice following the Battle of Bitter Creek, wanders the Old West helping others while he tries to clear his name.

⁸ Dr David Bruce Banner takes on a new identity each episode, and uses the abilities of his alter ego, The Hulk, to solve other people's problems, and then moves on before Jack McGee (a crusading reporter) can catch him. His ultimate quest is to learn to control the monster within him.

⁹ Following premature use of a time travel machine, Dr Sam Beckett finds himself "leaping" from body to body in different times in the past. Although Sam has no control (all he wants is to go home), each "leap" is for a reason: he must set something right, and when he has achieved this, he automatically leaps again. He never does get home.

¹⁰ Jarod has been raised by a mysterious agency, and trained to take on other personalities. Following his escape from the agency, he searches for clues to his true identity, and uses his abilities to help people in need.

¹¹ McCorry, Kevin. Plot summary for *The Littlest Hobo*. *Internet Movie Database*. [<http://www.imdb.com/Plot?0078644>]

space to probe more deeply into the nature of the knight, and how he fits in with the rest of society.

In *The Searchers*, John Wayne's character, Ethan Edwards, takes on the role of the questor, as he spends years searching for his niece, Debbie, kidnapped by Indians. Ethan, like so many Western heroes, is a "loner". Rather than settling down with a family and a farm, he chose to go off to war – and then, for three years afterwards, to "wander" rather than returning home. The reasons for this are unclear: "the question "What makes a man to wander .. and turn his back on home?" that initiates *The Searchers*' quest is never answered."¹² However, it seems likely that Ethan's feelings for his brother's wife were a strong contributing factor.

Having returned, he immediately adopts a "knight protector" role, enabling his brother to stay at home while he goes with the Reverend Captain Samuel Johnson Clayton's posse. After the massacre of his brother's family, Ethan initially continues to work with members of the community, but soon decides he can work better alone: "From now on, you stay out of this. All of ya. I don't want you with me. I don't need ya for what I got to do."¹³ However, he reluctantly allows Brad Jorgensen and Martin Pawley to accompany him. Brad does not survive long, but Martin can be seen as filling the role of a squire: assisting the knight in his quest, and ultimately learning the skills to become a knight himself.

We – and Martin – soon learn, however, that Ethan is not a pure, heroic knight of Arthur's court. Sensing that they are going to be ambushed by Futterman's men, Ethan uses the unknowing Martin as bait to draw them in, and then shoots all three members of the gang.

What is disturbing in this scene is not that Ethan should have killed the men ... but that he delights in the action, much as he delighted in shooting out the eyes of the dead Indian, killing Indian warriors at the river, and later shooting the buffalo so that the Indians would be deprived of their meat.¹⁴

In addition to his relish in acts of violence, the other highly disturbing thing about Ethan is his attitude towards the woman he is supposed to be rescuing. His hatred of the Comanche is so extreme that once Debbie has been tainted he feels

¹² Stern, Lesley. *The Scorsese Connection*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1995, p32

¹³ Nugent, Frank S. *The Searchers*. 1956.

that the only way to rescue her is to kill her. In the end, "blood ties, the sense of family or kinship, prove stronger than murderous hate"¹⁵, and he takes her home – but it is a home that he, himself, cannot enter. The door closes on the family, and Ethan walks away - as he first came - alone.

In fact, it is Martin who ultimately kills Scar. However, he could not have done this without Ethan to teach him. Martin – who never shared Ethan's manifest joy in slaughter, and who always wanted to save Debbie - rejoins civilized society, to become a family man. Ethan, by contrast, will "wander forever between the winds".

He does not belong to the civilized community that the Jorgensens have come to represent. Among the whites, Ethan is clearly the most savage and least social, the quintessential Western loner. And yet, it is he who was instrumental in promoting the development of civilization in the region by ridding the area of Western monsters, the savage Indians under Scar. Ironically, then, Ethan can never belong to the culture he helped to create because of his fierce violence and propensity toward fanatical anger, the very qualities that in time made the West more civilized.¹⁶

Like the medieval knights, Ethan is a protector of society. Unlike them, he does not represent all that is best about civilization. Rather, he represents a violent underside that society needs in order to survive in the American West. However, when that need is over, they close the door and turn away.

In *The Searchers*, civilized society is under threat from external forces, but Mrs Jorgensen says "I don't think it'll be forever. Some day, this country's gonna be a fine good place to be"¹⁷ – perhaps with the help of "knights" such as Ethan Edwards. However, this optimistic view does not carry through to American works with contemporary settings. Raymond Chandler describes the world of the modern, "realist" detective as one

in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law

¹⁴ Clauss, James J. "Descent into hell." *Journal of Popular Film & Television*. 27 (3), 1999, p. 5

¹⁵ Card, James Van Dyck. "*The Searchers*: by Alan LeMay and by John Ford." *Film Literature Quarterly*. 16 (1), 1988, p. 7

¹⁶ Clauss, *op. cit.* p. 129.

¹⁷ Nugent, *op. cit.*

and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing ... It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in.¹⁸

The threat is no longer an external one, to be kept at bay: rather, corruption now permeates society. And yet, even in this world, Chandler suggests, knights can make a difference:

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. ... He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. ... If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in.¹⁹

From the very first page of *The Big Sleep*, Chandler's Philip Marlowe is overtly presented as a modern day chivalric knight. Looking at a stained glass panel of a "knight in dark armour rescuing a lady", Marlowe thinks "if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying."²⁰ Unfortunately, the people around him are not of the same chivalric type.

Marlowe's professional connection with his employer, General Sternwood, "turns out to be the single most important relationship in *The Big Sleep*."²¹ In fact, it is akin to the relationship between a knight and his liege lord, driven by "the rule of *comitatus*, [which states that the knight has a] duty to protect his liege lord's interests at all times"²². As Marlowe says to the General, "You don't know what I have to go through or over or under to do your job for you. I do it in my way. I do my best to protect you and I may break a few rules, but I break them in your favour. The client comes first."²³

However, General Sternwood is no King Arthur. Although he has many good features – he respects the law, is a good conversationalist and is free of both illusions and false pretences – he has nevertheless used his money to hold himself

¹⁸ Chandler, Raymond. *The Simple Art of Murder*. New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1950. (Vintage Books Edition, August 1988), p. 17

¹⁹ Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. 1939. (Edition used: London, Pan Books, 1979), p. 18

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 5

²¹ Irwin, John T. "Being Boss: Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*." *The Southern Review*. 37 (2), 2001, p. 7

²² Rzepka, *op.cit.*, p. 703

²³ Chandler (1939), *op. cit.* p. 174

aloof from the mass of society, and he admits openly "Neither of [my daughters] has any more moral sense than a cat. Neither have I. No Sternwood ever had."²⁴

If the General is a slightly soiled liege lord, his daughters are perversions of the two types of women found in knightly romances: the knight's "lady", whom he loves chastely, and for whom he performs his deeds of glory; and the innocent "damsel in distress" who is, of course, rescued by the knight.

Like the General, Vivien Sternwood has some admirable features, such as wit, intelligence and family loyalty. However, she is also "spoiled, exacting ... and quite ruthless"²⁵. In covering up murder, consorting with racketeers and trying to seduce Marlowe away from his work (and, when that fails, to buy him off), she shows that she has become tainted by the corrupt world in which she lives.

Her younger sister Carmen lacks even Vivien's good qualities: she is "a child who likes to pull wings off flies"²⁶. In her childishness, she could, using a very broad definition, be termed "innocent", although Marlowe prefers the equally descriptive "dope". It is arguable that she is not totally responsible for her own actions. Marlowe's solution (to take her "somewhere far off from her where they can handle her type") is not merely to shield the General, but also because "she might even get herself cured, you know. It's been done." Nevertheless, she has killed, and is quite willing to kill again. Taking her "where they will keep guns and knives and fancy drinks away from her"²⁷ will protect her from the corruption of society – and it will also protect society from her.

Marlowe, no fool, recognizes the world for what it is. He knows that his idealistic code is hopelessly out of place in a society permeated by evil – that "knights [have] no meaning in this game"²⁸. And yet, he stubbornly clings to principles that most other people do not share, or even understand. As he explains to Vivien, "I risk my whole future, the hatred of the cops and of Eddie Mars and his

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 13

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 187

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 129

pals, I dodge bullets and eat saps ... for twenty-five bucks a day – and maybe just a little to protect what little pride a broken and sick old man has left in his blood”²⁹.

He never gets the girl, never marries, never really has any private life, except insofar as he must eat and sleep and have a place to keep his clothes ... he gets nothing but his fee, for which he will if he can protect the innocent, guard the helpless and destroy the wicked, and the fact that he must do this while earning a living in a corrupt world is what makes him stand out.

Unappreciated, unrewarded and unloved, at the end of the *The Big Sleep* Philip Marlowe is alone – just as Ethan Edwards was at the end of *The Searchers*. Philip Marlowe is a pure knight acting in a corrupt world, Ethan Edwards a tarnished knight protecting an innocent society: neither of them fits in, but in both cases society benefits from their existence.

Martin Scorsese has openly acknowledged that *The Searchers* was a great influence on his own film, *Taxi Driver*. Certainly, there are clear similarities between the major characters, Ethan Edwards and Travis Bickle. Both have returned from the losing side of a war, both are determined to “save” a young woman who may not want to be saved³⁰, and both of them are loners, “two of the most isolated characters in the entire range of American film”³¹. However, Ethan, although a loner, nevertheless has the capacity to interact with others, and to form connections³² – an ability that Travis demonstrably lacks.

Loneliness has followed me all my life. The life of loneliness pursues me wherever I go: in bars, cars, coffee shops, theatres, stores, sidewalks. There is no escape. I am God's lonely man.³³

Despite similarities in character, Ethan and Travis occupy two very different worlds. While civilization in *The Searchers* is desirable and pure (with Ethan as a dark underside), the society of *Taxi Driver* is even darker than that of *The Big Sleep*:

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 186

³⁰ This similarity may not be as great as it initially seems. Ultimately, Debbie does say that she wants to be rescued, whereas we get no such comfortable assurance from Iris. Furthermore, a large issue in *The Searchers* is the question of precisely what Ethan's notion of “rescuing” his niece. By contrast, Travis never strays from the conventional “You're a young girl, you should be at home now.”

³¹ Famiglietti, Ben. “The Western Revisited in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.” 1995. [<http://www.film.queensu.ca/Critical/Famiglietti.html>]

³² The one real exception to this being his unexpressed feelings for his sister-in-law.

³³ Schrader, Paul. *Taxi Driver*. 1976.

All the animals come out at night - whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies. Sick, venal. Someday a real rain'll come and wash all this scum off the streets.³⁴

If Chandler's Los Angeles is corrupt, Scorsese's New York is positively diseased.

Like *The Big Sleep*, *Taxi Driver* also contains distorted versions of chivalric characters: the liege lord (General Sternwood and Palantine), the lady (Vivien and Betsy) and the damsel in distress (Carmen and Iris). The difference is that Philip Marlowe knows that these people have not stepped out of a chivalric romance, while Travis Bickle is initially unaware of this fact.

As he comes to realize that neither his lady nor his lord has the qualities he had vested in them, Travis's fragile hold on sanity begins to slip. He tells Wizard "I got some bad ideas in my head", and later soliloquizes "The idea had been growing in my brain for some time. True force. All the king's men cannot put it back together again." To execute this idea, he decides "I gotta get in shape now"³⁵ (a notable contrast to Marlowe who, in the first paragraph of *The Big Sleep*, tells us he is "neat, clean, shaved and sober"³⁶). However, his plan to assassinate Palantine fails, and he feels there is only one thing left for him to do: save his "damsel in distress". The horrific carnage by which he achieves this shows that he has traveled much further than Ethan Edwards down the path of violence.

Unlike Ethan or Marlowe, Travis is celebrated for his actions: he receives the adulation of the press, the gratitude of Iris's parents and the comradeship of his fellow drivers. Even Betsy is willing to talk to him again. So perhaps this is "a game for knights"³⁷. However, in spite of the "legitimacy to [his] moral outrage ... the erosion to the fabric of society does not justify [Travis] as he himself becomes anti-social"³⁸.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Chandler (1939), *op. cit.* p. 129

³⁸ Swensen, Andrew J. "The anguish of God's lonely men: Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Scorsese's Travis Bickle". *Renascence*. 53 (4), 2001, p. 280

Furthermore, if we see Ethan as Sir Gawain³⁹, and Marlowe perhaps as Sir Bors⁴⁰, we may choose to view Travis as Sir Parsifal⁴¹. However, in reality he is more akin to a dark version of Don Quixote. Whereas Ethan and Marlowe see the world for what it is, and recognize their place in it, Travis's perception is delusional. In "a universe in which the True, the Good, and the Beautiful have not only lost their meaning but have evaporated altogether,"⁴² Travis believes he has nevertheless found some of the chivalric archetypes. When two of these fail him, this pushes him over the edge. In his "rescue" of Iris, he may simply be trying to act before she, too, proves to be an illusion. "In this state of "spiritual poverty" and "spiritual bleakness" ... [Travis] retains an intuitive longing for the ideal but no longer possesses the capacity for identifying, exemplifying or realizing it."⁴³

In fact, Travis Bickle has much in common with other fictional characters who react against the violence of society by becoming part of it, such as MacLyle in Theodore Sturgeon's "And Now The News"⁴⁴, or, to take a more recent (and better known) example, John Doe, the serial killer in David Fincher's film *Se7en*.

We see a deadly sin on every street corner, in every home, and we tolerate it. We tolerate it because it's common, it's trivial. We tolerate it morning, noon, and night. Well, not anymore. I'm setting the example. And what I've done is going to be puzzled over, and studied, and followed ... forever.⁴⁵

John Doe's speech bears a striking similarity to Travis's claim about himself:

Here's a man who would not take it anymore, a man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is someone who stood up.⁴⁶

However Travis may view himself, in the end *Taxi Driver* is not a tale of a displaced knight: rather, it is "a bizarre success story about how a sick young man

³⁹ A knight of the "old school" – prone to violence, and whose highest commitment is to family.

⁴⁰ Among the purest of Arthur's Grail knights.

⁴¹ The "pure fool".

⁴² Swensen, *op. cit.* p. 283

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ MacLyle shared John Donne's feeling that "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind". He felt he was getting "diminished to death" by society. His solution? "I'm going out there to diminish mankind right back" ... He killed four people before they got him."

⁴⁵ Walker, *op. cit.*.

⁴⁶ Schrader, *op. cit.*

finds his place in an equally sick world.”⁴⁷ If we want to see a film about a delusional knight in modern New York, we should rather turn to Terry Gilliam’s *The Fisher King* (“A modern day tale about the search for love, sanity, Ethel Merman and the Holy Grail”⁴⁸). In this film, Parry, like Travis, has lost touch with reality. However, unlike Travis, Parry has the “innocence and purity of spirit”⁴⁹ shown by both Don Quixote and his own namesake, Sir Parsifal, which keeps him free of the corruption surrounding him.

Another place we can turn for modern knights is comic books. In May 1939, *Detective Comics* #27 introduced a new knight to the world: the Batman. Among the most enduring of comic book heroes, this character has undergone a series of changes in the decades since his first appearance.

Originally an urban vigilante, by the late 1950s he had begun “to behave more like a school prefect than a crime-fighter,”⁵⁰ and by the mid 1960s, he was a comically camp figure. However, writer Dennis O’Neil reinvented the character in a series of realistically gritty adventures: “My brilliant idea was simply to take it back to where it had started.”⁵¹

Then, in the mid-1980s, writer/artist Frank Miller created the magnificent, four-part “prestige-format” series, *The Dark Knight Returns*, which “presented the last adventure of an aged and bitter Batman in Miller’s vision of Gotham’s future – a dark, corrupt and violent moral wasteland.”⁵²

Gotham City has always been a darker environment than that inhabited by other comic book heroes.

As current Batman editor Dennis O’Neil put it: “Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year. Metropolis is Manhattan

⁴⁷ LaSalle, Mick. “Taxi Driver Still Runs Hard.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 February 1996. [<http://www.filmsfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1996/02/16/DD10934.DTL>]

⁴⁸ Tagline, <http://us.imdb.com/Taglines?0101889>

⁴⁹ Swensen, *op.cit.*, p. 282

⁵⁰ Boichel, Bill. “Batman: Commodity as Myth” in Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (Eds) *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. New York, Routledge, 1991, p 14

⁵¹ O’Neill, *op. cit.* p. 18

⁵² Boichel, *op. cit.* p. 16

between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Streets on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year.”⁵³

By the time of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Gotham has become a “dark and unfriendly city in decay, populated by rabid and sociopathic streetgangs”⁵⁴ Once corrupt and crime-ridden, like the Los Angeles inhabited by Philip Marlowe, Gotham City has now become even more diseased than the New York of Travis Bickle: “WE NEVER FACED ANYTHING LIKE THIS – WE ONLY FOUGHT *HUMANS*.”⁵⁵ Is there a place for a knight – even a Dark Knight – in this world? This is the question that *The Return of the Dark Knight* attempts to answer.

In this near-future, we learn that most of the heroes of the DC comic book universe are no longer around, as the world had decided that it could no longer live with them, and had started to hunt them down. The heroes responded by departing (“DIANA WENT BACK TO HER *PEOPLE*. HAL WENT TO THE *STARS*.”⁵⁶) or going underground (“I GAVE THEM MY *OBEDIENCE* AND MY *INVISIBILITY*. THEY GEAVE ME A *LICENSE* AND LET US *LIVE*.”⁵⁷). Bruce Wayne initially laughed at this political expediency – “SURE WE’RE CRIMINALS ...WE’VE ALWAYS *BEEN* CRIMINALS. WE HAVE TO BE CRIMINALS.”⁵⁸ – but finally agreed to retire the Batman, after the death of Jason Todd – Robin – the Dark Knight’s squire.

The story opens ten years after this event. Bruce Wayne is drinking heavily and has become borderline suicidal, while the Batman seems to have temporarily become a separate entity within him: “IN MY GUT THE CREATURE WRITEHES AND SNARLS AND TELLS ME WHAT I NEED.”⁵⁹ Bruce tries to resist the pull to become the Batman again – “I WILL NOT *LET* HIM. I GAVE MY *WORD*. FOR *JASON*. *NEVER*. *NEVER* AGAIN.” – but finally he can no longer ignore it. And thus begins Frank Miller’s “Great American

⁵³ *ibid.* p. 9

⁵⁴ Moore, Alan. “The Mark of Batman”. Introduction to Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*. New York, DC Comics Inc, 1986, p. 3

⁵⁵ Miller, Frank. *The Dark Knight Returns*. New York, DC Comics Inc, 1986. Book 2, p. 20

⁵⁶ *ibid.* Book 3, p. 14

⁵⁷ *ibid.* p. 35

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 31

⁵⁹ *ibid.* Book 1, p. 4

Superhero story", a four-part "opera" about the fall of the hero in a world that has rendered him obsolete."⁶⁰

In this crime-ridden city, the Batman is indeed a Dark Knight, who is not afraid to meet violence with violence: "THERE ARE SEVEN WORKING DEFENSES FROM THIS POSITION. THREE OF THEM DISARM WITH MINIMAL CONTACT. THREE OF THEM KILL. THE OTHER - - - HURTS."⁶¹ However, unlike Ethan Edwards (and Travis Bickle) he does not kill – to do so would mean "CROSSING A LINE I DREW FOR MYSELF THIRTY YEARS AGO."⁶² Unfortunately, to some people, this distinction is irrelevant.

As the role of the Batman is debated in the media, the anti-Batman lobby takes the view that "IF YOU TOSS IN THE VICTIMS OF HIS *FAN CLUB*, THE *BATMAN-RELATED BODY COUNT* IS UP THERE WITH A MINOR WAR. ... WHO GAVE THIS *THUG* THE RIGHT TO DECLARE *MARTIAL LAW*, HM? LAST I HEARD, THAT TAKES AN ACT OF CONGRESS."⁶³ The opposing side argues that "WE ARE *VICTIMS* - - OF *FEAR*, OF *VIOLENCE*, OF *SOCIAL IMPOTENCE*. A *MAN* HAS RISEN TO SHOW US THAT THE POWER IS, AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN, IN *OUR HANDS*. WE ARE UNDER *SIEGE* - - HE'S SHOWING US THAT WE CAN *RESIST*."⁶⁴ In other words, the Batman is "THE LIVING SPIRIT OF ... SOMETHING WE *NEED*."⁶⁵

We, the readers, are encouraged to share the second point of view. However, because "values of the world we see are no longer defined in the clear, bright, primary colors of the conventional comic book"⁶⁶, we can also see the validity of the first point.

The Batman, like Ethan Edwards, is really too violent for his society – even though the society is already steeped in violence. The problem is, the Batman's violence operates outside the boundaries of the law, and very much in the public eye, so there is some justification for seeing it, like that of Travis Bickle, as part of

⁶⁰ Miller, Frank. Interview by Christopher Sharrett, in Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (Eds) *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 33

⁶¹ Miller (1986), *op. cit.* Book 2, p. 31

⁶² *ibid.* Book 2, p. 21

⁶³ *ibid.* Book 3, p. 40

⁶⁴ *ibid.* Book 2, p. 10

⁶⁵ *ibid.* Book 3, p. 13

⁶⁶ Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 3

the problem rather than part of the solution. Does this mean that Bruce Wayne is essentially delusional, like Travis, rather than being a true knight?

He certainly lacks the central stability and sanity of Philip Marlowe – but then, so does Ethan Edwards. More than Marlowe – and even than Ethan – Bruce Wayne is driven to do what he does. The Batman was essentially born on the night his parents were killed, and Bruce's whole life since that day has been dedicated to giving him form. However, this does not mean that Bruce Wayne is the same as Travis Bickle.

The basic story is that he is an obsessed loner. Not crazy, not psychotic. There is a big difference between obsession and psychosis. Batman knows who he is and knows what drives him and he chooses not to fight it. He permits his obsession to be the meaning of his life because he cannot think of anything better.⁶⁷

In fact, Dennis O'Neil's analysis of Bruce's personality could equally be applied to Ethan – but not to Travis.

Marlowe, although he occasionally “breaks the rules”, nevertheless essentially operates within the constraints of the law. Similarly, Ethan acts on a sufficiently small scale that, even if he does step outside the law, the authorities can afford to turn a blind eye to the telescope. The Batman, however, expects the law to be flexible for him – or rather, this is what has always happened, to an extent that he is unaware of. On the day of his retirement, Police Commissioner Jim Gordon muses “WHEN I THINK OF *BRUCE* -- AND WHAT HE'S IN FOR – I DON'T THINK HE CAN POSSIBLY KNOW HOW MUCH I BENT AND BROKE THE RULES FOR HIM ALL THESE YEARS -- -- WHEN I THINK OF *BRUCE* -- THEN I WISH THEY *HADN'T* RETIRED ME. HE'S *FINISHED*. AND THERE'S NO WAY TO TELL HIM THAT. AND NO *POINT*, I GUESS.”⁶⁸

Although neither Marlowe nor Ethan actually fits into society, they can nevertheless make a difference, and their presence is tolerated. This has ceased to be the case for the Batman. As Superman says, “THESE AREN'T THE OLD DAYS *BRUCE* - - WORLD'S GO NO ROOM FOR - - - IT'S LIKE THIS *BRUCE* - - SOONER OR LATER, SOMEBODY'S GOING TO ORDER ME TO BRING YOU IN. SOMEBODY WITH *AUTHORITY*.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ O'Neill, *op. cit.* p. 19

⁶⁸ Miller (1986), *op. cit.* Book 2, p. 47

⁶⁹ Miller (1986), *op. cit.* Book 3, p. 15

Somewhat more disturbingly, however, Bruce Wayne also comes to realize that as the Batman, he cannot actually make the difference he wants – needs – to make.

MY PARENTS -- TAUGHT ME A *DIFFERENT* LESSON -- -- LYING ON THIS *STREET* -- *SHAKING* IN DEEP
SHOCK -- -- *DYING* FOR NO REASON AT *ALL* -- -- THEY SHOWED ME THAT THE WORLD ONLY MAKES
SENSE WHEN YOU *FORCE* IT TO.⁷⁰

Not only does the world no longer want knights – he believes that knights can no longer achieve anything. Helping people in need may work on an individual level, but it will not improve society. And so, he fakes his own death, and then retires to the depths of the batcave “FAR PAST THE BURNT REMAINS OF A CRIMEFIGHTER WHO’S TIME HAS PASSED.”⁷¹ Since there is no longer a place for knights, he will build “AN ARMY -- TO BRING SENSE TO A WORLD PLAGUED BY WORSE THAN THIEVES AND MURDERERS.”⁷²

Bruce Wayne’s final words are “THIS WILL BE A *GOOD* LIFE -- -- *GOOD ENOUGH*.”⁷³ This may be seen as a statement of resignation – “it’s not what I wanted, but it will do” – and thus as a negative ending. However, it can also be seen as the reverse side of his thought during the car crash at the beginning of the story: “THIS WOULD BE A *GOOD* DEATH -- -- BUT NOT *GOOD ENOUGH*.”⁷⁴ Frank Miller certainly does not see it as pessimistic. Even though Bruce Wayne has immolated the Batman persona, this is

a hopeful ending. He’s looking forward to his next adventure after realizing that the methods of the past are no longer appropriate. The book starts with Bruce Wayne contemplating suicide; at the end he’s found a reason to live. He’s adjusted to the times.⁷⁵

To a greater or lesser extent, therefore, all of these works – *The Searchers*, *The Big Sleep*, *Taxi Driver* and *The Dark Knight Returns* – do, indeed, seem to suggest that the modern world is no place for knights. Ethan Edwards and Philip Marlowe both know this, and yet continue to operate under the knightly principles in which they believe. They make a difference to society – they make it a better place – but in both cases, they hold themselves apart. Our final view of Ethan is of

⁷⁰ *ibid.* Book 4, p. 40

⁷¹ *ibid.* Book 4, p. 77

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.* Book 1, p. 2

a man turning away from the door that shuts him out, while Marlowe tells us that "I stopped at a bar and had a couple of double Scotches. They didn't do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig and I never saw her again."⁷⁶ If either of them had spoken Bruce Wayne's final line - "A GOOD LIFE -- -- GOOD ENOUGH" - it would certainly have been a statement of resignation, rather than a positive affirmation for the future.

Travis Bickle is also one who finishes, as he started, alone. However, Travis is not a knight, and the final shots of him driving his taxi make us somewhat uneasy. He seemed to have found a place in society, and to be free of his knightly delusions. But as we see him driving along, looking out at the city, we cannot but wonder whether this stability will last.

Of all these characters, Bruce Wayne is the only one who does not stand alone at the end. Rather, he is surrounded by the children who will become his army. He has abandoned the life of the knight-errant for the life of the general, because, more than any of the others, his is a world in which knights have not only lost their meaning, but also lost their ability to effect change. The world of Gotham City is no longer a game for knights - not even for Dark Knights.

⁷⁵ Miller (1991), *op.cit.* p. 39

⁷⁶ Chandler (1939), *op.cit.* p. 189.

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