

Thesis on justice and revenge in the punisher: max

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The superhero comic book genre, as it has existed for the past few decades, is rife with a variety of stories, many of which involve virtuous heroes who stand for Truth, Justice and the American Way while saving innocent children from a burning building while non-lethally taking down some robbers.

However, as comic book audiences have matured, comic books themselves have matured with them, leading to characters that are far more unscrupulous and ambiguous in their morality.

Central to this line of morally-grey antiheroes is Marvel Comics' the Punisher (aka Frank Castle), a man with no superpowers - just an arsenal of weapons, the fighting skills of a warrior, and absolutely nothing to lose. As the years have gone on, even the Punisher has been given darker hues than his initial conception. The most prominent example of this is Garth Ennis' run on The Punisher for their Marval MAX imprint, in which more explicit and darker content was provided in their works (Maroney, 2006). Looking at the first completed story of Ennis' run, The Punisher MAX: Vol. 1 - In the Beginning, this darkening of superhero values and content is solidified in a story that demonstrates the complete nihilism and abject violence of superhero comics during the 90s and early 2000s.

The Punisher MAX Vol. 1 - In the Beginning covers the first six issues of the rebooted Punisher line, following a self-contained story in which Frank Castle's former ally and tech-man Micro lures him into getting captured in order to recruit him for a secret CIA operation, only for the both of them to find themselves in a mob war to kill the Punisher for wiping out their patriarch, Don Cesare. Across these six issues, Ennis provides a pulpy, exceedingly violent look at the dark and gritty world of Marvel's Boston, as

Italian mobsters, old friends and CIA hitmen all vie to kill the Punisher, while Castle himself must fight against all odds to kill them right back.

Ennis' primary stamp on the character and world of *The Punisher* is the maturity and extreme violence and sexuality that he introduced to the series (Jonsson, 2010). Each issue sees Frank and others dispatch people in a variety of violent ways, with blood splattering everywhere and various body parts becoming dismembered. Sexual violence is a constant refrain, as characters are castrated and abused in their genital areas, and the one scene we get of non-gang life involves prostitutes spending time in broad daylight. In many ways, this is a perfect fit for the amoral antihero *The Punisher*, as his kill-them-all ethos provides a perfect backdrop for this more mature look at the world of comic books. While comic books in general were leaning more towards the violent and depraved in these times, it was the *Punisher's* exploitation-movie roots that lent itself well to Ennis' exploration of the furthest reaches of this violence (Capitanio 159).

Central to the comic is the exploration of Frank Castle as a character, Ennis taking a particularly dim and nihilistic view of Castle's politics and history. The comic itself begins with Castle reflecting on the incident that made him who he was – a mob hit that ended up killing his family: “ They hated that old man so much they shot him through my family” (Issue 1, p. 1). Each subsequent page becomes an individual requiem for Frank Castle's family, showing how intense his loss is and how increasingly tragic the death of his family was. This places the reader in a place of instant sympathy with Castle, as we understand the way this has changed him and his desire to turn his grief into a crusade to kill those responsible: “ I go out and make the world

sane” (p. 7). By the end of the story, these sympathies are complicated by the things we have seen Frank do, even to ostensible friends – still, we get an impression of Castle’s unwavering desire to see justice done, which is the central component to his character.

Ennis writes Castle as a single-minded brute, speaking in very tactical sentence fragments, only conveying whatever information needed to convey his thoughts. The only emotion he tends to show is anger, such as when he rejects Micro’s offer to work for the CIA by saying, “ Yes or fuck you? Fuck you” (Issue 4, p. 6). When drawing his internal monologue, illustrator Lewis Larosa frames his thoughts in black bars, unlike everyone else – showing the black soul that has come to define him. After the death of his family, he feels nothing but vengeance, and these stylistic touches hammer this home for the reader in a fascinatingly tragic way.

Ennis’s Punisher is not a handsome, virtuous superhero, but a middle-aged, creaky, lost soul with a dark past and an even darker future. In many ways, he is the prime example of a very conservative idea that anger and emotion are righteous feelings that should be followed to their logical conclusions: “ For the Punisher, anger is not a feral emotion that should be expelled from the political or legal realm. Instead, it is a solvent that allows us to apprehend things as they really are” (Worcester 330).

As the issues go on, more and more layers of sympathy are peeled away from the audience’s appreciation of Frank, leaving us with a much more ambivalent impression of him than we may have previously had. Even from the beginning, Frank’s approach to taking down organized crime begins with gunning a 100-year-old man down in front of a crowded mansion on his

birthday, then mowing down all of his party guests as they run out of the mansion. These elements showcase his take-no-prisoners approach to vengeance; there is no chance of reprieve or surrender, just horrifying death. He compares the massacre to “China Beach Wounded Knee,” as he massacres his targets, framing him as anything other than the heroic savior of a city (Issue 1, p. 13). In fact, it is clear that Castle does this for his own personal catharsis: “only now, pouring automatic fire into a human wall – do I feel something like peace” (p. 14-15).

This approach to the ethos of a superhero showcases the relationship that mass media has with violence, as Ennis’ treatment of the Punisher takes the inherent lust for violence in comic books to its logical conclusion. According to Phillips and Strobl, “the narratives of deathworthiness in comic books resonate with readers and contribute to collective notions of the appropriateness of vigilante justice” (120). In this case, ‘deathworthiness’ is that vague sense of characters who are killed in media ‘deserving it’ by committing a heinous act, or carrying beliefs and attitudes that the average reader disagrees with. By taking this conceit to its furthest extent, Ennis’ *In the Beginning* challenges the readers’ desire to see justice done by making them question what appeals to them about the protagonist in the first place. As Micro says at one point, “You kill because you like it, Frank” – getting to the secret motivation of the comic’s hero (p. 13). The Punisher, at his core, is a psychopath, regardless of whether or not his targets were good people. Ennis’ approach to Frank Castle digs deeper than the simple ‘avenging angel’ motif that is informed by his inciting incident (i. e. the death of his family); he also brings in Vietnam imagery and history to further color

Frank's character. The Punisher was created not by that mob massacre, argues Micro, but by the events of the Vietnam War, where the middle-aged Frank served in the military and committed many atrocities. The specter of Vietnam is one that is still felt in American culture, with its many war crimes against the Vietnamese and the inevitable defeat of US forces leading to a disgraceful withdrawal, that conflict is considered to be a shameful and violent period in America's history (Kunzelman 17).

Consequently, linking Castle to that horror makes him a much less sympathetic character, as Micro's implication that Frank's bloodlust will be there forever is ominous: "There's something in there tells you you'll never be able to tame it. You can cage it up, teach it to do stuff, but give it half a chance and it'll tear your goddamned head off" (Issue 4, p. 20). Even then, however, the cycle of violence is at the core of *In the Beginning*, with Micro noting that the Punisher's quest will never truly end: "Crime never ends. It claims its victims. Accidental or intended. And as long as people want the things the law forbids them having, nothing you or I or anyone can do will make a difference" (p. 12)

Contrasting with Castle's utter disregard for human life is Micro, a character who has a complicated relationship with the Punisher throughout the series. He begins the comic as a villain, or at least someone with an eye to take down or capture the Punisher; his refrain at the end of Issue 1 that "I'm his only friend in all the world" is meant to be ominous (p. 22). However, once he finally captures Frank, it becomes clear that Micro is the more admirable idealist among the two.

Micro believes that, for all of Frank's compulsive violence and rigid moral

structure, he can turn that destructive power for good ends by serving his country and working for the government. He even holds out hope for Frank's soul: " Was there a time you weren't so certain of yourself, that your life wasn't a foregone conclusion? Could you have chosen not to be the Punisher?" (p. 20). However, Frank does not feel the same sense of goodwill and camaraderie that Micro feels for his former comrade - throughout, he simply treats him as a source of information, keeping him alive after being gut-shot just to learn more things about what he is facing. By subverting this relationship and making the titular hero an emotionless, inflexible killing machine, the audience invariably sides more with Micro than anyone else. While *In the Beginning* is a character study of Frank Castle, using Micro's moral compass as a contrast, Ennis and Larosa also sketch out compelling characters on the two sides who want the Punisher for their own ends. In the case of the Boston mob, many of the characters are cookie-cutter bad guys, with thick Italian accents and samey personalities - however, by depicting scene after scene of their fear of him, and their desire to kill him, a strange sense of sympathy is engendered on occasion for the reader. The characters of Pittsy & Ink are fleshed out in particular, as they are the kind of gimmicky comic-book villains that a normal superhero would face. However, the fight between Pittsy and the Punisher in Issue 6, in which Pittsy survives tremendous punishment (even being impaled by a piked fence) makes them fascinating and complex villains.

The CIA characters are fleshed out equally as well, Ennis conflating the two groups as equally unscrupulous and unworthy of the Punisher's attention.

The characters of Bethell and O'Brien, in particular, are fascinatingly drawn -

Bethell is the imperious, arrogant and dismissive CIA leader, while O'Brien is, fascinatingly, defined by her sexuality. Rather than being depicted as submissive, however, her sexuality is decidedly masculine and aggressive - in the first issue, she wonders whether or not Frank has a big dick, and later in the series she admits that her gunshot wound "made [her] wet" (Issue 5). By giving these characters some fascinating, off-kilter personality traits, Ennis manages to entertain even during the subplots that do not involve the Punisher. Even then, however, the Punisher has the ultimate word on the ineffectual and destructive nature of the government, informed by his time in Vietnam: "You fight the wars they start and feed. You kill the monsters they create. You die from handling depleted uranium while they get rich on oil" (p. 8). In this way, Ennis creates a world where, even when the Punisher is the bad guy, everyone else is still just as immoral as he.

The ending of *In the Beginning* is a particularly tragic one, cementing the Punisher's complete inability to be able to relate to anyone on anything approaching a human level. As the violence draws to a close, Ennis and Larosa make the rare choice of beginning to document and file the body count of the comic. Given that the previous five issues were full of bodies exploding and being ripped apart by bullets and knives indiscriminately, it is a shock to the system when typewriter text appears above a fallen police officer ("Officer Laura Miller"), explaining the technical circumstances behind her death (Issue 6). By suddenly giving faces to names and explaining their cause of death in a clinical way, Ennis reminds the audience how, like the Punisher, they have been numbed to the violence as well. This choice humanizes these characters in a fascinating way, while also providing

a device by which Ennis can critique the reader's own lust for violence. This device is also turned into an eerie bit of foreshadowing for Micro, as we see his name clinically written at the beginning of his final scene, along with "Deceased: gunshot wound to the cranium" (Issue 6, p. 19). This lets us know that Frank will most certainly kill Micro, around the same time he realizes it. This device also closes out the comic, as Castle shoots Micro in the head as the text reads: "Frank Castle: The Punisher. Whereabouts Unknown." (Issue 6, pp. 21-22). Ending on such an ambiguous note, In the Beginning solidifies Frank's total collapse into darkness, as neither the Boston mob nor the full force of the American military can contain him. Also, without any semblance of a moral center (something Micro represented), Frank himself will simply continue his mission of killing unabated.

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