

Julia Round, MA, PhD
39 Nortoft Road
Bournemouth
BH8 8QA
Email: jround@bournemouth.ac.uk

Cryptomimetic tropes in Yoshinori Natsume's *Batman: Death Mask*

Julia Round

This article discusses the gothic and science fiction influences apparent in Yoshinori Natsume's *Batman: Death Mask* with reference to poststructuralist criticism; in particular the notion of the crypt and Jodey Castricano's linguistic model of cryptomimesis. After establishing a critical context for both science fiction and the gothic, it discusses the gothic nature of the superhero, whose fragmented identity and use of motifs such as the mask most clearly reference the gothic. It also relates this figure to science fiction (making reference to tropes such as the pseudo-scientific origin and alternate worlds), with specific reference to Batman as the epitome of many of these archetypal traits. It then introduces the notion of the crypt (from the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and as later applied by Jacques Derrida), and Jodey Castricano's theory of cryptomimesis. It situates these models within the context of gothic criticism and relates them to both the comics medium and the Batman myth. Using a case study of Yoshinori Natsume's *Batman: Death Mask* it proceeds to establish and analyse the vital role that cryptomimesis plays in the construction of this narrative by demonstrating its reliance on absence, reversal and the notion of the 'other within'.

Historicist approaches to the gothic argue that this literary tradition emerged from an eighteenth-century architectural trend for the medieval and subsequent parodic reinterpretations. These led the way towards an inwards turn in gothic literature towards the subversive and decadent that was aided culturally by the emergence and popularity of psychoanalysis. Conversely, a cultural materialist approach situates the gothic as a response to social trauma, defining it as an overall tendency in literature rather than a historically limited genre (Punter 1980, 14): the existence of which is simply one instance of the effects of this literary mode. This has the advantage of reconciling the gothic's subversive elements and subcultural status with its canonical position and is continued in the work of Fred Botting, who similarly identifies the gothic's focus on marginalised and excluded cultural elements.

Botting summarises the dual impulse the gothic provokes historically, identifying its turn from external horror (where the object of terror was objectified and cast out) to internal horror and associated notions of guilt, anxiety and despair. Whereas eighteenth-century gothic texts located horror in the form of an outsider or mysterious external forces that could ultimately be overpowered, expelling the horror and restoring normality, later gothic works focus on the internal effects and causes of such events and resolutions reflect this. This turn is linked by many critics to the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, which relocated horror inside the psyche. The movement from external to internal can also be seen as exemplary of the Gothic's thematic of inversion:

If terror leads to an imaginative expansion of one's sense of self, horror describes the moment of contraction and recoil...The movement between terror and horror is part of a dynamic whose poles chart the extent and different directions of Gothic projects. These poles, always inextricably linked, involve the externalisation or internalisation of objects of fear and anxiety. (Botting 1996, 10)

These principles affect both the structuring and content of gothic fiction.

Many key elements and movements within the gothic tradition appear to be reflected in the comics medium and industry at the widest level. Historically speaking, the gothic has sustained itself through the absorption of other genres; parodying and subsuming them in the process. This process is in many ways echoed by the development of the American comics medium in processes such as retroactive continuity (the overwriting or addition of events to create a coherent character history). The gothic's subcultural status is similarly reflected in the marketing and audience of contemporary comics, as are themes of commodification and consumerism. Finally, it could even be argued that a kind of gothic structure is apparent in comics, as the narrative is presented in a non-linear form where all moments co-exist on the page, recalling the characteristically gothic tropes of haunting and multiplicity.

In terms of comics content, the dual identity of the comic-book superhero clearly represents some features of the gothic. The underlying thematic of the gothic may best be described as a notion of reversal or inversion: it often links mutually opposing ideas such as decay/growth and fear/attraction. It also brings into play notions of postmodern duality as the internal and external are contrasted, combined or exchanged; the horror without is reflected within. The superhero's use of multiple identities and alter egos not only represents the existence of such plural possibilities within an individual and the sustenance of the multiple by the postmodern, but can also be read as symbolising the gothic notion of constitutive otherness, where marginalised elements define the text and apparent unity is maintained only by processes of exclusion and opposition.

The fragmentation of identity apparent in the superhero genre is at the basis of this, the superhero condition. The alter ego is often directly opposed to the superhero identity – as evidenced by the frivolous playboy Bruce Wayne (versus the obsessive Batman) or the mild-mannered, clumsy Clark Kent (versus the omnipotent Superman), and in this sense the two halves define each other. Motifs such as the mask/costume are used to sustain this divide and also support a gothic interpretation as within the industry this symbol functions both as a symbol of internal power and simultaneously as an external disguise, calling to mind the associated gothic themes of isolation and the internal/external. The mask motif can be further related to Jung's notion of the persona as a mask that is formed during the civilisation process to hide negative character traits/the unconscious (Fordham 1966, 47).

All the above elements find a secure home in the Batman myth: more so than any other superhero. References to the tradition's most famous tropes and motifs are apparent in the character's most basic tenets. Gotham City, the psychogeographic landscape for the Batman's escapades, most obviously recalls the gothic both in terms of etymology and theme. Comics writer and editor Denny O'Neil has famously commented that 'Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year' (Boichel 1991, 9) and here the tropes of night-time, midnight, winter and so forth most obviously recall the gothic.

These tropes are represented in the Batman character: whose animalistic identity again

recalls the night, and even notions of vampirism via the vampire bat. Again, a theme of inversion is apparent in this motif's progression from the external to the internal. Nina Auerbach traces the development of the vampire over the last two centuries: from their origins as singular, charming f(r)iends to predators set apart and their consequent rehumanisation in the twentieth century. In contrast to their bestial depiction in early folklore (see for example the work of Carol Senf or Montague Summers), the twentieth-century vampire is sexual, decadent and humanised. Modern media have broken down the Manichaeic element in their portrayal still further and, as Fred Botting comments, "The vampire is no longer absolutely Other." (1996, 178) The vampire figure has thereby been brought closer to humanity, no longer a simple outsider but now an internalised 'other' that represents our darkest impulses.

Both Batman's history and menacing appearance evoke this duality of internal/external and self/other via vampiric and satanic references – for example in his mask and cowl with its extended ears that so often appear horn-like. Batman's whole outfit is deliberately designed to strike fear into the hearts of criminals. The underlying notion (that violent and dynamic mobsters are simultaneously "a superstitious and cowardly lot" (Finger 1939)) incorporates a further duality that recalls the gothic.

Duality, inversion and repression are therefore themes picked up in multiple Batman texts, such as Alan Moore/Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, which links psychological themes of repression and memory to the internal/external divide, calling to mind gothic notions of inversion and reversal via psychoanalytic criticism. Although a patient's avoidance or refusal to discuss trauma may lead a psychologist to hypothesise about repression, this can only be confirmed once the blocked memories resurface. Similarly, memories that are cherished as deeply internal and personal can also be defined as only the effect of external influences. This questions the divide between the internal and external, reversing these notions, for example as when the Joker says: 'SO WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF LOCKED ONTO AN UNPLEASANT TRAIN OF THOUGHT ... MADNESS IS THE EMERGENCY EXIT ... YOU CAN JUST STEP OUTSIDE, AND CLOSE THE DOOR ON ALL THOSE DREADFUL THINGS THAT HAPPENED' (21). Inversion is apparent as madness is described as 'THE EMERGENCY EXIT', which leads 'OUTSIDE', whereas the 'DREADFUL THINGS THAT HAPPENED' (that is, external events), are positioned inside the metaphorical ghost train. In this way, the fragmented identities of superheroes, and specifically Batman, are linked to the gothic notions of internal/external and inversion.

The transvaluation of moral issues in the contemporary gothic can also be explained with reference to its reliance upon inversion: as notions of 'evil' and 'monsters' become less clear-cut, as in the case of the vampire. Again, we can see the applicability of this statement to Batman, whose methods have frequently come under attack for their brutality. For example, Frank Miller/Lynn Varley's *The Dark Knight Returns* tells the story of an aged Batman, set in a Gotham city where psychiatrists argue for the release of the Joker and critics badmouth Batman as a fascist and vigilante. It is also worth noting that, in contrast to the internal narrative of *The Killing Joke* (whose psychological seem to be those of repression and memory), Miller's political and social agenda might be said to represent the external concerns of the superhero.

Science fiction obviously has more than a peripheral place in the world of comics. The pseudo-scientific origin has its basis in the silver age, as in characters such as the Fantastic Four (who gained their powers from exposure to 'cosmic rays' while on a space mission) and Spiderman (whose abilities come from being bitten by a radioactive laboratory spider). This trope became popular in the 1950s, along with fantastic settings, space travel, other worlds and so forth – motifs that locate comics firmly within the boundaries of science fiction.

Although scientific tropes of this type are not particularly apparent in the Batman, the

character is firmly situated in science fiction. He has no apparent superpowers and instead uses extensive martial arts training, detective skills, his intellect, technology and psychological warfare to combat crime. Although the notion of a non-powered superhero that can do what Batman does is actually in many ways *more* unbelievable than the standard superhero template, the Batman's methods ascribe a sense of realism to the superhero. It also adds the 'everyman' motif, implying that any reader could become a hero if they wanted it enough.

Batman's reliance on gadgets and his utility belt have been exploited in many ways over the years, ranging from the ingenious to the ridiculous. The character's tenets, however, add an extra dimension to the treatment of science fiction in this regard. The numerous genre rules integral to the superhero myth (which include the protection of innocent life at all costs, the prohibition of guns and firearms, and the rehabilitation or punishment of the villain rather than his destruction) requires that his gadgetry, rather than being effective weaponry, in fact prevents deadly force and, in this respect, 'fiction' is privileged over 'science'.

Yoshitomo Natsume's *Batman: Death Mask* addresses the combination of gothic and science fiction Batman represents, referring to Batman's extensive training in Japan during his youth and tying the emergence of his secret identity to a longer historical tradition of the Oni, a demon from Japanese folklore: humanoid, masculine and often pictured with horns. *Batman: Death Mask* is set in contemporary Gotham where Batman investigates a series of murders in which the victims' faces have been removed. The investigation takes him back to his formative years spent training in Japan and many of the characters he encounters are doubled by these memories.

This article will now explore some of these motifs in light of the gothic critical model of cryptomimesis. This semiotic reading of the gothic's thematic structures is defined by Jodey Castricano 'as textual production that is predicated upon haunting, mourning, and the return of the so-called living dead' (Castricano 2001, 32). The sense of haunting (as both a legacy and a promise) in the work allows it to resist lineation just as the gothic itself resists this sort of historical interpretation by its free appropriation of other genres and fads and by its constant evocation of the old, sustained in the postmodern present.

Castricano's theory follows the work of Jacques Derrida in considering the subject as phantom and the possibilities of approaching language and writing as non-linear. These notions also figure in Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, a semantic discussion that identifies encrypted linguistic structures via the 'cosymbol' of The Thing (as neither word nor thing-in-itself, but a mark or cipher). In 'Fors' (the introductory essay to this text) Derrida further discusses the psychoanalytic elements of semantics, taking the symbol of the crypt beyond easy metaphors by exploring its simultaneous internal/external nature (for example as above, where it is hidden inside the word 'encrypted'), notions of absence (as seen in psychoanalytic themes whose nature is to escape from discourse), and reversal, where that which is buried alive (such as certain emotions) is also in some ways satisfied by this process. As such, the object is defined as a thing to be deciphered according to a cryptographic structure, and narrative is viewed as an encrypting process.

These approaches appear to be consistent with contemporary cultural criticism and psychoanalysis in identifying the gothic 'other within' – Punter and Bronfen comment that the unconscious invoked by the gothic is not the kernel of the self but the other implanted within us (2001, 21). Marcus LiBrizzi takes a similar cultural materialist perspective for his consideration of the Anunnaki as modern vampires: invoking notions of the outsider/alien among us and the commodification of the self.

By linking semiotics to gothic themes, we can perceive a kind of gothic structuring within the comics medium that presents its narrative in a non-linear form (where all moments coexist on the page). The subsumation of individual story arcs within the wider plot (in this instance, of a four-part mini-series) again replicates this kind of dual narrative. However, the cryptomimetic model seems particularly applicable to the Batman character, which revolves around the notion of memories locked inside and the reversals of 'secret identity' and 'alter ego'. *Batman: Death Mask* proceeds from this position, opening by raising the eternal question 'IS WHAT'S BEHIND THE MASK REALLY THE FALSE IDENTITY?' (3), continuing:

WHAT IF THE BATMAN ISN'T BRUCE WAYNE WEARING A MASK?
what if he exists as a completely separate personality?
what if the real mask is bruce wayne? (11)

Of course, this question is not new to the Batman myth: after all, it can be argued that the façade of playboy Bruce Wayne is inherently false, that the 'real' persona is the boy seeking justice after the murder of his parents, not the extravagant and frivolous millionaire. However, Natsume offers us a different treatment, adding in the identity of George Woodbridge, the alias that Batman used while training in Japan in his early years. This alias is kept strictly separate from both his other identities: as Bruce muses: 'BACK THEN ... I WASN'T BRUCE WAYNE' (15).

Natsume also redefines the Batman in accordance with Japanese folklore, telling the story of an orphaned boy who lost both of his parents in a war, who was then trained by a Tengu (a goblin-like creature) so he might one day rid the world of war. The boy ended his training early, impatient to test his powers, and upon descending down into the world discovered the war had already finished. Trying to use his strength for good, he crushed many opponents, but in the process became ostracised for stirring up echoes of war and violence, so eventually returned to his mountain 'AS IF TO HIDE HIS FACE' (62). A mysterious masked figure reminiscent of an Oni (ogre, demon) was seen there afterwards; wearing a mask that is allegedly installed with all the fighting skills known to the young man.

Death Mask therefore proposes that, in his formative years, Bruce Wayne (known here as George Woodbridge) encounters the Oni. A spirit of this type appears to George, naming him as 'MY NEXT BODY' (69) and they fight. Shortly after, George is asked to leave the dojo, having developed a horned shadow (80). In this way Natsume redefines the secret identity/alter ego split: not as a divided personality, but as the other within, as both aspects of Bruce/George's personality are taken over by the Batman/Oni. Other characters reflect similarly on this; after George has had contact with the Oni, his friends muse 'IT'S LIKE HE'S ANOTHER PERSON' (77). It seems clear that *Death Mask* seeks to redefine the Batman as an outside presence, a symbiotic addition to an already-divided body.

This literal representation of the 'other within' is emphasised both visually and textually. On pages 70-71, which show a double page spread of George preparing to fight the spirit incarnation of Batman, which figure is represented entirely as a black absence, a literal shadow. Throughout the comic the outlines of this figure are frequently blurred or surrounded by a lighter tone: perhaps visually representing the loss of boundary between of self and other. The shadow motif is also echoed textually, as George states 'BY FIGHTING MY SHADOW ... I CAN TAKE MYSELF TO THE NEXT LEVEL' (78) and his Sensei also later comments 'SO THE SHADOW IS WITH YOU' (80). At the climax of the book, Oniyasha (the masked *Oni* killer, who is later revealed to be an aged

Sensei Kurosaki), literally emerges from within the skin of Agurama, the entrepreneur responsible for Sakura and Aya's loss of fortune and who is manufacturing the death masks in the present.

This 'other within' is also defined in temporal terms: in the midst of the climactic battle, while fighting the Oniyasha, Batman is transported back twenty years and finds himself incorporeal. Saying 'I'VE BECOME SOME KIND OF SHADOW FORM' (147), Batman takes on the role of the 'shadow' Oni who trained the young George Woodbridge. In this way Natsume adds a temporal strand to his narration: allowing the past and present to converge. We can see a kind of gothic structuring at play as the linear narrative of the comic is revealed to be circular, revolving around a series of pivotal battles between the Batman/Oni and Bruce/George. Their fight is initially presented in Batman's retrospective narration which reflects on his time spent training in Japan, and after this scene George's sensei instructs him to bury these events in the past and instead to look to the future (81). When we reencounter the battle from Batman's perspective, in the present, it is again defined as a 'FIGHT WITH THE PAST' as Batman implores George instead to 'FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE' (151). Castricano's notion of haunting (as both a legacy and a promise) is in this way invoked through temporal references. As the comic concludes: 'THE PRESENT IS BOUND UP WITH THE FUTURE... AS WELL AS THE PAST.' (194)

Similar treatment is given to standard gothic motifs such as the mask, which becomes a reversed symbol in *Death Mask*. Rather than providing a distinct identity, it merges its wearers, subsuming them into its history in a manner again reminiscent of the gothic. Instead of providing a new identity (as in the origin of Batman) it offers a return to a previous identity: that of the power and skills of the Oni. This inversion is also apparent in the title itself, whose etymology presents the object as a threat rather than a shield or disguise ('death mask'). This is reinforced by the events of the narrative, as countless criminals are sacrificed to grow new death masks, their faces removed (24). Deaths such as this also find a parallel in Batman's subconscious as he dreams of a similar event happening to him (29).

This comic also invokes a sense of duality common to the gothic, for example in the construction of these identities. 'WHAT I REALLY AM ... IS *YOU*' (132) says the Oniyasha to Batman, shortly before he is revealed to in fact be Kurosaki. This apparent contradiction is referenced at other points in the comic, for example in a conversation between Bruce Wayne and a shopkeeper on Japanese décor. The salesman muses on the simultaneous fragility and strength of barriers, saying: 'EVEN A SINGLE ROPE CAN DIVIDE THE SPACE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE' (31). At the climax of the book this point is again referred to as the Oniyasha describes the barrier in his mind as 'A WALL THAT CANNOT BE SURMOUNTED FOR ALL ETERNITY' (160) while Batman proposes the opposite: 'YOUR OWN MIND MADE THAT WALL...SO YOUR MIND... CAN BREAK THROUGH IT!' (161)

This duality of conflicting notions such as old/new or fear/play can be seen as another touchstone of the gothic and is referenced by other features of the text, such as the new breed of synthetic death masks that Agurama is manufacturing from the removed faces of criminals. The *deus ex machina* of hallucinogenic smoke and a fungus that can only be cultivated on disembodied human faces also invokes the pseudo-scientific, as does the reference to mass production (107). Here, factory-line production and modern marketing combines with tradition and superstition, referencing a gothic duality and perhaps even the gothic tradition's emphasis on parody and recycling. Whether couched in terms such as nature/culture, old/new or innovation/tradition, the opposition is clear. Other scenes in the narrative, such as the flashback on page 57 where the children at the dojo pretend George has turned into an Oni, also reference this combination of mutually opposing ideas. Here, the manga becomes simpler, almost parodic in style, while still invoking the combination of fear and play that is typical of the gothic.

It can even be said that as a whole *Death Mask* represents this type of juxtaposition, where the combination of manga stylistics and format with American comics tropes produces an alien and futuristic effect to Western readers. This contrasts with the historical storyline that draws on Japanese tradition, producing a hybrid text that combines gothic and science fiction in equal parts.

As noted, then, the narrative of *Death Mask* utilises cryptomimetic tropes in both its structure and content. Presenting a circular narrative that relates the present equally to both the future and the past most obviously recalls this type of haunted narrative, where past and future are shown to be equal. Similarly, the superhero is re-presented, not in terms of secret identity/alter ego, but instead as a man inflicted by a literal 'other within': in this instance, the shadow of the Japanese Oni, that is both himself and yet not.

It is this that most obviously references the crypt, as a place both internal and external, and which symbol is most applicable to Batman. As a figure whose every motivation can be traced back to the repressed memories locked inside, Batman seems particularly representative of this type of model. Introducing the Oni via Bruce/George's dreams (29) points towards this sort of interpretation, which is made explicit when George asks whether the Oni has 'ESCAPED FROM MY DREAMS TO CHASE ME IN REALITY?' (50). The Oniyasha mask is presented in similar terms: having aligned himself with Batman ('WHAT I AM ... IS YOU' (132)), Kurosaki's decision to put on the Oniyasha mask is then presented in terms evocative of the coffin and crypt, as he decides to 'OPEN THE CABINET. BREAK THE SEAL.' (158)

Batman's repressed memories, his origin experience, form the basis of the perpetual tension that drives the character. While *Batman: Death Mask* continues this theme, it goes beyond this simple construction, weaving a narrative that blurs past and future, self and other, and inverts and reconstructs superheroic motifs such as the mask. The story concludes by telling us that Gotham 'EVENTUALLY, FORGOT WHAT HAPPENED' (188), again aligning the hero and his city as memories are returned to the crypt and buried in time. This draws to a close the overarching cryptomimetic structure of the text, which thrives on its contradictions and juxtapositions. As such, it seems clear that the presentation of all these elements is cryptomimetic: reliant on absence, reversal and the notion of the other within.

Biography

Julia Round lectures in the Media School at Bournemouth University, UK, and edits the academic journal *Studies in Comics*. She has published and presented work internationally on cross-media adaptation, television and discourse analysis, the application of literary terminology to comics, the 'graphic novel' redefinition, and the presence of gothic and fantastic motifs and themes in this medium. Further details at www.juliaround.com.

Bibliography

Abraham, N. & Maria Torok. 1986. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press

- Adler, A. 1992. *Understanding Human Nature*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications
- Auerbach, N. 1995. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- Boichel, B. 1991. "Batman: Commodity as Myth", in Pearson & Uricchio 1991, 4-17
- Botting, F. 1996. *Gothic*, London: Routledge
- _____ ed., 2001. *The Gothic*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer
- Carter, M.L., ed., 1988. *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press
- Castricano, J. 2001. *Cryptomimesis*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press
- Cornwell, N. 1990. *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- Coverley, M. 2006. *Psychogeography*, Harpenden, Herts: Pocket Essentials
- Davenport-Hines, R. 1998. *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin*, New York: North Point Press
- Derrida, J. 1977. 'Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok', in Abraham & Torok 1986, xi-xlvi
- _____ 1994. *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge
- Bill Finger, B. & Kane, B. 1939. 'The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom' *Detective Comics* #33, New York: DC Comics
- Fordham, F. 1966. *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- LiBrizzi, M. 2003. 'The Anunnaki, the Vampire, and the Structure of Dissent', *Reconstruction*, 34 <<http://www.reconstruction.ws/034/librizzi.htm>> [accessed 20 November 2003]
- Miller, F. & Lynn Varley. 1986. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, London: Titan Books
- Moore, A. & Brian Bolland. 1988. *Batman: The Killing Joke*, London: Titan Books
- Natsume, Y. 2008. *Batman: Death Mask*, New York: DC Comics
- Pearson, R.E. & William Uricchio, eds., 1991. *The Many Lives of the Batman*, New York: Routledge
- Punter, D. 1980. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, London: Longman
- _____ ed., 2001. *A Companion to the Gothic*, Oxford: Blackwell
- Punter, D. & Elisabeth Bronfen. 2001. 'Gothic: Violence, Trauma and the Ethical', in Botting 2001, 7-22
- Punter, D. & Byron, G. 2004. *The Gothic*, Oxford: Blackwell

Senf, C. 1988. "*Dracula*: The Unseen Face in the Mirror", in Carter 2001, 93-103