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QUEER EYE FOR THE HERO GUY: Exploring Dick Grayson's Sexuality

Thea Cheuk

Introduction

The DC Comics character of Dick Grayson (best known as the sidekick Robin and later the hero Nightwing) has been subtextually coded queer since his first appearance over seventy-five years ago.

Using this historical foundation establishes the precedent of queer coding Dick Grayson, and provides context when analyzing the subtext of him as a closeted queer character. By examining Dick's relationship to Batman and other characters, his various costumes and visual presentation, and the efforts of some modern comics creators, my research shows how this subtext was created and sustained, and argues the validity of interpreting him as queer.

Relationships

One of the most famous partnerships in comics is Batman and Robin, and many scholars have explored the queerness of that relationship. Comics fans may be aware of psychiatrist Fredrick Wertham's influential 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* that claimed Batman and Robin comics were converting young boys to homosexuality, or of the years of jokes that have followed the campiness of the 1966 *Batman* TV show. Other avenues of queer coding Dick Grayson are less widely known, but still important.

For instance, Neil Shyminsky argues that superheroes are a metaphor for being closeted through close male bonds, marginalization, having to hide an aspect of themselves, and signaling Otherness through costumes/accessories/symbolic clothing.

With that implication contaminating the hero with queer potential, sidekicks are a way to transfer that anxiety away from the hero. Sidekicks reinforce superheroes' hyper-masculinity (and heterosexuality) so that in comparison to his sidekick, the hero looks less gay. Dick has also narratively played the part of damsel in distress for Batman, and when Batman's attention leaves Dick, for a woman or a different sidekick, Dick becomes jealous and upset.

His teammate relationships with heroes Donna Troy and Roy Harper have queer implications, and the romantic relationships he had with Koriand'r and Barbara Gordon have also tended to flip heteronormative dynamics. Dick's many strictly-sexual relationships with women are often complex, but frequently lack the emotional intimacy that he is seeking, in a rejection of hegemonic masculinity.

Costumes

One of the most essential aspects of a superhero is their suit, and the evolution of Dick Grayson's costumes is an important area to analyze. The Robin costume, as Joshua Pangborn notes, is distinctly feminine, which reinforces Shyminsky's argument that Robin was feminized to make Batman look more masculine. The Robin costume embodied hope, with bright colors that rejected the shadows and darkness of the Batman suit, both literally and figuratively.

When Dick became Nightwing in the 1970s, his new costume covered his legs, though the look was still queer because of the heavy disco influences. While not quite as eye searing as Dick's Robin outfit, the high collar and plunging neckline was still flamboyant and retained some of the yellow from the Robin costume. The silhouette also was reminiscent of the acrobatic uniforms of his circus performing family, an homage to his roots.

It was not until the late '90s that the iconic Nightwing suit was created. In addition to the color symbolism, the stripe of blue emblazoned across the chest adds a touch of playfulness and makes the black of the rest of the suit more approachable. The design of the symbol heavily implies ideas of flight, freedom, and alludes to his legacy as the last Flying Grayson.



From left to right: the original Robin costume; the first iteration of the "Discowing" suit (the first Nightwing suit); the most current iteration of the quintessential Nightwing suit as of 2020.

Creators

Many of the creators who have worked on Nightwing throughout the years have been asked about his unusual high degree of female readership, but more recently, contemporary comics writers have engaged with Dick's established (though officially unstated) queerness by pushing how far they can suggest him to be LGBTQ+. Flirtations with male heroes, including openly queer characters such as John Constatine and Midnighter, have led to further speculation and hope.

Writers like Devin Grayson, Tom King, and Tim Seeley have acknowledged their desire to portray him more openly interested in men, and even comics outsider actor Matt Bomer has drawn a connection to Nightwing and the metaphor that Shyminsky proposes of superheroes and closeted gay men.

While authorial intent is not the same as textual confirmation, it adds additional validity to queer readings.

Conclusion

With the increased understanding of the importance of positive representation of minority groups in media, a queer reading of the popular superhero Dick Grayson provides an opportunity to explore marginalized sexualities that have been long hinted at and suspected by some fans. The initial backlash against reading Robin as queer occurred in the '50s, but comic editors' attempts to assert his heterosexuality have had mixed success. Within the past ten to twenty years, writers have moved to push that subtext to text.

This shift is an indication of a growing societal acceptance of a wider range of sexualities, though it is very unlikely that anything of note will come from it. While queerness is slowly becoming more recognized within comics, especially comics targeted towards younger audiences, firmly entrenched, popular characters like Dick Grayson are unlikely to be ever be canonically queer, no matter how close they might come to crossing that line.

However, there is still validity and importance to interpreting the character as queer. For those who recognize aspects of queer sexuality or queer experiences in the relationships and visuals within the nearly eighty years of Dick Grayson's ongoing story, there is a wealth of subtextual possibility waiting within canon comics.

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