Judge, Jury and Executioner

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Essays on The Punisher *in Print and on Screen*

Edited by Alicia M. Goodman, Matthew J. McEniry, Ryan Cassidy *and* Robert G. Weiner

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Introduction

Alicia M. Goodman, Matthew J. McEniry *and* Robert G. Weiner

Since the Punisher's (Frank Castle) first appearance in *Amazing Spider-Man* #129 (1974), the character has become one of the most popular icons of the Marvel Universe with numerous series, guest appearances, three feature films, an animated movie, fan films (a notable one, *Dirty Laundry*, featuring former Punisher actor Thomas Jane) and a popular two season series on Netflix. An exceptional collection for a character whose co-creator, Gerry Conway, regarded him as "second tier" (Williams, 2010, p. 12), Conway goes on to state that he was surprised by the Punisher's success and that he was a "much stronger character than I'd originally imagined" (Williams, 2010). It's been estimated that throughout the character's 45+ year career that he has killed a staggering 48,502 people (Conely, 2017). The psychological profile of the Punisher is very complex, but his motives are very clear and simple: "He doesn't just kill people. He tortures, guns down, stabs, and terrorizes anyone he doesn't deem to be an innocent, and his view of innocent/guilty is black and white. Frank Castle is a man with nothing to lose, because he's already lost everything. Now all he has left is his mission" (Conely, 2017).

The Punisher's appearance in #129 is as a vigilante hired by the villainous Jackal, who has convinced the skull-wearing soldier that Spider-Man is the bad guy. The resolution of the issue ends with the Punisher realizing Jackal was deceiving him and vowing to get revenge, leaving Spider-Man alive (Conway, 1974). In *Daredevil vs. Punisher* #2, the Jackal brags to Hammerhead about his interactions with the Punisher: "He's a pure killer. I've stripped away his foolishness. Showed him his true essence. When I met The Punisher he was also nothing. I showed him how to channel his Anger. I gave him direction. Purpose. Molded him into what he is today" (Lapham, 2005). It's not a statement many in the criminal underworld would appreciate. The Punisher would appreciate it even less, as Hammerhead retorts

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back to the Jackal saying, "I wouldn't brag about that. He might blow your head off one day soon" (Lapham, 2005). The Punisher's origin has been enhanced with the canon story of the death of his family at the hands of various entities. While his wife, son, and daughter's deaths are always the beginning of any given reboot, the perpetrators can differ. His veteran status is also the same through some sort of combat scene which elevates his abilities beyond those of a distraught husband and father. The result is always the same, though, a very angry individual who has a mission of revenge that doesn't stop with the death of his family's killers but spills out into the world of heroes and villains.

Films with popular vigilante killers like *Death Wish* (1974), the Dirty Harry series (1971–1988), and characters like Don Pendelton's Executioner (Mack Bolan) are key influencers for the creation of the Punisher. The Executioner character and his war on the mob (1969) can be seen as the grandfather to Frank Castle and his identity of the Punisher along with his war on criminals (Kraft, 1975, p. 53). The Punisher is an American and believes in patriotism (himself a decorated military veteran), but he is apolitical. He disdains extremist political groups in equal measure. He has no sympathy for extremist right-wing groups, nor does he care for ultra-liberals who are allowing criminals to get away with their actions (Baron, 2007). He doesn't like either political position—he's on his own scale. In fact, the Punisher once saved a flag burner who was trying to make an artistic statement from being hanged, "Because that flag is big—big enough to survive the fool's right to burn it…. No law against flag burning, but there is against assault" (Baron, 2012). The would-be flag burner accuses the Punisher of being a "great white liberal," which is ironic. He tells the would-be performance artist: "My art consists of blowing away crooks" (Baron, 2012).

The Punisher appears with nearly every hero, with teams, monsters, and numerous villains in the Marvel Universe. He has even appeared with Archie and Eminem in special editions. Often, when the Punisher teams up with Daredevil, Captain America, Black Widow (especially in *Avengers Confidential: Black Widow & The Punisher*), Wolverine, or Spider-Man, they (reluctantly) work with him. Castle, on occasion, asks for help from other heroes, but he is cautious because he knows larger superhero teams find his presence uncomfortable. Anti-hero teams like the Thunderbolts often are too tame and disorganized for him, though he tries it out for a few missions by cooperating with Elektra, Ghost Rider, Red Hulk, Red Leader, Venom, and Deadpool. The Punisher quits when Red Hulk refuses to kill Dr. Faustus, instead wanting to flip him for a spot on the team. The Punisher occasionally employs his own sidekick, usually technology and weapons expert Microchip, to enhance his effectiveness between missions. This partnership is difficult as Microchip reflects that "[e]verybody I get close to

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seems to end up dead" (Remender, 2012). Their working relationship has turned lethal on more than one occasion, seeing Castle kill Microchip due to treachery. Trust is difficult to keep in their line of work. Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges for the Punisher in these teams is to put aside his predisposition to end criminal activities permanently with bullets instead of words and rehabilitation. He often sees the other heroes in the Marvel Universe as naive and putting too much faith in the justice system, especially when he's on the wrong side of it. Despite many attempts, Castle rarely stays in prison long enough for justice to reign in his lethal habits.

There are, however, a few heroes that the Punisher gives his respect to, such as Captain America. The feeling isn't always mutual. Cap has pointed out that his skull symbol is a problem for him explaining: "That skull makes you more than just an Anonymous Nut going out and fulfilling a twisted notion of justice. It changes you from a man into an idea. That skull could inspire people to act like you do. People who don't even know they're being inspired…. Symbols are powerful things, Frank. They're shorthand for big ideas. Advertisements for ideologies. I should know. I've been one for a long time" (Gimple, 2013). The Punisher is familiar with this idea and that's the point. As much as he can respect a symbol of the justice system and patriotism like Captain America, Castle is still going to execute the type of justice he's familiar with. When men choose evil, the skull, death, is their sentence (Gimple, 2013).

The Punisher's worldview is black and white, there is no gray associated with his ideologies. This yields an interesting relationship with almost all the characters he's encountered. They have polarizing opinions about how the Punisher does his work. Black Widow's opinion is the most obvious, stating the "man's a serial killer" (Dixon, 2018, n.p.). Daredevil concurs that although they may share enemies with Castle, the tactics he uses to take them down are vastly different. The Punisher is fighting a war against the mob, the criminal underworld, and anyone he thinks needs to be punished. Daredevil points out his war is "more like his neurosis" (Dixon, 2018, n.p.). General Ross believes the Punisher is a necessary evil, "A lot of good men are alive today because of you, Castle, and a lot of bad men are not" (Way, 2012, n.p.). Spider-Man compares what the Punisher does to losing joy in what they do as heroes, "find the joy in what we are and what we can do. Otherwise, well … down that road lies Punisher town" (Soule, 2016). But Spider-Man is cautious around the joyless vigilante, warning Daredevil: "if you think Castle can be trusted you're not the man without fear, you're the man without sense" (Rucka, 2012). In the most drastic of opinions, Ghost Rider uses his penance stare on Castle, but this yields no results since, despite killing thousands, he feels justified for every life he's taken.

Punisher stories work best when he's solo, such as events where the

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Avengers are trying to stop him during one of his rampages. Alone, the Punisher is much more effective as he sets the pace, the rules of engagement, and the method of taking down his target(s). If he teams up with another hero, he's often reduced to "The Disciplinarian," fighting a villain until submission rather than elimination. When Castle goes after gangsters, human traffickers, child pornographers, and drug lords in a lethal setting the stories seem the truest to his character traits. However, while these killings may seem justified because they are getting rid of all kinds of criminals, the Punisher is a murdering fiend. According to a 2005 FBI symposium, the definition for a serial killer is any individual who kills at least two people and doesn't require a cooling off period (FBI, 2005, p. 17). The Punisher is not only a serial killer, he's a mass murderer, which is defined as "murdering multiple people, typically simultaneously or over a relatively short period of time" (Bonn, 2015). The most accurate conclusion is that the Punisher is both of these things, making him a serial mass murderer with a cool off period that is only enforced when he has run out of targets and needs to rearm, reassess, and go hunting once more. Despite this characterization, the Punisher does not see himself as a murderer stating, "Murder is an unjust killing that serves no end" (Edondson, 2015). His purpose is so resolute to his punishment psyche that his killings are always going to have a purpose. They are to achieve justice, to rid the world of the blemishes, and to make sure the injustice he felt never happens again.

Superheroes don't kill as a general rule. Although it is tempting to call the Punisher a superhero or an anti-hero, according to John Romita, Sr., he's more of an anti-villain (Kreuger, p. 29). The Punisher certainly has some characteristics of a superhero in the form of a mission and identity, but he lives in a moral grey area (Coogan, 2005). Killing is usually associated with villainy, no matter what comic universe the characters are situated in. In Noelle Stevenson's (2015) young adult graphic novel *Nimona*, the title character who wants to be a villain sidekick states, after an explosion that caused several shocking deaths: "We're villains! Villains kill people sometimes" (p. 21). In a DC Comics series, Black Lightning admonishes the Blue Devil (who is about to kill a criminal) stating: "you told me you weren't one of the bad guys. Well, bad guys kill" (Andreyko, 2014, n.p.). The Punisher is not a good guy, nor does he see himself as a hero stating, "I'm here to take care of a problem. But let's be clear, I'm no hero…. A guy who does what needs to be done" (Hurwitz, 2017).

The Punisher cultivates a long list of nemeses because of his brutality and aggressiveness toward crime. He chews through a massive amount of henchmen easily, but some villains are successful enough to evade him and become a thorn in his side. Popular criminals such as Jigsaw, the Sniper, the Hood, Recoil, the Russian, Ma Gnucci, G.W. Bridge (though sometimes

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an ally), and Barracuda are often at the forefront of a series. Of the previous list, Jigsaw is the most frequent occurrence in stories featuring the Punisher. He's very similar to Batman's Joker, he's a matched opposite. The Punisher created Jigsaw by pushing his face through glass, and his tenacity can be attributed through his refusal to allow his disfigurement and pain to prevent him from getting his revenge. The Punisher tries to kill him and has seemingly succeeded on occasion, yet Jigsaw always resurfaces and prepares a new scheme to inconvenience Castle.

Castle has a personal code of conduct for his actions and during the missions he undertakes. He helps and protects the innocents. He's not above helping an elderly person across a busy street. He helps bystanders with car troubles and tries to be a good neighbor. If innocents are in a crossfire, he'll do his best to prevent casualties. He's saved animals including a coyote, shark, and lobsters from a grocery store. However, the Punisher is not perfect and on one occasion has had to kill an innocent woman because he was undercover in a right-wing racist group. The woman was the girlfriend of Stuart Clarke, a sidekick that replaced Microchip (Fraction, 2007). Clarke vowed revenge on the Punisher and used a suit of powered armor to become the villain Rampage in the eventual confrontation (Fraction, 2008).

Perhaps because of the deaths of his family, Castle has an unending devotion to keeping the (not criminal) family unit together. He does believe that some redemption is available for certain members of criminal families, it's a sixth sense he has for those individuals. However, when criminals use family as a bargaining chip or as a tool to achieve a sinister goal, the Punisher doesn't "go easy on men who use family against [him]" (Edmondson, 2010). Writer Robert Crais surmises that Castle's universe requires perfection, harming the bad, punishing evil while the innocent are protected at all cost (Crais, 2017).

The police share an interesting relationship with the Punisher. The leader of a task force designed to take down the Punisher, Detective Soap, points out that "every cop in the department loves him. They're always saying how he does half the job for us" (Ennis, 2000). Often the police don't look too hard for him due to their secret adoration of his methods. As Punisher writer Marc Guggenheim points out, "I think it's generally accepted that Frank Castle doesn't end up in police custody unless Frank Castle wants to end up in police custody" (2017, n.p.). Not all cops believe that what the Punisher is doing benefits them or their reputation. As a partner of a Punisher sympathizer states, "We serve the law. Like it or not that's our job. Castle serves himself…" (Rucka, 2012).

In both a nod to law enforcement officers and the Punisher, Frank Castle has a more violent counterpart in the form of Jacob Gallows from

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Punisher 2099. The comic is set in a dystopian future where police protection must be bought from wealth clients. Gallow, a cop himself, goes through the same tragedy as Castle and loses his family to violence. Gallow finds Castle's exploits from the past and models his revenge on the famous anti-hero, becoming the new Punisher. Gallow's methods were much more ruthless and very sadistic, going as far as keeping criminals in basement cells and torturing them for information (Mills, 1990). Frank Castle doesn't revel in the mayhem of Jacob Gallows, even though he can be selfish and at times see his role during missions as less of a justice crusade and more for "extermination" (Edmondson, 2015, n.p.).

Castle isn't afraid of death; he's supposed to be above the weakness of the vessel he's occupying. The Punisher is more than a man in a costume, he's a symbol, a lifestyle, and a prevailing force against persistent evil. He has the confidence to take out any villain he meets. He never waivers in his mission. This is particularly evident when he responds to the villain Face after a lengthy monologue about inevitability and defeat, "you're forgetting one thing, I'm the #@%*& Punisher" (Cloonan, 2017, n.p.). At the same time, the Punisher realizes that these qualities come with consequences. He knows that there is no redemption for himself, even though he does a smattering of good deeds with his punishment. They can't outweigh the massive amount of violence he commits, even if done for the right reasons. The Punisher tries to instill this to a boy whose father was killed by the mob imploring, "stay out of the revenge business, you'd only screw up your life" (Potts, 2008, 42). If he can steer others out of the life path he's walking, perhaps he can feel a little vindicated.

The Punisher has had three official movies made about the character: *The Punisher* (1990), *The Punisher* (2004), and *Punisher: War Zone* (2008). Each of these movies portray Frank Castle in a different setting. They all have their merits, but they also place their own spin on the character. In the 1990 film, the Punisher did not wear his iconic skull and acted more like a hero. The 2004 film saw a grieving Punisher who was methodical and less violent than his comic book counterpart. *Punisher: War Zone* featured a few gory and blood drenched fight scenes, had a proper Micro and included the villain Jigsaw, but they story went off rails after Castle uncharacteristically killed an undercover cop (Mendleson, 2017). Perhaps the most accurate portrayal of the Punisher is Phil Joanau's short film *The Punisher: Dirty Laundry* (2012), starring Thomas Jane reprising his role as Frank Castle. Castle intervenes in a local disruption with brutal efficiency after being goaded into action, showing the audience what the Punisher can do even on his laundry day.

The Netflix *Marvel's The Punisher* (2017–2019) series also differs from the comic character. He's still a veteran, but the wars have been updated

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