Rachel Hulshult

COMP 211

Dr. Blouin

December 11, 2012

Holy Trustworthiness, Batman!
How Captain America and Batman Represent America, Change with Society,
and Shape America's Views of Trust

There are countless superheroes out there, and some are more well-known than others, but they all have some things in common. According to Danny Fingeroth, in his book *Superman on the Couch,* a superhero must have "some sort of strength of character (though it may be buried), some system of (generally-thought-to-be) positive values, and a determination to, no matter what, *protect* those values" (Fingeroth 17). On top of that, they must have some set of skills or some kind of tools that ordinary humans simply don't have. This is true of two of the most well-known superheroes, Batman and Captain America, though they are drastically different. Because of his vast wealth, Batman has numerous gadgets, while Captain America possesses super-human agility and an indestructible shield. Even without the gadgets or super-human skills, Bruce Wayne and Steve Rodgers are both exceptional human beings in their own right. They were both willing to sacrifice for their communities, even when that community was unsure of whether or not to trust them. American's views on trust are shaped by the way Batman and Captain America earn the trust of people in their respective communities. Captain America works hard to earn and keep the trust of the people in America, while Batman is relatively unconcerned with earning and keeping the trust of the people in Gotham City. Batman and Captain America both represent America in different ways, the former darker and more complex, and the latter brighter and more idealized; they change with the society creating them and through their adventures, shape how American's view the idea of trust.

Superheroes Assemble!
Superheroes and Trust – Defined

Captain America began as Steve Rogers, a scrawny kid with a large heart. More than anything, he wanted to fight for his country in World War II, but couldn't because of his size and health issues. Eventually someone saw the spirit in him and chose him to become the world's first "super solider." He was injected with a serum that made him stronger and faster than any other human. At first, he was used as nothing more than propaganda to encourage Americans at home to purchase war bonds, but once he dove into battle, he was forced to confront real villains and became a true hero. The people of America fell in love with Captain America as a symbol selling war bonds, and news of his success during the war spread all over the world. The commanders in the army were at first unwilling to trust Captain America as anything more than propaganda, but after they saw his skills and success, they rethought that. He was willing to pull the ultimate sacrifice to save America when he was forced to crash a plane loaded with bombs into the arctic (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Captain America earned the respect and trust of those around him by doing the right thing and accomplishing whatever task was at hand. He was willing to lay down his life to protect others.

In *The Avengers* (2012), Captain America becomes the assumed leader of the Avengers team. Nick Fury, the director of a secret agency called SHIELD, trusts that the Avengers will come together as a community and do the right thing. He places his full trust in them, when many others are saying he shouldn't. Because of his trust and push (and the leadership of Captain America), the Avengers are able to come together and fight to save the world. After the Avengers emerge victorious from an epic battle in New York City against an army from outer space, most of the people praise them as true heroes and claim that they feel safer knowing that these heroes are out there. It is the government and other authorities that question the Avengers

the most. Those in authority attempt to blame them for the destruction in New York and question why they have since vanished. However, the majority of the people trust that the Avengers will return if they are ever needed (*The Avengers*). Superheroes often have to work outside of the law because those in authority mark them as vigilantes and refuse to trust them. The people trust superheroes even more because they are willing to work outside of the law. If the authority becomes corrupt or makes wrong decisions, the people trust that some superhero will be there to stop them.

Batman is perhaps one of the most well-known superheroes, even for people who have never opened a comic book. Bruce Wayne becomes Batman as an outlet for his guilt and anger over his parents' death. They were shot in cold-blood right in front of him by a criminal member of the mob in Gotham City, and Batman now takes it upon himself to defend Gotham City from average criminals and members of the mob. After he gains fame as the masked vigilante of Gotham City, he begins facing more than just average criminals and mob men. No superhero would be complete without a super villain, and Batman has no shortage of those. He faces insane villains, most famously The Joker, who represents what madness can cause and everything that Batman despises (Reynolds 66-67). Batman is sort of mad in his own way and his "obsessive characteristics link him with his enemies in a more personal way than [other superheroes]" (Reynolds 67). Although Batman is wanted by the Gotham City police, many people place their trust in him to protect the city. When things get rough, however, some join the side of the police force and want Batman gone. The people waver on whether or not they should trust Batman, but this eventually leads to an even deeper trust.

In *The Dark Knight* (2008), the community of Gotham City wrestles with the question of whether or not they can trust Batman. They are unsure whether he really has their best interests

in mind and he is wanted by the police. At one point in the movie, The Joker demands that Batman reveal his true identity and many in the town call for him to do so. Bruce Wayne contemplates it, but is saved from revealing himself by Harvey Dent's false confession. Toward the end of the movie, Batman takes the blame for murders committed by Harvey Dent "because sometimes the truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded" (*The Dark Knight*). The people of Gotham City had seen Harvey Dent as a hero and Batman wanted to reward that faith. Batman willingly lost the trust of the people of Gotham City because he felt that he wasn't the hero they needed at the time, proclaiming that he will be "whatever Gotham needs me to be" (*The Dark Knight*). The community's trust in Batman shifts; at various points in the movie, some place their full trust in him, while others are hesitant to trust him at all. Bruce Wayne realizes that it isn't solely about whether the people of Gotham City trust in Batman, it is about him being there when Gotham City needs him. Batman is willing to be perceived as the bad guy if that is what helps the people, which only makes the viewer trust him more.

There is another scene in *The Dark Knight* which reveals a lot about how Batman and the Joker view trust. Towards the end of the movie, there is a scene involving two ferries; one is full of criminals from the prisons of Gotham City, while the other is full of civilians. The Joker gives the people on each ferry a detonator and tells them that it can be used to blow up the other ferry. If they don't blow up the other ferry before a certain time, then the Joker says he will blow up both ferries. The Joker doesn't actually have any means to blow up the ferries, he just trusts that other people think like he does. Batman, however, trusts in people and believes that they will do the right thing. The people similarly place a certain amount of trust in the passengers on the other ferry not to blow up their ferry first. They also trust that Batman will save them and stop

the Joker (*The Dark Knight*). After neither ferry blows up, Batman triumphantly proclaims to the Joker, "What were you trying to prove? That deep down, everyone's as ugly as you? You're alone!" (*The Dark Knight).* This scene shows the differences between the hero and the villain. The villain, the Joker, trusts that people will do what he would do; he sees that as their only logical option. The hero, Batman, trusts the people to make the right decision. Batman understands people better than the Joker does or ever will. Batman's trust in the people and their trust in him is rewarded, while the Joker's is not.

Why So Serious-ly American?
How These Superheroes Represent America

Captain America and Batman both represent America in completely different ways. Captain America is a literal representation of America, complete with a star-spangled suit and a shield with a giant star in the center, while Batman is a darker, much more complex representation of America. Captain America is an embodiment of the "America Dream;" he represents all that Americans want America to be (Fingeroth, interview with author). Batman represents another aspect of the American dream. He shows that with hard work, determination, money, and some ingenuity, one can achieve whatever they set their mind to. Though they both embody some American ideals, they show Americans' completely different aspects of themselves. Dr. Jeffery Johnson put it best, saying that "Captain America is the best of who we are, while Batman is the harsh reality of what we are sometimes forced to be" (Johnson). Captain America is an archetype of all that Americans hope to be, while Batman is a grittier, more real symbol of what we must sometimes become.

Captain America was created during World War II and fought (and helped defeat) the Nazis. According to Joe Simon, the creator of Captain America, in a 2011 interview:

Captain America was created to be the perfect foil for the ultimate villain, Adolf

Hitler. At the same time he wasn't just meant to be a propaganda device—he was

designed to be one of us, and to represent all of us as the best America has to

offer. Just as Jack Kirby did when he was alive, I consider this to be the greatest

country in the world, and Captain America is a reflection of that feeling. (Zalben)

Captain America was created to represent the ideal of America and to show America what they

could and should be. He represents the feelings of America and, more than any other hero, rises

as an icon to which America can turn during times of crisis (Zalben).

Batman is a much darker, more complex representation of America. He represents the

capitalist side of America (Morrison 26). Batman began as Bruce Wayne, an ordinary man who

used his wealth and ingenuity to become a superhero. Bruce doesn't need any super-human

powers to become Batman. He shows that with a bit of work, some cleverness, and a good idea

of what is right and wrong, anyone could, in theory, become a superhero. According to Grant

Morrison, in his book, *Supergods,* "in a world where wealth and celebrity are the measures of

accomplishment, it's no surprise that the most popular superheroes today – Batman and Iron

Man – are both handsome tycoons" (Morrison 26). Batman has flaws, and sometimes his anger

gets the best of him, but that simply makes him seem more human. People want a hero to whom

they can relate in some way. Batman is merely an ordinary human with cool gadgets, which

gives inspiration to other ordinary people. Batman, however, doesn't follow the same laws as

ordinary humans do. Superheroes are often considered to be "above the law" and are not

constrained to follow the same rules as average humans, and Batman is no exception (Reynolds

16). Batman is willing to go against the law if he believes that is what needs to be done. This

sometimes causes him to lose the trust of those people he is trying to protect, but he will inevitably regain their trust, perhaps even stronger than before.

According to Danny Fingeroth, the superhero always "knows what the right thing [to do] is," which makes them easy to trust (Fingeroth 17). The people of Gotham City and Captain America's America can rely on the superheroes to make the right decisions and "fight the battles that [ordinary people] never could" (*The Avengers*). People are likely to trust those who are willing to do the right thing and stand up for what they believe in. Viewers learn that it takes work to earn trust and that trust can be easily lost. The people of Gotham City weren't immediately ready to place their trust in a man running around in a bat suit catching criminals; Bruce Wayne had to earn their trust as Batman, even if he wasn't really trying to. The first time the people perceive Batman to be in the wrong, he temporarily loses their trust. Even Captain America wasn't trusted immediately; he had to fight hard in WWII to earn the trust of Americans and the respect of other soldiers. Trust is often difficult to earn, even for superheroes.

The way Americans view trust is shaped by the way the heroes earn the trust of those people they are protecting. Captain America earns the trust of America by his actions. He tries to do what is best for America and trusts in the good of people. Batman is not overly concerned with earning trust and is hesitant in giving it. According to Fingeroth, Batman's "need to seem unpredictable (so criminals can never anticipate exactly what he'll do) and his use of frightening imagery, makes him someone people will never fully trust. It's something he accepts as part of his mission" (Fingeroth, interview with author). Though Batman's aim is not to earn the trust of the people, some do trust him; that trust is just accompanied by fear and awe (Johnson). With his dark cape and bat ears, Batman is not as immediately as trustworthy as Captain America; he earns the trust of the people of Gotham City slowly, by protecting them from crime and offering

himself as a scapegoat when the people need someone to blame. Though they earn trust differently, they both represent different aspects of our character. We see parts of ourselves in both heroes and see how trust affects them both, and are thus influenced.

To the Next Decade, Robin!
How These Heroes Change with the Times

What superheroes symbolize changes over time; they have to "represent the values of the society that produces [them]" (Fingeroth 17). Both Captain America and Batman have gone through many changes over time. From the "camp hero" Batman of the 1960s to the dark "almost sociopath" Batman of the 1980s and today, Batman has seen drastic change throughout his history (Johnson). Captain America "embodied the nation" as a patriot during WWII, but began to question the government during the 1960s and 1970s (Johnson). These heroes act like mirrors in a way, allowing us to better understand ourselves and the world around us. They change as the world changes, but they always stay recognizable (Johnson). As Dr. Johnson points out, "The heroes change with the country and their stories and existences help us to comprehend an ever changing world filled with glorious new possibilities and deeply troubling novel problems" (Johnson). Superheroes tackle problems and villains greater than the ones we face and give the people in their communities hope.

While Captain America was originally created to fight the Nazis, he changed throughout time to represent different symbols. Mike Dubose points to the 1980s to show how Captain America symbolizes different ideas over time (Dubose 927). He argues that the 1980s were "a drastically more morally complex era than that of [Captain America's] origin" (927). Captain America is forced to see that the country for which he is named isn't perfect and he must face that. According to Dubose, "Captain America in the eighties is a more thoughtful character than he was in the forties, more prone to contemplation over the nature of America" (928). Good and

evil are not as firmly separated in the 1980s as they were in the 1940s. Captain America still has a definite idea of what is right and wrong; everyone just doesn't agree with him as readily as they did in the 1940s. Cap never stops fighting for the American Dream, even if that American Dream changes throughout history. Though the times change, Cap never takes a political stance; he just begins to work separate from the government. With the new morality (or lack thereof), he must question even the government at times, and becomes less of a soldier who's ready and willing to follow orders (928).

Batman sees change throughout the 1980s as well. In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns,* Batman becomes much darker and has more weapons than he had earlier. In his article, "'To the Stables, Robin!': Regenerating the Frontier in Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns," Theo Finigan argues that President Ronald Reagan is portrayed satirically as "a trigger-happy cowboy president" in Frank Miller's comic *The Dark Knight Returns* (Finigan 4). While in earlier comics, Batman refused to use guns, this Batman is much more heavily armed, with a machine gun and a Batmobile like a tank (Finigan 13). This Batman comic is more violent and foreboding, and Batman sees that the world is changing. At the end of the comic, Batman resigns to throw in the towel, so to speak, but will inevitably return in the future as superheroes always do (37-39). The change Batman and Captain America experience during the 1980s is just one of the many examples of how these heroes change with the society around them.

We inevitably gain certain ideas from whatever is popular at the time, and superheroes have always been popular. Throughout their various stories, Batman and Captain America both must earn the trust of their communities, though they accomplish that (with varying degrees of success) in different ways. We see what makes them trustworthy and attempt to embody some

of those characteristics ourselves. Superheroes never give up; even when people in their communities don't trust them, they still keep doing whatever they think is right to protect those people. Maybe this is why they have endured so long. No matter what gets thrown at them, they keep going, showing us many things along the way, including what it means to be trustworthy.