NICHOLAS ZANE WINSTEAD. Holy Orientalism! Batman, Anti-Japanese Depiction, and the 1940s. (Under the direction of Professor Maria Prammagioire.)

The practice of using characters from popular culture to express an overarching, often inherently Western ideology is a long-standing practice in American culture, with superheroes playing a consistent role in presenting complex viewpoints, moral stances, and in some cases political perspectives. In frequent instances, comic book heroes have been used as propaganda in order to promote a Western idea that projects American strength, courage, and prominence that is meant to stir not only feelings of patriotism for American citizens, but simultaneously diminish other cultures through depictions that are exaggerated or inaccurate, especially those of the Asian and Arabic worlds.

One particular superhero has been a consistent figure in this East vs. West construct, Batman. For decades, Batman and his universe has incorporated the religions, arts, politics, and cultures from both the East Asian and Arabic worlds for the aforementioned reasons, starting with the Japanese at the height of World War II tensions. Comic books and film serials of the 1940s that featured Batman contained rampant anti-Japanese sentiment coupled with intense patriotism and a cultural belief that American valor, heroism, and way of life were superior to the cultures from the East, which were perceived as threatening. All of this created the roots of a clear pattern of Orientalism that remains present in the Batman mythos to this day.

In my project, I will analyze and explain the uses of Orientalism in the 1943 film serial Batman, one of the wildly popular serials of the era, as well as in issues of Detective Comics and Batman that contribute to this East vs. West conflict. Through this analysis, I will explain how these depictions and their associations create a construct for readers and viewers that present the
Japanese culture and characters as Others. Further, I will discuss how this Orientalism manipulates and blends all Eastern culture together in order to achieve a narrative or political effect at the expense of culture, religion, or values of these regions. This, indirectly or not, presents the Western ideal as superior. I will examine his role in all of this as a symbol of American ideology and a champion for the virtues of the American way of life and belief.