

# Eternal Struggles: A Critical Analysis of Christopher Nolan's Batman Film Trilogy

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***Eternal Struggles:  
A Critical Analysis of Christopher Nolan's Batman Film Trilogy***

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## Introduction

The literary character of Batman, first introduced by *Action Comics* in 1939, has been reincarnated several times in popular culture through graphic novels, radio, video games, television shows, and movies (Boxer). Christopher Nolan's Batman movies, however, portray only a fraction of the episodes and villains presented in the comic books, while reflecting on universal cultural, psychological, mythological, and social themes, archetypes, and conflicts.

In an interview with the Film Society of Lincoln Center, Nolan explains that he was trying to portray Batman as an extraordinary character in the fabric of an ordinary city with familiar traits that would be recognizable to the audience. The theatrical Batman, with high-tech devices and powerful combat tactics, creates a stunning contrast against the dismal background of Gotham. Nolan designed Gotham in this way to remind the public that “[i]n America we take for granted a stability to our class and social structure that has never been sustained elsewhere in the world. In other words, this sort of thing has happened in countries all over the world, why not here? And why not now” (Foundas)? While he acknowledges that his movies are open to numerous political, religious, philosophical, and economical interpretations, on a deeper level, Nolan seems to have wanted to create these movies as a response to this eternal struggle of society against the forces of chaos and injustice, part of the inherent conflict of the human condition. Nolan also addresses the numerous factors that contribute to the incitement of such chaos, including government censorship, lying, and covert violence, which, paradoxically, are often used as justifications for preserving the social order.

Several of the aspects of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* are applicable to modern society; others are influenced by monumental historical events. One of the crucial themes of Nolan's trilogy is the search to understand what it truly means to fulfill the role of the Batman, that is, the role of a guardian of order and justice against the forces of chaos and injustice.

## **The Nietzschean Perspective on Chaos and Order in Gotham**

The eternal struggle between Apollonian and Dionysian forces discussed in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy From the Spirit of Music* is a major theme in the Batman trilogy. In *The Dark Knight* the villainous Joker presents perhaps the most obvious Nietzschean allusion. Early in the film, the Joker states, "I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you...stranger" (*The Dark Knight* 0:05). This line is a punning adaptation of the familiar Nietzschean aphorism, "What does not kill me makes me stronger." The similarity of these quotes prompts consideration of whether the childhood traumas endured by several characters in the films do in fact make the individuals stronger, or, as the Joker suggests, stranger. Furthermore, the allusion invites the viewer to consider Nolan's trilogy as a Nietzschean investigation into the different aspects of the human struggle to maintain order against nihilism and chaos.

Apollo, also known as Phoebus, is the god of many disciplines, including archery, prophesy, poetry, medicine, and the sun. In ancient texts, especially in mythology, the sun and light were a metaphor for knowledge and wisdom. Nietzsche describes this god as embodying "that freedom from wilder emotions" (*Birth* 3); Dionysius, conversely, personifies chaotic and unpredictable activities usually associated with ancient pagan cultures.

Hesiod's *Theogony*, which is one of the earliest examples of Greek poetry, details a genealogy of the gods from the beginning of time and creation. He explains that Apollo was born of Zeus and the goddess Leto, while "Cadmus' daughter Semele bore him a resplendent son in shared intimacy, merry Dionysus, immortal son of a

mortal mother” (Hesiod 31). These descriptions of their parentage indicate how Apollo and Dionysius, because they are immortal and share the same divine father, can never be truly separated from each other. Nietzsche suggests that they are further related in that Apollo represents visual art, like sculpture and painting, while Dionysius embodies non-visual musical art. Neither of these divine forces is independent; together, they represent the entirety of emotions of the human condition and experience. Nietzsche proposes that the theater of Ancient Greek tragedy was the highest form of art because it strategically combined the concrete Apollonian dialogue with the ecstatic Dionysian chorus.

Nietzsche explains how Apollonian and Dionysian concepts are always in necessary conflict in the Greek tragedies. The hero seeks to create order out of a disorganized, chaotic situation, but his efforts are almost always unsuccessful, resulting in his death; these tragic heroes include Oedipus, Medea, and Creon.

Nietzsche suggests,

Both these so heterogeneous tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance, and continually inciting each other to new and more powerful births, to perpetuate in them the strife of this antithesis, which is but seemingly bridged over by their mutual term ‘Art’ (*Birth* 1).

The audience needs both the chorus and the actors on stage in order to appreciate the beauty each exudes; otherwise, if the audience was only subjected to one component, their minds and souls would not be passionately effected and the play would not be as powerful. The actors capture familiar human rationality while the chorus’ music serves as a conduit to the divine. Nietzsche suggests that successful art embraces and emerges from the eternal conflict. With respect to Nolan’s modern adaptation of this inevitable clash of chaos and order, Nietzsche would likely agree

with Slate movie critic Dana Stevens' analysis of Nolan's trilogy: "He wasn't in it for the fast-food tie-ins; he was making art" (Stevens).

Dionysius, also known as Bacchus, is revered as the god of wine, madness, ecstasy, and dancing and is often contrasted with Apollonian ideals. Dionysian cults believed that the experience of worship was not merely figurative, but a literal cosmic reunion of man with man and man with nature. Nietzsche explains how in the grips of this "blissful ecstasy which rises from the innermost depths of man, ay, of nature...by the powerful approach of spring penetrating all nature with joy..." mortal reason and rationality collapse under the weight of the masterpiece that man has become (*Birth* 4.)

One of the most explicitly hedonistic Dionysian myths is "Pentheus and Bacchus," told within Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. King Pentheus refuses to worship Bacchus and is angry that his subjects refuse to worship himself as a deity, instead preferring to drink to intoxication and dance primitively in the hopes that Bacchus will appear. Despite the prophet Tiresias' premonitions and warnings to curb his vanity, Pentheus, enraged, approaches these maenads to condemn their worship. The maenads, however, in their ecstatic, divine state, view Pentheus as a boar who will serve as an ideal offering to Bacchus. Led by his mother, a devout follower, "the whole mad throng rush at him, all united...[his mother] howled and tossed her head and hair, her streaming hair, and tore his head right off...and cried 'Hurrah for victory! The triumph is mine!'" (Ovid III.712-28). As this myth shows, Dionysius embodies passion, recklessness, and impulsivity; in the words of Nietzsche, "[n]ow is the slave a free man, now all the stubborn, hostile barriers, which necessity,

caprice, or 'shameless fashion' has set up between man and man, are broken down" (*Birth* 5). Throughout the trilogy, Batman is constantly battling the Dionysian forces of chaos to protect the established law and order of Gotham. To do so, however, he must step outside the rules of society.

Batman's role as a vigilante, stepping outside the rules of society in order to restore justice, is mirrored in the Ancient Greek tragedy the *Eumenides*, the final play in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Apollo advocates for Orestes, who has killed his mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus, to avenge their betrayal and murder of his father, Agamemnon. Apollo defends Orestes' actions as just and superior, as he was protecting the sacred bonds of marriage between his father and mother, which she had violated. This demonstrates Apollo's belief that because legal codes are binding and sacred, upholding the law is of utmost importance, even if that requires further stepping outside of the law and condoning violence to remediate previous injustices. Batman similarly seeks law, order, and justice for Gotham and its citizens; such is his justification for acting outside the law. During his training Ducard tells Bruce, "Crime cannot be tolerated. Criminals thrive on the indulgence of society's understanding" (*Batman Begins* 0:36). Ducard also teaches him that sometimes it is necessary to step outside the rules of society in order to save it.

Bruce soon learns that the League of Shadows plans to use this doctrine to justify the systematic purification of decadent societies through mass extermination, beginning with Gotham: "Gotham's time has come. Like Constantinople or Rome before it, the city has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice. It is beyond saving and must be allowed to die...Gotham must be destroyed" (*Batman*



*Begins* 0:37). In this way the League of Shadows and Batman are not so different; each believe that they are pursuing the most just and acceptable way to save the city. Bruce's compassion, however, and belief in the ability of the citizens of Gotham to redeem their city, are what sets him apart from these ninjas and gives him "the courage to do what is necessary" (*Batman Begins* 1:47). However, Batman will not kill in the name of restoring order and justice. This theme is continued throughout the series in the struggles between Batman and each film's major villains.

The villain who most effectively captures this nihilistic, maniacal attitude, while also appreciating the inextricable relationships between good and evil as well as order and chaos, is the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. The Joker's trademark phrase, "Why so serious?" is repeated several times throughout the film, emphasizing his perpetual curiosity as to why people keep trying to stick to the system, follow the rules, do as others tell them to do, when nothing ever turns out the way they plan. The Joker explains his philosophy to Harvey Dent, knowingly influencing his transformation from Gotham District Attorney into Two Face:

I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it! You know, I just do things. The mob has plans, the cops have plans, Gordon's got plans. You know, they're schemers. Schemers trying to control their little worlds. I'm not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are (*The Dark Knight* 1:48).

Instead of being upstanding, law-abiding citizens, the Joker encourages the Gotham public to pursue any cause, establish their own code of moral, exclaiming "I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you...stranger" and later, "The only sensible way to live in this world is without rules" (*The Dark Knight* 0:05, 1:29).

This nihilistic theme is also prominent in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which the title character criticizes the anonymous, mindless mob that watches a tightrope walker plunge to his death. Zarathustra, conversely, applauds the tightrope walker for embracing adversity and making danger his vocation. Nietzsche, like the Joker, is deeply critical of the masses, who are devoid of originality and engage in activities merely for the sake of conformity. Nietzsche believes that the current state of man is a deadly affliction that must be overcome through liberation from all the corruptive principles of society and focusing one's life on one particular passion: "I love him who makes his virtue his addiction and his catastrophe...One virtue is more than two, because it is more of a noose on which his catastrophe may hang" (*Zarathustra* 4). Zarathustra is trying to impress upon the oblivious majority that absolutizing one virtue will ensure true happiness and give a life value. Because postmodern society is plagued by nihilistic beliefs that undermine the importance of universal legal code or morality standards, it is each individual's responsibility to give his own life meaning in whichever way he determines (staunchly opposing Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative). The Joker embraces this independent attitude of self-reliance, rejecting the Gotham District Attorney's campaign slogan "I Believe in Harvey Dent," instead proclaiming, "You can't rely on anyone these days. You gotta do everything yourself" (*The Dark Knight* 2:11).

The Joker understands that the anarchic, villainous role that he plays in Gotham would be incomplete without a hero to counteract his advances. He is a sociopath, not a criminal with a vendetta against Gotham, Harvey Dent or Bruce

Wayne. The Joker simply aims to upset the status quo and introduce principles of anarchy to the people of Gotham (foreshadowing Bane's campaign against Gotham's elite in *The Dark Knight Rises*). Anarchy, the Joker argues, is much more fair than a judicial code because it is based on chaos, one of the universal constants; one can never expect the unexpected. One of the most chilling conversations of the movie occurs when the Joker is being held as Batman's prisoner in an abandoned office building. The Joker, whom Batman has literally suspended upside down, is the visual opposite of Batman, symbolizing how the two characters are necessarily inseparable, like the natural duality in a yin yang. The Joker, even though he is about to be taken into police custody and sent to Arkham Asylum, explicitly alludes to their inherent magnetism, taunting,

This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are *incorruptible*, aren't you? Huh? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness and I won't kill you because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever (*The Dark Knight* 2:13).

He accurately does not view his arrest as the end of Batman's fight against chaos and mayhem, which will always rage in Gotham, as well as within his own soul. The Joker even says to Batman, "You complete me" (*The Dark Knight* 1:28). Nietzsche indicates that Apollonians, who seek to establish and protect "boundaries of justice," will forever be in conflict with Dionysians, who defend the freedom to create unique rules based on individual tastes and morals. It cannot be said, however, that one point of view is superior because, "Whatever exists is alike just and unjust, and equally justified in both (*Birth* 39). This struggle encompasses the entire range of human emotion and action, providing the fabric for the human condition, which,

according to Nietzsche, is profoundly miserable when the individual tries to suppress the eternally entwined Apollonian or Dionysian forces.

## **Injustice in Defense of Justice**

One of the most important characters in *The Dark Knight* is Gotham's District Attorney Harvey Dent. Charismatic, brave, and idealistic, Dent, as Batman's foil, shares many of the same characteristics as Batman, except for one: Dent does not conceal his identity from the public. He is a hero without a mask: Gotham's White Knight. Dent's attempt and ultimate failure to restore Gotham is best described in James Madison's Federalist Paper #51: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself" (United). Dent achieves much success in the first part of this statement; he has had a long career of putting away mobsters, money-launderers, and other criminals. The campaign slogan, "I Believe in Harvey Dent," captures the simple allure, dedication, and hope that the citizens of Gotham have in their District Attorney. As Dent admits, however, "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become a villain" (*The Dark Knight* 0:21). This admission is a commentary on the idea that injustice can only be fought with injustice, thereby validating attempts to restore order by stepping outside the bounds of society.

After the Joker kills Rachel, Dent fulfills his prophecy, undergoing a profound transformation into the villain Two Face, and seeking revenge on those responsible for her death. Dent, encouraged by the Joker, goes on a murderous rampage and eventually falls to his death. Commissioner Gordon is heartbroken, convinced that if the people of Gotham learn of Two Face's actions they will lose faith in the city they have all been working so hard to revive. His last lines of the film poignantly capture

the role that Batman decides to fill: “He’s the hero Gotham deserves but not the one it needs right now. So we’ll hunt him because he can take it. Because he’s not a hero. He’s a silent guardian, a watchful protector. A dark knight” (*The Dark Knight* 2:24). Batman refuses to allow the Joker to win by preventing the public from learning that even the heroic Dent can become undone; he sacrifices himself, taking responsibility for Two Face’s actions, in order to preserve Harvey’s reputation as Gotham’s White Knight. Batman and Gordon accept that they will lie to the public, whom they have both vowed to serve and protect, encouraging propaganda that supports the idea that Batman is a destructive force that Gotham must fight. He proclaims, “Gotham needs its true hero...I can do those things because I’m not a hero...I’m whatever Gotham needs me to be. Sometimes truth isn’t good enough. Sometimes people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded” (*The Dark Knight* 2:22). This is yet another example of Nolan’s protagonists using injustice to fight injustice. This “faith” is faith in the idea that order and justice can overcome chaos and injustice. Nolan, it seems, questions this devotion.

Gordon’s final lines can be interpreted as Nolan’s commentary on our post-9/11 culture and society. Nolan notes the danger in placing too much power in the hands of a single individual. Early in the film, Dent notes that the ancient Romans would suspend democracy during wartime and elect one official to make tactical decisions to defend the city. Rachel points out that Julius Caesar, the last one to be granted this authority, infamously abused this power and was eventually murdered by his closest political advisers, led by his best friend, Brutus. Similarly, Two Face, who has turned to utilizing chaos and injustice to fight chaos and injustice, is pushed

off the roof and killed by Batman, who was arguably his closest thing to a friend besides Rachel. In modern warfare, however, America does not suspend its democratic principles; responsibilities are delegated among several groups and individuals. This does not mean, however, that politicians are infallible. Nolan is warning against putting too much faith in such a figure who, like Dent, is liable to corruption and radical transformation. Furthermore, Nolan is suggesting that it is very likely that our government is shielding information from the public and condoning activities that it views as necessary to maintain order and justice.

America has encountered terrorists not unlike Nolan's villains, most notably Al Qaeda, and has responded in ways that parallel Batman's tactics in the film, which include torturing criminals for information and designing a sonar-tracking system using cell phone signals to monitor the Joker. Nolan seems to be questioning the effectiveness as well as the morality of these American methods of fighting and preventing terrorism.

In *Batman Begins*, Bruce explains how he plans to rebuild the city by inspiring the citizens: "People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy, and I can't do that as Bruce Wayne, as a man I'm flesh and blood I can be ignored, I can be destroyed but as a symbol, as a symbol I can be incorruptible, I can be everlasting" (*Batman Begins* 0:42). His vigilantism, however, inspires even more chaos, the emergence of copycat vigilantes, and the introduction of criminals much more sadistic than the mugger who killed his parents (which is especially ironic because the reason that he initially sought training from the League of Shadows was to avenge his parents' deaths). The scene in *The Dark Knight* when Batman

interrogates and beats the Joker, hoping to elicit Rachel and Dent's whereabouts, demonstrates Nolan's skepticism and disapproval of torture as a means to extract information from enemies and terrorists. While the Joker does tell him the captives' locations, he switches the addresses; this reflects the tendency of tortured prisoners to offer false confessions and information in order to stop their punishment, therefore undermining the efficiency of this method. Nevertheless, torture, both in America and in Gotham, is clearly not something condoned by the government, but is justified because it is supposedly a necessary measure to protect society from harm. This is undoubtedly the sort of abuse of power Madison was alluding to when he noted the challenge in trusting those who govern the masses to also govern themselves and abide to the same legal precedents. Madison, as well as the rest of the Founding Fathers, expected the government to protect the rights of the people, who in turn trusted their leaders to act virtuously in the pursuit of justice. While Nolan arguably does not agree that such behavior is moral, he seems to admit that leaders sometimes step outside the law to maintain order and prevent chaos in society.



## **The Cycle of Political Unrest and Social Revolution**

Nolan includes both contemporary and historical references and allusions into the plots of his movies. While some critics posited that *The Dark Knight Rises* reflected the American recession and the Occupy movements, Nolan himself says that he drew inspiration from a much older source: Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, which is based on the French Revolution. Although Nolan was influenced by this novel, he addresses universal themes and societal conflicts that are not particular to a specific location or people. This movie can be viewed as commentary on the American recession and Occupy Wall Street, particularly the potential danger for the rebels and supporters of similar movements to spiral out of control; this is particularly evident, even chilling, in the scene portraying the fight between the Gotham police force and Bane's army of released prisoners, which was actually shot on Wall Street in New York City. Economic depression and popular disapproval of leaders are two crucial elements that contribute to revolution and the resulting chaos that Nolan warns against in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Written in 1859, *A Tale of Two Cities* details events leading up to and throughout the French Revolution. Prior to the revolution, the decadent French aristocracy, led by King Louis XVI, mistreated the peasants and increased tax rates to reduce France's enormous debt, resulting in widespread poverty among all but the nobility. Fed up with these oppressive economic policies that enabled the nobility to sustain extravagant lifestyles, the peasants and middle-class revolted. The commoners stormed the Bastille, the royal fortress that housed some prisoners and a vast arsenal of weapons, and began their assault on the French elite.

One of the most notable aspects of the revolution was Reign of Terror, which occurred from September 5, 1793, to July 27, 1794. Maximilien de Robespierre, who was the head of the Committee of Public Safety, led the campaign to eliminate groups who were viewed as enemies of the revolution, including nobles, priests, and hoarders. Implementing the Law of 22 Prairial, year II (June 10, 1794,) which “suspended a suspect’s right to public trial and to legal assistance and left the jury only a choice between acquittal and death,” the Committee for Public Safety executed roughly 1,400 people via the guillotine during the Revolution (Reign).

At a press conference in 2012, just prior to the release of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan admitted that he was profoundly influenced by *A Tale of Two Cities* and included themes that directly referenced the French Revolution:

I was looking to old good books and good movies. Good literature for inspiration... All of these films have threatened to turn Gotham inside out and to collapse it on itself. None of them have actually achieved that until this film. 'A Tale of Two Cities' was, to me, one of the most harrowing portraits of a relatable, recognizable civilization that completely folded to pieces with the terrors in Paris in France in that period. It's hard to imagine that things can go that badly wrong (Lesnick).

The third film opens eight years after the death of Harvey Dent. Gotham is in an economic depression, Bruce Wayne has become a recluse, barely making public appearances, and Batman is nowhere to be found. The main antagonist, Bane, is hell-bent on alleviating the financial crisis and establishing a social order based on equality. Seeking the destruction of Gotham, he proclaims to Batman, “I am the League of Shadows and I am here to fulfill Ras al Ghul’s destiny” (*The Dark Knight Rises* 1:13). In many ways Bane embodies the slogan of the French Revolution,

“Fraternity, Liberty, and Equality.” He attacks the Gotham Stock Exchange, resetting the credit of the city’s wealthiest corporations, including Wayne Enterprises.

The iconic storming of the Bastille in 1789, which marked the beginning of the French Revolution, is reincarnated when Bane hacks the electrical grid and releases every prisoner from Blackgate Penitentiary. Since he has also trapped the majority of the Gotham Police force underground, Bane and his band of criminals, who have raided Batman’s armory, now exert tyrannical rule over the city. Aware of Bruce Wayne’s secret identity, Bane captures and imprisons Batman. The revolutionaries target the wealthy and powerful elite, expropriating their money and property. Bane has also taken control of a nuclear bomb, originally designed as a fusion reactor for sustainable energy by Wayne Enterprises, which he threatens to detonate if anyone attempts to flee Gotham. For months Bane and his vigilantes terrorize the city, ruling by fear and force reminiscent of the Reign of Terror.

The scene that perhaps most explicitly echoes the French Revolution shows Dr. Jonathan Crane, a villain who teamed up with Ras al Ghul in *Batman Begins* to engineer a hallucinogenic weapon, presiding over the trials of Gotham’s elite, who have been abducted from their households and hiding places. Crane explains to a hostile defendant,

There’s been no mistake Mr. Stryver. You are Philip Stryver, executive vice president of Daggett Industries, who for years has been living off the blood and sweat of people less powerful than him...Bane has no authority here. This is merely a sentencing hearing. Now the choice is yours. Exile or death (*The Dark Knight Rises* 1:57).

The exiled individuals are forced to walk across a frozen lake, which inevitably cracks and leads to an icy death. Similar trials occurred during the Reign of Terror:

thousands of the elite, including Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, were prosecuted without a lawyer and executed for what the Committee for Public Safety considered to be crimes against the revolutionary cause. Robespierre, in a speech to the Convention on February 5, 1794, justifies these harsh actions: “The government in a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny” (Robespierre). As Slate staff writer Forrest Wickman acknowledges, “[i]n each revolution, the trials are decided more by the clamor of the crowd than by any due process, and there’s little hope for the defendants” (Wickman). The likeness of Dr. Crane to Robespierre vividly recalls the revolutionaries’ activities during the Terror.

The leaders of the French Revolution held many of the same ideals expressed in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s political treatises, especially *On The Social Contract*, written in 1762. In order to free men of the chains of destructive civil society, which is plagued by the consequences of economic disparity and unequal distribution of property, Rousseau proposes a new political system based on the general will, which “defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and by mean of which each one, while uniting with all, nevertheless obeys himself and remains as free as before” (Rousseau 148). This government is led by a sovereign who represents the general will and intentions of the people. The sovereign is instilled with the duty of protecting the harmony and prosperity of society, particularly ensuring “that whoever refuses to obey the general will will be forced to do so by the entire body. This merely means that he will be forced to be free” (Rousseau 150). The sovereign also is prohibited from imposing laws and rules that do not benefit the majority of the general population. Furthermore, the general

population has a right to usurp the power of the sovereign if he is not accurately and effectively striving to fulfill their goals and wishes.

This idea is reflected both in the French Revolution and *The Dark Knight Rises*. The lower and middle classes united during the French Revolution against the aristocracy, who had imposed great financial burdens on them in order to sustain their own lavish lifestyles. Similarly, Bane and his group of criminal vigilantes seek to overthrow the rich and powerful citizens of Gotham. Illustrious cat burglar Selina Kyle warns Bruce Wayne of the plans to remediate this corruption:

I take what I need from those who have more than enough. I don't stand on the shoulders of those who have less...There's a storm coming, Mr. Wayne. You and your friends better batten down the hatches, because when it hits, you're all gonna wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us (*The Dark Knight Rises* 0:35).

Both the French radicals and Bane's vigilantes respond to economic inequity by forcing the nobles and wealthy elite to stand trial by jury without legal representation, resulting in certain death. However, such actions were justified in the minds of the perpetrators because they served the interests of the general population. In this way Rousseau's political philosophy, especially the idea of the sovereignty of the general will, supports and justifies the despotism of the Terror and the harsh judgments delivered in Bane's kangaroo court.

While these themes of the French Revolution are woven throughout *The Dark Knight Rises*, a direct reference to *A Tale of Two Cities* is made at the very end of the film. Commissioner Gordon, delivering the eulogy at Bruce Wayne's intimate funeral, reads the last lines of this novel: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known" (*The*

*Dark Knight Rises* 2:32). This is a response to Gordon's last lines of *The Dark Knight*, which characterize the Batman as a god-like protector, the hero who must be sacrificed to serve the needs of the dependent citizens of Gotham. Bruce Wayne, just like Dickens' protagonist Sydney Carton, has performed the ultimate sacrifice to protect the ones that he loves and has sworn to defend from evil. By including this allusion to *A Tale of Two Cities*, Nolan is warning the audience that history tends to repeat itself; these existential, psychological, and social conflicts, and the resulting revolutions, are not unique to a specific people, and therefore worthy of examination, particularly in the midst of America's current condition.

## Nolan's Inclusion of Jungian Archetypes

One of the primary villains in *Batman Begins* is Dr. Jonathan Crane, a corrupt psychopharmacologist who has been performing experiments on his patients at Arkham Asylum. Crane, along with the help of the League of Shadows and Carmine Falcone, a Gotham Mafia don, has developed a fear-inducing drug that he uses to terrorize his patients. The Mafia and the League of Shadows, after viewing the effects of the potion at Arkham, pollute the Gotham water supply with the hallucinogen, which eventually drives the paranoid and terrified victim to insanity. Crane, who is obsessed with the power that the mind can exert over the body, exacerbates the hallucinations by donning a malevolent scarecrow mask that appears to decay and be covered with maggots, earning him the nickname Scarecrow. When questioned as to why his patients (who have been administered the drug) repeatedly mutter "Scarecrow," Crane responds, "Patients suffering delusional episodes often focus their paranoia on an external tormentor. Usually one conforming to Jungian archetypes. In this case, a scarecrow" (*Batman Begins* 1:24). Jungian archetypes and themes are scattered throughout Nolan's Batman trilogy.

Just as Nolan's themes are universal, so are the character archetypes he employs throughout his films. Keeping these roles in mind can help in an analysis of Nolan's artistic motives. In *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung proposes that men utilize symbols and concepts to represent ideas that they cannot fully articulate. He explains, "[t]he mere use of words is futile when you do not know what they stand for" (Jung 88). This is due in part to the limits of human consciousness, which is dependent upon the quality of the senses. The psyche constantly interacts with the

collective unconscious, which Jung describes as humanity's aggregate experiences and memories. Such experiences are recollected in a number of various archetypes, which "manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images" (Jung 58). These archetypes and motifs, which are limitless, occur throughout art and literature, reflecting fundamental concerns and universal crises; therefore, a single character can embody multiple motifs. Several of these archetypes are represented throughout the Batman films, but are especially prominent in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

The primary Jungian archetype is the Self, which contains the conscious self, the unconscious (through which individuals access other motifs), and the ego. Jung suggests that these aspects of the Self, through formative interactions with other archetypes, become integrated through the process of individuation, after which the individual is a unique entity distinct from the collective unconscious. As the protagonist and hero of the series, the Batman and Bruce Wayne together represent this divided personality. Bane, conversely, embodies the Shadow archetype. Jung explains,

The shadow cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavorable (or nefarious) aspects of the personality. But this darkness is not just the simple converse of the conscious ego. Just as the ego contains unfavorable and destructive attitudes, so the shadow has good qualities—normal instincts and creative impulses. Ego and shadow, indeed, although separate, are inextricably linked together in much the same way that thought and feeling are related to each other (Jung 110).

Bane and the Batman similarly share many of the same characteristics. Both share the same spiritual father, Ras al Ghul, and received their training from the League of Shadows. They have the same overall goal: Bruce Wayne asked Ducard to help him



acquire “the means to fight injustice, to turn fear against those who prey on the fearful” (*Batman Begins* 0:08). Similarly, Bane strives to alleviate the inequity of corrupt societies. The shadow figure often has the same overall goals as the ego, but selects methods that the ego has rejected. For example, Batman has a strict no-kill policy. Bane, however, does not refrain from killing CIA agents, blowing up Gotham Stadium, resulting in the deaths of spectators and athletes, and manipulating the fusion reactor, developed by Wayne Enterprises as a sustainable energy source, turning it into a nuclear bomb. Bane presents himself publicly as a threat at Gotham Stadium and appears in televised broadcasts to submit his demands, while the Batman maintains strict anonymity.

Both members of the League of Shadows wear masks, but for different reasons. Jung notes, “in psychological term, the mask transforms its wearer into an archetypal image” (Jung 263). Notably, every significant villain in Nolan’s trilogy wears a mask; the only exceptions are Ras al Ghul, who disguises his true identity by initially introducing himself to Bruce Wayne as Henri Ducard, and Talia al Ghul, who everyone assumes to be Miranda Tate for the majority of *The Dark Knight Rises*. Bruce Wayne’s mask transforms him into the Batman, whereas Bane’s appearance metaphorically turns him into the Shadow. Bane implicitly embraces this title, proclaiming to Batman, “Oh, you think darkness is your ally, but you merely adopted the dark. I was born in it, molded by it. I didn’t see the light until I was already a man. By then, it was nothing to me but blinding! The shadows betray you, because they belong to me!” (*The Dark Knight Rises* 1:14). Spending his formative years in

the darkness plays a crucial role in Bane's development as the villain of *The Dark Knight Rises*.

As Jung noted, a single character can embody multiple archetypes at different points in the story. Just as Bane serves as the Shadow to balance Batman, who represents the Self, Batman can be interpreted as the Shadow of Bruce Wayne's Self. All of these parties are inextricably linked together; the externalization of the Shadow as Bane, however, allows Bruce to shed his role as the Batman and lead a normal life. This unbreakable connection between the hero and the villain has spanned the three movies, beginning with Bruce's training with the League of Shadows and, later, more explicitly with the Joker's numerous taunts that he and the Batman are flip sides of the same coin. Because the Shadow is a perversion of the conscious mind, it must be discarded before individuation can occur.

Selina Kyle is crucial in helping Batman achieve his final victory over Bane, allowing them both to permanently discard their covert identities and begin new lives with fully integrated personalities. The final scene shows Alfred, Selina, and Bruce at a café in Florence. Notably, Alfred is sitting a few tables away from the new couple; this shows that Alfred will continue to be available to counsel and support Bruce whenever the situation requires.

These contributions by Selina and Alfred show that less significant characters in *The Dark Knight Rises* also represent Jungian archetypes. Alfred, the Wayne family's loyal butler, embodies the role of the Wise Old Man. Batman fulfills the stereotype of the abandoned child who grows up under the care of sage elders to become a hero; other characters to follow this path include Superman, Hercules,

Spiderman, Romulus, and Zeus. Alfred, who was the boy's primary guardian after his father died, provides emotional and physical support to Bruce Wayne, literally tending to his wounds, tidying Wayne Manor, and preparing his meals. When Bruce decides to transform himself into the Batman, Alfred helps him articulate what values he seeks to embody and the ends he hopes to achieve. He also provides technical advices in the construction process of the Bat Cave, the Batmobile, and armor. After Rachel dies, Alfred burns the letter she requested that he deliver to Bruce in an effort to protect him from the revelation of her dying intention to marry Harvey Dent. He reminds Bruce of the importance of preserving the Wayne legacy that his family worked so hard to build, most notably asking, "Why do we fall sir? So we might learn to pick ourselves up" (*Batman Begins* 1:50). Had Alfred merely performed standard butler duties, which he undoubtedly signed on for at the beginning of his tenure at Wayne Manor, Bruce and the Batman would have evolved in drastically different manners. Alfred is the father that Bruce never had, providing unceasing support and love as well as influencing his development as a man and as the Batman.

Jung asserts that the development of the male ego is also influenced by the anima, or strong female manifestation of the unconscious. In *The Dark Knight Rises* the audience is led to believe that Miranda Tate, Bruce Wayne's partner and investor in Wayne Enterprises' clean energy project, portrays the anima figure. When the company goes bankrupt Bruce Wayne entrusts Miranda as CEO with the future of his family's company; she also begins a romantic relationship with him when his self-esteem is at a low point, his company is in shambles and his body is physically

deteriorating. Jung notes several anima figures within myth and folklore that symbolize “destructive illusion,” particularly beautiful and attractive magical figures that lure men to their deaths by promising comfort, love, and sexual fulfillment (Jung 190).

This deception continues until she reveals her true identity, Talia al Ghul, the daughter of the late Ras al Ghul. The true anima, the audience learns, is Selina Kyle. Like the Batman, she wears a mask in order to become an iconic figure who fights for justice and equality; they pursue the same goals of ending corruption and injustice, but in different manners. Batman prefers to hand-to-hand combat while Catwoman resorts to thievery, seduction, and manipulation to achieve her goal of deleting her criminal record and starting a new life with a clean reputation. The anima gives a man encouragement and strength to achieve his goals and craft his values. Jung explains,

Even more vital is the role that the anima plays in putting a man’s mind in tune with the right inner values and thereby opening the way into more profound inner depths. In establishing this inner “radio” reception, the anima takes on the role of the guide, or mediator, to the world within and to the self (Jung 193).

In this way, the anima assists man in the process of individuation, which consists of the integration of the conscious self, the ego, and the unconscious. Nolan directly addresses this psychological division: “By making [Bruce Wayne] into these three aspects, you really start to see the idea that you have a private person who is wrestling with all kinds of demons and trying to make something productive out of that” (Foundas). Selina Kyle is crucial in this capacity as the anima, as she is Batman’s sidekick in the battle for Gotham, assisting him in tracking down the

nuclear bomb and killing Bane, his arch-nemesis. After Selina has killed Bane and his army has been defeated, she and Bruce Wayne are finally able to retire from their crime-fighting careers and abandon their masks, effectively reuniting their split personalities and psychological dualities in order to pursue normal, fully integrated lives.

## Conclusion

These observations demonstrate how the eternal struggle between chaos and order across time, civilizations, and cultures can foster the emergence of individuals who choose to fight the established order. This rebellion almost always seems to necessitate a willingness to resort to injustice in their attempts to restore order. The ambiguous ending of *The Dark Knight Rises*, especially with the revelation that Detective John Blake's given name is Robin, Bruce Wayne's relocation to Florence, and Robin's discovery of the Batman's secret underground lair, suggests that any individual can fulfill the role of the Batman by fighting society's accepted ideals and the status quo. Indeed, Nolan admits, "The open-ended nature of the film is simply a very important thematic idea that we wanted to get into the movie, which is that Batman is a symbol. He can be anybody...the symbol lives on" (Foundas). Because the Batman chose to conceal his true identity to symbolize the immortal and eternal struggle between chaos and order, justice and injustice, freedom and tyranny, and Shadow and Self, this role can be adapted to suit any individual's own culture, values, circumstances, and conflicts. Christopher Nolan urges the viewer to take control of his own life in a Nietzschean manner, using *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* as resources in determining what is truly most important and holding these values as guiding forces.

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