HYPERMASCULINITY AND THE HERO IN COMIC BOOK FICTION: ***THIS IS IT***

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by

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Abstract

This thesis examines occurrences of hypermasculinity in examples from the genre of comic book fiction, utilizing textual evidence to suggest the current collection has re-iterated the more negative hypermasculine components of their source material: comic books. In doing so, the thesis compares the present novels with the creative element of the PhD submission – *This Is It* – a novel which serves as a critique of the prevalence of hypermasculinity in heroic figures within comic book fiction. By analyzing the sociological reasons behind hypermasculinity, and its subsequent effects, this thesis aims to make apparent the danger inherent with the continued association of hypermasculinity and hero figures in a new medium such as comic book fiction. It will also argue that the development of such a form divergent from comic books allows scope for a deconstruction of the hypermasculine comic book hero.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Aim

This thesis examines occurrences of hypermasculinity in examples from comic book fiction such as *Hero* by Perry Moore, *Soon I Will Be Invincible*[1] by Austin Grossman and *Superpowers* by David J. Schwartz, utilizing textual evidence to suggest the current collection has re-iterated the more negative hypermasculine components of their source material: comic books. In doing so, the thesis compares the present novels with the creative element of the PhD submission – *This Is It* – a novel which serves as a critique of the prevalence of hypermasculinity in heroic figures within comic book fiction.

By analyzing the sociological reasons behind hypermasculinity, and its subsequent effects, this thesis aims to make apparent the danger inherent with the continued association of hypermasculinity and hero figures in a new medium such as comic book fiction. It will also argue that the development of such a form divergent from comic books allows scope for a deconstruction of the hypermasculine comic book hero.

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[1] Henceforth referred to as *Invincible*.

1.2 The Hypermasculine

> HM (hypermasculinity) is a personality construct that occurs primarily in males, in which stereotypically "macho" traits are held up as an ideal. Hypermasculine males exhibit extreme and exaggerated forms of masculinity, virility, and physicality . . . (Scharrer, *Experiment* 354).

Consider the above statement – with its references to the extreme and exaggerated nature of masculinity and physicality inherent within the hypermasculine structure – in conjunction with analyzing Figure 1 below.

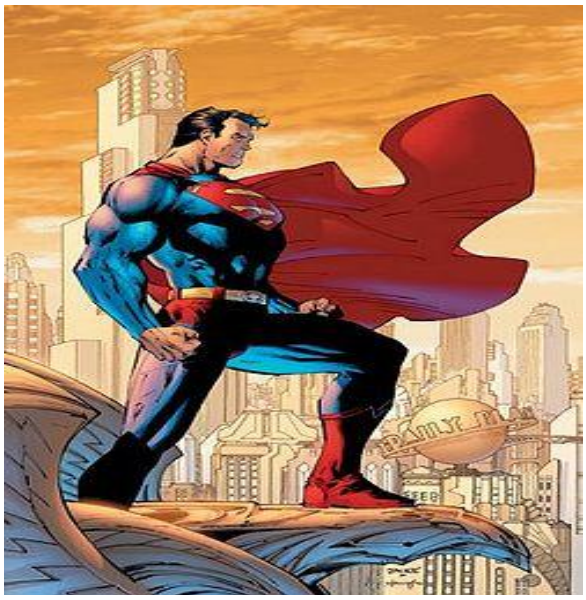

Figure 1: Promotional art for *Superman* #204 (vol. 2, April 2004)

When we consider Superman's disproportional physique, his position above the urbanscape of Metropolis looking down, the fact that he stands with every muscle in his body seemingly tensed (even though he is clearly only watching the city below) it becomes evident that he embodies elements of the construct described as 'hypermasculine'.

To appreciate the superabundant nature of hypermasculinity within comic books in relation to reality, consider what Beesley and McGuire had to say in their research on the role of hypermasculinity in violent offending:

> 'Masculinity' is a socially constructed concept and designated masculine attributes usually include a range of characteristics such as physical strength or power, aggressiveness, risk-taking, emotional control... (251)

It becomes apparent after only a cursory glance at mainstream comic book characters[2] that they embody extreme versions of the functions found in the range of 'masculine' characteristics: indeed, the famous first published image of Superman, on the front cover of *Action Comics* #1 (1938), shows the character lifting a car over his head and smashing it into the ground as people flee. These people are gangsters – therefore "fair game" in the dichotomous Good vs. Evil realm of comic books – but the impact nevertheless makes apparent the underlying leitmotif of comic books: heroes are strongest, and the strongest always win.

Yet this symbolism would not ordinarily pose a problem in a world where art is merely a reflection of reality; the reader would take the material in context. Superman is *emblematic* of people's better nature, as opposed to the nebbish and sometimes cowardly Clark Kent. But when "...some criminological theories suggest that aspects of self-image, particularly self-perceptions of attributes considered masculine, may be contributing factors to personal violence" (Beesley and McGuire 251), a truth presents itself. The traits of masculinity posited as ideal (in heroic terms) in comic books are also the traits to which males engaged with a hypermasculine personality construct aspire.

The world of comic books presents a world-view distinct in its hypermasculine outlook – signified by a clearly delineated polarity:

[2] A few examples to outline the impossible physique and strengths of comic book heroes: Superman, Captain America, Spiderman, Batman, Daredevil, Wolverine and the Flash are just a small selection who, beyond their superhuman powers (with the exception of Batman), all have disproportionately muscular physiques.

> The ideological script for *machismo* descends from the ideology of the warrior and the stratifications following warfare – victor and vanquished, master and slave. (Mosher and Tomkins 60)

This ideology of the warrior repeats itself in comic books over and over – the victorious hero conquers the vanquished villain, only for the sequence to repeat itself. The hero is too powerful to ever be defeated, and too heroic to actually kill the villain and end the cycle.

Yet in comic books the violence is *real*. Not actual, because it is fictitious, but real in the sense that within the narrative it actually occurs. A superhero will fight a supervillain in hand-to-hand combat, with both likely to suffer injuries – and this signifies a major component of what is defined as hypermasculine, as there is an "...association between an exaggerated sense of male identity (hypermasculinity) and proneness to violent offending" (Beesley and McGuire, 253). The hero matches the villain's violence with violence of his own: beyond the question of right and wrong, it is merely a contest of strength

With the nature of the contest set, the definition of identity – specifically that of the hero – must be called into question. Every comic book hero who strikes an opponent is breaking the law, just as a police officer would be; that they aren't prosecuted is testament to the fact that whilst the violence of comic books is real (in a physical sense, actually replicating that of real life), the structure is not. Just as for the real hypermasculine man "...in his dangerous, adversarial world of scarce resources, his violent...and dangerous physical acts express his "manly" essence" (Mosher and Tomkins 60), so the violence of the comic book hero is what actually expresses his identity: the point of combat instead of the initial opposition which created it. In a world where the villain will always be villainous, the hero will always be stronger and also

where the hero will never kill the villain in order to break the pattern, the result is always a display of violence on *both* parts. For the hero and the villain, "...there is only the joy of victory or the agony of defeat" (Mosher and Tomkins 71), decided through battle over and over again.

Within the violence itself, too, there are the traits of hypermasculinity – namely aggression on the part of the hero. This is acceptable in a comic book world because it is required to defeat the enemy (the assumption being that a hero wouldn't use such force or aggression against an ordinary person). Yet, while the medium lauds the hypermasculine figure as well as presenting an impossible image of it, it is the cyclical nature of violence that echoes the real-life experiences of those engaged in hypermasculine lifestyles: "HM (hypermasculinity) is seen in tendencies to view physical aggression as a typical and, indeed, inevitable, response for men" (Scharrer, *Experiment* 355).

Yet, in the comic book world, the balance is constantly maintained: the hero always holds back so as not to kill the villain, and the villain in his inherently inferior state cannot cause the hero lasting harm. Their violence, in this context, is meaningless, as the hero cannot achieve lasting peace or the villain a dictatorship. In the real world, where this hypermasculine ideal cannot be achieved but whose hallmarks – strength, power, lack of emotion – are still upheld, no such balance exists: the role of victim is not temporary, as it is for the villain. Worse still, the symbolic reasoning of the hypermasculine violence – Good vs. Evil – is lost as the results of victory become paramount: "Like any warrior, he assumes power, pride, and glory as his entitlement; the vanquished reap the fear, distress, and shame that was (sic) once his" (Mosher and Tomkins 69).

There stands a strong body of evidence – from Mosher and Tomkins, Scharrer, Beesley and McGuire – that the most susceptible group to idealizing hypermasculinity is the one with the least opportunities to advance socially: "Mosher and Tompkins (1988) suggested that young men and men from lower socioeconomic classes are most likely to adopt the hypermasculine personality constellation" (Scharrer, *Experiment* 355).

Within this constellation, men compete for scarce resources, utilizing physical aggression to nullify threats and to gain advantages: "...individuals who lack orthodox skills to enhance their self-esteem may use coercive strategies including violence to achieve power and status" (Beesley and McGuire 253).

Given this context, the reality of the hypermasculine construct is lacking the signifiers which give its comic book counterparts context: a man beating another man does not save the world as Superman beating up Lex Luthor does. And yet, the symbolism – linked by violence – alludes to the possibility that such context can be attributed: "The purpose of hero-worship behavior seems to be to convert a selected individual into an ideal, a durable symbol of supernormal performance – to capture and make a norm of the exceptional" (Klapp, *Social Control* 60).

Hero as durable symbol of supernormal performance: Superman, instead of being emblematic of justice and freedom, becomes the symbol of supreme strength and physical performance. His heroism is in some way linked to his violence because he *always* has to be violent in order to defeat the villain. It does not require a strong element of moral relativism to allow for most acts of violence – especially when met with violence – to become justifiable and even, from a hypermasculine perspective, lauded.

This is not to say that comic books are to blame for hypermasculinity – indeed, as will be noted later in this thesis, the aggrandizement of sports stars and rap musicians signifies that popular culture at large plays its part in presenting hypermasculinity as the ideal state for young males. Yet comic books are culpable by their very nature: predominantly masculine, violent, with wildly exaggerated physical proportions that emphasize the physicality essential to hypermasculinity.

It should be noted that the term hypermasculinity as presented in purely sociological terms refers to the phenomenon of "machismo" – that is, an excessive display of traits traditionally considered to be masculine strengths. However, in light of the disconnection between subject (man) and signifier (images of men), I will use the term also to mean something else: the point of connection between the masculine image and Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. This is the nature of the symbol: it is dualistic in its interpretation, and serves its purpose in both forms within this debate – that is, hypermasculinity is the readily identifiable extreme image *and* the impossible ideal, inherently virtual in its relation to actuality.

With the relatively new arrival of a fledgling fiction genre – comic book fiction, in the guise of *Hero* by Perry Moore, *Invincible* by Austin Grossman, *Superpowers* by David J. Schwartz and *This Is It* by Daniel J. Connell – there is a new opportunity to analyze the hypermasculine hero, now in a different medium. Without the conformities of characters over half a century old, how does comic book fiction treat hypermasculinity? Does it move away from the original source, or does it continue in the same vein?

1.3 Absence of a Profound Reality

> Such would be the successive phases of the image:
>
> It is the reflection of a profound reality;
>
> It masks and denatures a profound reality;
>
> It masks the absence of a profound reality;
>
> It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6)

Hypermasculinity – in Baudrillardian ideology – is not real, nor can it ever be. In sociological terms, when a man is described as conducting in hypermasculine activities, it relates to his perceived adherence to a hypermasculine ideal as opposed to him achieving a truly hypermasculine status. His black-and-white outlook is at odds with the world he inhabits, and so any and every victory is tainted by reality.

In this, it can be argued that hypermasculinity – especially in the context of comic books – signifies the fourth phase of the image as denoted by Baudrillard: it is its own pure simulacrum. The relationship between such an image and reality is well observed by Paula Murphy on analyzing the war in Iraq:

> The current global conflict, synecdochically represented in the war between America and Iraq, is fundamentally postmodern...images of war have become more significant than the reality of war. This is an example of what Jean Baudrillard calls simulacra. Simulacra are not reflections of reality.

What is particularly interesting about hypermasculinity is that it cannot exist and yet is continually sought after by those males in low socioeconomic urban environments. Yet whereas in the simulacra both hero and villain escape relatively unscathed (or, in the case of death, can be resurrected[3]), the violence inherently related to hypermasculinity produces real effects: trauma both physical and psychological.

I should at this point make note of the meaning of the term 'violence' within this thesis: it deals specifically with the physical act, eschewing the wider connotations such as institutional violence, the violence of language itself as explored by theorists such as Žižek.

The rationale for this delineation has already been established: the structure of the world within comic books does not pertain to the logical order, and yet the physical violence does: the one area where comic books attempt to convey a sense of the actual can be found within the confines of the physically violent act. By focusing on the physical violence, we can assess the impact comic books have as a socially defining implement – that is, the cultural reverberations accentuated by the influence of the source material. It does not replicate reality, but it does impact upon it.

Baudrillard's notion of the lack of a profound reality – within comic books, the notion of Good defeating Evil as inevitable – compounds the senselessness of this cyclical violence, calling into question the nature of the images themselves which promote such hypermasculinity:

> By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial

[3] This can be highlighted by the demise and eventual resurrection of Superman at the hands of Doomsday in the 1992 series *The Death and Return of Superman* (DC Comics)

> resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning. (Baudrillard, Simulacra 2)

This malleability suggests a capacity to affect the rationale in place for the continuation of adherence to hypermasculinity. If the link between heroism, hypermasculinity and violence were placed in a critical context – the revelatory aftermath of 'real' hypermasculine conduct shown instead of idealized, simulacral images – then the duality and fated nature of hypermasculine conflict in a comic book scenario would be shattered: people would get hurt, people would die, and no-one would escape the violence unscathed.

Chapter Two

Situating the Hypermasculine in Comic Book Fiction

2.1 Comic Book Gods

> American children are a comic book generation; that is, their heroes are comic book heroes, their ideas of justice and morality are comic book ideas, and their gods are comic book gods. Superman is more real to many children than are their parents. Superman's world works. Their parents' world doesn't. It is not surprising, then, to find many adults who retain this comic book view of the world . . . (Leonard).

Consider the above comment in the context of what Baudrillard had to say about what he perceived to be the effect of Disneyland:

> This world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are everywhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere – that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster the illusions as to their real childishness. (Simulacra 13)

The notion fits comic books. If Disneyland is a simulacrum, designed to fool its customers into believing that the adults are being childish in this environment as an escape from the incessant and universal adult "real" world – when in truth no such world exists – then comic books also utilize that function. They do this by exalting the hypermasculine hero: The heroes – and the justice they purport to deliver and protect – are present in the books to mask the absence of such traits in the "real" world. Their hypermasculinity, as well as the victory over villainy derived from being hypermasculine, hides the impossibility of such an occurrence in reality.

It does this in two ways: one, by presenting an idealized hypermasculinity which cannot physically exist;[4] two, by circumventing the procedures put in place by society to negate violence – namely law and order. Superheroes not only engage in violence but also escape punishment for doing so, making apparent the notion that violence is somehow less criminal than other unlawful activities.

This is problematic in terms of moral relativism, when read in conjunction with the following statement: "...What the hero is or does in terms of objective reality are less important than what he represents to our inner reality" (Rollin 435). The temporary effect of comic books – the reader must remove themselves from the virtual world, just as the customers do from Disneyland – is displaced by the connection between the real violence of comic books and the actual violence of reality.

The ideal hypermasculine hero becomes representative of the person's inner reality – his exaggerated form and violent acts become symbolic of what it means to be masculine.

[4] For example, Superman being impervious to bullets.

If a superhero with a strict moral code can beat his opponent into an unconscious state, then the message is clear: violence does not conflict with morality; it is a function to which morality can be assigned in the light of victory.

This thesis will examine the nature of heroism in the genre of comic book fiction, ascertaining whether it continues the hypermasculine motif prevalent in comic books, or attempts to treat hypermasculinity in a different way.

2.2 Magic and Nightmare

> As soon as we move beyond the implicated hero and examine the tragic framework as a whole we are confronted with a world far more akin to magic and nightmare than to everyday reality . . . (Allen 400).

Comic book fiction at present, just like comic books, places the implicated hero in a central location, where we cannot easily move beyond him. His presence is everywhere, melded with the landscape.[5]

Thom Creed, protagonist of *Hero*, entangles himself into the environment by joining the League, a group of superheroes tasked with protecting the world. His connections to the universe of the text multiply as the plot develops; his father Hal is implicated in the destruction of the Wilson Tower (now the Wilson Memorial) a prominent city landmark which was destroyed in the defeat of an alien monster.[6] His mother, seemingly vanished, is in fact invisible (and in a way, therefore, omnipresent):

> "I've been watching you."
>
> Of course she knew. Mothers knew everything. (Moore 286)

When the League turns against citizens, it is Thom who saves the day.[7] He progresses from a teenager confused about his homosexuality, troubled by his relationship

[5] The relationship between environment and hero in comic books is fundamental: Superman and Metropolis, Batman and Gotham City, Spiderman and New York City. In each city, not only is the hero's presence visually obvious, he dominates the city-wide media: he is representative of the place he inhabits.

[6] The event claimed an estimated 19,000 lives (291), and appears to be a hyperreal interpretation of the events of 9/11.

[7] In the final chapter, Uberman (a disgraced superhero of the League) says to Thom that "People know what you did, what your father did..." (423). This is in contrast to the infamy cast upon his father, Hal, after the

with his father, to an anxious gay teenager who has issues with his dad but who saves the world by confronting the almost-enveloping history (evidenced, literally, in the architecture of the landscape 312-313) created by his progenitor, Hal Creed.

We cannot escape Thom.

Fatale, one of two narrators in *Invincible*, is a female cyborg who joins superhero team the New Champions. Badly injured in an accident in Sao Paulo, she undergoes experimental surgery performed by a shady corporation called Protheon (18). For the entirety of the novel, Fatale has no memory of her life before the crash; she is, to an extent, a blank canvass.

Because of this lack of history, her sections of narrative are filled with her present – that is, the team of superheroes and the life they lead. Fatale's entire world is superheroes: their powers, their identities, and their desire to protect the world and see that justice is served.

Through her eyes, we cannot escape the superheroes:

> Being this close to so much power is a vertiginous sensation. The heroes pop out at you, impossibly vivid, colorful as playing cards but all from different decks, a jumble of incompatible suits and denominations dealt out for an Alice in Wonderland game. A man with the head of a tiger sits next to a woman made of glass. The woman to my right has wings. This is where I want to be – the players. (Grossman 20)

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original incident at Wilson Tower. However, such reactions are simply negative and positive oppositions with the same effect: Thom and his father are part of the landscape.

Superpowers contains an editorial narrative by Marcus Hatch, a journalist tenuously linked to the protagonists who form the superhero group the Madison All-Stars. Hatch has compiled the story *after* the events detailed in the book – although, aside from his editorial sections, it is written in 3rd person omniscient perspective. Furthermore, his account is based largely on the interviews he undertakes with Charlie Frost, a member of the All-Stars (Schwartz 2).

Superpowers differs from the other two books in that it doesn't place an existing superhero group in a central position from the beginning (though there is a group who serve as a precursor to the Madison All-Stars, a WWII team with similar powers who fought for the Allies, who were known as the Yankee Doodle Dandies; they are represented by Bert O' Brian, an elderly man who is visited by the All-Stars (276-281). It follows the genesis of a superhero team after a freak accident early on in the novel – as such, the world isn't already substantiated on the existence of superheroes.

In this context, it could be argued that *Superpowers* doesn't have an environment in which the comic book element is pervasive. However, this is a deceptive notion created by the use of an omniscient narrator. As has been noted, Marcus Hatch is the narrator, taken from the accounts of Charlie Frost. The view, the world seen by the reader, is subjective. This can be evidenced in how closely the narrative follows the four heroes throughout; although the reality of their environment is hostile (in opposition with *Hero* and *Invincible*, where the environments appear meshed in comic book lore and also passive), there is the question of moral relativism raised by the source of the story. The world the reader knows is that of the Madison All-Stars, and only that of the All-Stars, even if it is re-told by Marcus Hatch in a way that makes it seem detached.

This Is It is not the same. It remains unclear whether the protagonist, masked vigilante Marshall Mason, has any superpowers. He undergoes "conditioning training" to perform black ops in Iraq (Connell 99), but the outcome of this isn't explicitly revealed – although it is hinted at when Shahina's assistant informs her Marshall fighting is "unlike anything I've ever seen" (86). Hence a largely hyperreal element of comic book hypermasculinity – power in excess of what is humanly possible – is left ambiguous, with examples of its absence: Marshall simulates superpowers by trying to convince teenager Art Mausman he can fly (28), and there are several incidents and references to his relative lack of finesse – a good example being his clumsy fall through the floors of the Reaper's lair (52).

There is also the fact that Marshall is not exclusively central to the action. Chapter 1 begins by following Shahina; there are chapters which follow Shahina or Alan Greenburg; several chapters begin without reference to either Marshall or the Knight. He is part of a system not reliant or entirely accepting of him – indeed, Greenburg is more fundamental to the landscape of the novel than the vigilante, his family's legacy and riches being founded in and perpetuating the architecture and redevelopment of Tupello.

Another factor is point of view. *Hero* and *Invincible* are written in 1st person, while *Superpowers* is presented as 3rd omniscient but with clear subjectivity[8] as to the source of the material. *This Is It*, on the other hand, is written in 3rd person, the only context of bias being the continued return to Marshall and the frequent inclusion of his inner monologue.

[8] Marcus Hatch's editorial sections appear repeatedly to clarify or comment on the relevant action – or to argue the veracity of the story itself. In this, his presence as the person presenting the story to the reader is undeniable.

The fact that there is separation from Marshall – the primary comic book element in the text – at certain junctures indicates that the hyperreality of the landscape itself is fractured. That is not to say that Marshall is a simulation in a "real" environment – merely that the simulated environment does not accept his symbol of the Knight, does not remain passive to his simulation, does not complete the hypermasculine simulacrum in a way akin to comic book lore. Marshall is at the centre of the story, but he is not *the* centre.

2.3 Warrior without Wimp

> Warrior and wimp exist side by side, each defining the other in mutual opposition. (25)

Jeffrey A. Brown noted the development of hypermasculinity while looking at Milestone comic books and Image comic books. Milestone and Image are not unique in this respect; it is rare to pick up any comic where the men and women are proportionally correct (compare Figure 2 – an image of Icon, one of Milestone's premier heroes, with that of Figure 3, Batman - muscles are enlarged and upper torsos broader than realistically plausible). Yet Brown noticed in comic books aimed at African-Americans that hypermasculinity had not only increased – there was also a disturbing absence:

Figure 3 - Cover artwork from *Icon* #41 (Jan. 1997). Art by Wilfred Santiago.

Figure 2 – Promotional art for *Batman* #608 (Oct. 2002, 2nd printing). Pencils by Jim Lee and Inks by Scott Williams.

> At its most obvious and symbolic level, comic book masculinity characterizes for young readers a model of gender behavior that has traditionally struggled to incorporate both sides of the masquerade, yet has recently slipped into the domain of the almost exclusively hypermasculine. (25)

This separation of the warrior from the wimp – the alter ego who displays fallibility, weakness, human emotion – is problematic; it distils the sense of what it is to be a man into a physical realm – muscular, powerful. Not the world of intellect, empathy or self-awareness: it is who is more powerful.

In this context, it is also entirely divorced from reality – a physical impossibility which imposes in its structure a primitive sense of masculinity and heroism, leading to seemingly inevitable success. Consider it in relation to the following statement: "The law frequently appears to be too complex or cumbersome to deal with crises, so the hero, whether he is a real or titular king, becomes a law unto himself" (Rollin 437).

What does hypermasculinity mean in a hyperreal context? The impossibility of physique implies an excess of heroism – strength built for any challenge imaginable. Musculature designed to fight supervillains. And this, of course, is primarily (and almost exclusively) what superheroes do. Such attributes infer this: it is impossible to be this strong, this powerful; and that it is the only way to be.

The prevalent notion in comic books is that the (fictional) world requires these superheroes to keep them safe, to symbolize their sense of justice and right. However, it is very rare to see such figures embody this notion – if Superman is fighting Lex Luthor, if Spiderman is fighting Green Goblin, if Batman is fighting the Joker, then who is apprehending the mugger, the rapist, and the murderer? It is the law, the social system put in

place to perform such a function. But in this hyperreal world they are indeed cumbersome, inadequate and physically inferior.[9]

Then there is the symbolic to take into account – the violence of the signifier, sweeping aside the laws of the land to deal with the crisis. The gravity of the crisis is often used as justification for the hero resorting to violence – with no question raised as to why, and how, he so often finds himself in a scenario requiring such measures.

Every superhero uses violence as a measure against villainy. In this, every superhero breaks the law. But this is absolved, because it is deemed not only necessary, but preferred. A villain cannot win at their own game, their basest function: that of violence. And so the hypermasculine is elevated – it is the savior of everything, time and again.

This is a lie – it is the savior of nothing, not even in the hyperreal environment world in which it occurs. People still get hurt, they are simply left unseen, unheard, removed from the panels the reader can see. Supervillains exist in the hyperreal because of the parameters which allow for the existence of superheroes: "Good and evil are irresolvably bound up with one another, this is fatal in the original sense: an integral part of our fate, our destiny" (Baudrillard, *Fourth World War*).

Because of this, it is clear that the villains only exist in a world where there are heroes to balance the equation; there is no scenario where there are superheroes without enemies, or where there are supervillains without heroes.

They do not alter the hyperreal world they inhabit: threats of great change, enacted through planet-changing tragedies, are always averted. The hypermasculine heroes merely

[9] This can be seen in many examples: the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents which leads to his vigilantism; the murder of Peter Parker's father-figure uncle, which also leads to his vigilantism; the elevation of the villainous Lex Luthor to the position of President of the United States of America, the social system unable to prevent his ascendance to power.

return the situation back to neutral, to normality. And because they do not deign to bother themselves with the mundane efforts of everyday policing, they do not improve the inadequate system which supposedly enables their being required.

2.4 A Better Place

The effect of the hypermasculine in comic books is twofold:

One, it implies the system will protect you. By having hypermasculine heroes in a world where the system does not adequately protect its citizens from supervillains, the inverse is suggested about reality – the system will defend you because there is an absence of villainy in reality.

Two, it implies that it will almost certainly fail to protect you, as the evil of reality does not distil itself into the obvious villainy of comic books – the occurrences are many, smaller, and impossible to entirely eradicate.

While the two elements appear contradictory, they are not in terms of the comic books' aims: to make you believe in its hyperreality; to make you believe in its hypermasculine ideals; to show that they are impossible in reality, that you are not safe in the "real" world but that you are while in the boxed off, 'hero saves the day...again' world of masks and capes.

Hypermasculinity forms an integral part of this strategy: the sculpted physiques of their heroes play a wish fulfillment role for the predominantly adolescent comic book readership. Its impossibility makes it more desirable, not less; the lack of distinction between realities – the world of the superheroes seeming more real than that of the actual – doesn't make it any more possible, but gives a sense of being tangible. This increased fear of the real world, and the security comic books seem to offer, leads to the hyperreal affecting notions of reality:

The world would be better if there were superheroes.

Hypermasculinity is one of the less palatable aspects of the hyperreal world of comic books. It asserts pressure to conform, to measure one's self against an impossible ideal. Because it is hyperreal, its absence in reality does not comfort, either: there is merely a void in the real world which cannot be adequately filled. No man is big enough, strong enough. These men of the real world are not enough, and that is why the world cannot be saved as it is in every comic book.

Naturally, the strongest element of construction in hypermasculine ideals is visual – men towering over women, arms as wide as a surfboard. This thesis examines how comic book fiction deals with this element of comic book tradition – does it correlate, and if so, does it apply the same pressures as comic books themselves?

Chapter Three

Hypermasculinity in Current Comic Book Fiction

3.1 Everything a Man Should Aspire To Be

> The guy is a paragon of everything a man should aspire to be – the perfect hero. Superstrength, the power of flight, invincibility – all the A-level superpowers. But his strength of character was just so damn perfect, too. Always saying the right thing on the news after a big fight, never too busy to thank his fans...Perfect skin, a great smile with impossibly bright, but not horsey, teeth, and strong, chiseled features. (Moore 41-42)

The man protagonist Thom Creed is describing is Uberman. As his name suggests, he is one of the premier members of the League, a poster boy for superheroes. He transfixes Thom upon their first encounter, when he "dove down from the stars ready for battle, his body aimed, his muscles poised and rippling under his costume" (73).

Uberman *is* the embodiment of perfection, even his title providing a nod to both Nietzsche's *Übermensch*[10] and the comic book character Superman. In fact, in a

[10] The goal Nietzsche set for humanity in his 1883 book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

1979 sketch on Saturday Night Live, called "What If?", Superman came from Krypton but crashed down in Nazi Germany; this alternative was known as Überman[11].

Beyond his name – he is muscular, powerful, and effortless. But does the 'strength of character' Thom asserts to preclude him from a consideration of the hypermasculine? In the course of the book, the League's leader, Justice, plots to create a huge explosion to propel him back home, destroying the planet in the process. As part of the plot, he controls the minds of the League through the rings which signify their membership (Thom hasn't put his ring on because his father disapproves of superheroes). Uberman is one of the heroes cast under Justice's control. Consider what Thom thinks of him in the aftermath of the final confrontation:

> His muscles had grown noticeably softer in the stomach and around his neck. He wiped a greasy streak of blond hair from his forehead . . . His nose started to drip. Jeez, what a mess. (Moore 423)

Uberman is reduced, that reduction symbolized by his physical decline. The question is this: is his strength of character related only to the continuation of his hypermasculine ideal, his symbolic potency as a hero of great power?

Moore has attempted, with Uberman, to denote the fallacy of hero-worship: Thom lusts over the seemingly all-powerful, charismatic hero at the beginning of the novel, and by the end Uberman is asking Thom for his help, a disheveled impression of his former self.

[11] There has been considerable debate regarding the translation of the German word "Über", the main argument being whether "super" or "over" is more accurate: the interpretation of "Über" as "super" was popular at first with George Bernard Shaw in his 1903 play *Man and Superman*, followed by Thomas Common's translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* into English in 1909.

The problem is apparent: Uberman has no double, no secret identity, and no wimp to his warrior. His sense of self – and hence, worth – is bound up in his image. This is why he thanks the fans, not because of a sense of duty or loyalty. It is also this reason that leads to his lessening – if he is less heroic, less of an idol, he is also physically less.

The hypermasculine principle is upheld, ironically, by Uberman's inability to remain heroic – it is his lapse into enforced villainy which reduces his hypermasculine persona, and only that. There is no substance behind the image, and the image is one of impossible machismo, of extreme musculature.

Grossman's *Invincible* also places hypermasculinity on a pedestal, like *Hero*, to emphasize the fallacy of such idolatry. In place of Uberman is CoreFire, easily the most powerful person – hero or villain – in the *Invincible* universe. He stands almost like a Greek God – here is what his nemesis Dr. Impossible has to say:

> All heroes have an origin. It's a rule, right? Flash of fire, a miraculous accident. But what could have made something like you, CoreFire? So ungodly powerful, so perfect. You've barely aged, you know. You might live a thousand years. Some people think you're alien; some people think you're Cain, condemned to wander the Earth, untouchable. (253)

This embodies the hypermasculine ideal, a godlike man of perfect physique. But there are signs that this is not something to be lauded or yearned for – that it, in fact, betrays a certain emptiness and with it callous disregard for the fallible, limit-bound mortal life. This shows itself in the way other members of the New Champions react to CoreFire, ignoring his powers and image, like when Blackwolf calls CoreFire a "jerk"

(168) or when Lily comes to defeat Doctor Impossible after CoreFire has (for the first time ever) failed to do so:

> "That's right, Impossible," CoreFire snarls, emboldened.
>
> "You're finished!"
>
> Lily doesn't even turn around to answer him. "You shut up, fuck-head. I've got your number." (264)

Despite these negative reactions, Grossman's book still places hypermasculinity as the most important element of heroism by having CoreFire be the central (but largely absent[12]) and most important heroic component of the New Champions.

There are men who do not follow the classic hypermasculine traits (Mister Mystic, a master of magic) and there are women in the team, but CoreFire is the most powerful, the most famous, and the most important. He is invincible, and as Doctor Impossible states, it is possible he may live for a millennium – the hallmark of hypermasculinity potentially outlasting all others. They may look down on him as a person, but his power is desired: "Invincible. It's what everyone wants to claim they are. Not just tough, but downright invulnerable" (168).

So the ideal state – invulnerability – is most pronounced in the hypermasculine symbol of *Invincible*. Allied with the diminished femininity of the women in the group – Fatale is more a robot than a woman; Damsel is part alien; Elphin is a fairy-warrior; Lily has become virtually invisible – the book treats hypermasculinity in a paradoxical manner. With the negative references to CoreFire, it shows the shortcomings of

[12] CoreFire fakes his death to fool Doctor Impossible (revealed by Lily [268]), and so isn't present for most of the book.

hypermasculinity: no one likes CoreFire. Yet it also shows how much everyone – Doctor Impossible included – wants to be like CoreFire, or even to *be* him.

As the novel ends with the defeat of Doctor Impossible, it denotes two things: that hypermasculinity wins in the end, and/or those who desire/covet hypermasculinity win in the end. Doctor Impossible is powerful, but he isn't hypermasculine – he uses his brains. Every time he takes on CoreFire, he loses. *Invincible* shows hypermasculinity to be victorious, and more than just that, seemingly fated to be victorious.

CoreFire always defeats Doctor Impossible.

3.1 Violent and Deviant

> Attempts to restore a just society (and save society from itself) are . . . neither innocent nor heroic since the means required to effect them in a dehumanized world must be as violent and deviant as those of the villain. (Allen 409)

This statement is firmly in evidence in the activities of the Madison All-Stars, the superhero group formed in David J. Schwartz's novel, *Superpowers*. The group comprises of Harriet, Charlie, Caroline, Mary Beth and Jack. Harriet becomes invisible; Charlie becomes psychic; Caroline can fly; Mary Beth gains super-strength and Jack develops super-speed.

They obtain these powers in a mysterious and unexplained way – though probably revolving around a party at the beginning of the novel, when all five drink home-made beer and there is a large storm outside. Yet the powers they gain, although in the traditional form found in comic books, are not random. Each ability correlates with the person who now has them – or, more accurately, is a response to some trauma within their lives before they got super-powers.

At the party, Charlie was "drifting off on his own, which he tended to do" (8). Later on in the party, he had been "watching Mary Beth for a while, he realized. He liked her smile" (9). These points, allied with Charlie fantasizing over all three – Harriet, Mary Beth and above all, Caroline – at the beginning of the novel, while not talking to them much, imply an insular, even socially inept character. He struggles to connect with people, often watching rather than participating. His new power of reading minds does little to change this simply because of its overwhelming power: he cannot

control the mindstream. But it is the impulse which is important: the ability to read minds, to know what people are thinking. It would make functioning in a social capacity easy, the exact thing Charlie struggles with.

During the party, Charlie notices that Mary Beth "was quick to brag about her roommates but hardly ever said a word about herself" (10). We find out later on that she "had long ago resigned herself to being small and, if not helpless, at least better off walking away from trouble" (12). Before the accident, in an attempt to balance her insecurities about being small (and therefore not in a position of strength), Mary Beth became a hard-working student. This added another element to her supposed social stigma:

> They called her Bookworm and Teacher's Pet and other things that ought not to have stung as much as they did. But no one had ever labeled her athletic, or strong. (12)

Once her power – incredible strength[13] - manifests itself, the destructive nature reveals itself quickly as she destroys items in her flat (12-13). This power becomes a point of concern, for Mary Beth and the rest of the group:

> "...don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think I'm dangerous. We can worry about me once we get a handle on what's happening with you."
>
> "Dangerous." As frightened as she was, Mary Beth had to smile. (16)

Mary Beth's power manifested itself as strength due to what she perceived as a lack of strength; what better way to defeat bullies than being stronger than any person

[13] When Harriet takes Mary Beth to the gym to test her strength using a bicep press machine, Mary Beth lifts 400 pounds without much effort (19).

on the planet? The opposite of small may be big, but it's the inference of Mary Beth's stature that causes her insecurities: small means weak, small means insignificant. Mary Beth's power addresses this on a literal basis – although not physically manifested (she does not change, either in stature or physique), she has embraced the hypermasculine ideal of super-strength.

Jack is imbued with extreme speed, and at first it is not clear why this is given to him: he is handsome, smart, and sociable. But contrast his feelings when he first tests his new power: "The speed limit here was sixty; the cars around him might as well be in a showroom. His heart was pounding; he was getting an erection" (30), with how he feels when he (very quickly) reaches his family home: "It was a long walk, but now that Jack was here he was in no hurry to be inside" (31). This is because of Jack's father, who is seriously ill:

> He looked like a deflated version of the man Jack had to look at pictures to remember. He wondered if he had ever really looked at his father before the diagnosis. Not in a long time, he decided. (32)

The symbolism of Jack's power is clear – he wants to run away from the situation he is confronted with, the impending death of his father. It is important to note that it cannot help his father, nor help Jack to deal with the problem; it is a power on the level of escapism.

Caroline works as a waitress at a diner to pay her way through college. The job is mundane and monotonous:

> . . . it was nearly 3.30. She groaned. She had to work a double shift tomorrow, ten to ten, and she was going to be doing it on

> less than six hours sleep. She was back on earth again. She couldn't wait to leave. (61)

Caroline can fly. Like Jack, the symbolism is obvious, but subtly different: Jack wants to run away from his problems, so he gains super-speed. Caroline feels trapped, stuck, so her ability is to fly – she wants to be free. Flying offers freedom unlike any other power.

Harriet becomes invisible. While Charlie exhibits some of the characteristics that define which power he gets, Mary-Beth and Jack reveal their issues as they are realizing their powers, and Caroline's power is revealed shortly after the reasons for its manifestation are made clear; Harriet's ability, however, is detailed long before the underlying reason which is shown when she spies on a young man called Xavier:

> She remembered him unzipping his pants and realizing that they were alone in the locker room. She remembered him sticking his crotch in her face, and she remembered shaking her head, telling him no. Somehow, he had made the alternative seem like a bargain, like it was an either/or situation and not one she could opt out of entirely. He had let her take off her own pants, and she remembered thinking, ludicrously, that it was nice of him. (95)

This event – which took place four years ago – is shown to define how she sees herself, or more accurately how she fears other people will see her:

> She had never told her father; she had never told anyone. It wasn't that she blamed herself. It was that she didn't want it to

> define her. People she had never met would think of her as That Girl Who Was Raped. The victim. (95)

Later, in the same chapter, it becomes apparent the connection between this past incident and why she developed the power of invisibility:

> She spat and struck him just on the neck. Then she walked out, hearing him swear behind her. She looked in the mirrors as she passed, but she didn't see her reflection. It was like she wasn't even there. (96)

It has a double meaning: not being there so as to not be seen, or noticed, making a re-occurrence impossible; but also invisibility as the disappearance of referentials – if she can't be seen, she doesn't exist. If she doesn't exist, the rape never happened. It determines control over the future and wipes clean the past.

The relevance of these powers and how they are bestowed upon in relation to hypermasculinity is profound: it is one of the women who gains super-strength. Not only that, but the powers both men obtain are largely debilitating – Jack not only runs fast, but his metabolism has increased greatly. He is living faster, and as a consequence his death is brought much closer: a matter of months instead of decades. Charlie's psychic abilities make him a social recluse, as he cannot block out what people are thinking. Any possible advantage to such a skill is rendered, by and large, obsolete.

It goes further than to place a hypermasculine trait in a feminine context and show its male heroes in ever reductive states: it shows the complete lack of control of *any* power. The famous slogan of Spiderman, so often repeated, is that with great power comes great responsibility. Schwartz shows that no amount of responsibility can equal, or negate, power. Harriet disappears entirely, unable to stop her invisibility; Charlie is

overwhelmed by the mindstream, the outpouring of pain and hate from the world's minds; Jack's power ages him into an elderly state and premature death; Caroline's ability to fly cannot help save her mother, a victim of 9/11. But most important, in terms of hypermasculinity, is what happens when Mary Beth loses control.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the All-Stars are fragmented. Caroline is grieving; Jack goes to his mother to tell her he is dying; Charlie is struggling to cope with the overload of thoughts after the tragedy; Harriet has become permanently invisible. Mary Beth, wandering the streets of Madison not knowing what to do, happens upon a brutal attack: five young men attacking another, Solahuddin Sutadi, who had happened to befriend Jack earlier in the book. Solahuddin is a Muslim, and this is the reason for the young men's attack. Solahuddin's reaction is to chant 'There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet', which increases the ferocity of the attack until it is broken up by Mary Beth. Although the violence has stopped, when Mary Beth asks him if he is okay he continues to chant. At this point, Mary Beth loses control:

> She didn't hold back when she hit him. It felt good. She hit him and he went quiet and when she could see again she saw that his head lay at an unnatural angle, his eyes half-shut and still, his mouth open.
>
> He was dead. She had broken his neck, and he was dead. (347)

This event is indicative of the outlook *Superpowers* has on hypermasculinity and its predominant traits. The other heroes have an effect, when they lose control of their powers, that is either insular or indirect: Charlie cannot function, Caroline cannot save her mother, Jack dies prematurely, Harriet becomes invisible. But Mary Beth kills a man – not because he was a criminal, not because he posed a threat, but because she was angry.

It shows the reality of an imbalance hypermasculinity causes within the parameters of normality, and the probable outcome: immense violence. The issue is that Mary Beth is human – and as such, prone to fits of anger, of fallibility.

In *Superpowers*, none of the powers give the characters an ideal existence, make their lives better or even solve their problems. Jack's power kills him, but Mary Beth's – the most hypermasculine of the set – damns her, ruins her life, turns her into a villain. Schwartz bestows the most hypermasculine power to a woman of diminutive stature not to show that in the right hands (or even simply non-masculine), such ability can be wielded in a more just way: he does so to illustrate the shortcomings of either wanting or having such a power, because it can only be destructive.

Chapter Four

Hypermasculinity in *This Is It*

4.1 Gonna Make You Big an' Strong

> The black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily. (Brown 28)

This Is It follows Marshall Mason, an African-American man who becomes a vigilante after returning from service in Iraq. His father is absent (he is "god-knows-where" according to Grandpa, [15]) and he is involved in a car crash in which his mother, grandfather and sister, Madeleine, die:

> Other cars swerved, trying to dodge the mangled wreckage that sat in the middle of the cross section. Marshall thought that maybe he saw one drive right over Maddy, just before everything shattered and drowned in black. (Connell 25)

The crash can be seen as the genesis of Marshall's idealism regarding hypermasculinity, although the seeds were already sown. Grandpa was an army man, castigating his grandson for a supposedly soft demeanor: "You sissy, boy? Masons are real men, we shake hands like real men. Or even better, gimme a salute" (15). When

Grandma, upon hearing his idolizing of basketball star Michael Jordan, tries to teach him about Achilles to show that no-one is perfect, she is shouted down by his mother[14]:

> "Jeez, you gotta push it, ain't you? He's only ten, for Chrissakes. Let him have his heroes. God knows he needs a good, strong man to look up to. Yo' always tryin' to make him grow up so quick, I'm sick an' tired of it." (14)

It becomes clear in the aftermath of the crash that, perhaps as a result of her daughter's death, Grandma has ceased trying to caution Marshall regarding heroes, instead encouraging him to find people to look up to (most probably as an attempt to stop him from associating with those whom she considers bad people, such as Dwayne Bouvier[15]):

> "Heroes are precious, son. Don't never forget that. People stick by heroes – always have, always will. It's worth more than money, 'cause it's somethin' money can't buy. Money's no question tonight, Marshall. We goin' to see Jordan. Period." (45)

Yet little attention is given to the direction of Marshall's hero worship – predominantly black symbols of hypermasculinity. Consider this statement from Jeffrey A. Brown:

> Even in contemporary Western culture, the most pervasive and influential images of black men are tied up in hypermasculine symbols. The two primary means to legitimate success for black males in popular culture, sports and music, ensure the

[14] His mother implores him to eat his fruit, telling him it will make him "big an' strong" (12). This implies that size and strength are important and that the extremes of both should be desired traits.

[15] In one particular conversation when Marshall is still a teenager, she tells him that "No grandson o' mine's gonna end up a hoodlum" (43)

> replication of such ideals from the world of sports such as Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Bo Jackson, and Shaquille O' Neil (sic), and from music such overtly masculine examples such as L.L. Cool J, Snoop Doggy Dog, and Tupac Shakur – images that consistently associate black men with extremes of physicality and masculine posturing. (29)

Michael Jordan – the sports star Marshall looks up to – is listed, as is Shaquille O' Neal, another basketball player whom Marshall's rival Dwayne Bouvier idolizes.[16] When added to the negative implications of hypermasculine comic books Brown highlights, consider the type of comics Marshall chooses to read:

> "New Icon comic. This one's a special one – see how the front cover's laminated?" he beamed.
>
> "Uh-huh," she said, squinting at the book through her spectacles.
>
> "This's a crossover, apparently there's gonna be a huge fight between Icon and Superman."
>
> Grandma frowned.
>
> "Superman'll kick his big black butt, damn fool."
>
> "No he won't. Not against Icon."

[16] It is interesting to note the different forms of hypermasculinity Jordan and O' Neal symbolize: Jordan is widely perceived as the greatest player of all time, on account of his well-honed all-round game (another legend, Boston Celtics star Larry Bird described him as 'God disguised as Michael Jordan' (http://www.nba.com/history/jordan63_moments.html)), and while massive by conventional standards at 6 ft 6 " tall and weighing 215 lbs, he doesn't compare to the brutish physicality of Shaquille O' Neal – 7 ft 1 " and 325 lbs. Both are hypermasculine, but one is a measure of hypermasculine perfection, the other hypermasculine excess: the idol of the hero against the idol of the villain.

> "But that's Superman yo' talkin' about, Marshall. No-one can beat Superman, uh-uh. Everybody knows that."
>
> "But Icon is jus' as good as him. They're pretty much equal: same strength, same speed, both can fly – they're neck an' neck." (Connell 35)

So Marshall is inspired by hypermasculine representation in comic books, and competes with his rival Dwayne over who is the best out of the duo of Jordan and O' Neal (Marshall informs Dwayne that Jordan is "gonna kick O' Neal's butt" [37]). This may not be, in itself, problematic – comic books and sports are popular with children and teenagers, after all.

But it is the profound absence of 'normal' masculinity – fallible, prone to weakness, mortal – that changes the scenario into a dangerous one. Marshall has no father figure, through the absence of his real father and the paternal figure of Grandpa. He has no brothers.

While Jordan is fallible, mortal, the air of celebrity brings him closer to the realm of comic book status. It is worth noting that Chapter 2 – when Marshall and Grandpa discuss Jordan – is set in 1991; this was the year when Jordan broke through the 'Jordan Rules' strategy which had been popular for years, leading the Chicago Bulls to NBA Finals victory for the first time in franchise history and earning his first NBA Finals MVP (Most Valuable Player) Award.[17]

This marked the beginning of an era of dominance for both Jordan and the Bulls, as they won in 1991-92 and 1992-93. Jordan achieved the NBA Finals MVP Award both times, becoming the first player in history to receive the award in three

[17] The 'Jordan Rules' strategy was simple: rivals marked Jordan out of the game by putting two or even three players on him. This is very unusual in basketball, due to the relatively small team size (5 active).

consecutive seasons. At the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, Jordan formed part of the US basketball team known as The Dream Team. They won the Gold medal.

On October 6th 1993 Jordan announced his retirement from basketball to try out at baseball, a decision prompted by the murder of his father on 23rd July.[18] His baseball career was not successful, playing for a couple of minor league baseball teams but never excelling.

So, between the events of Chapter 2 – the car crash and decimation of Marshall's family – and Chapter 4 – in 1994, when Marshall and Dwayne fight over who is better, Jordan or O' Neal – basketball was dominated by the presence of Michael Jordan.

Marshall looks up to Jordan, but the murder of Jordan's father also gives Marshall a sense of shared tragedy which seems to strengthen his hero-worship; they have both lost the signifiers of masculinity. [19] The key difference is that this removal occurred for Marshall when he was ten years old; Michael Jordan was thirty. Consider such an absence in relation to what Anika Lemaire says in her analysis of Lacan's work:

> By internalizing the Law, the child identifies with the father and takes him as a model. The Law now becomes a liberating force: for, once separated from the mother, the child can dispose of himself. He becomes conscious that he is still in the making, and, turning towards the future, integrates himself into the social, into Culture, and re-enters into language...The father is he who 'recognizes' the child, giving him a personality by means

[18] http://partners.nytimes.com/library/sports/basketball/041194bkn-jordan.html

[19] At the end of their fight, having defeated Dwayne, Marshall makes a point of asking him: "An' what d'we think about Jordan?" (38)

> of a Speech which is Law, a link of spiritual kinship and a promise. (84)

The car crash forcibly separates Marshall from his mother (although strictly speaking in the sense of the above statement, they were already separated at the point of Marshall's birth), but it also eradicates an opportunity for Marshall to have a father (or father-like figure), who is the link between the child and the process required to enter into the social. This is fundamental to Marshall's acceptance of hypermasculinity as an ideal, as its function is hyperreal in a social context: it does not exist, cannot exist. As Lemaire states:

> Society and its structures are always present in the form of the family institution and the father, the representative of the law of society into which he will introduce the child . . . (92).

"Representative of the law of society": the symbolic figurehead of the structure into which the child must enter (no child, upon growing up, cannot enter society). But without the symbol, there appears to be a vacuum – the absence of the father. But, as Baudrillard says:

> When everything is taken away, nothing is left.
>
> This is false.
>
> The equation of everything and nothing, the subtraction of the remainder, is totally false.
>
> It is not that there is no remainder. But this remainder never has an autonomous reality, nor its own place . . . (*Simulacra* 143).

There is no vacuum – the loss of the father figure does not equal a complete absence. This is the position taken up by hypermasculinity. Hero-worship is inherent in the process between the father and the child – as Lemaire stated, the child takes the father as a model: an ideal. But in his absence, the hypermasculine takes hold – in Michael Jordan, in Icon.

All Marshall has as symbols are hypermasculine ideals, which signify a structure that doesn't exist: he isn't being prepared to integrate into the society around him, he isn't learning the Law or the Speech with which he can relate to other people and develop in a social context.

Therefore, he has to search for an alternative, something to balance the equation. We see this in the hero-worship of Jordan, the reading of Icon comic books, but also in the rivalry between Marshall and Dwayne. Dwayne positions Shaquille O' Neal as his hypermasculine ideal, which Marshall reacts strongly against.

This is because the symbolism is literal for Marshall, in a way in could never be for Dwayne: Michael Jordan *is* his father, Icon *is* his father. To attack or question Jordan is to attack the Law or Speech Marshall has used to fill the void, and with it the supposed fabric of his society (which isn't real, as Jordan isn't representative of reality).

This becomes even stronger in a hyperreal context, backed up by hypermasculine comic books: there is no alter ego, no weaker male, no fallibility or lack of strength. Strength wins, always, as long as it is good. To question such things when there is no "real" alternative, in Marshall's view, would be sacrilege.

But the way in which he tackles the dispute – attacking Dwayne violently – is indicative of a kinship beyond the boundaries of society's structure. Violence is the Speech of the symbolic hypermasculine (but illusory) father figure: it is the currency by

which good and evil compete and balance is restored. By engaging in this, by being violent, Marshall is saying this to Dwayne: this is *our* language. *We* are hypermasculine. As Mosher and Tomkins note, ". . . gaining admission to a male peer group in a subculture of macho youths requires fighting your way in" (71), which both Marshall and Dwayne do willingly. This connection supersedes sides, good or evil, because it validates the position of hypermasculine symbolism as father figure. It makes it so that, even if it is simply the two of them, the hyperreal structure exists within the structure they have not been initiated into.

In this context, it is not surprising that the reader learns they are part of the same teenage gang in 2001 (Chapter 8) – this is simply an evolution of the hypermasculine ideal they shared in earlier years. As Beesley and McGuire state in relation to hypermasculine youths:

> . . . definitions of masculinity were found to be an important aspect of self-awareness, allowing individuals to differentiate themselves from members of other groups and endorsing the use of violence as an inevitable feature of life. (252)

It is also clear that the uneasy duality between the two has continued: they plan the robbery of Valerii's shop together while the rest of the gang work on something else (71), hinting at a close link between them. This robbery is actually a task designed to strengthen the hypermasculine ethos of the gang:

> Other real-boys-becoming-men also know how to intimidate and aggress, to be daring and heroic, and to be tough and callous. The world of boys becomes, in time, a world of youths. This transition from "real boy" to "real men" requires trials by fire – *rites de passage*. (Mosher and Tomkins 71)

In fact, this task has been set up by Dwayne to appear like a rite of passage, but in actual fact was designed to get rid of Marshall. There is clear tension when Marshall returns unscathed, and the issue of electing a new leader is raised – a position that holds substantial hypermasculine power, a leader of hypermasculine men, as Mosher and Tomkins elaborate:

> The macho world is adversarial. To the victors: honor and pride; to the victims: distress, fear and shame. To earn acceptance within the young warrior's honor society, a man must slay his lion. The *rite de passage* – a ritual marking the transition from boyhood to manhood – is a scene of special significance because it tests the manliness of the macho aspirant. The jury – the male youth group – stands in judgment; their sentence: acceptance or rejection. (71)

Dwayne's manipulation of events, however, converts the jury – the remaining members of the gang – into victims, as he pushes aggressively for the leadership. It is a position Dwayne covets, and when some of the gang prevaricate towards Marshall, the tension between the two is evident:

> "I dunno, it's a tough decision. I dunno what t-"
>
> "Quit stallin' an' make a fuckin' choice, you useless piece o' shit."
>
> Everyone but Marshall stared at the ground. He looked over towards Dwayne, on his own at the other end of the room. The only noise in the dingy room was the gentle hum of cars rushing

> by outside. Marshall's jaw was set, his stance readied. He remained as silent as the others did. (Connell 72-73)

This conflict between the two of them again reveals Marshall's literal interpretation of the hypermasculine ideal, the fictitious structure his world is based on: he isn't intimidated by Dwayne's posturing because Dwayne isn't entirely invested in the hypermasculine, which leads to his overblown bravado. As Beesley and McGuire noted, "...early research by Toch (1969) found that threats to masculine self-image and self-image promotion or 'reputation defending' were closely associated in his studies of violent encounters between offenders and the police" (253), and this "reputation defending" seems in to be the primary rationale for Dwayne's hypermasculinity.

Marshall appears to understand better than Dwayne what Baudrillard stated – that good and evil are irresolvably bound up with one another:

> "Come on then, champ. Let's go for it. Go on, you got the balls? You gonna come up against me? You actually think you got what it takes to beat me?"
>
> "If I voted for me," Marshall said, looking him straight in the eyes, "we'd share power." (Connell 73)

At this point Dwayne uses a gun to threaten Marshall. The gun is an important symbolic element, being as it is an item which dispenses great power and immense violence, yet perceptibly causing an unfair imbalance. This act paradoxically makes Dwayne appear weaker, as he isn't able to face Marshall's hypermasculinity in a direct and fair confrontation.

Hence, even though Marshall walks away from the showdown and the gang in this instance, the determination that hypermasculinity is a reverential ideal is

strengthened in both men: Marshall won morally with his show of strength, only to be cheated. This affirms Marshall's belief in the Speech of violence, and makes Dwayne ever-more eager to attain the elusive position on the hypermasculine chain that Marshall inhabits. Hence Dwayne's saying, which he uses repeatedly as the Reaper: You can't *keep* what you can't *prove*.

Ironically, this is almost homage to Marshall's position – it signifies the impossibility *and* desirability of the hypermasculine ideal. As neither is, in the strictest sense, hypermasculine, they stand in a constant race to prove they are, despite the inevitability of failure. Each attempt to prove they are hypermasculine (and more hypermasculine than the other) will fall short, which makes the ideal all the more tantalizing.

Because of this, Marshall requires the absence to remain filled with the symbolic hypermasculine – a place taken by Michael Jordan and Icon, and then by the gang and Dwayne. After he has left the gang, he returns home to witness some disturbing events unfolding on the television:

> What was going on? He edged nearer to the TV. He sat inches away, transfixed by the bizarre image. Is this a movie? he thought.
>
> The news presenter broke down in tears.
>
> Over and over again, a large ball of orange light engulfed the middle of the screen before disappearing as black smoke billowed. Planes had hit the towers, they were saying. It wasn't an accident, they were saying. Words flashed on the screen in bold red letters:

AMERICA UNDER ATTACK

> Marshall stared at the words, horror and awe filling his mind. A sense of dreadful wonder, of the unimaginable happening in the real world. (76)

The tragedy of 9/11, despite its immense violence, is the complete antithesis of hypermasculinity.[20] It offers Marshall a viable alternative to the gang – another group symbolized by adherence to the hypermasculine: the army. His intention is to direct his hypermasculine in a positive direction – to emulate his heroes:

> He was going to do whatever his country needed him to do, whatever was required to fix this. Marshall made his way upstairs. On the TV, the first tower crumbled like a sand castle swept by the tide. (76)

But Marshall, at this point is unaware of the fallacy of his hypermasculine ethos: there is no "fixing" this, hence as he races upstairs to plunge headfirst into an arena of violence, he is completely inadequate in relation to the thing he is trying to fix. Once the action has occurred, the consequences are inevitable: the towers fall. Marshall joins the army believing he can balance the equation, utilizing his hypermasculinity. But this is impossible: there is no countermeasure, because history and events are fluid, always evolving.

In this context, Marshall enters the symbolic realm of American foreign policy in the aftermath of 9/11: a homage to brute strength, highlighted by the bombing

[20] Even villainy pre-warns of its actions: the anticipation of an event is vital to hypermasculinity, because it amplifies the victory/defeat.

campaign on Baghdad known as "Shock and Awe".[21] Marshall becomes at one with his country, avenging an event already too late to prevent:

> The Americans' war is focused on a visible object, which they would like to destroy. Yet the event of September 11th, in all of its symbolism, cannot be obliterated in this manner. The bombing of Afghanistan is a completely inadequate, substitute action. (Baudrillard *Fourth World War*)

This turn of events – a national validation of Marshall's hypermasculine ideals – propels him into even more extreme actions. This is a catastrophic scenario where Marshall begins to believe (unlike in his gang days) that the structure, Speech and Law, into which he indoctrinated himself is widely shared; that it is in fact, that of society and not merely comic books. In Marshall's mind, this is confirmation. He has entered a realm in which becoming a hero is no longer an ideal impossibility: it has become real, viable. And so Marshall strives to become what he has looked up to for so long – a hero.

Unfortunately for Marshall, just as Tupello before it, Iraq does not make allowances for the artificial Speech of the hypermasculine. He is loathed by the unit he is a part of, mostly due to his gung-ho attitude:

> "What I mean is – why go solo? Is he crazy? A suicide risk?"
>
> "Only to everyone else, sir. He's been with our unit seven months. Before him, we'd lost one guy. Since he showed up, we're three men down and four men maimed."
>
> "So he's reckless, then?"

[21] Not only did this title precede the bombing, giving it a sense of anticipation, but it also straddles the language of both negative and positive hypermasculinity: shock (negative) and awe (positive). It is doubly hypermasculine.

> "If you ask me, sir," said the soldier, "he thinks he's some sort of hero."
>
> "Well, son, war can do strange things to men. Changes their perceptions, you know. Though you and I may see differently, I've no doubt there are those who'd see him as an All-American hero."
>
> "If that's the case, sir, then with all due respect – our country's going straight to hell."
>
> The General smiled.
>
> "We're already there, soldier…" (Connell 97)

Marshall has caused mayhem during his time in Iraq; he is undertaking a hypermasculine imperative – to conquer by strength. This is because he expects to meet similar minded people, as can be denoted in this quote:

> ... hypermasculinity is more likely to develop in an environment that is male-only or male predominant. In addition, we propose that the more opportunities men have to reinforce one another's behavior, the higher the levels of hypermasculinity will be. (Fancher, Knudson and Rosen 328)

But this is not the structure he finds himself in: no-one is hypermasculine enough to reinforce his outlook, leading to even more reckless behavior. Worse than the lack of like-mindedness with the men he is surrounded by, in Iraq there are consequences in the form of death and mutilation. It isn't until Marshall faces the results of his immense violence that his belief in the hypermasculine begins to waver:

> Marshall moved back into the building. Treading carefully, he could see all the mines had been tripped. Twitching corpses and charred remains littered the rooms. As far as he could see, there were no survivors, just countless bodies and pieces of bodies. He didn't feel so heroic now, not in this chaos. There was only cold isolation as he walked amongst the stains of death. (Connell 92)

It is in this environment – the remains of immense violence – that Marshall commits his first atrocity. That he does so not in the name of hypermasculinity, but out of mercy, is almost irrelevant. It is the same as the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan post-9/11 – there is no way to untarnish a brutal act, even if it originally stood as retaliatory:

> Wars are often begun in the name of justice, indeed this is almost always the official justification. Yet, while they themselves want to be so justified and are undertaken with the best of intentions, they normally don't end in the manner in which their instigators had imagined. (Baudrillard *Fourth World War*)

Marshall finds that in the aftermath of using violence he needs to use more violence as an act of mercy. For the first time, utilizing and trying to live up to the hypermasculine ideal invokes guilt:

> Impatient and scared that doubt would overcome him, Marshall squeezed as hard as he could. Shock filled the Iraqi's eyes as one last sensation passed over him; an intense pain rose sharply

> from his throat to smother his features as his larynx snapped.
>
> The breathing stopped. The fight was over.
>
> Marshall flopped forward exhausted, sobbing uncontrollably. He held his hands up to his face; he had been gripping so tightly they had cramped up. Pulling them down to his sides, he caught a glimpse of the cross and chain hanging from his neck.
>
> A birthday present from his Grandma. (Connell 95)

This murder is compounded by the later discovery that he hasn't murdered a teenage boy, but a girl: a clear violation of what Marshall considers to be the heroic hypermasculine. There is such a lack of equality in power between the two during the struggle that Marshall has, in essence, betrayed the Law he adopted. It is victory through brutality, a hypermasculine ideal preferred by Dwayne.

His killing of the Iraqi girl also throws Marshall into a fit of despair – the forever-distant but attractive ideal has become, to his mind, utterly impossible. He recognizes, briefly, the actuality of violence, its unforgivable nature:

> "Tell me – you still want to be a hero? A hero for your grandmother?"
>
> It felt like a stupid question to Marshall – he'd strangled a teenage girl only hours ago. There was too much blood on his hands, saturating into his skin, into his own bloodstream.
>
> There could be no washing away of his sins; the things he had done would last forever. Being a hero was impossible. (99)

The problem for Marshall is that at this moment, when he can no more create a hypermasculine Law such as Jordan or Icon or the gang or the army, another presents itself in the form more closely connected to Lacan's idea: a father figure in the guise of the General. Just as the events of 9/11 appeared to thrust Marshall into his destiny, giving him a way out (but also, in hypermasculine terms, a way up into a more positive structure), so the General seems to arrive at the perfect time to 'save' Marshall from his past, his former self:

> "We are going to make you better than the rest. The things you'll be able to do, you wouldn't believe. You're going to help end this war. We are going to turn you into our ultimate weapon, son."
>
> Marshall looked uncertain, his eyes wavering between the General and the ground. The officer patted Marshall gently on the back as he led him up to the army truck, smiling warmly at him. (99-100)

And so Marshall progresses along the hypermasculine path, from hero-worship to gangbanger to soldier to "ultimate weapon" for the good guys. At each turn, Marshall becomes anew – there is no reference from the old: the comic books do not bleed into the gang days, the criminal element of the gang does not infiltrate the attempts at heroism in Iraq. There is only escalation, and so the General's proposal signifies a crucial moment in this pattern.

The conditioning training Marshall undergoes is left undefined, as are the things he does while in the black ops unit under the General's command. Yet there are hints that Marshall committed terrible acts during this time – as the General himself attests to later on, while being tortured:

> "He's dangerous. S-seriously, there're th-things he can do. T-t-terrible things. You don't understand. That man is b-beyond darkness, trust me. I made him what he is. You don't know w-what he's c-capable of." (60)

Again, this is repeated when Marshall's psychiatrist Dr. Roundlearth is tortured towards the end of the novel:

> Alex looked away, tears filling her eyes. She looked down at the knife, then back at her attacker.
>
> "Please, you d-don't under…stand. He's v-very dangerous." (193)

At the end of the novel, once all the things Marshall has forgotten come back to him, once it is revealed that Shahina is his tormentor, there is another indication as to his actions after the initial encounter with the General:

> An image broke in his mind, splintering into segments. It was a struggle to keep it all in; he felt his brain exploding. But he saw something, a jolt that would've made the hairs on his neck stand on end, if only he could feel his body. He saw something, then another thing, then he saw someone.
>
> He saw her.
>
> Shahina.
>
> Her, but not her. Another time, younger. In his presence, the memory broken but undeniable. Their pasts lay interwoven. She

> had known of him, his crimes, for years; only now was he catching up. (246)

His experiences during this time – although unknown, as Marshall himself states to Mike the barman (139) – leave Marshall a shell of his former self. Although the General offered him a chance of redemption, it was merely salvation within the societal structure of the army: his record being wiped clean.

For Marshall this offers no solace: it does not signify a return to the positive hypermasculinity that dictated his development, his childhood. It is merely a dark hiatus – as he does not know what he has done, he does not definitively know he has fallen further – but he knows with certainty he has not progressed, signified by the strongest symbolic element of the hypermasculine:

> Grabbing onto his arms, she inspected him. Marshall looked gaunt, his cheeks covered with prickly stubble and sunken in the gaps around the bones. She noticed his army suit hung off his shoulders, dipping where his muscular frame used to fill it out. He tried to smile, the very corners of his mouth turning slightly. Yet his eyes remained as they were – washed out and vacant. (113)

His reduction on moral grounds is exemplified in his diminished power, which reveals itself in the physical. Marshall went out to Iraq believing his Speech, his Law – that of hypermasculinity – had finally been embraced and taken as actual by the rest of society. Yet his unique interpretation of the structure of reality was called into question by the repercussions of his actions and then manipulated by the General for his own advantage. Because of this, he returns to the place he once escaped a broken man. He has returned to the environment where his abandoned attempts at hypermasculinity

reside, where his failure to assimilate is most pronounced (but ironically, with far less severe consequences than in Iraq).

It is in this sense of despair that Marshall begins drinking – that most hypermasculine response to crisis: attempted oblivion.[22] His choice of arena for self-destruction inevitably lends itself to paths of both salvation and damnation: he inhabits a world of confrontation and violence, deliberately lowering his inhibitions and exhibiting aggressive hypermasculinity without fear of non-conformity:

> Marshall finished another whiskey, sliding his glass carelessly across the polished wooden surface. A man playing pool walked over, offering his hand.
>
> "Fuck off."
>
> "Hey, there's no need to be like that, soldier. I only wanted to say thanks for wha-"
>
> "Jus' listen, okay? You got no idea what I did, who I am, what I am. What's the fuckin' point of thankin' someone if you haven't got a clue about them. Save your breath an' get outta my goddamn face." (115)

In this state his old friend-rival Dwayne Bouvier returns, exhibiting enough power and influence to make the people in the bar avoid his gaze and then exit swiftly (116). It is at this point where history finally emerges in Marshall's present – as he himself recognizes: "You're my past, man. A ghost . . . " (116).

[22] As Mosher and Tomkins observe: "Being drunk justifies a respite, being a drunk (or a "head," or an addict), justifies a retirement from the macho lifestyle of counteraction" (81).

The difference in social stature between the two is at its greatest yet, with Dwayne teasing Marshall over the power he now controls. It appears as though the negative hypermasculine ideal has won over the positive – evidenced by Dwayne offering Marshall a job in his crime empire, which Marshall quickly rejects. Yet Dwayne is perceptive enough to notice Marshall has changed, the idealism of his rival before Iraq now clearly gone:

> "Yo' cold, man. That army shit ate you up an' spat you out pure fuckin' ice. Real shame, you coulda made a difference."
>
> Marshall smiled wryly.
>
> "I thought that. Once."
>
> "An'?"
>
> "Didn't turn out so good." (117)

Still the void remains in Marshall's vision, his idea of Speech – gone are the comic books, the gang, the army and now the General. Alcohol cannot fill the void left by hypermasculinity. With the re-introduction of images of his former self – the return to Tupello, the return of Dwayne, and the offer of joining a criminal gang – the seeds of how to eliminate the void present themselves in the way he now views his surroundings:

> "Tupello. It's diseased, rotten. Fallin' apart all around us. Ain't you seen it? Taken a real good look at it?" (118)

Marshall, a reduced impression of his former self (both in terms of his hypermasculine idealism and his hypermasculine physique), now sees degradation in the very fabric of society – his downfall mirrored by that of the landscape and the people:

> The physical and social decline of neighborhood and school structures are cause for great concern since social disorder has historically shown a correlation with delinquency and violence. (Seaton 368)

This physical and social decline, more or less unchanged throughout Marshall's life, now becomes a revelation to him. Just as Marshall initially created the framework for hypermasculine out of space – the absence of a father figure, of family – so he now identifies a new framework: the lessened city, stricken with the disease of crime.

It isn't until later, still getting drunk at Chorrcha's bar, that what to do with the framework becomes apparent. The symbolic nature of the comic books, of Michael Jordan, made things easy – try and be big and strong. This led to the gang, and the gang led to the army as these were natural developments: variations of negative and positive hypermasculinity.

This pattern is evolutionary *and* accumulative – each time Marshall enters a new phase, the void in his Law becomes wider, more difficult to fill. After all, "...masculinity is an achieved rather than an ascribed status" (Beesley and McGuire 252), and with each progression into more extreme hypermasculinity, so the required level of achievement becomes significantly harder.

At this juncture a solution is not as easy as has been before. He isn't merely aiming to be strong or have power or atone for criminality by being a war hero: he is taking on his perception of a corrupted urbanscape, absorbing the wrongs of millions. His inspiration comes from an incident like all seminal events in his life thus far – one of immense violence.

In the process of breaking up a robbery in the bar (Marshall wakes up with a hangover upstairs, having been put to bed by the barman), he shoots and kills a man. Mike, the barman, shows Marshall something his life has lacked: gratitude. Castigated by the Principal at school, targeted as a rival in the gang, ostracized for his recklessness in the army, Marshall now finds for the first time a positive reaction to his willingness to utilize violence:

> "You saved my life. You're a real hero, you know that?"
>
> "I ain't no hero."
>
> "Yes you are. Yes, *you* are. Don't let no-one tell you otherwise. This city needs a man like you. Seriously, you did a great thing tonight." (Connell 142)

This reaction gives Marshall the appearance he can use hypermasculinity for positive aims, even if the rest of society doesn't adhere to such principles – or even better, that it will thank him for doing the things it cannot.

However, in this Marshall willfully ignores the truth – that the man thanking him is also capable of immense violence in a unique situation, shown when Mike shoots the two remaining robbers in cold blood once Marshall has left. Instead of acknowledging that, at best, Marshall has merely found another counterpart in a similar mould to Dwayne – he ruminates on the possibilities opened by this new framework of the broken city:

> Marshall ran the rest of the way home, his mind racing – one thing repeating itself above all else: *You're a real hero, you know that?* (142)

An adaptation of his ideology is sparked by Mike's choice of words, explicitly

calling Marshall a hero. This was the impossible ideal of his comic book days, the point of rebellion in his gang days, the aim (and subsequent ruin) of his army days.

For all the people he killed in Iraq, he was never called a hero – a description the General used to entice Marshall into his black ops team. Yet here, in the supposedly changed landscape of Tupello, he kills one man and is hailed as a hero.

The framework allows Marshall's perception to create a suggestion: that the city, embodied by Mike, calls him a hero because it *needs* a hero – and in this sense, the hypermasculine ideal can finally be achieved: "Not just male, not just masculine, the macho must be hypermasculine in ideology and action" (Mosher and Tomkins 64).

4.2 We Call You Freak

> Destruction and violence are just the flip side of accumulation.
>
> (Noys)

In this state of accumulation, Marshall's attempt to give Tupello its hero could only be steeped in violence. He has accrued the tools which make him capable of such acts through both his criminal life and military service – he is still that "ultimate weapon" the General spoke of; only now, he has his own agenda – he wants to save Tupello from itself. In response to this desire he creates a vigilante persona known as the Knight.[23]

By taking Mike's assertion that he is (or can be) a hero literally and acting upon it in equally literal terms, Marshall ignores the impossibility of making such a thing actual, as Baudrillard states:

> Everyone can dream, and must have dreamed his whole life, of a perfect duplication or multiplication of his being, but such copies only have the power of dreams, and are destroyed when one attempts to force the dream into the real. (*Simulacra* 95)

Dressing up in Kevlar, a fire-proof cape and a heavy metal mask, Marshall takes to the streets to tackle criminals – but it is quickly apparent that the lack of self-control which proved disastrous in Iraq still afflicts him:

[23] The Reaper hints the name has racial connotations, telling the Knight he's "a disgrace to black folk everywhere" (54) – however, it could also be: a reference to his metallic mask; the fact his activities occur nocturnally; or because people consider his crime fighting noble.

> There were abrupt sounds – bones shattering in the gloom, impatient screams.
>
> "Getoffme, Getoffme you freak! Ohgodohgodohg--"
>
> "I goddamn warned you, didn't I? DIDN"T I?"
>
> The echo of knuckles smashing down on flesh boomed in the shadows. There were loud thuds as men fell, whimpers as they recoiled on the ground beneath flailing fists. (Connell 6-7)

When Shahina criticizes him for using unnecessary violence, he justifies himself by saying what he did was more right "...than what they had planned for you, that's damn sure" (9). With this philosophy, Marshall can construct legitimacy for his immense violence by taking on those who either practice brutality or, as is the case in Chapter 1, even those who intend upon brutality.

When he compensated for the violence in Iraq by deeming it as necessary to the pursuit of heroism, the excuse was crushed by the reality of direct evidence – the carnage he left behind. In this new hypermasculine construct, however, the likelihood of facing such evidence is small: the societal structure wipes clean the urbanscape continually in the form of hospitals and prisons. Marshall will not face the evidence of his violence until it has recovered.

Because of this, he can be as brutal as his hypermasculine ideal allows; there is no need to exercise caution, as he operates outside of the parameters merely by existing as the Knight. He isn't trying to conform to that reality – he is utilizing his hyperreal symbol to affect what he sees as positive change in Tupello.

This is continually justified by the pervading criminality of the city – he has promised himself this role to rid society of an undesired function that cannot ever be

removed: he has, as a symbol, given the Knight a never-ending task. His enemy – the Reaper, a grown-up Dwayne Bouvier who has carved out a criminal empire – shows his awareness of the enormity of what Marshall has put himself up against:

> "No future for you here, freak. You wanna hear somethin' interestin'? There's always been crime. Always. Before you. Before police. Before civilization, even. If I were to put my last dollar on one fact, it'd be this: crime'll last forever..." (55)

He taunts the Knight, repeatedly calling him "freak", saying the criminals of Tupello know him "better than anyone else. Like brothers o' the night" (54). Yet this taunting – from his hypermasculine counterpart, no less – has little effect: it appears to make Marshall even more determined to assert his symbol on the city:

> The Reaper kept clawing towards him, eyes filled with intense hatred. The Knight propped himself up, barely able to look at the man desperately trying to get him.
>
> "If I have to, I *will* kill you. Please don't make me," he said, before hobbling away into the night. (56)

At this point in the novel, the reader has seen Marshall kill twice: once in Iraq and once in Chorrcha's Bar. However, the context of those killings is important. In Iraq, Marshall killed the girl to spare her a slow death, an attempt at mercy. In the bar, he killed the robber because it appeared Mike was in mortal danger. But in this showdown with the Reaper, there is little substance to form a rationale: "If I have to", he says, without any suggestion as to what that limit might represent. It is a threat which comes with no external element – he isn't saving anyone or sparing anyone.

At this juncture, against his hyperreal counterpart the Reaper, Marshall has abandoned the pursuit of hypermasculine heroism because he believes, through the symbolic persona of the Knight, that he has become the ideal – he does not separate the mask from the man underneath:

> Trapped by the imaginary, the alienation of the subject is the loss of distance from the signifier, from the representative in so far as that is all it is: representative. The subject believes in his delirium, he believes in his symptom, retaining only its literal signification . . . (Lemaire 74).

By aligning himself against all malign elements in a city of millions, Marshall's vigilante holds great symbolic power – but it is already problematic, for Marshall's impression of the dynamic between good and evil is that of a false dichotomy. He is good; therefore the violent acts he commits are entirely separate from those of the opposing force – evil.

Not only is this wrong – in real terms and in the hyperreal structure of Tupello – its rigid design allows only a binary opposition: The Knight against Them. But as the Reaper gains in power and influence, Marshall's view is allowed the creation of a shadow, an equal (but in hypermasculine terms, inherently inferior) dark force to balance the equation made uneven by his introduction into the system. Marshall perceives the world as a set of dualities, especially after he realizes the Reaper is his old foe Dwayne Bouvier – and Marshall cannot see the danger in his creation of the Knight:

> Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other,

> which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 95)

Marshall's life is now overburdened with "doubles" – and hence, filled with the markers of imminent death: Marshall and Dwayne, Marshall and the Knight, the Knight and the Reaper. There are continual suggestions not only that Marshall and Dwayne (and the Knight and the Reaper) are locked in an escalating and eventually deadly cycle[24], but also that there is something fatal in the dynamic between Marshall and the Knight:

> . . . there were four people in this, not two. Now there was just one – him. Marshall. He wasn't so sure that was what he really wanted, in the end. (Connell 123)

The absolute belief that Marshall has in his symbolic double appears absent from Dwayne and his persona of the Reaper: the role of villain is utilized for practical gains so that he can avail himself of the resultant spoils of hypermasculine success, money and power.[25]

Marshall doesn't want the rewards – he wants to be like his idol Michael Jordan, to be the best. More: he wants to be perfect, absolute. Instead of taking the signifiers of death as necessary risks justified by compensatory prizes, Marshall simply

[24] For example, Marshall, in a fit of rage because of the Reaper's continued presence, determines the only way to beat the criminal world is to "...cripple it, cut off its head" – by which he means the Reaper (33); the Reaper declares that he is "...gonna slaughter Tupello's own superhero like a dirty mutt" (55).

[25] He tells the Knight directly when he states the dividing line between them is "a profit margin" (54).

doesn't believe they are hallmarks of *his* imminent demise – as he is the embodiment of hypermasculine heroism; his role is too important to be burdened by death.

Hence his promise to the Reaper: "If I have to, I *will* kill you..." – to uphold and preserve the symbolic Knight. There is no outwardly benevolent action in the threat, other than to ensure the survival of the heroic persona above that of the villainous one – the definitions of what constitutes heroism and villainy of course defined by Marshall, who happens to be in the position of hero.

He is adhering to the hypermasculine mantra of competition through a battle of strength – armed by the belief that his position as good (in his black and white world where the two spheres – good and evil – are entirely separate) will guarantee him victory in due course.

While he ignores the signifiers of imminent death in the appearance of doubles in relation to himself (and, more importantly now, the Knight), his rhetoric suggests he still acknowledges the inevitable outcome by even mentioning killing the Reaper. Marshall has decided, in this hypermasculine structure imprinted on society by both him and Dwayne, that one will die and that one can only be Dwayne.

This is almost fatal when, having escaped with a narrow victory in their first encounter, the Knight appears overly confident the next time they meet:

> There was a heavy crash behind him, followed by loudly whispered curses.
>
> "Real subtle. Hurt yourself?"
>
> "What d'you care?" snapped the Reaper, brushing his arms as he got up.

"I don't want an unfair advantage." (61-62)

His casual attitude hands the advantage to the Reaper's more underhand nature, and very quickly he has suffered great physical damage: a broken arm, deep stab wounds to his leg and right arm and other injuries. Yet, even at this desperate juncture, his faith in the hypermasculine ideal is unshakeable – his symbol is, to him, undeniable:

> Speeding up to a jog, he launched a vicious kick into the Knight's ribs. Frustrated by the armor plates, he kicked him over so that he was lying on his back. The Knight was struggling for breath; even his mask couldn't hide the trouble he was in. I'm losin', he thought. (65)

To Marshall, all these injuries signify is the potential for loss – not of life but the fight. This suggests that the gap between Marshall and his symbolic self are closed: death is not death, it is losing – and worse, at the Reaper's hands it would constitute the worst hypermasculine loss conceivable.

This is realized when the Reaper goes to remove the Knight's mask – which Marshall knows is fatal in more than one sense, hence his desire to not "let him know" (65): He must prevent the Reaper (whom he knows to be Dwayne) from finding out his real identity, thus their connected past. But also he must not let the Reaper unveil the Knight as mere man, regardless of who is beneath the mask, as the hypermasculine ideal is dependent on the lack of a weaker, less masculine alter ego.[26]

Both men appear aware of this fact, which is why when the Reaper does pry it from Marshall's face he holds it up ". . . like a treasured prize" (65). It is worth noting at

[26] Although Marshall is an adherent to hypermasculinity, it is irrelevant: no-one can achieve the symbolic ideal the Knight has, as without connections he is shorn of the signifiers of weakness: love, dependency, doubt.

this point how this may be a hallmark of the Reaper's closer adherence to the hypermasculine Law of comic books: he constantly references them in his fights with the Knight, but considered in connection with his boasts about using the villainous image to gain more money and power, it appears to the reader he utilizes comic book lore for less symbolic reasons than Marshall.

However, this holding up of the mask insinuates his belief is stronger than just using the idea of comic book villain to augment his criminal goals. At this point in the fight, he has won – won entirely. It seems the Knight – as a symbol, as potential – is destroyed forever: he has become a broken man lying in sludge on a building roof.

This reverts the hypermasculine norm of comic books – brutality (in the form of villainy) never beats perfection (in the form of heroism). Yet here it has – the heroic symbol is made less, tarnished. By holding the mask aloft, the Reaper is showing he believed exactly what the Knight believed – that the heroic hypermasculine was always going to win, because that was how the Law of the hyperreal structure worked.

Yet the unveiling of a double reveals another double: Marshall for the Knight. At this point he is helpless, powerless – he has even lost the imperative to preserve his symbol as it has been separated from him.

Dwayne reacts by repeatedly stamping on Marshall's face: now the mask has gone, this is all he can do to rid himself of the double, the shadow, his signifier of imminent death. Now, however, with twice the symbolic threat that Marshall/The Knight poses, the playful banter ceases.

Brutality has allowed the tearing away of the mask, the destruction of Marshall's face. Now the situation is uncharted territory for negative hypermasculinity:

the villain always professes to want to kill the hero, yet is always thwarted at the last minute.

Marshall, with deep stab wounds, a broken arm and possibly a fractured skull, is in no position to play out this narrative: there are no miraculous powers to call on at the last minute, no sidekick to help distract the villain. And so Dwayne does only what can be done: he purges himself of the Knight, of Marshall, in a hypermasculine show of callous violence atop the multi-storey building:

> "You don't belong here, man. Yo' my past. You hear me? My past. It's time for you to go back there. Yo' history."
>
> His cell phone ringtone played out once more. He hesitated for a second then he threw the Knight over the edge. (66)

Marshall doesn't die – the resultant injuries, however, are horrific, as witnessed by Shahina and the doorman of the hotel from whose roof Marshall was thrown:

> She turned the Knight over. They both gasped. His face was caved in in places, crushed in others. Every part of it seriously damaged. The swelling shocked most of all; his face had ballooned into a series of grotesque purple lumps. Whoever he was, he would probably be unrecognizable even to friends and family. (67)

This ties in with the notion suggested in Perry Moore's *Hero* by the physical decline of Uberman – that physicality, in a hypermasculine, hyperreal structure, is bound to heroism. But the distinction is clear – Moore's character suggests that there *is* a link, that being big and strong and powerful makes you heroic and therefore superior.

The resultant injuries suffered by Marshall, on the other hand, indicate a different notion: that immense violence is the inevitable outcome of hypermasculinity, because both positive and negative hypermasculine individuals seek out and confront one another.

Marshall's face is ruined, protecting his identity, but also symbolically destroying it – which is what Dwayne wanted because, as was made clear by his actions in their gang days. He doesn't believe they can exist in the same space because there is only *one* hypermasculine – a primary, whether it is good or bad.

By washing away the mystique of the Knight and then ruining the image of his rival beneath the mask, Dwayne is using his brutality to ensure that brutal hypermasculinity achieves and then maintains dominance over Marshall's more positive, perfectionist ideal.

4.3 Self and Other

When the reader next encounters Marshall, he has been convalescing under Shahina's care – an intriguingly helpless scenario that raises several questions about his ideology after the devastating fight with the Reaper. The problem stems from an ideological schism – Marshall has given up part of the equation:

> The symbol is different from what it represents, this it its condition; thus, if the subject who is called 'John' or who translates himself in discourse as 'I' saves himself through this nomination in so far as he inscribes in himself in the circuit of exchange, he becomes, on the other hand, lost to himself, for any mediate relationship imposes a rupture of the inaugural continuity between self and self, self and other, self and world. (Lemaire 68)

In the creation of his symbolic vigilante, Marshall divorced himself from the system which surrounds him: self and world. He does so by replacing himself with the Knight, who doesn't fit into the structure but has the capacity to affect it because he, unlike Marshall, is ideal (from Marshall's perspective of hypermasculinity).

The implications are clear – Marshall did so because he believed entirely in the power of the symbol: the Knight will never lose. He has eradicated himself from the balance, and ironically he has been aided through the Reaper's near destruction of his body and face. The trouble comes from the notion of a symbolic adoption becoming "lost to himself" – lost implying the link between symbolic and real has been removed: it can be rediscovered. Marshall is not merely lost to himself because of the Knight – he

has replaced himself with his double. Now that the symbol has been broken, we find Marshall physically less – but also his belief in the hypermasculine philosophy is less strident, as evidenced by his shock when Shahina attests that Marshall must kill the Reaper: "But-but you want me to kill the Reaper? Actually kill him?" (Connell 84)

This insinuates that either Marshall now doubts the necessity of hypermasculinity's end result, or that he never fully believed it would get that far. The lack of clarity creates two possibilities for Marshall as a character: either he is reacting quite simply with doubt as a result of the brutal last encounter with the Reaper, or he hasn't yet been able to engage entirely with the extremities of the symbolic hero he has created. If violence and destruction are the products of accumulation, the accumulation of hypermasculinity can only accentuate and bring forward the intensity of a violent and final destruction.

It is possible that there is an element of difference between Marshall and the symbol he has created – after all, why discard himself? – as, in the creation of a double, there is splitting, a division. As Lemaire states, "splitting . . . therefore masks the subject from himself in the utterances he makes on himself and the world" (73). To mask is to hide, to divert attention from the apparent truth of appearance – and so it becomes plausible that, when he threatened to kill the Reaper, this masked the truth: that Marshall could do no such thing.

In this state of doubt there is great potential for Marshall to renege on his hypermasculine ideal – the symbol of that ideal, after all, was destroyed. Not only literally with defeat, but also by unmasking and forever linking the seemingly immortal ideal with the mortal man hiding beneath. His vulnerability – both physical and mental – allows for a withdrawal from the path he has chosen, but that is quashed by what Shahina says to him:

> "How do you think this will end? Can a jail hold this man, can you imprison his influence, his ideals? As long as you hold to the idea that he and you can both live, the only outcome will be your death." (Connell 84)

She has made explicit the exact dynamic that led to his defeat – but suggested the impossibility of going back to before: there can only be death. The structure of Marshall's hypermasculinity, like many heroes in crisis, has undergone complete reversal: from death being impossible in the conflict between the Knight and the Reaper, it has become he who is fated to perish.

It is this paradigm shift in the structure of his Law that he uses to justify what was threatened in their first encounter: killing the Reaper. It is as though the Reaper's murderous intentions weren't real to Marshall (because the hypermasculine hero is destined to be victorious over his villainous counterpart) until after the Reaper almost succeeded, and even then only because he was successful in destroying the image of the Knight, not the violence acted against Marshall.

Because Shahina tells him the relationship between him and the Reaper is still fatal and inevitable, this opens up a new possibility that, until defeat, hadn't crossed Marshall's mind: regeneration. Without the final stage of the hypermasculine journey – violent death – there is no reason why the symbolic potency of the Knight cannot be continued. At this juncture, having come so close to losing the hypermasculine ideal forever, its preservation is paramount in his mind: "One thing he knew was true – the Reaper would stop at nothing to see him dead. He couldn't continue to be the Knight and leave this unfinished . . . (85).

And so in Dr. Barnen's hi-tech medical facility the Knight is reborn. The deadly relationship with its double, the Reaper, is seemingly strengthened as the driving

element – " . . . challenges by male adversaries require escalating violence to be more manly...the rule: escalate anger, daring, callousness until dominance is established" (Mosher and Tomkins 79) – calls for yet further escalation.

Again, as with his reaction to 9/11, Marshall signifies the larger American pre-occupation with identifying an external object to fight against, a signifier to vent fear, frustration and anger out on – yet he ignores the true nature of the Knight-Reaper/Marshall-Dwayne dynamic in relation to himself, which draws parallels with the War on Terror in its implications:

> The war on terror mirrors the psychological implications of fortress America, where the threat is presumed to be an entity that can be locked out, but in fact resides in the state itself. Likewise, terror is an emotion that has outside stimulants, but originates in, and can only be controlled by, the subject. (Murphy)

Marshall has targeted the Reaper, a hypermasculine symbol, without recognizing the relationship between inner and outer reality: if he is to judge the Reaper for his brutality with death, eradicating the terror of the symbol, then what of his own hypermasculinity, his own brutality, his own symbol?

4.4 We Are Who We Are

> A ghost came bursting in from the night, silhouetted by the giant moon. Before he could react, Taylor was pulled out and thrown flailing into the cool air. His hurried screams quickly vanished; seconds later, there was a faint thud. (Connell 104)

The next time we encounter the Knight, it is revelatory; gone is the casual violence displayed in Chapter 1 against Kurt and his gang, and again in Chapter 5 against Jimmy, a low level pimp working for the Reaper. It has been replaced by an efficiency which displaces doubt, to the point where the Knight has no qualms about killing Taylor because Taylor stands between him and the destruction of his adversary. He makes no attempt to hide this when he states "This ends tonight" (104).

The action of callously flinging Taylor to his doom seemingly makes concrete the meaning behind the Knight's words – they now appear real, as opposed to the hollow threat issued at the end of their first encounter. At this point, the Knight reveals something else – having already shifted from their normal rules in calling the Reaper by his real name: "You can't hide behind the mask forever. Neither can I. We are who we are" (104).

With these words, Marshall asserts that the actions he is undertaking tonight are his own, no longer separated from himself by the symbolic disguise of the Knight. This suggests two things: that Marshall was unable to kill Dwayne up until this point because he didn't want to (and tried to circumvent this using the Knight as symbolic double); and that Marshall believes that even in their last encounter – when the Reaper

almost killed him – that it wasn't Dwayne trying to murder Marshall, only his symbolic villainous identity.

By saying "we are who we are", he reintegrates the men beneath the masks into the equation – it has finally become the conflict Marshall walked away from when they were teenagers, when Dwayne used a gun to gain an unfair advantage. It is the tacit acknowledgement that having symbolic ideals is not enough – the discrepancies between what the Knight is capable of, and what Marshall is willing to do, caused an unavoidable gap.

They have adopted hypermasculine totems, but this will not decide the conflict – just as the totems of Michael Jordan and Shaquille O' Neal did not in their childhood. The only way to decide who is better within the hypermasculine frame is to be as hypermasculine as possible against one another – to actualize, as much as is possible, the ideals enshrined in the signifiers they have created.

This shift does not mean much to the Dwayne/Reaper dynamic, as his ideal has always been utilized with practicality and brutality in mind. The Marshall/Knight dynamic, on the other hand, changes irrevocably. Hence when the Reaper taunts him about the imminent death of Linda Greenburg, with the expectation that the Knight will be hampered by trying to save her, the cold reply instead comes: "She's an acceptable loss" (105).

Marshall has now adapted his hypermasculine ideal – no longer trying to outdo other men with brutality, he applies a clinical strategy: Taylor and Linda Greenburg are not important to the preservation of the Knight; they can only impede the destruction of the Reaper. He has renounced hypermasculine brutality not because of its lawlessness, because it is immoral, but because it is unwieldy, because it will not achieve what he desires: hypermasculine perfection. It is worth questioning why he doesn't perceive

murder as an element that blocks this ideal – and the answer stems from the now-blurred relationship between Marshall and his vigilante symbol.

He is wearing the mask – a mask he never wore in Iraq, for example – yet he states quite plainly that this is between him, Marshall, and Dwayne. In all previous encounters, the mask hid the man beneath – now it stands for purely symbolic reasons. Yet now, from Dwayne's perspective (and Marshall's), the Knight is symbolic *of Marshall*. When he states they are who they are, it is clear that the Knight is who Marshall is.

But given that a mask can be taken off, put away, there is the possibility of removal from the Knight's actions – unlike his actions in Iraq, which caused him such guilt. If the Knight still hid Marshall but could not progress beyond Marshall's limitations (i.e. willful murder), the hypermasculine ideal he believes in will never beat Dwayne's brutal, uncompromising alternative. Now they are one and both, and the removal of moral responsibility becomes possible in both guises:

To the Knight, Marshall killed Taylor because he needs to kill Dwayne to survive.

To Marshall, the Knight killed Taylor because he stood in the way of the Reaper, who must be defeated by the 'good' hypermasculine.

There is no moral code now, not for the man or the symbol, because both entities have become interchangeable: there is only the fatalistic relationship with his dual opposite, Dwayne/Reaper. The burden of collateral damage, which seemingly stopped him from hurting Jimmy further in Chapter 5, is no longer a burden but an acknowledged fact: people will die.

Yet it is the relative worth of these people from Marshall's perspective that proves decisive. Marshall's world has always been symbolic: Icon and Michael Jordan as perfected hypermasculinity; Dwayne and Shaquille O' Neal as brutal and inferior hypermasculinity; the teenage gang as negative hypermasculine and the army as positive; the young Iraqi girl he killed as damnation; the General as salvation; Mike as a city in need of deliverance; the Knight as opportunity to realize the hypermasculine ideal.

Marshall has always developed his ideology in relation to these symbolic elements; the issue is mass: people as an entity. Mike *is* the city, just as the Knight is Good and the Reaper is Evil in Marshall's perspective. In other words, Taylor and Linda Greenburg represent a tiny fraction of the whole, the whole being something Marshall is not a part of.

Both Marshall and the Knight – and, he believes, Dwayne and the Reaper – inhabit a hyperreal structure at odds with the 'reality' of Tupello at large. These victims are not victims of the Knight, or of hypermasculinity – they are victims of the hegemonic system's desire to infiltrate Marshall and Dwayne's 'pure' symbolic system. From Marshall's perspective, neither he nor the Knight can be held responsible: either these people or Dwayne put them in this situation, and in both the culpability rests elsewhere.

To him, Dwayne should not engage with the system and the system should not be present. The problem is that Marshall ignores an important fact of the equation: he was able to enact a hypermasculine ideal through absence of a traditional model of masculinity. There was a gap which he could fill, so that was what he did. But there is no gap in the system of Tupello for the Knight to 'fit' into; he has imposed himself on the system. He cannot interact with it without being part of it. In this sense, the Knight

(and Marshall) has taken part of Tupello – just as Dwayne/Reaper has. As Baudrillard states: "The hypothesis is the following: the world is given to us. The symbolic law says: what is given must be given back" (*Integral Reality*).

What is interesting at this point is the difference between Marshall and Dwayne: they both stand in debt to the system, required to give back what has been taken. Yet Dwayne inhabits a realm within the system – he is a criminal. Marshall has forsaken Law, the order of governed justice, to create the Knight.

The system is naturally against Dwayne, but accepts his existence as it stands as inevitable that, once he goes (either by death or detention), someone else will fill his role. In this sense, he performs an acceptable function. But Marshall stands alone – there is no function for a vigilante, no pattern. While Tupello may periodically turn against Dwayne in increased terms, it is permanently and passionately opposed to the existence of the Knight.

So in this confrontation, Marshall (as the Knight) represents the hyperreal defiantly taking from the overriding social system – signified by the 'acceptable' deaths of Taylor and Linda Greenburg. What happens to the system – and as such, the people inhabiting the system – is unimportant to him.

The balance of power between the Knight and the Reaper has altered once more because of this. The Reaper is reliant on the system: he merely uses the hypermasculine to gain control over the Speech and the Law entirely absent from Marshall's existence. Now that the Knight is willing to destroy parts of the system in order to exert his dominance, the Reaper cannot compete. Any advantage he once had has disappeared, the fact made clear when the Knight uses the Reaper's own line after he's killed Linda Greenburg:

> "You killed her ass, man! Nothin' like that needs to ever be done. You chose to do it. You wanted to do it."
>
> "No. I had to."
>
> "Why? Why the hell did you have to do it, then?"
>
> "You can't *keep* what you can't *prove*."
>
> The Reaper stared dumbfounded at him. (Connell 106)

The importance of the repeated discussion between the two about whether this – their personas as hero and villain in the "reality" of Tupello – is a comic book now becomes clear: to Marshall there is no link, his hypermasculine ideal has evolved far beyond the strict morality of the panels and speech bubbles which dominated his youth. Dwayne has banked on the notion that Marshall/Knight was "playing" hero, and in that believed in the social constructs of morality and right. In other words, Dwayne believed Marshall wanted to uphold the Law of the system without engaging in its Speech – instead using hypermasculinity to achieve his goals.

He is wrong.

Marshall wants to uphold what *he* feels is right, not decreed by society or law. Fundamental to this is the survival and continued existence of the Knight. This runs counter to the Reaper, the symbolic villain masking the criminal Dwayne. Dwayne would still be who he is without the Reaper, and so there is less at stake in the fight between symbolic entities for him.

The crux of the fight reveals the very nature of their continued battle for hypermasculine supremacy: even as Marshall shows his incredulity that Dwayne could

even deign to think he can compete, Dwayne shows in the most literal terms how far he is willing to go not to concede:

> The Knight moved over to him slowly, bending down to grab him by the collar. His whole body was shaking.
>
> "IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED, DWAYNE? IS THIS WHAT YOU WERE AFTER, ALL THESE YEARS?"
>
> There was no response to the question, merely screams. As the Knight shook his head in frustration, the Reaper lifted up a foot long shard of wood.
>
> He rammed it into the Knight's chest. (108)

Moments later, Dwayne attempts to shoot Marshall – signifying a return to the conflict of years ago. Yet the difference between then and now is clear: Dwayne shoots three times, striking Marshall once in the arm. In response, Marshall doesn't flee this time – instead crushing Dwayne's hand and tossing the gun out of the window. In their teenage encounter, they were both 'playing' their roles. Now, it is real to both of them: this has become their relationship, each representing the other's imminent death.

It becomes clear, though, that each man does not understand either their respective motivations or even the dynamic that has driven them to this point. Marshall screams at Dwayne in disbelief that he persists: "WHAT DO YOU GOT THAT'S EVEN WORTH FIGHTIN' FOR?" (108); Dwayne – while held over the precipice by Marshall – asks his rival "...ever wonder what woulda happened if you'd been voted leader instead o' me? Think you'd be me, an' I'd be you?" (109), to which Marshall inevitably replies "No". They have both invested so much into their pursuit, their

hypermasculine symbolism, that they never stopped to analyze *why* their opposite was doing so.

Dwayne does, while being dangled from the great height by the Knight, recognize the inherent duality of their positions: Marshall has done what he has done to compete with and eventually defeat the Reaper. What of after? Dwayne illustrates the idea: "You can't exist without me! This ain't jus' the end o' the line for *me*. Do this an' there's nothin' left for you either" (109).

He is correct: in the system they created in their youth, there was only Marshall and Dwayne (or the totems of Marshall and Dwayne). If Dwayne/Reaper dies, Marshall is left alone, with the system he is not a part of desperate to destroy him (this would also be accentuated without the criminal Reaper present). Nonetheless, Marshall determines that he must kill the Reaper.

As he is about to, Shahina enters. She implores him not to kill the Reaper, reiterating what Dwayne said when she states "This will be the end of you" (109). In a moment of hesitation the Knight is blinded by the lights of a television channel helicopter outside, and in that instant the Reaper reaches up and pulls part of the wooden shard still lodged in Marshall's chest. Trying to stem the bleeding, the Knight is now holding his adversary with just one hand.

This, for the first time, seems to run counter with their confrontational dynamic – Marshall is confused and surprised by the action:

> "Why'd you do that? Jesus, I can't hold you up. Grab my arm, man. Grab my arm! Why'd you do that? Why? *Why*?"
>
> "Why? Fuck you, that's why." (110)

With this final exchange Dwayne smashes down on Marshall's arm, forcing him to release Dwayne. The Reaper falls to his death, not making "...a single sound as he swept down into dark oblivion" (110). With this last pattern, Dwayne's motives become clear: in questioning the Knight's need to kill him, he appeared determined to preserve himself. Yet, with the actions and statements leading up to his death, the true reasoning becomes clear.

Dwayne cannot compete with the sheer belief and hypermasculine superiority of Marshall or his symbol, not now Marshall has integrated the brutality and callous disregard for the "real" system into his ideology. And so he competes in opposites – contradicting Marshall at each turn. Marshall goes to kill him, Dwayne says he shouldn't; Marshall hesitates, Dwayne forces his hand; Marshall demands an explanation; Dwayne uses his final words to give as little of an explanation as possible. Even his death inverts expectations – there is no scream; indeed, it seems as though he is the only element in the entire scene not making noise.

In contradicting the expected terms of conflict and result – in much the same way Marshall, at the beginning of this fight, gained the upper hand by not fulfilling his supposed role – Dwayne has not won, but he has denied Marshall victory.

Hypermasculinity has resulted with the death of one, but it has not resolved the question critical to the conflict – who is better, who is stronger? The largest threat of imminent death has been removed, but the hanging question leaves a stain on that other double, the one who also signifies Marshall's imminent death – the Knight.

In making the Speech of the hypermasculine solitary – removing the Reaper and Dwayne from the equation – Marshall escalates the conflict between hypermasculine symbol and the system it has been imposed upon – a conflict driven by a strong reaction:

> The symbolic order can in essence be supported only by itself; it cannot, that is, be referred directly to the real. (Lemaire 67)

And so Marshall's symbolic order stands supported only by himself: there is no authority, in the form of sports stars or comic books, which validates his mode of being. Nor, now, is there a peer: with Dwayne gone, the question is whether Marshall can take the burden of his hyperreal structure.

4.5 Peculiar Liberation

> Naturally the United States, in principle, could liberate every country just as it has liberated Afghanistan. But what kind of peculiar liberation would that be? Those so fortunate would know how to defend themselves even with terror if necessary. (Baudrillard *Fourth World War*)

If anything is gained from the death of Dwayne, it is this: Marshall is liberated from the fear of death (or terror) from his double. But the point Baudrillard makes about the US can be related to Marshall, he has eradicated the symbol of his imminent death, but it solves nothing – the system, Tupello, still cannot accept his existence. Worse still, the liberation is peculiar in that it appears to grievously harm Marshall. It warrants the retirement of the Knight and a period of great uncertainty:

> He'd crossed a line that shouldn't ever be crossed, but there was no choice. The Reaper would have torn the city down if he'd let him. But now he was stuck, feeling dead as Marshall and tainted as the Knight. It was like he'd poisoned his own dream, his own ideals. (Connell 122)

At points of crisis in his life – not danger, merely the periods where he questions the Law and Speech he has adopted – someone has been there to re-affirm his position, enabling Marshall's progression on the hypermasculine scale. Grandma encouraging hero-worship after the crash; Dwayne promoting signifiers of brutal hypermasculinity; the General offering "ultimate" hypermasculinity, turning Marshall

into a weapon; and Shahina, re-assembling him when he falls, a broken man after the second fight with the Reaper.

So it occurs again – and once more it is Shahina who comes to Marshall in his moment of doubt. Yet he shows signs of finally accepting the impossibility of diametric opposition – that he cannot remain out of the system entirely, or that he ever has been:

> "...When I first became the Knight, it was so straightforward. They're bad, I'm good. But it's not like that, it's *never* been like that – not really. How can the Knight exist, if I'm not certain what I'm doin' is right?" (122)

This suggests he has now grasped the nature of his ideal: it can never be made "real" because it is dependent on a more simplistic model of hyperreality than Tupello offers. If everyone he confronted was 'bad', the techniques he utilized can be justified. He has come to understand, much too late, the part of Speech and Law that Grandpa tried to impart upon him in one of their final conversations, when Marshall was eleven:

> "Yeah, he's okay. But he ain't no Jordan."
>
> Grandpa smiled.
>
> "Careful, son. Heroes, villains – world ain't black an' white like that. All muddled up, shades o' gray. He's good but he ain't perfect." (16)

This makes maintaining (or progressing) Marshall's position on the hypermasculine scale extremely difficult, as he appears to have accepted the virtual nature of the role he has placed himself in. He seems to suffer at this invasion of reality, in a way described by Baudrillard:

> . . . things are nothing but what they are and, as they are, they are unbearable. They have lost every illusion and have become immediately and entirely real, shadowless, without commentary. (*Integral Reality*)

In this sense of despondency, Shahina's task as regenerative force to Marshall's hypermasculine self is further complicated. She cannot support idols to follow, as Grandma once did; she cannot offer a distinct path to hypermasculinity, as Dwayne did; she cannot entice Marshall with a supreme hypermasculinity, as the General did – and now, she cannot help him recover and improve physically as she once did. So it is little surprise that the way she re-opens the possibilities for Marshall is skilful and intelligent:

> "...the Reaper was not the end – he was the first chapter of the Knight. Just as he dominated briefly in the name of evil, you can dominate in the name of good for much longer. You can make Tupello your own."
>
> "No one person can make this city their own."
>
> "Not you, Marshall. The Knight. The Knight is no person – he is myth, he is legend. Young children no longer play with toy guns; they wear capes and masks. You have captured this city's imagination. It is your kingdom, if you want it to be." (Connell 124)

Instead of offering goals and ideals, she places Marshall as an already achieved ideal – the story of the Knight has become a narrative in which Tupello is merely a domain. The continual rise and fall of Marshall's hypermasculinity now becomes

episodic – literally chapters of his story. By doing this at the point where Marshall has realized the reality of his actions, Shahina diminishes them to fables, history that seems to span beyond Marshall himself. She implies that Tupello is fated to be controlled by the Knight – that the vigilante is meant to be an integral part of the system, denied that place by the existence of the Reaper.

This offers Marshall an entirely new perspective – one in which the Knight has not invaded the 'real' space of Tupello, but has merely had his position incorrectly filled by his hypermasculine enemy, the Reaper. Instead of being independent of the system, with his own separate Law and Speech, the Knight is actually meant to occupy part of the hyperreal landscape of Tupello.

In Shahina's narrative the impossible integration now becomes not only viable, but imperative: it would be wrong of Marshall to *not* have the Knight make Tupello his own. Yet here, as in certain conversations before, there is a duality to Shahina's speech that Marshall is either unaware of, or ignores completely:

> "Have faith, Marshall. This is what you are meant to do with your life. Do not give up your purpose. If you endure, you will get everything you deserve."
>
> "Thanks, Shahina. I really appreciate your support," he said, straightening up. (125)

"You will get everything you deserve" – to Marshall, this signifies the legend of the Knight: a perfected ideal of hypermasculinity, effortlessly heroic and unquestionably right.

But when taken in context of other words Shahina has used – "This is not a gift between two friends" (83); "I abhor violence, I have from a young age" (84); "There is

a fine line between what one prefers to do, and what one knows is the right thing to do" (84); "The Reaper will kill you, Marshall. I do not want to see that happen" (85); "If you do this, you are above justice. You are not above justice" (109); "He chose his path – as we all do" (123); "Can we treat the man who kills with the same rules as the rest of us? No, they are different" (123) – there is a suggestion that Shahina's motives are not merely to aide Marshall in his hypermasculine quest – especially when combined with the knowledge that Marshall spent a year in Iraq undertaking black ops missions he cannot remember, and Shahina is Iraqi.

The chapter ends with Marshall determining that "he killed the Reaper, killed Dwayne. Now it was time to kill the Knight" (125), yet Shahina's persistence in championing the Knight and its purpose are left unquestioned. He is left alone to ponder the structure of his Speech, his Law, but Shahina's notion of a mythic Knight allows him a potential new direction to continue in.

4.6 The Knight Is Real

> "Police may make you feel protected but it ain't real. The Knight is real, he can protect this entire city from itself. There's no more sufferin' 'cause of Dwayne Bouvier."
>
> "Tell that to Mrs. Bouvier," she snapped. (150)

Marshall, having buried the Knight under increasing scrutiny in the form of a city-wide manhunt, reveals his secret to Grandma. Her reaction is one of complete horror: his hypermasculine odyssey has been kept from her. As she only saw the comic books, the gang and the army as phases, there was no question of there being any underlying motivation.

Because of this, Marshall is now entirely separate from the signifiers of his hypermasculinity. Dwayne is dead, Grandma has disowned him, and the General is a distant memory. Even the Knight – for all his symbolic potency – has disappeared. For the first time in his life he feels truly alone, and so he turns to the one person who has appeared to be supportive:

> He pressed a number on speed dial.
>
> "Hello, this is Shahina. I cannot get to the phone at present. If you would be so kind as to leave a message with your name and number, I will call you back as soon as I can."
>
> He hung up without leaving a message. (150-151)

With nowhere else to turn, and no-one else to turn to, Marshall ventures back to the place where his latest hypermasculine incarnation began: Chorrcha's Bar. In this

arena, drunk, Marshall attracts a different type of attention: his attributes, shorn of the symbolic Knight, cast him in an unfavorable light as Jeffrey A. Brown suggests:

> The ritualized hypermasculinity performed by many black men as a cool pose, particularly the preoccupation with enacting a tough persona, is rife with the negative potential to promote dangerous lifestyles (e.g., gang bangers, tough guys, drug dealers, street hustlers, and pimps) . . . (29).

Marshall no longer automatically represents good, as the Knight did in continual relation to the Reaper. What makes this problematic is that Marshall doesn't see this: he is still the hero, the one who is indefatigably right. Yet in the bar, appearances dictate, as Marshall discovers:

> Letting out a sharp gasp, Marshall shook his head violently as he frowned. An involuntary belch escaped his mouth.
>
> "Jesus Christ, guy's a fuckin' tramp!" spat Frank.
>
> "Easy, Frank."
>
> "No, Mike. Look at the state of him! Hey, buddy - when was the last time you had a wash?"
>
> "Last time I was home."
>
> "And when was that, the freakin' eighties?"
>
> People around the bar sniggered. (Connell 153)

This scene signifies the conflict between Marshall and the system: he is outside, as shown by Frank mocking him and the rest of the bar enjoying this humiliation. Marshall mistakes Frank's insults as a signal to confrontation, something

Marshall readily engages in with brutal hypermasculinity, badly beating Frank. Marshall's distance from the reality of Tupello is made clear when he sits back down, tacitly refusing to acknowledge he will be sought out by the police for hurting Frank:

> "Marshall, you better go. I think the cops are coming."
>
> "So?"
>
> "So, they're coming for you."
>
> "No they ain't. They're comin' for him," he replied, nodding to Frank.
>
> "Buddy, you smashed him up real bad. They're coming for *you*."
>
> "Bu-but *I'm* the good guy. He's the one they want. I only give 'em what they deserve."
>
> Mike blinked.
>
> "Huh?"
>
> "All of them. Me an' them, up against it, all the time. The only damn one to make a stand. They ain't comin' for me. I'm the good guy." (154)

Marshall inhabits a space which doesn't exist in this environment – the hypermasculine. He mistakenly believes that, because Mike acknowledged his heroism in the bar years earlier, he can be a 'hero' in the bar once more. The trouble is that, as with the Knight, Marshall asserts his own morality on the role of hero, and sees no issue in utilizing extreme violence to achieve his goals.

The police arrive and arrest him, keeping him in a cell for the night (he is put in solitary because he is too disruptive, [155]). There is another signifier of what has been lost – the absence of his hypermasculine symbol evidenced in a physical form of weakness: “Looking down, he couldn’t believe how badly bruised his knuckles were. A long time had passed since he'd hit someone without his gloves on” (155).

This, combined with his arrest, makes clear Marshall’s inadequacy in relation to the symbol of the Knight: he cannot compete on a hypermasculine level, the system will not allow him.

That point is made tangible when Marshall visits his grandmother on her deathbed. They make their peace with one another:

> “But son, you can’t go around beatin’ people up. It ain’t right.”
>
> “I know that now, Grandma. I’m not gonna do that no more.”
>
> She smiled once again as tears continued to run down her crinkled face. (161)

Yet, as Grandma slips into an unconscious state, Marshall’s desire to actualize the hypermasculine ideal is aroused once more. Watching from the hospital window, helpless to act, he witnesses the theft of a bike from a little girl at street level:

> He looked on in despair as the little girl sat there screaming. Not moving, just wailing. Run, little girl, he thought. Run. No-one’s gonna save you.
>
> He felt his heart swell as his resolve became stronger. There was something there, a part of him. It wanted to burst through the window and jump. Jump down into the very depths of

> Brinkmater and take them on, all of them, every last one. Save
> the good, save the bad from themselves.
>
> It was the better part of him and he knew it. (163)

Having confronted the truth in Chorrcha's Bar – that, in hypermasculine terms, as Marshall he can only be viewed in negative terms – Marshall seeks to fulfill what Shahina spoke of after Dwayne's funeral: the return of the Knight. When Marshall promises to Grandma that "I'm not gonna do that no more", he is referring only to the overt violence of his vigilante – the seeming excess.

Because that excess can be consigned as a chapter in the story of the mythic Knight Shahina has proposed – a chapter where he attempts to fight the Reaper's criminal empire by his own brutal means – it is now perfectly acceptable to view a new, less violent Knight as the hypermasculine ideal. It is evolutionary, improving chapter upon chapter within the narrative.

Marshall acknowledges this idea – as well as his own dependency on his ideal – when he declares an oath to the now-deceased Grandma:

> "I ain't gonna go back an' do what I did. I'm gonna do it better.
> Gonna get it right this time. 'Cause…I'm all they got. An'
> they're all I got. I ain't nothin' without them, an' they can't fight
> for themselves. Gotta make a stand, Grandma. They need me.
> This is what I was meant to do." (163)

And so, without a double in the form of Dwayne/Reaper, Marshall strides forward in his hypermasculine journey – not because there is anything in particular to fight against, but because he has come to realize the truth: at the point where he became the Knight, years ago, he replaced himself because he never wanted to be *just* Marshall

Mason. He wanted to be more, and in the Knight he feels he has achieved this and can be infinitely more, because Marshall Mason is not to the Knight what Clark Kent is to Superman.

Marshall Mason is an empty shell, a nothing: he has replaced his life with that of the Knight. With this realization, the imperative returns: the Knight must exist once more, albeit in a new chapter.

4.7 I Made a Promise

Upon his return, we see a more economical Knight, using tranquilizer darts to subdue criminals and tying them up instead of using violence. Yet something troubling persists, suggested by the Knight himself in a conversation with one of the Marquez gang:

> "What kinda guy wears a mask an' beats the crap outta people he don't know?"
>
> "The kinda guy who's doin' it for himself," the Knight said, his hand falling back down. He felt an urge to speak, to say aloud all those things he'd kept hidden in the past. There was no hiding, not now.
>
> "I made her a promise. *I* don't care why I do this, or whether it's right. To hell with what people think of me. But, for her, I made a promise. You should be thankful." (171)

Here, the Knight admits his abstaining from violence isn't a personal preference. He shows definitive awareness of the gap between his hypermasculine system and the "real" system of Tupello – he is "doin' it for himself"; he doesn't care why he does it or "whether it's right", and he says "to hell" with people's opinions. All these, and his admission that if it were his choice, he would be freely violent, indicate that this "new" Knight is little more than the old vigilante merely holding back. He admits as much to himself later on, when he considers what he is doing now to be "somehow diminished" (187).

Yet the approach of the Knight is still irrelevant: regardless of the fable Shahina suggests, the system is determined to reject the Knight. To Marshall, through the idea of the Knight being a legend, his system can be imposed and co-exist with the larger social system, without the need to integrate. The system, however, granted no such opportunity: the Reaper's position has been filled by Jose Marquez and his gang. But it has lost something in the invasion of the Knight, the hypermasculine symbol, and it wants a return to order. Even the criminals recognize this as such, because they too perform a function within the system:

> "Just go away already. No-one wants you here, can't you see that? You're a fuckin' pariah, homes. Pigs want you worse than they want us, an' that's sayin' somethin'. They don't care if you get rid of us, man. All they're after is control, an' they don't like you 'cause you're out of control. To them, we just gangsters. But you, no. They look at you an' they see a monster." (171)

The last part – the Knight as a "monster" – opens an interesting idea, a different perspective, this time from the system itself. The Knight *is* a legend, but his narrative is one of nightmare – he is more monstrous than any criminal could ever be, because he is an Other who remains out of their domain of control. Just as Robert Neville, of Richard Matheson's classic science fiction novel *I Am Legend* (1954) became a folktale monster for the vampiric people of ruined earth, the Knight represents the villainy of mass perspective: the only person who sympathizes with his position is himself.

That he ignores this idea at this particular moment is unsurprising, given there have been other earlier signifiers of a monstrous identity – namely in the death and mutilation of others throughout his adult life. But Marshall views the raid on the

Marquez gang as being entirely successful, and in the context of an absence of violence it is: the entire gang has been caught with minimal bloodshed.

Afterwards, Shahina comes to him and they discuss certain things from his past: the car crash, the girl he killed in Iraq (to which Shahina reacts strangely). Upon this confession, she again makes a statement wrought dubious by its potential double-meaning: "The time for judgment of your history is not today." (177). However, she follows this with a question of commitment from Marshall – one which converts the statement of the criminal about the Knight being a "monster" into a seemingly small concern:

> "Your return will change things – both on the streets and in the offices. There will be more scrutiny than ever before – the media, the Mayor, the authorities. I have helped with the new equipment but the rest is down to you. Can you be the best you can be? Is it in you, Marshall Mason, to be the hero you always wanted to be?" (177)

By aligning ominous statements with broader declarations about the Knight, Shahina never allows Marshall the time to consider there might be another interpretation of some of her words: she knows his pre-occupation is with the Knight, that because he has replaced himself with the Knight Marshall will concern himself primarily with issues of the vigilante over those directed personally at him.

4.8 The Merest Whisper

In the next chapter we see two of Tupello's most powerful figures – Mayor Lee and businessman Alan Greenburg – align against Marshall. The most telling element is that Shahina does not disagree, only suggesting that the new manhunt – demanded after the Knight's return to apprehend the Marquez gang – be announced as part of Mayor Lee's acceptance speech.[27]

The system is setting conditions for the Knight's expulsion, ignoring the fact that he stopped Jose Marquez. Marquez is acceptable, because his presence changes nothing in terms of the balance within the system. This means that the Knight catching Marquez – or any criminal, for that matter – makes no difference.

When Marshall next goes out as the Knight, he is confronted by a teenager who pushes a gun into his face. After he talks the youth down, Marshall again reiterates his position of hypermasculine idealism: "He knew that kind of power should never be wielded so easily. Any time he'd confronted death it had been the hardest moments of his life" (184).

To him it is too easy to merely point a gun at someone – the position of strength, in the hypermasculine system, has to be earned by being inherently stronger. Guns allow disproportion, distorting the balance which is easily identifiable in Marshall's world. When he comes close to using violence once more in stopping an attempted rape (p. 186), it is clear that the Knight we were introduced to in Chapter 1 is merely being repressed due to the oath Marshall made to Grandma.

[27] Tupello has been involved in a mayoral campaign which has centered on the activities of the Knight. At this point, Mayor Lee is down in the polls due to the failure to find the Knight in the first manhunt.

It is after this that things take an unexpected turn for Marshall. Moving through the alleyways, someone is behind him – dressed all in black, a balaclava covering their face. Giving chase, Marshall's strength – bound by hypermasculine criteria – means little and, crucially, his bulk proves to be an obstacle:

> As he landed his foot planted squarely into something soft, almost liquid. He slid forward sharply, sending his legs high into the air. He landed heavily on his left arm, his hip crunching against the floor. (187)

Not only does his mass – so important to his image as the hypermasculine Knight – impede him, but the defeat when it comes runs counter to Marshall's experiences; instead of a clear confrontation, there is an absence: "The Knight hobbled past the shadows into the light. He heard a noise, so faint as to be the merest whisper. Everything melted into overwhelming black" (187).

With Dwayne/Reaper, everything was in front of Marshall – even if he was outsmarted from time to time. But when he wakes up this time, with the alleyway trashed and his hands and feet severely bruised, everything he assumes about combat is inverted.

The enemy has not shown their face; they have not bested him in a challenge of strength. Worst of all, they did not require their own strength – they used Marshall's to show their superiority, their command over his power. The hypermasculine ideal has been tamed by a superior force, one which doesn't even need to present itself to assert its authority.

In response to this – and assuming this blackout has something in common with the year he lost in Iraq – Marshall contacts his therapist, whom he saw sometime

after returning from combat in the hope she could help him remember. She refuses to use regression therapy on him, claiming it could be dangerous (190).

However, in the next chapter – one month on – Doctor Roundlearth is assassinated in her apartment. Before she is killed, the intentions of the assassin are made clear:

> "I need the words that trigger him."
>
> Alex looked away, tears filling her eyes. She looked down at the knife, then back at her attacker.
>
> "Please, you d-don't under…stand. He's v-very dangerous."
>
> "I understand perfectly well. More than you could know." The stranger twisted the knife, and Alex let out a silent yelp. "Now. The words, Doctor Roundlearth." (193-194)

The insinuation is clear: Marshall has had regression therapy within the month's gap, and a result of that therapy is the discovery of trigger words that the assassin wants to know. This suggests also the reason and manner Marshall has no knowledge of his year in black ops: he was controlled, literally, in his role as the General's "ultimate weapon".

It is against this backdrop that Marshall again ventures out as the Knight, unaware of what has occurred to Doctor Roundlearth. After breaking up a bungled robbery, he blacks out once more. This time, however, he doesn't do so against the backdrop of an abandoned alleyway: one of the robbers is with him. When he comes to, the evidence of actions taken which he was not in control of is irrefutable:

> It was the robber. The rain washed blood from his broken face, yet still more poured from deep wounds. There were gouges on the man's swollen cheeks and temples. His white t-shirt now stained incarnadine. The Knight lifted his hands up toward the light.
>
> "No. Please, no," he said, barely a whisper.
>
> The rain pattered his blood-stained gloves. (200)

This manipulation of the Knight is a nightmare for Marshall: without control, he can no longer pertain to the hypermasculine ideal. With this new, unpredictable element, his aims can be easily destroyed. He suggests as such when he has a seemingly chance encounter with Shahina:

> "I thought I was always doin' the right thing. Made lots of mistakes, sure. But when I came back, after Dwayne, I knew it had to be for the right reasons. Now, there's nothin' left to do. The Knight can't exist anymore." (202)

The Knight as symbol has survived up until now because it can be readily re-interpreted, made anew. Marshall recognizes that this cannot occur if the Knight has become a puppet, because the direction and nature of his hypermasculine violence has always been critical to the upholding of the Law and Speech unique to Marshall.

Without telling Shahina that what he did was the result of a blackout, she presses upon him a view of the system of Tupello which casts him in a favorable light:

> "Think about it; you are wanted for the murder of Dwayne Bouvier. Yet how long have you existed since that night? Why do you escape their punishment?"

> "I-I don't know…"
>
> Shahina smiled knowingly.
>
> "Because they do not *want* to punish you, that is why. They need you. It is not up to them to pass judgment on you, Marshall." She touched his arm. (203)

This is a continuation of the myth she proposed after Dwayne's funeral. Tupello does not punish the Knight because it does not want to, ignoring the more likely scenario: Tupello does not punish the Knight because it does not know *how* to. In a system where there is no space for a vigilante, what can be done if a vigilante exists?

Marshall leaves in a similar state of soul-searching to the first time he was triggered. This time, however, he does not call his therapist: the escalated action of whatever force is against him has pushed him to also escalate (a hypermasculine response). In search of answers, he reasons that he must "face the General" (204).

It becomes clear, though, that he does not immediately face the man from his past. When we next encounter Marshall, he is trying to disseminate the meaning of his dreams, a task which he gives up as fruitless (210).

We learn that Marshall hasn't spoken to his therapist in a little over two months, and that their last encounter involved hypnosis therapy that Roundlearth says "they shouldn't try again" (210).

In deciding once more that Roundlearth is the most likely chance he has at piecing together why he keeps blacking out, he calls her office only to find out she has been murdered. This act, allied with the blackouts forced upon him, signify the beginning of the death of his hypermasculine ideal, because actions are occurring

outside his realm of control or beyond a position where he can force confrontation.[28] Desperate to find answers, he finally decides to confront the General – only to find that he, too, has been murdered in an identical way to Roundlearth.

The structure upon which he based his hypermasculine ideal has collapsed – Grandma, Dwayne, the General, his therapist. Without these signifiers, he is pulled from his hyperreal construct and forced to face reality: real consequences, just like the real deaths of those people Marshall used to create the Knight. It is this sense of isolation – shorn of the figures from his past – that ironically makes him realize its importance:

> The Knight was out of the way now and Marshall had never felt so exposed to the murky past, his past, a past he couldn't even begin to guess at. But someone was out there, someone who did have the answers and they were out to get him. (217)

At this point he receives a phone call from Shahina; someone is going to try and kill the Mayor at his acceptance speech, in the heart of Brinkmater Straights. This is, in terms of the conflict between Marshall's imaginary structure of hypermasculinity and the "real" structure of Tupello, a disastrous occurrence for him. If he saves the Mayor, he will be caught; if he does nothing, he finally obliterates his own ideal through inaction. Either way, there is no doubt the system will either expel him or reduce him to the smallest possible potency: "The issue of community survival is one which can conveniently be invoked in any crisis in order to justify its actions, even the sacrifice of its best, the hero himself" (Rollin 438).

Whereas Rollin constitutes the hero in its most positive terms – being the 'best' of the community – the opposite is true of the Knight: for all the people he has saved, he

[28] The Reaper often performed actions beyond Marshall's control, but this led to their confrontations: the Reaper ultimately paid for usurping Marshall's control in the hypermasculine system with his life.

is viewed by Tupello as representing the worst facets of society. In this context, the notion of saving the leader of the system – Mayor Lee – in the now-gentrified centre of Tupello stands as likely to result in his destruction as both Marshall *and* the Knight.

The fact that this would occur in an area fought over by him and Dwayne, now taken over by the corporate giant Greenburg and the political force of Lee, is lost on Marshall. This is because he does not engage with the system, even now. There is only one question left for him: does he willingly ruin his legacy as the Knight, or does he bring about its end by saving Mayor Lee?

4.9 Is This Real?

At the acceptance speech, in front of Tupello's media and luminaries, the Knight does in fact save Mayor Lee from a bullet, shot by disgruntled former employee Siegel. This, ironically, is the only occasion he has saved someone without resorting to violence. Yet the forces which have gathered against him in recent months – in the form of blackouts and murders of figures from his past – align against him once more:

> Lee looked up at the Knight, gratitude etched on his face.
>
> "T-thank you," he muttered in a small voice.
>
> They extended each other a hand to help one another up when the Knight felt hot breath against his ear.
>
> A hushed voice hissed into his consciousness, yet he couldn't hear any words. He was drowning in darkness, the briefest outline of his body doing things he hadn't told it to do as the world slipped away. (Connell 226)

Having accepted that the system will devour his hypermasculine symbol if he presents himself in the saving of Mayor Lee, Marshall falls into a trap. He does so because of his lack of engagement with the system: the person behind his downfall – Shahina – uses both the system and Marshall's own structure of Speech and Law to achieve her goals. This is something Dwayne was incapable of doing as, despite being less fervent than Marshall, he remained a disciple of hypermasculinity (as highlighted by his choosing death to deny Marshall an acceptable victory). In focusing on the

system and its opposition to his symbolic vigilante, Marshall ignored the obvious Other who represents a reality outside the structure of Tupello: Shahina.

Waking in prison, he is eventually told of his actions: he killed Mayor Lee with his bare hands. Now his ideal is both tainted and diminished: the murder of such a figurehead renders the Knight forever villainous to the system, and in turn the system has condemned the vigilante by placing him in the company of his opposites: criminals. This scenario is so alien to Marshall that he struggles to believe it is actually happening:

> Marshall shook his head, overwhelmed. He was close to tears – of frustration, of fear. This was all too much. There wasn't anything in here that scared him as much as not knowing. Is this real? He looked up at the guard, his head still shaking. Reeve sighed as he moved away from the bars.
>
> "It *was* you. You killed him," he said in a low, firm voice as he walked into the ethereal light and down the corridor. (230)

The system assimilates him into its structure: it sends him to a facility for "correction" – whether he is able to be "corrected" or not. In these terms he has become what he once hunted, but this is in the view of society: this is not true for either Marshall or the criminals that surround him:

> A few moments passed before the howling began. Not just howls, cackling hyenas. And the name, always the name, spat into the darkened air. *Knight.*
>
> *Hey, Knight.*
>
> *We gonna get ya, freak.* (228)

By repeating his symbolic name in conjunction with ‘freak’, the criminals are asserting that in no terms is he one of them, despite his crime and incarceration. The implication is clear: regardless of what the Knight undertakes, even murder, his opposition consider him the same. In this sense, the hypermasculine ideal is now achieved, as the symbol is viewed by criminals as incorruptible: the Knight is the Knight and nothing can change it.

Unfortunately, this acknowledgement provides no solace to Marshall. Shorn of his double, punished by a system he does not belong to, unaware of who has orchestrated the chain of events that led him here, he is lost in the truest sense for the first time – not merely questioning his purpose, or how he is to achieve his goals: he has no purpose or goals any more.

This is Shahina’s victory over Marshall, over his hypermasculine violence. Greenburg tries to rob her of this by providing Marshall peace of mind: he enters the prison and informs Marshall that he was the one plotting against the Knight (305). But Shahina moves quickly to crush this path, telling Greenburg that he has spared Marshall “. . . only what he deserves” (241) before killing him and going into the prison to confront Marshall.

4.10 What Happened Next

Their confrontation is an extension of Greenburg's interference; it is not what Shahina intended as Marshall's fate. In this sense, she attempted to defeat the hypermasculine in a way that opposes the force it wishes to eliminate: without direct conflict, without a final symbolic defeat. She wanted Marshall to suffer being part of the system for the rest of his existence – worse, to be part of the worst element within the system, yet be branded by that element as a pariah.

In their discussion, it becomes apparent that Marshall – even at this late juncture – is beyond saving: his malleable interpretation of what is real follows his similarly flexible notions of what it is to be a hero, what constitutes good and evil, what can be considered a crime (and how that changes depending on who is committing that crime) and shows the notional problem with hypermasculinity – when the question is strength, a shift in perception is all it takes to become victorious:

> "I-I don't know. Haven't really thought about it, to be honest with you. None of this feels right."
>
> Shahina smiled.
>
> "Do you want the truth?"
>
> He studied her eyes, looking for some hint of meaning. The truth...what *wasn't* the truth? (245)

This pliable idea of "truth" is what has sustained Marshall in his pursuit of the hypermasculine ideal: it has allowed him to remain a "hero" (or a potential "hero") even in the aftermath of the most extreme violence. Finally, Marshall has unmasked the inherent nature of hypermasculinity: brutality and sadism masked by the veneer of symbolic power. The permanence of Marshall's heroism in spite of his actions renders a judgment of hypermasculinity as false and reprehensible, made capable only by the eternally shifting boundaries of what constitutes acceptable hypermasculinity.

As it is, Shahina reveals the truth of his past to him: his lost memories from Iraq. His being utilized by the General as an "ultimate weapon" to undertake violent operations now becomes symbolic of how empty hypermasculinity is: merely a celebration of strength and the signifiers of such.

Being hypermasculine didn't make Marshall heroic or Dwayne villainous: it was their actions, but also Marshall's perception, that gave the impression of heroism and villainy. Hence, aside from Art Mausman, a teenager in awe of the Knight (probably because at this point in Art's life, he ascribes to comic book hypermasculinity in much the same way the teenage Marshall did), Tupello's population consider the Knight a menace. He *isn't* a hero to Tupello, but he is brutal and unnecessarily violent – hypermasculine:

> . . . A system of beliefs that justified the use of violence as a means of preserving a sense of masculine identity, leading to the conclusion that '. . . adherence to 'hypermasculine' values and norms does indeed influence the commission of violent acts'. . . (Beesley and McGuire 252)

Unable to face this notion, having based his entire existence on hypermasculinity being the ideal state of being, Marshall begs Shahina for it to end. Having been robbed of her original plan – to let Marshall diminish over decades – she still finds a way to deal hypermasculinity (and with it, Marshall) a fatal blow: controlling him, she has him attack Jose Marquez and Kurt, the man he badly beat in Chapter 1.

Hypermasculinity comes full circle, as the notion of heroism is wiped clean: in the pursuit and validation of hypermasculinity, there can only be the creation of victims:

> Then he stood, doing nothing, waiting.
>
> Arms to the side, limp.
>
> Marshall didn't need to see Kurt's face to know what was coming, or Jose's either. He didn't need to see Trent's gleeful smile to know what happened next.
>
> "Please, Shahina. Please," he choked through tears as men rushed toward him, arms outstretched.
>
> *This is it*, she mouthed through the screen before rising to leave, brushing a curled lock from her face as she exited the room. (Connell 247)

Chapter Five

Conclusion

5.1 A Picture Book of Forgotten Horror

It is no mistake that the Prologue of *This Is It* – the first time the reader sees Marshall – is set in the present day (the rest of the novel is set in the past, chronologically making its way to the present) during his prison encounter with Greenburg; that is, it shows Marshall at the point of his most pronounced physical decline.

Words which form the negative opposite of hypermasculine idealism – set as it is upon strength and action – abound: "shook his head", "motionless", "little energy in him", "helpless", "he stared numbly", "...held limply in the palm of his gaunt hand", "a weak smile" (2). This absence of hypermasculinity – the ironic result of Marshall's continued idealism – is contrasted with his seemingly god-like presence in Chapter 1:

> Shahina pulled her head forward to look at what she'd run into.
>
> It wasn't a wall.
>
> "Get behind me."

> She did as he said. Shahina couldn't reach above his shoulder,
> so she peered from the side of his giant arm, watching the gang
> as their body language changed. (7)

The novel stands as a continued criticism of comic book fiction's adoption of the original form's hypermasculine properties. Instead of lauding the impossibly strong male figure, as *Hero* and *Invincible* does by placing a hypermasculine figure as ideal, *This Is It* shows the truth of what occurs when such symbols are worshipped and then emulated: the accumulation of violence realized to its conclusion, destruction: ". . . high attachment to a masculine self-concept may be linked to offending behavior and most notably a willingness to use violence" (Beesley and McGuire 253).

While *Superpowers* does not maintain the comic book prerogative of placing a strong heroic male figure centrally, instead of deconstructing the hypermasculine myth Schwartz avoids it altogether. His concern is with the unreliable nature of power itself, in any form and to male and female alike: while there is a strong suggestion in both *Hero* and *Invincible* that power is corruptible and unstable in the wrong hands, there are several examples that power can be a positive element when bestowed upon the 'right' person. Thom, the protagonist of *Hero*, and Fatale, the protagonist of *Invincible*, serve this function.

But *Superpowers* shows every member of the Madison All-Stars as unable to utilize their powers in a positive way: the best the remaining members of the team can do, at the end of the novel, is flee the authorities in an attempt to survive. This resonates with Schwartz's overall message in the book: powers won't solve your problem.

While successful in showing this, the hypermasculine ideal remains as potential: it can be argued the problem lies in the psychological problems afflicting Mary Beth that lead to her killing Solahuddin Sutadi. And so, as comic book fiction

stands at present, two of the books present the traditional comic book interpretation of hypermasculinity – an ideal to be held up – and the other calls into question one of the formative elements of the medium itself: power.

This Is It utilizes the novel form to tackle the problem of hypermasculinity directly: to show the causes *and* effects resulting from the appropriation of exaggerated masculine forms, which ". . . divides society into the strong and the weak in accordance with success in embodying the ideals of 'real masculine superiority'" (Mosher and Tomkins 64).

It should be noted that, in the pursuit of creating a "positive" hypermasculine idea, and destroying the old "negative" one, as a result of the Knight's/Marshall's actions, almost all the men in the novel die or are damned: Kurt, Sergeant Timms, Taylor, Dwayne, the General, Mayor Lee, Siegel, Alan Greenburg and Marshall himself.

This shows that the effects of hypermasculinity are not only established in those that are hypermasculine: all men suffer in the wake of such impossible idealism, because as men they all constitute what is potentially hypermasculine. This signifies that "...the pride of masculine ascendancy – the hubris of "masculine superiority" – precedes a fall into death." (82)

That the Knight is destroyed by Shahina – feminine, sleek, intelligent – shows the idiocy of hypermasculinity; it can only compete effectively with variations of itself, such as the Knight against the Reaper. When confronted with a force that does not abide by its principles, the strength which so attracts adherents is rendered obsolete. This is because the hypermasculine man is unwilling or unable to adapt his ideology: "Intolerant of any ambiguity in the dichotomous classification mandated by the criterion of his ideals, he understands the world is divided into the strong and the weak . . . (69)

By situating the story in Tupello – a fictional large American city – the novel also asserts the impossibility of a hypermasculine symbol in any system, real or virtual. That the city is not actual is irrelevant in relation to Marshall's outlook and the Knight: no city, fictional or real, would accept him. This is in direct contrast with comic books, where New York accepts Spiderman and Metropolis accepts Superman – the real and the fictional, in comic books, require these hypermasculine symbols to keep them safe.

Ultimately, *This Is It* condemns the positive attributing of hypermasculinity to heroism by outlining it as a gross misinterpretation of the virtue of strength: the excess of power inevitably leads to an excessive use of power, as evidenced by Marshall's activities throughout the novel. It is worth noting the main occurrence of chapter 2, detailing a part of Marshall's childhood which stands as a precursor to his hypermasculine journey – the death of his family in a car crash. The beginning of his transformation does not come about because of destiny, or a strong sense of morality or alien powers – it comes from grief, loneliness and fragility:

> . . . it seems that many young African American males in urban contexts may feel depressed, sensitive to rejection, and scared; yet, they might hide these feelings under a mask of aggression that keeps these emotions from view. (Cassidy and Stevenson Jr. 70)

Marshall Mason is symbolic of the inevitable outcome which being hypermasculine follows, when the underlying vulnerability is not dealt with and the limiting structure of hypermasculinity is left unchecked:

> When the ratio of positive to negative affects resulting from living a macho lifestyle has reached its nadir, the macho man still clings to hope for a heroic rescue of his failed life. He

> believes that he can save the meaning of his life by heroically losing it. To repair his hypermasculine identity from his failure-at-living, he gives his life in glorious ascension from nadir to zenith – before the fall. (Mosher and Tomkins 81)

Any attempts to imbue the mode with positive traits are destined to fail, as the framework dictates a violent, hegemonic attitude. It is Marshall's inability to remove the hypermasculine elements from his being which damn him: initially through the consequences of his interactions with Dwayne/Reaper, and then ultimately through Shahina.

By repeatedly and graphically detailing the actuality and extreme nature of Marshall's violence, and his unwillingness to reduce this unnecessary element of force, *This Is It* makes a clear statement: being hypermasculine has nothing to do with being a hero.

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