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## The Meaning of the Mask: Darth Vader on the Screen and the Page

Brenna Renfroe

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The Meaning of the Mask: Darth Vader on the Screen and the Page

by

Brenna Renfroe

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
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May 2023



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## ABSTRACT

Masks can be found throughout popular culture, and their roots trace back through history. Whether on the screen, the page of a comic book, the stage, or in the halls of a Comic-Con, masked faces are intriguing. Among the numerous masked faces that populate our imagination, few are as iconic and instantly recognizable as Darth Vader from *Star Wars*. Despite his popularity, most of the research devoted to masked characters has been interested in why heroes such as Batman wear masks. There is little research on why a tragic hero turned villain does so, since the connotation of masks seems to be inherently negative. Thus, many have concluded that Vader wears a mask because he is a villain. In this thesis, I challenge this one-sided notion of masks and explore the nuance of masks through the character of Darth Vader. In the first chapter, I analyze the meaning of the mask in terms of storytelling – what it means to Vader, to those who know who lies behind the mask, and to those who do not. In the second chapter, I look at how the work done to bring a masked character like Darth Vader to life influences our perception of masks and adds to their meaning.

**Keywords:** masks, Darth Vader, Star Wars, film, television, comics

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my mom, Eles Renfroe. Thank you for always being so ready to help when I came to you wanting to read over drafts of my thesis. I highly value your opinion and insight and thank you for so enthusiastically giving both. I also dedicate this thesis to you is because you and dad sat me down when I was little and showed me Star Wars. I do not know who I would be today if you had not shared with me your love of this saga about space wizards and laser swords, but I surely would never have written this thesis. You already know how much it means to me that I was able to write my thesis on something that I love so much, and I must thank you for bringing that love of Star Wars into my life. It is an integral part of me, and I owe it to you for the spark that started it all.

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Lastly, I briefly want to acknowledge all the talented creators, actors, writers, and people behind the multitude of Star Wars stories we have today. Thank you for lending your talents to this galactic drama that means so much to so many around the world.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

IMDb      Internet Movie Database

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Darth Vader, Batman, The Mandalorian, Iron Man, Spiderman, Daredevil, Boba Fett, Jango Fett, Kylo Ren, Westley, Zorro, Ghostface, the Phantom of the Opera, the Lone Ranger, Catwoman, Deadpool, and more. Some of these characters are heroes. Some are villains. Others fall in between. Each of these famous characters do share something in common. They all wear a mask of some kind, sometimes covering their entire face, sometimes only half of their face, sometimes just a swath of black around their eyes. Almost everywhere we look in popular culture, masked faces greet us. Despite either part or all their faces being obscured, masked characters have fascinated audiences for centuries.

This legacy of masks and masked acting can be traced back through years of history, a legacy that spans both drama and theater. Though masks pervade popular culture today, one can look as far back as the fifth century B.C. and find the masked actors and chorus members of Greek drama (see fig. 1.1).



Fig. 1.1. Greek Theater Masks.

As scholar Martha Johnson explains, fifth century Greek masks were “simple and naturalistic” (21). The masked actors had to learn to enhance their performance in

nuanced ways for the audience to pick up on the character's story and emotions. Since the actor was unable to express emotion with his own face, the reactions and verbal descriptions of the other actors and members of the chorus helped sell the masked character's emotions to the audience. It was quite similar for masked actors in ancient Roman drama who, like Darth Vader, wore masks that fully covered their face (see fig. 1.2).



Fig. 1.2. Roman Theater Mask.

Another deep-rooted tradition of masked acting is found in Japanese Noh Drama, a tradition that has continued for hundreds of years (see fig. 1.3).



Fig. 1.3. Noh Mask.

Noh shares some similarities with Greek drama that include “the use of masks, chorus, a limited cast of male actors; a relatively bare scenic areas; dance, instrumental music, and song” (Johnson 22). However, Noh focuses more on “evocative, formal expression rather than realistic portrayal” (Johnson 22). The art of the masks is also more nuanced and detailed, as Johnson details,

Noh masks are perfectly suited for the archetypal characters and underlying principles of Noh. As isolated objects, Noh masks are of high artistic quality, endowed with powerful expressive potential. There are many different kinds of masks, which fall into two general categories: exaggerated demon or god masks, and more realistic masks used for a majority of characters. (22).

Noh actors are trained from a young age to develop the skill and versatility necessary to embody this art form. One skill they learn is the *kata*, which comprises the hundreds of different choreographic movement patterns that physically express emotions and tell the story. The movements range from small and constrained to bold and acrobatic.

The Noh actor must be very conscious of his stage presence through his application of tone of voice, *kata*, relation to lighting, and more. The Noh mask is a revered object, and the actors treat it as such. Unlike with many Western masks, where the actor puts on the mask as an object separate from himself, the Noh actor treats the mask as another human face, an extension of himself. This difference is apparent even at the linguistic level, with the word “mask” in English primarily meaning “to cover or conceal” the face. The mask is a disguise. In Noh, “the term for mask is *omote*, an archaic word no longer in general use, which in classical Japanese means ‘face’” (Johnson 25). For the Noh actors, the mask is a thing of beauty and transformation.

Masks repress while also revealing truths about the person beneath. They are powerful and intriguing objects, and thus our fascination with them throughout history.

The use of masks as thematic and transformative devices in literature, theater, and film is not a new concept. In fact, historical masks as well as masks in popular culture have been widely studied. However, most of the attention in popular culture studies seems to be directed to masked heroes. For instance, one can find entire chapters dedicated to analyzing Batman's mask, but there is not as much that can be found for a tragic hero turned villain like Darth Vader. The attention given to masked heroes is often about trying to unearth why they wear the mask, as if its connotation is inherently negative and not positive. This connotation is true in many ways, since Batman as a hero intentionally utilizes the terror his mask inspires, but masks are more nuanced than that. Whether on an ancient stage or a modern movie set, actors throughout time have learned to act behind the mask and to make their masked character not only intimidating and mysterious but also a compelling, multi-faceted character that audiences root for and love. Masks draw our attention. They are important not only to the audience and the actors and crewmembers working behind the scenes, but also to the masked characters as well as those characters who share their story.

The Star Wars franchise offers one popular example. This galactic drama about family, war, and hope has captivated audiences for decades. Legions of loyal fans from across the world engage with the stories told throughout the saga. Award-winning author Carrie Goldman insists that because of Star Wars' widespread audience and impact, "people across cultures and generations have a shared understanding of the characters and the plot" (Langley et al. xiv). Yet for a saga that has so captured the human imagination,

there is a surprising number of characters who have no face, neither human nor alien, with which we can connect. At a Comic-Con where Star Wars fans gather to celebrate the saga, for instance, those fans engage in *cosplay*, which means to dress as a character. When in a room full of Star Wars cosplayers, one might be surprised at just how many masked faces are present.

Masks can be found everywhere one looks in the Star Wars galaxy. Not only do notable characters like Darth Vader, Boba Fett, or Kylo Ren wear a mask, but clone troopers, stormtroopers, Mandalorians, Jedi-Temple Guards, and other groups all wear masks. A character like The Mandalorian, whose real name is Din Djarin, has become one of the most popular and beloved Star Wars characters of recent memory, despite his face being hidden behind a shiny mask of beskar – the near indestructible metal that the Mandalorians use to make their armor (see fig. 1.4).



Fig. 1.4. Din Djarin/The Mandalorian.

The mask is an integral part of Din’s identity as a Mandalorian. As explained on *StarWars.com*, Lucasfilm’s official website for the saga, the masks are integral to Mandalorian culture because they are “often customized to show clan affiliation” and to honor “the legacy of the warriors that came before and all they had fought for” (Knox 1).

Din's mask carries a lot of cultural and symbolic weight. For much of the show, the audience never sees his face, but audience members have clearly connected with him.

Though Din is an increasingly beloved character, he has not been around as long as one of the most iconic characters in pop culture and cinema history: Darth Vader.

*Rolling Stone* magazine lists Darth Vader as one of the most iconic Star Wars characters (Hoffman 1), and *Empire* magazine goes even further by listing Vader in the top ten most iconic characters in film history (1). Vader has been around for over forty-five years, yet his popularity has never faded. His masked face is found throughout various media as well as much of the marketing and merchandising for Star Wars. Even decades after his first appearance in *Episode IV: A New Hope*<sup>1</sup>, new stories continue to be told about him, both on screen and on the page. Despite his popularity and prolific history as well as the fan connection with the character, his face is almost always hidden by his dark mask (see fig. 1.5).



Fig. 1.5. Darth Vader's mask in *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*.

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<sup>1</sup> The full titles of the episodic Star Wars films are often quite long, such as *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope*. To be more concise, they will only be referred to by episode number and title throughout this thesis.



For a character that we seem to know so much about, the mask presents an intriguing contradiction. The famous visage of Darth Vader is an expressionless mask. It conceals while at the same time reveals much of Darth Vader's character arc, emotions, motivations, and more. Chapter one of this thesis will demonstrate the meaning of the mask in terms of storytelling—what it means to Vader, to those who know Vader's identity, and to those who do not. Chapter two will show how the work done to bring a masked character like Darth Vader to life influences our perception of masks and adds to their meaning. Overall, I challenge the notion that masks are inherently negative and explore the nuance of masks through the character of Darth Vader. Given how powerful of an object a mask can be, analyzing the meaning behind the mask of Darth Vader can illuminate much not just about how masks affect storytelling and acting but also about Vader's character and the larger story set a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

## CHAPTER II: VADER'S MASK AND STORYTELLING

Lucas Film released *Episode IV: A New Hope*, then just called *Star Wars*, in 1977<sup>2</sup>, and the masked evil that chased the heroes across the galaxy immediately intrigued to audiences. One could not tell if Vader was a machine, human, alien, or something else entirely. His eerie breathing filled the initial silence and always punctuated his presence. That whooshing, rhythmic intake and outtake of breath seemed to indicate that this masked villain had to be alive and not a droid, but it was not until *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* that this assumption was proven correct, primarily in two scenes of the film. One is when Admiral Piett comes to talk to Vader, and we see a brief glimpse of the back of Vader's head without the mask (Kershner 44:30-45:00). The other is the famous scene near the end of the film where Vader reveals the big secret to Luke. Vader is adamant that he did not kill Luke's father. Instead, he tells Luke, "No, I am your father" (Kershner 1:51:05-1:51:30). Luke is shocked and declares it to be impossible, though deep down he immediately knows it to be true.

Luke's reaction is probably the same as everyone's who watched this scene for the first time back in 1980, as well as anyone lucky enough today to not already know this plot twist. To think that this masked menace is human, was once in love, and was once a hero changes the audience's perception of him. Vader might have not always been the masked villain Luke sees in front of him. Vader is a complex character, and one who continues to allure us. His most recent appearance in the Disney+ show *Obi-Wan Kenobi* demonstrated that many audience members still hunger for this character, even if the

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<sup>2</sup> All dates have been verified via the Internet Movie Database, hereafter IMDb.

audience has followed him for four decades of storytelling and has followed his character arc over the original trilogy<sup>3</sup>, the prequel trilogy<sup>4</sup>, comic books, novels, TV shows, video games, and more.

Darth Vader has always been a scene stealer. His intimidating height, mask, rhythmic breathing, sonorous voice, dark persona, and various complexities all draw the viewer's attention to him any time he appears in a scene or darkens the pages of a novel or comic book. People are not only drawn to this character but also afraid of him. Sometimes the reaction falls heavily on one side of the scale, others a mixture of both. Either way, the reaction tends to be immediate, intense, and unforgettable. My first reaction to him is no different. Both of my parents are *Star Wars* fans and were itching for that special moment when they could show their children the *Star Wars* saga. They carefully pondered the question of when to do so, but eventually they could not wait any longer. I was young, but I clearly remember my initial reaction to Darth Vader. I stared with wide eyes as the seemingly never-ending Star Destroyer chased the Rebel ship across the television screen. The stakes were high, and I sat on the couch both nervous and completely swept up in the story and its new world. When the door was blasted open and Darth Vader appeared through the smoke that filled the white halls of the Rebel ship, I was terrified. I feared for the lives of the good Rebels and the two funny droids, especially the cute, sassy blue and white droid named R2-D2. We only watched a few more minutes of the film because my distress heightened any time Vader appeared in a scene. My parents decided that it might be best to give me a few more years. We did just

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<sup>3</sup> *Episode IV* through *Episode VI*.

<sup>4</sup> *Episode I* through *Episode III*.

that and a few years later, I sat down on the couch once again. This time we watched the entire film. There was no distress, just wide-eyed wonder. We spent the next week watching one of the films every night until we finished the saga. The story told in *Star Wars* has stuck with me ever since, especially the character of Darth Vader, later revealed to be Anakin Skywalker.

Many audience members likely have stories like mine of the first time they saw Darth Vader. This common reaction is evident in the YouTube comments one can access for any scene of the film. The reactions to Vader's first appearance range from fear, intimidation, or chills. Yet there were also reactions of sadness or wistfulness depending on what order one watched the films. Some fans grew up seeing the prequels first, and when Vader enters the scene in *A New Hope*, they felt sadness at what he has become and all he has lost. Wherever one falls on the emotional scale, Vader makes an immediate impression, and there are multiple reasons why. However, one of the most glaring reasons is his mask and everything that the mask means for the audience as well as for Vader.

The mask of Vader serves multiple functions, such as life support. An article on the official Star Wars website goes into greater detail about the masks' purpose. The mask and domed helmet that goes on top of it enhance Vader's foreboding appearance and iconic silhouette. But the mask also protects his eyes and is "where Vader's respiratory system lives" as well as a system that "pumps air and helps regulate Vader's body temperature" (Shkoukani 1). The mask and suit are a prison, but one that keeps him alive. Vader is severely injured in his duel with his former master and friend Obi-Wan Kenobi at the end of *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. However, the films do not give us a

complete representation of what it is like to be Darth Vader. We can infer based on what we are shown, such as the brief shot of Vader in the curative bacta tank in *Rogue One* as well as moments of dialogue throughout the films, but we understand him differently when we encounter him through novels.

The now de-canonized but still influential novel *Star Wars: Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader* by James Luceno<sup>5</sup> allows readers inside Vader's mind, which makes up for missing elements in the films, such as understanding Vader's own relationship to his mask. The novel is set almost immediately after *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* and finds Vader in a precarious state. He struggles to adapt to his new reality, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Before his injuries, he was fast, agile, and acrobatic. In his early days as Darth Vader, he must relearn how to move and how to adjust his fighting techniques. He is forced to walk with "exaggerated caution lest he stumble or topple over" (Luceno 55). He requires the mask not only because it assists him in breathing and speaking, but because "the dark hemispheres that [cover] his eyes [filter] out light that may [cause] further injury to his damaged corneas and retinas" (Luceno 56). The control panel on his chest, which regulates multiple functions of the suit, "[beeps] frequently" and "the constellation of lights [serves] only as steady reminders of his vulnerability" (Luceno 57). He is always tired because "the incessant rasp of his breathing interfere[s] with his ability to rest, let alone sleep. And sleep, in the rare moments it [comes] to him,

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<sup>5</sup> After Disney purchased Lucasfilm in 2012, a new method of categorization arose for the wide array of *Star Wars* novels. Some were deemed "canon," while others were relegated to "legends" status. That new method meant that these "legends" novels were no longer considered part of the official *Star Wars* canon. Luceno's novel was among those recategorized under legends. However, it should arguably still be considered canon because the novel does not deviate in any big way from the canon storyline. It is also a much-needed story providing Vader's point of view, which is not found very often in canon.

[is] a nightmarish jumble of twisted, recurrent memories that unfolded to excruciating sounds” (Luceno 57-58). We learn that he has already “experienced moments of claustrophobia—moments of desperation to be rid of the suit, to emerge from the shell. . . . All in all, he thought: *This is not living*. This was solitary confinement. Prison of the worst sort. Continual torture. He was nothing more than wreckage. Power without clear purpose” (Luceno 58). Even if some of Vader’s initial disorientation with his new situation lessens over time, it is safe to assume that he continues to feel some of these emotions. The mask separates and isolates him. He is locked behind it, hidden from society. The otherness of the mask immediately calls attention to the fact that he appears tragically separated from humanity.

Unlike many heroes like Batman or Daredevil who choose to don their masks and even participate in some way in its design, Vader is afforded none of that freedom. His mask is designed by Darth Sidious, who is introduced later in the original trilogy, first as a hologram in *Episode V* and physically in *Episode VI*. Vader has no say in the design of the suit and the mask, though he is likely physically unable to at that point anyway. He does not choose to wear a mask to become more intimidating, because that choice is entirely out of his control. However, his choices made over the course of his life do lead him down the path that will eventually see him poised on the edge of the lava bank on Mustafar, about to make the brash decision that will lead him to the operating table where he can do nothing but watch as the mask descends onto his face and encases the human inside. As the mask comes down, the audience gets a last look at the human face of Anakin/Vader, and we see his eyes widen slightly in what appears to be fear (Lucas 2005 2:06:29-2:06:59). This scene towards the end of *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* might be

reminiscent of the Frankenstein films, since the monster is created on the operating table. Once the table rises to vertical and the operation is complete, nothing about this creation appears human. It is only the emotion in Anakin's eyes before they were hidden from us, as well as the emotion Vader expresses once Sidious tells him Padmé is dead at Vader's hand, that remind the viewer that this creation is not a droid. Behind his mask lies a human face, a face we once knew from following his journey over the course of the three prequel films and later in other media forms. But even with the knowledge we have of his history, the closing of the mask and the birth of Darth Vader as we know him feel final. The mask separates us from the character we knew and transforms him, both in terms of appearance and morality. The mask allows the audience to separate Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader. It allows us to forget, just as it allows him to forget.

Throughout the saga, Vader attempts to separate entirely from Anakin Skywalker. It is as if he believes he is a different person. He escapes fully into his Dark Side persona and buries any remnants of Anakin down deep. One of the ways in which *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *persona* is “the aspect of a person's character that is displayed to or perceived by others.” The mask and everything it represents is the only aspect of Vader's character that is visible for others to perceive. Part of what makes this attempt to erase his past self seemingly effortless is that his mask makes it easy for him to hide. If Vader were to look into a mirror, he would see a “face” that is not at all his own. Dark black orbs hide his eyes. His true self, or his past self as he might like to believe, is gone. The anonymity gives him a way to justify the evil he has done. As author Jim Davies argues, “masks are known to have psychological effects. For instance, feeling more anonymous (either being in the dark or wearing sunglasses) makes people more aggressive, less generous, and

more likely to cheat” (Langley et al. 68). The mask dehumanizes Vader and lets him disconnect with his morality. It is easier to let the mask become his new face.

The mask not only conceals the physical changes to his face due to his injuries, but it also presents a face lacking emotion. As a person whose facial expressions were once easily read, Anakin can now come across as threatening and thus always project exactly the image he wants. His true emotions could be sad, annoyed, furious, contemplative, or nervous, but almost none of these emotions will be obvious to those around. Yes, his body language still can convey some of his emotions, but never so much as his face and his eyes. As scholars Oliver Kohns and Sébastien Thiltges insist in their argument about why villains are so often masked, “As soon as there is a face, there is a connection” (Kohns and Thiltges 7). As humans, we constantly seek connection with other humans, and much of that connection is made with the face. Eyes, eyebrows, and facial expressions guide our interactions with each other.

When an interlocutor is masked, all those connections disappear. In discussing masks in ancient Rome, only seen from a distance, author Michael Lippman observes that as a society we “have come to expect close-up interaction with facial expressions and the perceived transparency they provide, as we see in film and television. Because we rely on the face as a key communicative tool, obscuring it makes us uncomfortable” (26). There is an inherent sense of trust in our desire to connect with eyes and facial expressions. They can be a window into what a person’s feelings are if they are willing to be open with them. Vader’s mask removes this potential for emotional connection. Masks are fixed, and often, especially with a full-faced mask like Vader’s, obscure most facial movements, which makes both the viewer and the other characters in the film unable, as



Stephen Rojcewicz puts it, “to accurately judge the feelings or intentions” of the masked person, “enhancing the sense of threat” (Rojcewicz 23). Vader’s mask is especially threatening and unnerving for those characters who have no idea of Vader’s self. They are on edge in his presence because they cannot read him.

Indeed, in the original trilogy nervous body language can be seen in most members of the Empire whom Vader encounters. It is as if the Imperial officers, cadets, and soldiers want to meet his gaze assertively and confidently but fail miserably. Vader has no discernable eyes to lock onto. Instead, the Imperials end up darting their eyes away and looking anywhere but at Vader, especially when he is in close proximity. In a scene from *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, the Imperial Commander<sup>6</sup> with whom Vader is conversing constantly swallows nervously, looks either to the left, right, or down, and is clearly uncomfortable around Vader (Marquand 3:38-4:46). The 2016 film *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* is another good example of a nervous Imperial encountering Vader, when Krennic comes to see Vader on Mustafar to grovel and waste Vader’s time (Edwards 1:13:30-1:16:25). Krennic, whom we have seen throughout the film as an officiously ambitious man, is not afraid of speaking his mind. This bravado evaporates as Vader gets too close to him. The more Vader closes into Krennic’s personal space, the more Krennic is visibly on edge. Vader even tells Krennic, “You seem unsettled.” Krennic denies it, but he is obviously unnerved by Vader’s presence. It is not until Krennic believes Vader is a safe distance away that he gets the nerve to speak up again.

Aside from the lack of eye contact and other physiological norms, Vader’s mask also scares these characters because he represents the unknown. They have no idea what

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<sup>6</sup> He is named in the credits as Moff Jerjerrod, though his name is not spoken in the scene.

or who lurks behind the mask. The unknown is terrifying for many people. We like control and honesty, and the mask alienates us from both. Aside from a few people who knew him as Anakin, Vader is a mystery. Almost no one in the galaxy knows what to make of him. He is a blank slate, and characters are left to project their own ideas, curiosities, and fears onto the blank mask. Elias Canetti explores this fear of what lurks behind the mask, saying “Part of the strength of its effect is due to the fact that it reveals nothing of what is behind it. . . . The tension created by the contrast between its appearance and the secret it hides can become extreme. This is the real reason for the terror the mask inspires. ‘I am exactly what you see’ it proclaims, ‘and everything you fear is behind me’” (376). The mask hides Vader’s humanity, and his actions make it hard to discern anything human under the mask and the black suit. The mask leads many beings who populate the vast galaxy of Star Wars to conclude that he is not human.

In volume one of Charles Soule’s canonical comic run, set after *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, very few people in the galaxy know the identity of this new masked enforcer of the emperor. He appeared out of nowhere yet seems to be second in command only to Emperor Palpatine. They are wary of him and his power. Throughout the comic, Vader is called a “beast,” “monster,” or “creature” by the other characters in the story (Soule 56, 76, 84). Yet, this degradation does not phase Vader. As noted above, Vader chooses to assume the fear and horror the mask inspires and to wield those emotions just as he would the Force. In the same comic, Vader hunts a Jedi who survived Order 66.<sup>7</sup> The former Jedi tells Vader, “You are a monster.” Instead of denying it, Vader agrees,

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<sup>7</sup> Order 66 is Palpatine’s plan to annihilate all Jedi in *Episode III*.

“Yes. I am” (Soule 84). This perception is one he has come to believe, because the mask lets him disregard his humanity.

In Volume 2, the distrust increases when a group of Imperial Soldiers, jealous and wary of Vader and the power he suddenly possesses, attempt to assassinate him. They obviously fail, but it is unique to see Vader not be totally in control of others. In the beginning, his subordinates do not fear him. They instead distrust and even ridicule him because they doubt Vader’s place. At one point in the comic, an officer condescendingly tells Vader, “You are here as a courtesy,” and refuses to respect him or his opinion (Soule 40). This early in Vader’s life behind the mask, he has not yet reached the point where his mask inspires fear. That impression is something he must work towards.

Vader and his mask set characters on edge, as we have seen above, but none more so than those who knew him as Anakin and were close to him and loved him. Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin’s mentor, and Ahsoka Tano, Anakin’s Padawan (Jedi apprentice) and friend, both have encounters with Anakin after he has become Vader. The fear of the unknown is a driving factor behind others’ fear of the mask, but for Obi-Wan and Ahsoka, that mystery is non-existent, and their fear is that they do know who lies behind the mask, but they wish they did not. Reconciling that it really is Anakin under the mask is difficult for both characters. It is not until the moment of unmasking, which happens for Obi-Wan in the finale of *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and for Ahsoka in the season two finale of *Star Wars: Rebels*, that they must confront who is behind the mask. The dark mask hides the face of Anakin and allows Vader, Obi-Wan, and Ahsoka to separate the two identities, even though they are one.

This desire to separate the two may be why Obi-Wan lies to Luke in *Episode IV: A New Hope*, when Luke asks Obi-Wan about his father. Obi-Wan talks about Anakin in the past tense, “He was the best star pilot in the galaxy and a cunning warrior. . . . He was a good friend.” He wants Luke to think Anakin died a hero. He only portrays Anakin as a Jedi fighting for the Light Side of the Force and doing good in the galaxy. This may be how Obi-Wan wants to remember Anakin. He omits any details about Anakin’s fall. He might think it easier for both of them to believe Anakin died instead of acknowledging the truth. Thus, when Luke asks how his father died, Obi-Wan responds, “A young Jedi named Darth Vader, who was a pupil of mine until he turned to evil, helped the Empire hunt down and destroy the Jedi knights. He betrayed and murdered your father” (Lucas 32:36-34:38). Even in *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* when Luke confronts Obi-Wan about how he lied about Vader, Obi-Wan still separates the two identities, insisting to Luke, “Your father was seduced by the Dark Side of the Force. He ceased to be Anakin Skywalker and became Darth Vader. When that happened, the good man who was your father was destroyed. So, what I told you was true. From a certain point of view” (Marquand 45:58-47:08). Even when Luke insists that there is still good in Vader, Obi-Wan emphasizes that Vader “is more machine now than man, twisted and evil” (Marquand 45:58-47:08). Vader’s mask and all that it obscures allows Obi-Wan to put up a wall between himself and Anakin.

What happens when cracks appear in that wall is explored in the recent Disney+ show *Obi-Wan Kenobi*. Throughout the six episodes of *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, we see Obi-Wan start out as a lonely, isolated man wracked with guilt over Anakin’s fall. He is lost, unable to find any motivation in life besides watching over young Luke Skywalker on

Tatooine. The show takes viewers on a journey with Obi-Wan and explores his character arc. However, in relation to this thesis, one of the most important parts of Obi-Wan's journey is his conflict with Vader. When Obi-Wan first encounters Darth Vader in episode three of the show, he is clearly horrified. In fact, he appears almost physically sick (Chow 29:09-32:08). How could the boy he trained and raised become the dark figure he sees before him? To regain balance within himself, Obi-Wan must reconcile the fact that Anakin is behind the mask, but the mask makes that reconciliation almost impossible.

Vader's mask hides the truth, or at least makes it easier for Obi-Wan to run from. When Obi-Wan finally is forced in the third episode of *Obi-Wan Kenobi* to stop running and draw his blue lightsaber, he stares at Vader with no recognition in his eyes, only fear. He asks Vader, "What have you become?" Obi-Wan does not say *who*, but *what*. His language dehumanizes Vader, who does not deny Obi-Wan's choice of words but responds in kind: "I am what you made me" (Chow 33:57-34:06). Vader's response in many ways increases Obi-Wan's guilt. Of course, it was Vader's decision to jump into what would maim him, but Obi-Wan's decisions have already been keeping him awake at night, and Vader's mask just aggravates Obi-Wan's self-reproach. Obi-Wan is unable to form any connection with Vader. There is no human face, no eyes, mouth, eyebrows, or any other indicators of mood or emotion. Much like the characters in Charles Soule's comic run who reduced Vader to a creature or a monster, Obi-Wan struggles to see anything human in his former friend. The mask obscures it all, at least until the moment of unmasking in the final episode.

Obi-Wan and Ahsoka meet this moment with relief. They are forced to stop trying to deny that the person behind the mask is someone that they know. They finally can make eye contact and read emotions clearly on Vader's/Anakin's face and in his visible eye. But Vader's reaction to unmasking is the opposite. While others want nothing more than for the mask to be ripped away, Vader desperately wants it to stay on and never be removed in front of others. Author Elias Canetti explains the wearer's fear of being unmasked,

The mask is something put on, something external. As a physical object it remains quite distinct from the man who wears it. . . . As long as he wears it, he is two things: himself and the mask. . . . The secret he represents to those who see the mask from outside must also have an effect on himself inside it, but it clearly cannot be the same effect. *They* are afraid of the unknown; *he* is afraid of being unmasked. (377)

In the finale of *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, Vader's fear of his mask's being torn away comes true. At the end of their duel, Obi-Wan manages to slice open one side of Vader's mask. Vader's emotionless mask and everything he uses it for is stripped away. Part of his face is visible, as is one of his eyes. There is nothing he can hide behind anymore, nor for Obi-Wan. As soon as he meets Vader's eye, Obi-Wan asks, "Anakin?" Even with the mask broken, Vader still attempts to be in control of the emotions he projects. He tries to insist that he buried Anakin by telling Obi-Wan, "Anakin is gone. I am what remains." Obi-Wan's own teary-eyed face is easy to read as he apologizes to Anakin for things that were not entirely his fault.

The use of color in this scene, specifically the red or blue reflections of their sabers on their faces, underscores the emotions the two characters are exhibiting. At first, the emotion visible on Vader's face appears to be remorse, supported by the blue light, but it twists into something sinister and gives way to red as he says, "I am not your failure, Obi-Wan. You didn't kill Anakin Skywalker. I did. The same way I will destroy you." Even with the mask broken, Vader still tries to insist that the mask and all it represents is his true face now. Obi-Wan senses this resolve in his former Padawan's tone and choice of words and accepts the truth, even if it pains him. And even though we as audience members know that Vader is in some ways deluding himself, that there is a piece of Anakin left to be redeemed in *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, Obi-Wan does not have this hope. This encounter brings closure for Obi-Wan. He accepts what Vader is telling him. In fact, his words to Luke in *Episode IV: A New Hope* seem even more true, because we now know that he heard them from Vader himself. Even though this moment of unmasking briefly creates a connection, it does not last. Vader puts his mask, the persona of Darth Vader, back on, and this allows both characters to accept the transformation and believe that Anakin really is gone.

In the tv show *Star Wars: Rebels*, Ahsoka Tano has a similar moment where she manages to unmask Vader in the finale of season two. Throughout the season, Ahsoka has been presented with evidence multiple times of what really happened to her mentor Anakin, that he did not die but became something much worse. Yet each time she is confronted with the truth, Ahsoka tries her best to ignore it because it would hurt too much to accept it. After Ahsoka first encounters Vader through the Force, she goes searching for answers as to the truth of his identity. In season two episode eighteen of

*Star Wars: Rebels*, this search leads her to an abandoned Jedi Temple on the planet of Lothal, where the Force presents the truth to her in a vision. She is confronted by a haunted apparition of Anakin, who berates her, saying that she selfishly abandoned him when he needed her most. He then whispers, with the signature woosh of Vader's breathing punctuating his words, "Do you know what I've become?" (14:11-15:06). Ahsoka, who is quite emotional at this point, cries out in denial as she ignites her saber and swings it wide, only to find that nothing is there for her to strike down. Whether the vision was purely of the Force or was a manifestation of her guilt and fear is up for interpretation, but part of the reason she reacts so viscerally is because she knows exactly what Anakin has become. The wording here is once again important. Vader/Anakin did not ask if Ahsoka knew *who* he had become. He asked *what*. Just as the mask allowed Obi-Wan to see Vader as a monster, to question *what* he had become, so does it allow Vader to view himself less as a person, a *who*, but as a monster.

This is a truth that Ahsoka struggles to come to terms with. It is not until the episode "Twilight of the Apprentice: Part 2" that she finally comes face to face with Vader. Again, Vader's mask allows someone to deny the truth. She tells Vader, "I was beginning to believe I knew who you were, behind that mask. But it's impossible. My master could never be as vile as you." Vader responds similarly as he did to Obi-Wan, "Anakin Skywalker was weak. I destroyed him." Ahsoka sadly bows her head in acceptance, readying herself for the coming duel with "Then I will avenge his death" (Filoni 14:49-15:38). The former Master and Padawan fight, but at first neither can win. He trained her and thus can anticipate her every move, yet Ahsoka is now the faster more agile fighter. Late in the fight she manages to slice open Vader's mask just as Obi-Wan



did, though this time on the other side. And like Obi-Wan, this other crucial person in Anakin's life immediately changes her attitude when seeing a part of his face allows her a brief connection with him. Indeed, the first thing Ahsoka asks, just like Obi-Wan, is "Anakin?"

Yet, in this scene that parallels the moment with Obi-Wan, Ahsoka is unable to fully reach Anakin. Despite an initial glimpse of something genuine in Vader's face which caused Ahsoka to vow that she would not leave him, Vader again hides behind the persona of the mask, disassociating from any positive emotions. He molds his face to be just as much a mask of death as the black one he wears as he shuts down Ahsoka's hope and offer of help, proclaiming, "Then you will die" (Filoni 18:32-19:21). Though these two scenes in which the destruction of opposite halves of the mask permit a fleeting breakthrough, half of the mask is still intact, permitting Anakin to withdraw into Vader.

It is not until the end of *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* that the mask comes off completely (Marquand 1:59:42-2:01:56). It is removed by Vader's son Luke after Vader made the choice to return to the Light and save his son. Despite Luke's initial reaction to learning the truth about his father, he grows to not only accept this truth but also to be one of the only people who is adamant that there is still good in Darth Vader, that Anakin Skywalker still lives. Not even Obi-Wan or Ahsoka seems to believe this anymore, especially after both of their disastrous encounters with him. Right before Luke is brought before the emperor, he and Vader have a brief conversation. Luke is very confident with his body language. Unlike so many others before him, he is not scared of Vader. He stands tall and stares straight at Vader, never breaking eye contact even though his father's eyes are hidden. He insists on calling Vader "father" and refers to him as

Anakin Skywalker, despite Vader's protest, "that name no longer has any meaning for me." Luke does not back down, saying, "It is the name of your true self. You've only forgotten. I know there is good in you. The Emperor hasn't driven it from you fully" (Marquand 1:23:09-1:25:36). Luke loves with his whole heart and sees the best in people. He does not abandon those he cares about, and just as he would do whatever he could to save the lives of his friends Leia and Han, he vows to do the same for his father, even though he is absent the majority of Luke's life and has committed many horrible deeds across the galaxy. But Luke shares his sense of hope and empathy with his mother, Padmé. When she is dying, she insists to Obi-Wan that there is still good in Anakin, in Vader. Like his mother, Luke believes that Anakin will come back to the light, and though his belief is severely tested right up until the last possible moment, he proves to be correct. Anakin saves his son's life because his son saved his.

Luke has hope and is able to see beyond the mask even before it comes completely off. When Anakin and Luke truly hold each other's gaze for the first time, that connection is whole and genuine. Nothing separates the wearer of the mask and the person he interacts with anymore. Here, we see that Anakin is willing to remove his mask, even if it means he will die, to connect with his son. Even though the wearer puts parts of himself into the mask, the mask is still external. It conceals and alienates, and it must be removed for the mystery and intrigue to be shattered and the truth to be unmasked.

Darth Vader has intrigued audiences for decades because of the intimidating mask and the complicated human beneath. But in the end, he is alone. From the outside, the mask scares us. It puts us on edge. Yet it also draws us closer because of the mystery and

the shadows and the blanket of anonymity. The wearer of the mask ultimately lives a lonely, isolated life, and as enticing as the mask may seem, ultimately it strips away what makes one human and can be transformative in a negative way if one allows it.

### **CHAPTER III: VADER’S MASK AND LEGACY**

Vader’s mask greatly influences the entire Star Wars saga. It affects how he sees himself, how other characters see him, and how differently both he and those he encounters believe about what it means and what it hides. The mask is remarkably significant, thanks in large part to behind-the-scenes work done to create that significance. Before Vader’s masked face appears on a screen or page, a lot of thought and care is put into the character. The costume department, writers, actors, artists, and multiple others all contribute to the meaning of Vader’s mask.

The costume department plays a valuable role in bringing characters to life. Masks are not always as revered as the masks of Noh drama or of theater in Rome and Greece, which were briefly discussed in the introduction. Aside from the allure and mystique associated with masks, they can also produce mistrust and unease. This reaction is partly produced by our desire to connect through each other’s face, as discussed in the previous chapter, but it could also partly be from the use of masks as historically associated with deadly pandemics or other medical hazards, such as the Bubonic Plague in the 1600s and the gas masks of World War I. The macabre plague masks are a good example of the uneasiness a mask can inspire (See Figure 3.1).



Fig 3.1. Bubonic Plague Doctor's Mask.

As author David Caldwell explains, “European plague doctors wore beaked visors with glass eye coverings to protect themselves from miasma, the putrid and supposedly infectious air that was believed to cause the disease” (200). The gas masks worn by soldiers in the trenches in World War I also look unnerving (See Figure 3.2).



Fig 3.2. World War I Soldiers Wearing Gas Masks.

Interestingly, these World War I masks were part of the initial inspiration for Vader's mask. Concept artist Ralph McQuarrie worked closely with George Lucas to design Vader's mask. The costume and helmet in McQuarrie's art resembled "a Nazi helmet and pieces of trench armor" worn in World War I (Alinger 24).

Aside from physical masks, many people wear multiple metaphorical masks in their everyday lives. We may behave one way when we are out with our friends in college, and another way when we go to visit our grandparents. On social media, people often have multiple different online presences, taking comfort in the anonymity the internet can provide. Author Scott McCloud agrees that our face is a mask, "worn from the day [we] were born. Slave to [our] every command. Seen by everyone [we] meet. But never seen by [us]" (34). Even if our face is not something we actively think about, it can become a mask. Everyone has a relationship with a mask of some kind.

This complex history of masks carries over into the present, and the many different people who have written Vader for the screen or the page of a novel or comic have multiple different characters to draw inspiration from. Whether it is famous characters like Darth Vader, Westley from *The Princess Bride*, or superheroes like Daredevil, Spiderman, and Batman, masked faces can be found throughout popular culture. In *The Princess Bride*, other characters upon meeting the masked Man in Black, who turns out to be the hero Westley, often immediately assume the worst of him. The comic Sicilian villain Fezzik runs through a series of scenarios in his head about why this man wears the mask, thinking that he is "Obviously a criminal of character. (Was he a criminal, though, Fezzik wondered. Surely the mask would indicate that. Or was it worse than that: was he disfigured? His face burned away by acid perhaps? Or perhaps born

hideous?)” (Goldman 169). Of course, not all Fezzik’s assumptions apply to Westley, but many do apply to Vader. Vader lacks moral character and is also disfigured behind the mask. His face is also burned, though not by acid. In *The Princess Bride*, even the heroine Buttercup thinks the worst of the Man in Black when she first meets him. She fears him, this “masked and hooded and dangerous” stranger (Goldman 180). Much like Vader, Westley even plays into her fear and mistrust of his mask. When Buttercup asks who he is, the only reply he gives her is, “I am no one to be trifled with. . . . That is all you ever need to know” (Goldman 180). He knows the common assumptions people make about masks and those hiding behind them, so he exploits those assumptions to help build his persona. He is the mysterious Man in Black, the Dread Pirate Roberts, that is, a man of mystery and intrigue who should not be crossed, but who also is a hero and a man with a kind heart.

Batman is another famous masked hero, one with a legacy that began in the 1930s when he first appeared in the pages of a comic book and has continued through multiple television shows and films, even one as recent as 2022’s *The Batman* directed by Matt Reeves. As with Vader, most people recognize Batman/Bruce Wayne. Though he dons the mask for different reasons and under different circumstances than Vader, as well as using it from a desire to do good, both characters utilize the mask to inspire fear. In the comic *Batman: Year One*, Bruce goes out in the mask and costume for the first time. He finds criminals quickly on the streets of Gotham, noting, “The costume works better than I’d hoped. They freeze and stare and give me all the time in the world” (Miller 31). To them, he is a “creature,” an “it” (Miller 33-35). In the opening scenes of *The Batman*, he is viewed with open hostility and ridicule and called a “freak” (Reeves scene 2). This

language is similar to how people refer to Vader. Though Batman puts on his cowl to help people, it takes time to work past its negative connotations and establish it as the symbol of a hero.

But Batman's mask does not just influence those in opposition to him. It influences Bruce as well. He finds himself having to restrain himself from going too far. The mask provides anonymity, which is both good and bad. It keeps Bruce's identity safe, but it also can reduce the self-consciousness and self-awareness of the wearer, as psychologist Travis Langley points out in his book *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*, saying, "The mask can make it easier for the hero to lose control" (72). Bruce wears multiple masks: the cowl of Batman and the public facade of rich, carefree playboy Bruce Wayne. It can be hard to determine where the real face lies, not just for the audience but for Bruce as well. Like Vader, the mask and the persona that accompanies it complicates his own relationship with himself.

Much of the history and legacy of masks can be applied to Vader's mask. His mask is an intriguing object that draws in the viewer as well as the characters in the story. This depth owes a lot to the multitudes of people who work behind the scenes to bring Vader to life, such as the directors, actors, movement coaches, artists, writers, and composers. First, there are the multiple actors who have played Vader over the years, such as David Prowse in the original trilogy, Hayden Christensen in the prequel trilogy and *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, and the many stunt doubles who inhabit the character in the more challenging fight scenes. As actor Hayden Christensen says in his roundtable interview on the *Skytalkers* podcast, "There's a long history in my profession of working with masks, and the Darth Vader mask is such a powerful one. . . . his mannerisms and the



way he moves. . . . there's a continuity there that we need to adhere to. It's a collective effort, this character" (Errity and Plesher 21:25-22:40). This collective effort Christensen alludes to comes from multiple individuals.

One such individual is the "Vader movement specialist" that Christensen also mentioned in the above interview. This person's job is to coach the actor regarding how Vader moves and how he holds himself. These details all help portray some emotion from Vader. One knows he is furious when he comes storming at a character at a fast pace, or when he places his hands on his hips and looks down on them. He clenches his hands into fists when he is frustrated. When Vader gets down on one knee before Darth Sidious with his head tilted down, he is projecting submissiveness. As already noted, part of what helps portray emotion from the masked character is the reaction to his mask from those he encounters.

The deeply resonate voice work done by James Earl Jones also adds layers to Vader's intimidating presence, as well as sometimes giving him a little emotion, such as when one can hear a note of cruel amusement in Vader's synthetic voice. It is the job of the actor behind the mask to embody the physical presence of Vader and to take into consideration the input from others. Actors often rely on their eyes when working opposite other actors to spark connections and as a way into their own character.

The mask takes that resource away from the actor, and they must rethink their performance and their way into the character. Actor Robert Pattinson, who played Batman in the most recent film, said in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, "You can have all the ideas in the world about how you want to play something and then you put on the suit... It's just straight back to the drawing board immediately. The cowl

makes its own set of expressions which you are entirely unaware of. If the light hits in a certain way, you can suddenly look way more threatening or way less threatening” (3:49-4:46). Much like Christensen, Pattinson found that masked acting proved to be quite a challenge. Author Michael Lippman, who argues that masks and movement are very important when it comes to defining character, acknowledges that while masked acting is often more challenging for the actor, at the same time it provides a degree of innovative creative expression. He explains,

Masks require a wholly different style of acting in order to communicate what is lost by the lack of facial expression; the masked actor must compensate by using a complementary physicality. Rather than limiting the actor’s ability to transfer complex text or emotions, however, the stylized movements of a masked actor bring a new dimension of expression, as well as a new language, to the performance. (26)

All these differences in body language are created by the actor working together with the movement specialist to help compensate for the actor’s face being covered by the mask, creating a new language of acting.

As important as all the work everyone does to bring Vader to life on the screen is, he can also be found in many other media. The character has a prolific presence in comic books. The comic book artists and writers rely on different methods to portray Vader’s emotions. In the comic *Star Wars: Darth Vader* volume 1 by Kieron Gillen and others, the team of writers and artists made the decision to utilize flashbacks, posture, and Vader’s environment to portray emotion. For example, the end of this comic, which is set between *Episode IV: A New Hope* and *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, includes a

scene where the bounty hunter Boba Fett brings to Vader the name of the Rebel who destroyed the Death Star: Luke Skywalker. Vader's reaction virtually leaps off the page. Images of him and Padmé talking about their child, of Vader's hand trembling, and of the glass viewport in front of him becoming a spiderweb of cracks all help immediately demonstrate Vader's emotions before he even says a word. Even then, his dialogue is sparse. There is only one word written in Vader's dialogue bubble: "Skywalker" (Gillen et al 130-137). Though it is just one word coming from behind a fixed, emotionless mask, all the emotions are encompassed in that one word. Since it is a comic book, we cannot hear Vader's tone of voice, but the art in the comic panels compensates for that lacking element. Whether an artist or an actor, there are multiple avenues where one can help portray emotion from a masked character.

Lastly, music is a tool to portray a character's emotions, which is especially useful for Vader. Music interacts with our minds using keys, harmonies, melodies, instrumentation, and more, and John William's music for *Star Wars* is a masterful example. Music can sometimes give the audience a deeper connection with the characters, especially if one is masked. One of the points of discussion for authors Jim Davies and Joe Kraemer, who argue about the importance of music in storytelling, is how music lets us in to Anakin's or Vader's mental state. One example they point to is the death of Anakin's mother, Shmi Skywalker (Lucas 1:18:33-1:20:35). Davies and Kraemer elaborate, "As Shmi dies and Anakin simmers with rage, the violins play jagged rhythms in strongly bowed phrases. The brass crescendos as Anakin bursts out of the hut and slaughters two Sand People" (Davies and Kraemer 249). All of the emotions Anakin feels in this scene from *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* are evident on his face, but the

music makes them even more pronounced. We hear the music complement Anakin's emotions as they go from cautious joy at seeing his mother after so long apart to fear, then grief, and finally pure rage as he loses her. A bright, major key often signifies happiness. A dissonant minor key portrays unease, darkness, sadness, and melancholy. John Williams also associates certain themes with a character, so that whenever that theme plays, one can assume that character is either physically present or is being thought about in another character's mind. Music helps add dimensions to the story and characters, and the saga would not be complete without it.

The absence of music can be just as powerful. The finale of the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* concludes with such a scene, where the music is sparse throughout. This moment is the culmination of seven seasons of storytelling that began back in 2008. Throughout this show about the experiences of Anakin, Ahsoka, Obi-Wan, and others during the Clone Wars, we see Anakin build relationships with both old and new characters. Given that the series is a long form of storytelling, that is, one covering a long period of time with multiple story arcs, in this case seven seasons with 12-22 episodes each versus a two-and-a-half-hour film, *The Clone Wars* gets more time to flesh out Anakin's character, further portraying him as the hero and friend that Obi-Wan remembered him to be in *Episode IV: A New Hope*. In contrast to the high-stakes action and drama of the rest of the finale, the last scene of *The Clone Wars* is a silent one. There is no dialogue or grandiose, soaring music. There is only the sound of booted feet crunching in the snow and the signature sound of Vader's breathing (Filoni 19:57-21:05). Yet this is one of the few scenes in the saga where many audience members look at Darth Vader and only see Anakin Skywalker. Maybe it is because we can just barely see his

eyes behind the lenses of the mask when he looks up and are therefore able to make a connection.

Maybe it is the image of him holding Ahsoka's blue lightsaber, the blue signifying light and life, goodness. Just as with the use of color from the scene in the finale of *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, discussed in the previous chapter, the audience can infer the character's emotions based on the colors presented. Part of the reason why color is so important is because of the emotions and experiences connected with colors. As award-winning book illustrator Molly Bang explains, "Color's effect on us is very strong—stronger than that of other picture elements" (Bang 74). The blue of the lightsaber stands out and draws our eye because the scene is otherwise washed out in neutral shades of white, grey, and black. The blue saber is something we associate with Anakin, not Vader, which can tell us a lot about his emotional state in this scene. He thinks Ahsoka to be dead, and his emotions come across as sadness, not the bright red anger we normally associate with him.

Even though the blue saber stands out, it is not vibrant. It does not seem to emit a cheerful glow. Instead, it seems muted, robbed of the heroic purpose it once served. It simultaneously catches the viewers' attention yet blends into the snowy backdrop. Bang explains the influence of a white background, "Against white or pale backgrounds, bright colors often look washed out. There is a physiological reason for this: since white light is made of all the colors, all the colors receptors in our eyes are activated and become 'bleached out' when we see white" (Bang 69). Color is often used in harmony with other thematic elements to help convey the meaning of the scene. As discussed above, it can tell the audience so much about the multiple layers presented in the scene. Color and the

emotions it inspires are especially helpful when the only character in the scene is wearing a mask. Indeed, the creators of this show utilize color, silence, and the eerie stillness to illustrate just how alone Vader has become. He is buried behind the mask, dehumanized, locked in the prison created by his own choices.

Masks have played significant roles in society throughout the past, both as means of dramatic expression and as protection against diseases and other hazards. Vader's mask is a part of that legacy, and though he is not a masked hero like Batman, that difference does not make the meaning of his mask any less worthy of study. Masks both conceal and reveal, and the many creators and actors behind the character of Darth Vader help bring that nuance to life and draw in the audience, making them invested in this masked character, an interest that has spanned decades.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

As I have argued, there is much that can be learned from studying Vader's mask. He is an integral character to the entire *Star Wars* franchise, yet his mask and the meaning behind it is not as widely studied as the mask of a hero like Batman. Vader's mask and its meaning in the story and behind the scenes unearths much about Darth Vader, the characters and narrative that surround him, heroes and villains, masked acting and costume design, identity, and more.

Darth Vader's mask is a crucial part of him. It lends itself to his dark persona, inspiring fear in others and adding to his aura of danger. He wants to be feared, and his mask is an important tool that helps Vader achieve that reaction. Yet Vader's mask is also something for him to hide behind. He fears being unmasked, because underneath the mask lies Anakin Skywalker, and Vader wants to distance himself from his past. Vader's mask is a complex object, and Vader, Luke, Obi-Wan, and Ahsoka all have strong reactions to it. The mask is transformative. It transforms not only Vader's relationship with himself, but also his relationship with those who have been close to him and who knew him as Anakin: Ahsoka and Obi-Wan. Even for someone like Luke who never got to know his father as the Jedi he used to be, the mask still influences their relationship. Vader's mask is crucial for the storytelling and character building that takes place throughout the saga.

The importance of Vader's mask in the story is in many ways thanks to its sources. Whether it was the writers of the scripts, comics, or novels, the varying actors who work to bring Vader to life, or the artists and costume designers for the original trilogy who took inspiration from the haunting gas masks of World War II, Vader's mask

comes alive thanks to a multitude of people. The history of masked characters in popular culture and theater who came before Vader has also influenced how this masked character is written, performed, and perceived.

Masks are more than just visually striking objects that intrigue audiences. They speak volumes about the way we tell stories about the characters we engage with. They tell us much about the wearer of the mask, but they also tell us about ourselves and our society. Darth Vader as a character has been around since the 1970s, yet new material continues to add even more nuance to Darth Vader. This thesis could be expanded upon as more comics, novels, shows, and films about Darth Vader come out in the future. He is an immensely popular character, and much of his allure comes from the mask he wears and all that it reveals and conceals about this fallen Jedi turned Dark Lord of the Sith.



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