

“When the Gunfire Ends”: Deconstructing PTSD Among Military Veterans in Marvel’s *The Punisher*

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In the field of American masculinity studies, few research topics are as prominent as the military. The military is “an institution populated with men, but it [also] plays a primary role in shaping images of masculinity in the larger society” (Barrett 129),¹ yet “there is [no] consensus among all men and women in any national setting about the ideal man” (Nagel 247). The soldier is an especially enduring archetype of hegemonic masculinity, a concept describing the most currently honored and idealized forms of masculinity in a society (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). The popularity of this archetype can be partially attributed to the extensive representation that the American armed forces have enjoyed in mass media, with the grit, bravery, and heroism of the American soldier being not only celebrated in mainstream news media, but also mythologized in blockbuster Hollywood productions:

Militaries around the world have defined the soldier as an embodiment of traditional male sex role behaviors. From recruiting posters that seek “a few good men” to popular media images of John Wayne fearlessly leading the troops in a World War II battle, Tom Cruise as a “top gun” pilot, or Sylvester Stallone as Rambo single-handedly rescuing American prisoners of war, there has long been an association between the military and images of masculinity. (Barrett 129)

¹ Although women have since been integrated into the military and deployed in combat, the military remains a largely traditional institution “structured along the lines of gender,” with maleness being viewed as an inherent element of soldiering (Herbert 7-8). In particular, “the soldier identity forged during training is focused on the production of an efficient fighting force and involves the acquisition of traits that characterize hegemonic masculinity, such as physical toughness and (at times) aggression” (Emslie et al. 1485).

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Noticeably absent from many such depictions of the American soldier in popular media is either acknowledgment or a realistic portrayal of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a common condition that affects military veterans. PTSD is defined as “an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or series of events [...] in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened, causing feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (Backos et al. 157). Due to the negative feelings it entails, PTSD increases “the odds of unemployment by 150% and marital instability by 60%” (Galovski and Lyons 478). It is conservatively estimated that 11% of veterans who fought in Afghanistan suffer from PTSD, while this number increases to 18% for veterans of the Iraq War (Backos et al. 158). Consequently, the past decade has seen “PTSD in soldiers...become a major focus of the U.S. news media” (Armstrong and Olatunji 55).

Despite the now recognized commonality of PTSD amongst veterans, the condition’s poor portrayal in mass media has only promoted damaging stereotypes. Paul Rieckhoff, founder of the nonprofit organization Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, asserts that veterans who suffer from PTSD are broadly portrayed in news media as psychotic and unstable (Hipes and Kleykamp 348). Similarly, while post-9/11 cinema and television have depicted PTSD with greater regularity, fictional portrayals of the condition remain problematic. Writing for *The Washington Post*, Stephanie Merry observes that:

In the Hollywood take on war, there are basically two types of military veterans [...] The former are superheroic killing machines, like the Navy SEAL played by [Mark] Wahlberg in [the] action hit *Lone Survivor*. The latter are fragile ticking time bombs, like the PTSD-afflicted Navy SEAL personified by [Bradley] Cooper in the Oscar-nominated *American Sniper*.

Indeed, many veteran advocacy groups have expressed concern towards the “media stereotyping of veterans as either victims or heroes, with little in between” (Hipes and Kleykamp 348). The portrayal of soldiers in Hollywood films such as *Jarhead* and *The Hurt Locker* especially “are examples of descriptions of a combat veteran’s experience that may be misinformed [and] can lead to complicated self-esteem issues for PTSD veterans of those wars,” possibly even exacerbating suicidal ideation (McDermott 139). Although “the risk of suicide associated with PTSD exceeds that of any other anxiety disorder” (Galovski and Lyons 478), the hypermasculine nature of military culture often “inhibit[s] individuals from seeking treatment for suicidal ideation” (Braswell and Kushner 531). However, this just

makes the Netflix series *The Punisher* and its commentary on PTSD that much more unique and important.

Adapted from the eponymous Marvel Comics character, *The Punisher* premiered on streaming service Netflix in November 2017, airing two seasons before its cancellation in February 2019. Set in New York City, the series follows combat veteran Francis “Frank” Castle, who adopts the Punisher alias after his family is murdered and becomes a violent vigilante. Castle’s crusade brings him into conflict with numerous antagonists, including domestic terrorist Lewis Wilson, corrupt ex-soldier Billy Russo and, most notably, his own struggles with PTSD. Using Castle as a prism, *The Punisher* highlights issues related to veterans, specifically by increasing awareness of PTSD and its treatment, which continue to be misrepresented in mass media and stigmatized in cultural discussion.

From Page to Screen: The History of the Punisher

The Punisher is a spinoff of fellow Netflix series *Daredevil*, which introduced the Punisher in its second season. Both *Daredevil* and *The Punisher* are set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), an extensive media franchise consisting of various film and television adaptations of Marvel Comics properties (Beaty 321). In both the original Marvel comics and the MCU, Castle is a former United States Marine Corps Scout Sniper. After his wife and two children are killed during a gang war in Central Park, a vengeful Castle uses his considerable military training and firearms expertise to wage a one-man war on crime. This story arc is adapted for *Daredevil* and expanded on in *The Punisher*, in which Castle discovers that his family’s deaths are connected to a larger conspiracy involving corrupt government and military officials and swears vengeance against them.

The Punisher was an immediate hit among readers upon his debut in 1974 and soon starred in his own comic (Browning 972). By the mid-1980s, the character was starring in multiple monthly titles. Comic book writer and editor Tom DeFalco believes that the popularity of violent antiheroes such as the Punisher can be attributed to them reflecting “society’s frustrations [...] they want to see someone actively solving problems instead of just talking about them” (Stevens 131). Many Punisher comics during the 1980s and since have drawn influence from the Western genre, with the Punisher conveying the iconography of the Western protagonist though his isolation and violent capability (Palmer 280). As stated by Keith Dallas:

[The Punisher] is the iconic solitary vigilante, that alluring figure within America's cultural mythology that embodies a frontier brand of individualistic justice. But what the Punisher signifies beyond that depends on his writers and his readers. For some, he is a force of righteousness, remedying the failings of the judicial system by killing criminals who deserve to die. (590)

Notably, the Punisher is extremely popular amongst law enforcement and military personnel for precisely this reason. Others gravitate toward the character "not because they want to emulate his tactics in real life, but because they share his aims of discipline and freedom" (Riesman).

The Punisher's fandom amongst law enforcement and military personnel is controversial, although the character has been no stranger to controversy throughout his history. His 1980s comics were "typified by implausible, steroid-inspired physiques, outsized weapons [and] generous bloodletting" (Stevens 131). Such traits are evocative of toxic masculinity, "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination [...] and wanton violence" (Kupers 714). "Generous bloodletting" remains a common element of modern Punisher comics, and the character's propensity for brutal vigilante justice has also been criticized as embodying "para-fascist ethics" (Di Liddo 48). Consequently, the character's Netflix adaptation attracted considerable media attention before it even premiered. Prominent television commentator Alan Sepinwall expressed concern that the Punisher's historical portrayal as "an unstable man with an arsenal of automatic weapons" would be inappropriate in the modern sociopolitical climate, which is sharply divided on issues related to gun control and mass shootings. However, as asserted by reviewers such as Abraham Riesman, *The Punisher* does not glorify vigilante violence, with the character "going after corrupt officials in the military-industrial complex and high-level law enforcement [rather than] shooting up mobsters and street toughs." Instead, the 13 episodes that comprise *The Punisher*'s debut season are primarily concerned with providing viewers a rich insight into how PTSD affects veterans like Frank Castle and their reintegration into American society, and how the condition can be treated.

Methodology and Framework

The creator and showrunner of *The Punisher* is Steve Lightfoot, a television producer who was drawn to the project due to his interest and empathy for the veteran experience:

We’re sending these young people to war, year after year, deployment after deployment. We’re asking them to manage these extreme environments and then return home as though everything is fine. [*The Punisher*] is about the drama and the emotional damage that comes with going to war. It’s about the impact of this on the people who do the fighting and the killing. (Illing)

For its method, this essay employs narrative rhetorical criticism to highlight specific dialogue and scenes that best demonstrate how *The Punisher* incorporates Lightfoot’s promised commentary into its narrative. Narrative rhetorical criticism is a submethod of textual analysis, which is harnessed by scholars to delineate “the primary, linguistic meaning of a text’s component parts [from] the secondary, or textual meaning” (Altman 15). Narrative rhetorical criticism specifically is used to identify the themes of a text and how these themes are represented in the narrative (Foss 326-7).

Regarding theoretical framework, this essay utilizes stigma theory, which was originally developed “to explain the behavior, perception[s], and development of the social and psychological self of stigmatized persons” (Bauman et al. 633). Individuals can be stigmatized by possessing attributes “that others see as negative, unfavorable, or in some way unacceptable,” such as PTSD (Bauman et al. 634). Experts assume “that PTSD has been under-reported for veterans of both [the Afghanistan and Iraq] wars to avoid stigmatization” (Backos et al. 158). Harold Braswell and Howard Kushner argue that because “the military ideal of emotional control is inseparable from its notion of masculinity,” the stigmatization of PTSD and mental health care among soldiers “may be tied to a philosophy of masculine self-reliance and emotional detachment” (533-4). This stigmatization of PTSD influenced Lightfoot’s writing, with Lightfoot lamenting that “PTSD has become a label in society, and that’s a problem. It’s almost become degrading in a way” (Illing). According to stigma theory, people can develop conceptions and stereotypes of mental illness “from family lore, personal experience, peer relations, and the media’s portrayal of people with mental illnesses” (Asmussen et al. 1621). While mass media especially has contributed to stereotypes of PTSD, Lightfoot intends *The Punisher* to challenge these stereotypes and promote great understanding of the condition among viewers.

Portrayal of PTSD

In the *Daredevil* episode “Semper Fidelis,” after Castle is arrested for murdering numerous gangsters involved in the Central Park massacre, his legal advisor, Karen Page, suggests a defense based on PTSD. However, Castle flatly refuses:

Page: “We think [PTSD] would greatly help with your defense.”

Castle: “Don’t do that. It’s an insult.”

Page: “Lots of veterans experience it.”

Castle: “I’m not talking about me; I’m talking about them. It’s an insult to them, people who are actually going through it.” (00:08:36-00:08:48)

This line provides particular insight into Castle’s character. Although the Punisher “has an ambivalent relationship to the military, as do many who have served [...] he love[s] his fellow warriors, [and] detests the immoral men who send grunts to foreign abattoirs and ignore them if they return” (Riesman).

Despite his insistence otherwise to Page, Castle *does* exhibit symptoms of PTSD in the MCU, particularly in his own series. The American Psychological Association lists three specific symptom clusters that characterize PTSD: re-experiencing, avoidance, and hyperarousal symptoms. As stated by Rachel Dekel and Candice M. Monson:

Re-experiencing symptoms are characterized by intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, and psychological and physiological reactivity when encountering trauma cues. Avoidance symptoms consist of avoiding thoughts and activities associated with traumatic experiences, inability to recall aspects of the traumatic event, diminished interest, emotional detachment, restricted affect, and a sense of foreshortened future. Hyperarousal symptoms of PTSD include sleep disturbance, irritability/anger, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance, and an exaggerated startle response. (303)

In contrast to other popular media texts, each one of PTSD’s specific symptoms is both represented and accurately depicted in *The Punisher*, exhibited by not only Castle but numerous other veterans in the program’s ensemble. After Castle, the character whose PTSD receives the most focus is Lewis Wilson, a young veteran who attends a support group led by Curtis Hoyle, a close friend of Castle. Lightfoot wrote Wilson as a tragic character whose own character arc parallels Castle’s, with Wilson being “an extreme example of [...] the psychology of when people are hurting [due to PTSD],” which ultimately claims his life (Li).

Reexperiencing. Veterans suffering from PTSD can reexperience their trauma through nightmares, described as “recurrent distressing dreams,” or flashbacks, described as “repeated daytime images related to an event now perceived as having severely threatened someone’s physical or psychological wellbeing” (Allan et al. 255). Throughout *The Punisher*, Castle suffers from both nightmares and flashbacks that provoke feelings of fear and horror. While PTSD is the product of “exposure to an overwhelmingly stressful event or series of events, such as war,” it can also result from experiencing other “abnormal situations” (Abdolian and Kalayjian 157). In Castle’s case, although he is troubled by his experiences in Afghanistan, his PTSD is also closely tied to witnessing the murder of his family.

After escaping from police custody in *Daredevil*, Castle is now working in construction under an assumed name. In “3AM,” the first episode of *The Punisher*, it is established that Castle continually experiences involuntary flashbacks to his family’s deaths. Castle releases his pain and anger through the physical labor of construction, even to the point of bloodying his palms. Such violent, physical exertion satisfies the hypermasculine ideals of traditional American masculinity (Maruska 239). However, Castle enjoys no respite in sleep either. Throughout the season, he suffers recurring nightmares where he reimagines his family’s deaths. It is documented that “feelings of intense guilt and self-loathing are...common with PTSD” (Backos et al. 157). For Castle, his guilt and self-loathing primarily derive from his perceived failure to protect his family, popularly considered to be the single greatest patriarchal responsibility (Connell and Messerschmidt 839-40).

Wilson also suffers from nightmares resulting due to his PTSD. In the episode “Kandahar,” Wilson relates to the support group that while serving in Iraq, he witnessed an American helicopter kill several of his squad in friendly fire. However, the incident was covered up and reported by the press as an enemy ambush. This event imprinted on his psyche, and Wilson continually relives it while sleeping, much to his anguish. When his father inadvertently wakes him from his sleep, Wilson reflexively draws a gun from his bedside and fires, only narrowly missing his father.

It is confirmed that “higher reexperiencing symptoms are associated with several problematic behaviors,” such as depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Blais et al. 169). While Wilson does not abuse alcohol, drugs, or other substances in *The Punisher*, the prospect of almost killing his father depresses him further. Wilson subsequently considers suicide in the episode “Crosshairs,” putting his gun in his mouth and daring himself to pull the trigger. Unfortunately, such

ideation is not uncommon among veterans. Suicide rates among the armed services has increased dramatically since 2002, with “the higher rates of suicide among the Army and Marines have been attributed to these branches being significantly more involved in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan” (Braswell and Kushner 530). Additionally, as depicted in *The Punisher*, the trauma veterans experience in service obtains increased lethality after returning home due to “the ready access to firearms characteristic of military life” (531).

Ultimately, Castle and Wilson’s psychic struggles in *The Punisher* function less to fulfill the expected melodrama of superhero entertainment² than to provide an authentic representation of how veterans experience PTSD, particularly in how they “repeatedly re-experience the terrifying event(s) in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares, or frightening thoughts” (Backos et al. 157). In the episode “Resupply,” a sympathetic Hoyle tells Wilson that “when you look in a mirror, you still see a soldier. And out on these streets, that soldier is invisible to everyone else” (00:16:27-00:16:36). This invisibility contributes to the isolation that PTSD imposes on veterans. Additionally, veterans themselves may also figuratively render themselves invisible through avoidance, another recognized symptom of PTSD.

Avoidance. Within the context of PTSD, “avoidance is related to a fear of reexperiencing thoughts and feelings associated with the traumatic event. This pattern of avoiding behavior prevents individuals from effectively processing the traumatic event” (Irwin et al. 176). Avoidance can be divided into internal and external categories, with internal avoidance describing “efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, [and] conversations,” and external avoidance describing “efforts to avoid activities, places, [and] people” (Allan et al. 255). It is documented that “over half of post-9/11 veterans who served in combat” have experienced difficulties readjusting to civilian life (Hipes and Kleykamp 350). Many of these veterans’ difficulties stem from the avoidance symptoms of PTSD:

The behavioral avoidance symptoms of PTSD can make routine daily activities, such as going to friends, taking part in school parties or kids’ programs, difficult. Emotional numbing, which reflects on the ability of

² While the Punisher lacks the superpowers and strict moral code expected of the superhero archetype, he was originally introduced in a 1974 Spider-Man comic as a foil for that character. In the decades since, Marvel has frequently contrasted “the Punisher’s violent and lethal methods [...] with the more benign methods of Marvel superheroes,” with the Punisher having particularly extensive histories with Spider-Man and Daredevil (Jeffery 121).

those with PTSD to experience and express a range of feelings, can affect attachment to children and intimate partners. (Dekel and Monson 304)

Dekel and Monson’s observation about the impact of PTSD on familial relationships is interesting. While there is considerable literature on how PTSD impacts veterans personally, “there is little written on the impact of PTSD on veterans’ family relationships and the impact of these relationships on healing from trauma” (Ray and Vanstone 839). This makes it even more impressive that *The Punisher* also explores, to great extent, the impact of PTSD on veterans’ families. Although Castle’s family are deceased prior to the events of both *Daredevil* and *The Punisher*, Castle talks about them constantly, as they motivate the actions of his crusading alter-ego. In the episode “Two Dead Men,” Castle relates to Hoyle how his wartime experiences affected how his wife Maria and children perceived him: “That shit follows you home no matter how hard you try. It follows you home, and Maria, she knew it. She knew it, the kids knew it. Sometimes I’d catch ‘em, they...they’d be looking at me and they’d have this look. Look at me like they didn’t even know who I was” (00:11:36-00:11:52). In the episode subsequent “Home,” Castle remembers one of his last conversations with Maria, after he returned from another tour of duty:

Maria: “You’re back but you’re not really here. More and more of you stays there. Where’s home, Frank? Is it here or is it there? I wanna hear you say it.”

Castle: “It’s here. It’s with you, always. You know that.”

Maria: “I don’t know that.” (00:35:55-00:36:32)

Reluctance among veterans to discuss their feelings or emotions, either with their family or mental health professionals, is largely attributed to the military’s “warrior culture.” This averts soldiers “from speaking openly about their psychological and emotional fragility,” thus hindering “the ability of mental health practitioners to recognize suicidal individuals [and] the healing process necessary to overcome suicidal ideation and posttraumatic stress disorder” (Braswell and Kushner 531).

The military’s “warrior culture” is an exaggerated form of traditional hegemonic masculinities. As observed by Anne Cleary, “within this construction of masculinity, admitting to psychological distress presents particular difficulties as it implies weakness and is connected to the feminine domain” (499). Because traditional gender constructions portray women as more inherently emotional and hysterical than men (Carranza and Prentice 269-70), emotional expression “is highly gendered, with males less likely than females to express emotion” (Cleary

499). Castle's attempts to numb his emotions following his service are indicative of internal avoidance, which creates a distance between him and his family. Castle's diminished relationship with his family especially causes him guilt following their deaths.

Castle is also shown practicing external avoidance throughout *The Punisher*. After investigating the government conspiracy surrounding his family's murders, Castle discovers that their deaths were orchestrated by Billy Russo, his former best friend who he served with in the Marine Corps. Russo intended for Castle to die in the massacre, to hide evidence of his own crimes from when they served overseas. In "Memento Mori," the season one finale, Russo leads Castle to Central Park for their final confrontation. Castle, after returning to the location where his family was murdered, is crippled by flashbacks to their deaths, which Russo had anticipated to give him an advantage in combat. While Castle succeeds in defeating Russo and avenging his family, he is still shown to be overwhelmed after being exposed to an external reminder of their murder. Wilson similarly exhibits avoidance symptoms, particularly in "Resupply." Trying to escape his nightmares, Wilson digs a foxhole in his backyard and sleeps outside, despite the cold November temperatures, an action indicative of his struggle to reacclimate to civilian life. When a concerned Hoyle visits him, Wilson explains: "I don't have nightmares out here. I should never have discharged, Curtis. None of it — the heat, cold, sand, noise, 50 guys stinking up a dorm — it never kept me up. Never bothered me. I slept good" (00:14:43-00:15:02). Through the actions of both Castle and Wilson, *The Punisher* accurately portrays the extent veterans will go to avoid revisiting their trauma, even to their own detriment.

Research indicates that the prevalent reluctance among veterans to express their emotions and "disclose emotional pain may intensify distress and put them at higher risk for suicidal behavior. These beliefs and practices...emerge from a socialization that teaches boys the importance of projecting strength and concealing emotions and pain" (Cleary 499). Braswell and Kushner thus argue that a reconfiguration of military masculinity is necessary in order to reduce the stigma of emotional expression and consequently discourage suicidal ideation (535). However, avoidance is not the "engine that drives other symptoms" (Doron-LaMarca et al. 411). Rather, that engine is the hyperarousal symptom cluster.

Hyperarousal symptoms. The hyperarousal symptom cluster encompasses hypervigilance and exaggerated startle responses (Allan et al. 255). Research into PTSD indicates "that hyperarousal symptoms may play a particularly important

role in both the development and maintenance of PTSD [and] influencing later symptoms” (Doron-LaMarca et al. 411). Castle displays such exaggerated responses, even before his family’s deaths. A flashback in “Two Dead Men” depicts Castle taking his daughter Lisa and son Frank Jr. on a ferry trip to the Statue of Liberty, although the trip soon turns sour:

Lisa: “I read at school that [the statue] represents everything good about America.”

Castle: “That’s about right.”

Lisa: “Is that why you have to go away and fight?”

Frank Jr.: “Dad goes away so he can kill lots of hajjis. How many have you wasted anyway, Dad?”

Castle: “Hey! Don’t you ever say anything like that again. You got that? Do you got it?” (00:01:12-00:01:28)

Castle grabs his son’s face, barking this demand at him. Both Lisa and Frank Jr. recoil in fear at their father’s anger, and the trip ends in silence. In the subsequent episode “Gunner,” Castle sadly admits to Page, who has since become a close friend and confidante, that this was not the first time he had physically intimidated his children. Castle recounts an incident where he came home early from deployment and discovered his son had painted a crude soldier on the living room wall, prompting him to lose his temper:

I dragged him outside. I put him on the ground. I had a finger in his face [...] I said, “What the hell were you thinking?” He looked up at me, like a little man. He said, “Marines scare off bad guys, Daddy. When you’re not here, it’s my job to protect our girls.” They were better off without me, Karen. (00:21:49-00:22:22)

Castle’s love for his children is undeniable. However, his hyperarousal symptoms are established as provoking extreme, agitated responses that often frightened them, despite his best intentions and much to his regret. Braswell and Kushner observe that veterans’ attempts to bottle their emotions, “combined with the aggressive character of military socialization, [can] lead to violent outbursts” (534), some of which even manifest in familial abuse.

Wilson similarly scares his own father through his display of these symptoms. His reflexive firing of his weapon after waking from his nightmare in “Kandahar” is an example of the hypervigilance associated with hyperarousal symptoms. However, a more extreme example of Wilson’s hyperarousal symptoms occurs in “The Judas Goat.” After learning that O’Connor, another attendee of Hoyle’s

support group known for his extremist rhetoric, has been lying about his military background and never actually saw combat, an enraged and insulted Wilson attacks and kills his former friend, stabbing O'Connor in the stomach with a knife.

O'Connor's legacy in *The Punisher* is a dark one. His extremist and conspiratorial political views,³ such as “the real persecuted minority in this country today [being] the Christian American patriot” and “liberal, do-gooding assholes [wanting] to take our rights and our guns” (“3 AM,” 00:16:42-00:17:16), ultimately influence Wilson to become a terrorist, crafting pipe bombs to attack media centers in Manhattan. This brings Wilson into conflict with the Punisher, who is motivated to protect New York citizens, and ultimately results in Wilson's suicide in the episode “Virtue of the Vicious.” Despite his gradual evolution into an antagonist, Wilson is still portrayed in a sympathetic light. As stated by Lightfoot, “we really tried to show how someone like that — a young and alienated veteran — can get radicalized when he comes home and feels his life empty and purposeless” (Illing). Ultimately, *The Punisher* ruminates at length on the effects of violence on the psyche of the American soldier, and how PTSD can manifest in self-destructive action without proper intervention.

Conclusion

Today, “estimates of the psychological toll of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan indicate that approximately one in five service members is classified as suffering from PTSD following service” (Dekel and Monson 303). However, despite its recognized ubiquity, the depiction of PTSD in popular media is often skewed and oversimplified. The frequent presentation of PTSD-afflicted veterans in popular film and television as “fragile ticking time bombs” (Merry) has greatly contributed to their stigmatization among the general populace. Such prevalent stereotypes towards PTSD have raised concerns that “if the public socially excludes veterans because of a generalized concern over PTSD, [then] stigmatizing treatment may in fact lead to the onset or exacerbation of mental health problems among veterans”

³ O'Connor's beliefs and rhetoric are characteristic of the alt-right, a white supremacist political movement whose members have conducted numerous killings and mass shootings in recent years (Morlin 6-7). Punisher iconography has been appropriated by members of the alt-right, but the series makes clear that Castle does not share their values, and in an interview with *Esquire* Jon Bernthal, the actor who portrays Castle in *The Punisher*, famously said “fuck them” in reference to the movement (Rodrick).

(Hipes and Kleykamp 365). This is precisely why *The Punisher*'s nuanced commentary on PTSD, masculinity, and the American soldier is so important.

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Jon Bernthal, the actor who portrays Castle in the MCU, explains that he extensively communicated with military veterans before filming, in order to deliver an authentic, respectful portrayal of the American soldier:

One thing I've heard from a lot of people who have gone through severe trauma in combat is that, when the fight's on, and when you're on mission, your training kicks in and you know exactly what you're doing and you're moving forward [...] But it's when the mission ends, it's the quiet afterwards. It's going to sleep. It's returning home. That's when the war inside begins. (Betancourt)

This “war inside” is depicted in *The Punisher* through Castle and Wilson's struggles to reacclimate to civilian life. Due to the isolating effects of PTSD, doctors strongly recommend group behavioral treatments for veterans struggling with the disorder, noting that “group treatment is particularly useful for combat-related PTSD because military training and combat operations are group experiences and traumatic experiences in the military typically are managed in the context of the group” (Backos et al. 158). However, a prominent factor that exacerbates veterans' mental health problems is the “link between the military's masculine culture and the denial of trauma and, more generally, mental healthcare,” something that has “been openly acknowledged by military personnel attempting to address the current problem of military suicide” (Braswell and Kushner 533).

The reluctance that not just veterans, but men in general, have in expressing their emotions “has been one of the most frequently discussed but controversial topics in the study of masculinity” (Rochlen and Wong 62). This “inability to express emotions, especially distressing emotions, has been cited as a risk factor for suicide, and this is linked theoretically with the idea that particular constructions of masculinity endanger men's health” (Cleary 499). Superhero fiction is notably a strong arena for discussions of masculinity in society, with Jeffrey Brown observing that the construction and performance of masculinity is a major motif in the genre:

Classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of [American] cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man. In general, masculinity is defined by what it is not, namely

“feminine” and all its associated traits — hard not soft, strong not weak, reserved not emotional, active not passive. (26-7)

Although such a presentation of masculinity is still persuasive in superhero fiction, many modern superhero characters and stories have sought to expand constructions of masculinity, and *The Punisher*, both in comics and television, is no exception. The character occupies an interesting niche, originating from the superhero fiction of the Marvel Universe but also embraced by law enforcement and military personnel as one of their own. His eponymous television series, despite its roots in superhero fantasy, presents a realistic depiction of PTSD and offers commentary on the treatment of American veterans. This is not without precedent, as superhero narratives have a long history of addressing contemporary societal issues (Johnson 2).

Group treatment is notably depicted as a wholly positive force in *The Punisher*, represented specifically through Hoyle’s support group, which Castle joins in “Memento Mori” after defeating Wilson and Russo and avenging his family. *The Punisher* thus explicitly rebukes the notion of suppressing distressing emotions, instead endorsing a more progressive model of masculinity in which acknowledging and discussing PTSD and other forms of trauma is normalized rather than abhorrent. The final scene of the season depicts Bernthal, in character as Castle and echoing his interview with *The Washington Post*, highlighting the difficulty of overcoming the quiet after combat and winning the war inside:

I think that might be the hardest part, the silence. The silence when the gunfire ends. How do you live in that? I guess that’s what you’re trying to figure out, huh? It’s what you guys are doing. You’re working on it. I respect that [...] First time, as long as I can remember, I don’t have a war to fight. And I guess, if I’m gonna be honest, I’m scared. (00:51:39-00:52:48)

Notably, many of the attendees in Hoyle’s support group are portrayed by actual military veterans (Gaudette). As explained by Lightfoot, “I thought we needed to find real vets to play the guys in the group therapy sessions [...] I thought it was the right thing to do. Luckily, they were very supportive” (Illing). Bernthal has also related how veterans have approached him and praised the series, noting that “they especially like how he conveys [...] the symptoms of PTSD” (Betancourt).

It is estimated that “30% of people who have been in war zones develop PTSD...the average duration of[which] is ten years” (Backos et al. 157). Therefore, it is important to promote a greater understanding of PTSD among the civilians

whom our soldiers fight to protect, and popular media texts serve as strong educational tools to do so (Giroux 23-4). As stated by Sean Illing, a former United States Air Force paramedic who interviewed Lightfoot for news and opinion website *Vox*: “I’m not sure any pop culture work has captured the chaos and isolation of PTSD as vividly as *The Punisher* [...] I’m a veteran myself and while I’ve experienced nothing like what the characters on this show experience, the way it handles life after deployment resonated.” As indicated by the enthusiastic response to *The Punisher* by Illing and other veterans, Lightfoot and Bernthal have succeeded in their aims to raise awareness of PTSD among mainstream audiences.

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