University of Colorado, Boulder
CU Scholar

Spring 2013

The Masked Menace: Ideology, 'Unbecoming', and the Emergence of the Id Monster in Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight Trilogy

Jillian Glimer
University of Colorado Boulder

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

The Masked Menace: Ideology, "Unbecoming," and the Emergence of the Id Monster in Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight Trilogy

By
Jillian Gilmer
Dept. of English, University of Colorado at Boulder

Defended on April 3rd, 2013

Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Kelly Hurley, Dept. of English

Defense Committee:
Dr. Kelly Hurley, Dept. of English
Dr. William Kuskin, Dept. of English
Dr. Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz, Dept. of Film Studies

Table of Contents

Abstract

In this thesis, I will be exploring and developing the character of Batman as he is portrayed in the Christopher Nolan films, *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). These films are very topical and have not yet received the level of literary inquiry that they deserve; Nolan provide us with a popular and modernized Batman story with a dark, complex, and very round character that is worthy of analysis. I hope to show that he is not as heroic as many claim; unlike other Batman portrayals, this Batman is draconian, militaristic, and almost cruel. He beats and tortures criminals without giving them a trial or even reading them their Miranda rights, he is obsessed with the idea of revenge, and he takes power onto himself as a single man. Working with the three films, we see Bruce Wayne's evolution into Batman; he separates himself into two characters, attempting to embody society and disembody it simultaneously. His desire to fix the broken system of Gotham force him to go outside of the rules he imposes on others, ruining his attempt to purify and reinforce systematic rules. By illuminating his hypocrisy, his injustice, and his repressed animalism, I hope to prove to my readers that Batman cannot simply be categorized as a hero.

Introduction

What you really fear is inside yourself.
You fear your own power. You fear your anger:
the drive to do great or terrible things.
-Ra's al Ghul, *Batman Begins*

In this thesis, I will be examining the character of Batman in the recent Christopher Nolan films—*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)—through an Althusserian and Freudian lens in an attempt to provide insight into the structure of his surrounding society, how this structure shapes the becoming and "unbecoming" of Batman, and the psychological fracture that this creates within his character. In addition, I will attempt to convince my readers that Batman, although traditionally viewed as a hero, is much more complex than this title gives him credit for. He adopts the role of Gotham's savior, but his morally questionable methods and mental instability highlight his darker, more animalistic qualities. In other words, Batman is by no means Gotham's guardian angel, but a driven vigilante with a thirst for power. I will argue that Nolan's trilogy departs from past interpretations of Batman in the sense that his character is consumed by the darkness he inhabits. He is characterized by a total lack of control over himself; although he attempts to subdue his inner demons, they tend to explode from him violently in moments of great passion or anger. Although his ultimate goal is to rid the city of crime and restore balance, there is a part of Bruce Wayne—a very large part—that enjoys the brutal physicality of Batman and his sovereignty over all citizens of the city. It is this part of him, and his refusal to acknowledge it, that overwhelms Wayne's existence and leads to the chasm in his identity.

I will begin with a brief introduction of the Batman series and its history to better contextualize the Nolan films. This will help show the progression of the Batman character as a whole, from the campy TV series to the complex graphic novels to the dramatic Tim Burton films. I want to provide my readers with a general understanding of the evolution of the Batman character and how this influenced Nolan's decision-making in the astoundingly successful "blockbuster" trilogy.

Rather than attempting to separate the films into three separate chapters, I have decided to interweave them and use each of them throughout the thesis wherever they are applicable. I feel that this method will be less forced; instead of hammering the texts into three distinguishable categories, I will let them stretch out, interact with each other, and remain open to different lenses of interpretation. All three films are so interweaved in both overarching themes and characters that it would be an injustice to truly separate them from each other. In the end, I feel that this will allow me to better explain the technicalities and complexities of each of the films, especially in relation to each other.

I will immediately move into the theory section of my thesis; I will be working with Althusser's theories of ideology and interpellation and Freud's theory of the unconscious. I chose Althusser primarily for his discussion of Ideological State Apparatuses, Repressive State Apparatuses, and the constraining effect these kinds of institutions have upon social individuals; all of these aspects of his ideology theory are very applicable to the power relationship shared between the city of Gotham and Bruce Wayne. I will examine Gotham's power structure and how the tensions between the police force, justice system, and crime syndicates affect Wayne's decision to become a vigilante. Wayne is caught in a battle for power between these standing institutions and is forced to create a new category of citizen in order to empower himself and

save the city. I will also be working with Althusser's theories concerning interpellation and the Freudian theory of the unconscious and the "id" monster to provide groundwork for Batman's lack of control over himself.

Freud's essay "The Structure of the Unconscious" points to the unknown, unconscious, and animalistic desires of the mind—which he describes as the "id"—as an origin point for these dark desires. This theory is especially relevant to Bruce Wayne in his attempts to repress his inner monster; although he tries desperately to remain in control of his base emotions, they externalize themselves tangibly in a monstrous alter-ego. As the Batman, Wayne has the power, the method, and the opportunity to release his deep, ingrained anger as both a physical and mental weapon against crime. Althusser's interpellation theory will give this a more detailed context in relation to the societal stresses and tensions that are upon Batman; he will give in to his animalism, but only in an attempt to escape the institutions that oppress and smother him. The Batman vigilante is able and willing to break laws, punish criminals, and torture men for answers, all in the name of a greater justice. Regardless of whether or not it serves a good purpose is, however, it is clear that Batman enjoys this brutality more than society says he should.

So how can we categorize the Batman? Is he worthy of our admiration, or is he a power-hungry monster with explosive inner demons? In my thesis, I hope to convince my readers that being a hero is not all about riding a white horse into the sunset; Batman embodies an imperfect, human hero, who is characterized as much by his flaws as his is by his strengths.

The History and Evolution of the Batman

Christopher Nolan was certainly not the first person to take on the Batman franchise. Batman originally came into existence in a comic book in May of 1939, in which Batman appeared as a sort of detective; even then, however, he was depicted as a fearsome creature of the night who seemed to have few qualms about killing, maiming, or using weaponry to battle crime (Brooker 2000). Since then, the Batman series has exploded into an epidemic; Batman has his own comic books, TV series, graphic novels, and even some movie serials that were released in the 1940s.

Most recently, the series has been moved into the film media. Directors including Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher tried with various levels of success to inject excitement and intrigue into the Batman franchise, which had been sitting on a dusty shelf and losing its popularity. Unfortunately, some of these films proved lackluster; the story died back down after the scathing reviews of Schumacher's *Batman Forever* (1995), which was so despised by film critics that its sequel, *Batman Triumphant*, was canceled pre-production. The most recent Batman film of that era, Schumacher's *Batman and Robin* (1997), proved to be the last straw for the series; another film was not attempted for almost a decade.

At this point in time, Christopher Nolan—a young, relatively inexperienced director— decided to revitalize the series. By approaching the character of Batman through a new and darker lens, Nolan revamped the series completely and brought Batman back from death. Known for creating stories of turbulent psychological intrigue, Nolan provided the die-hard graphic novel fans with a gritty, violent, and psychologically fascinating character.

"Celluloid Hero," a topical article published in *Rolling Stone* in August of 2012, provides us with a humorous but historically accurate run-down of the Batman texts as they have evolved

into different media. Grant Morrison, a comic book author and critic, gives his detailed opinion on each of the Batman mediums: the 1940s movie serials provide us with an "utterly mundane, crushing idea of a Batman without money or commitment," while the 1960s television series presents a Batman who is "out in the daylight - a pop-art figure, a living cartoon" (Morrison 2012). These bland Batman tales led to a swift decline in monetary success as the public grew weary of a one-note character. Morrison quickly moves into descriptions of the three major film franchises based on the Batman comic books. The Tim Burton movies—*Batman* and *Batman Returns* (1989 and 1992, respectively) were essentially a "revival" of the Batman character as a whole. The lackluster television series had drained Batman of any mystique or depth, and Burton began to restore this by bringing the character back to his dark past and his "damaged child" persona (Morrison 2012). The *Batman and Robin* Schumacher film, Morrison argues, reversed this entirely and did a poor job of further exploring Batman's character; in fact, he views this film as just a campy continuation of the TV series.

After a ten year hiatus in Batman films, Nolan's *Batman Begins* was released in 2005. This film revolutionized the series as a whole—Nolan's dark, edgy, modern interpretation thoroughly reinvigorated the over-exposed character. In an interview with Geoff Boucher at the Hero Complex Film Festival, Nolan explained that he viewed his films as "the finishing of a story… that sets you very much on the right track about the appropriate conclusion and the essence of what tale we're telling. And it hearkens back to that priority of trying to find the reality in these fantastic stories." (Boucher 2010) In other words, Nolan was trying to give comic book fans a series they could respect—a series that could evoke reality in a world of fiction.

Will Brooker, an academic critic with a taste for popular fiction, argues that part of the commercial success of the Nolan films is due to their fidelity to the darker, psychological graphic

novels published in the late 1980s (Brooker 2012). Frank Miller and Alan Moore gave birth to a complex, intriguing, and violent character in their graphic novels *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988). With Nolan's film, fans of the graphic novels were promised an origin story of their beloved dark protagonist—everyone wanted to know the history behind the emergence of the Batman vigilante, and Nolan certainly delivered.

Unlike the rest of Nolan's films, the Batman series already has a past—quite a lengthy one, in fact, spanning over sixty years of discussion and artistic interpretation. With such an elongated history to consider, Nolan had quite a difficult job ahead of him. Not only would he have to produce a high-grossing, commercially successful blockbuster, but he would have to do so in a way that still satisfied the long-standing Batman fans. How could Nolan possibly create something original when Batman's character and storyline had been built and rebuilt for sixty odd years?

On this front, Nolan was surprisingly successful. His unique, personal directing style—gritty, philosophical, and non-linear in its storytelling—proved perfect for the Batman franchise. As Brooker explains,

> Bruce Wayne is tailor-made for Nolan's interest. As with *Memento*'s Leonard, events have trapped Wayne into a cycle of violence and vengeance …. Compare Wayne also to Will Dormer, the detective at the heart of *Insomnia*, who likewise treads a delicate moral line between right and wrong. Nolan remains fascinated by the negative psychological effects of upholding law and order . . . [O]nce more, Nolan centres on the notion of identity. (Brooker 2012)

Nolan's efforts were less successfully reviewed in terms of media and genre; many critics felt that Nolan was unable to properly portray Batman in film. In "Complexity in the Comic and Graphic Novel Medium: Inquiry through Bestselling Batman Stories," a journal article written by Paul Crutcher, the effects of Batman's change in media are examined through a critical lens; Crutcher explains that the film media has less to offer artistically than graphia. Crutcher argues that the "[graphic novel] medium easily extends its complexity over literature and film through its ability to employ mixed media" (Crutcher 63). In other words, the graphic novel is much more personal and inspiring through its utilization of both textual and visual stimuli. In Crutcher's opinion, no film or novel can ever be more viable than a graphic novel, and Nolan was doomed to fail in his revival attempts.

Will Brooker, however, disagrees strongly with this analysis. In his academic book *Batman Unmasked* (2000), Brooker argues that the comic and graphic novel writer has "a role perhaps equivalent to a film scriptwriter, director, and editor—at once the author of dialogue and voiceover, the architect of the plot, the supervisor of action, and the organizer of shot sequence" (Brooker 2000). In his mind, a graphic novel author and a film director are essentially equal in terms of supervision and organization. Nolan's work cannot be considered flawed simply because it utilizes a different artistic medium. He goes on to state that Nolan's interpretation is simply an addition to an intertextual series. Brooker argues that the sixty-plus years of Batman texts "all feed into a Batman metatext, a collected myth that constitutes the character as a whole" (Brooker 2012). Nolan does not stand out as being separate or different due to his use of film— rather, his film merely adds another perspective into the melting pot, and our idea of Batman is enhanced rather than diminished.

Brooker also argues that Nolan's interpretation of Batman is largely influenced by the "post 9/11" trauma experienced so strongly in the United States (Brooker 2012). Unlike the graphic novels, which largely portray Batman as an enigmatic loner, these films create a "super soldier" who uses tanks, wears militaristic body armor, and who fights very, very serious villains. Villains in the television series and even in the graphic novels were more playful and even silly; most of their plans involved general mischief or thievery. In the Nolan films, however, we confront villains who greatly resemble modern-day terrorists. In each film, the city of Gotham as a whole is being threatened by those who seek to destroy every life within its walls: citizens are gassed via biological warfare, hospitals are blown up, and in the last film, the city is threatened with a nuclear detonation. The citizens of Gotham must live through constant bombings, murders, and unnecessary brutality—in a certain sense, this evokes the same on-edge mentality of the Iraq War. Nolan's Batman, therefore, emerges as the tangible symbol of America's "war on terror" (Brooker 2012). Batman is the ideal post-9/11 hero for American film viewers; he protects our cities and continually reestablishes peace and order.

A Brief Timeline of Batman:

1939 – Batman first appears in *Detective Comics #27*
1943 – *Batman* the movie serial is released (15 episodes)
1950s-1960s – DC comics
1966-1968 – "Batman" TV series
1970s – Start of the revival of DC's Batman comic books
1986 – Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*
1988 – Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke*
1989 – Tim Burton's *Batman*
1992 – Tim Burton's *Batman Returns*
1995 – Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever*
1997 – Joel Schumacher's *Batman and Robin*
2005 – Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*
2008 – Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*
2012 – Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises*

The Ideology of Gotham City

In each film of Nolan's Batman trilogy, there is a distinct relationship between Batman, Bruce Wayne, and the surrounding criminal and justice-upholding societies. In order to further explore this relationship between Wayne and Gotham's social institutions, I will be using Althusserian theory; specifically, we will be examining his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* and how it relates to the second film in Nolan's trilogy, *The Dark Knight*.

To explore the dynamic interactions of society, Althusser presents us with the concept of infrastructure versus superstructure. In a basic definition, infrastructure is comprised of the economic base of society—what Marx would consider the mode of production—and superstructure is comprised of politico-legal and cultural apparatuses that have sovereignty over the infrastructure, i.e. the legal system, the police, religion, education, and culture as a whole. Like Marx, Althusser believes that the superstructure could not exist without the infrastructure; using a building as a metaphor, he refers to the infrastructure as the bottom floor and the superstructure as the top floor of society. The "the upper floors could not 'stay up' (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base" (Althusser 1148), and in the same manner our society could not exist without our proletariat backbone. Althusser also borrows from Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political theorist and philosopher, who further divides the superstructure into two distinct strata: Hegemony and Rule (Gramsci 1142). Hegemony relates directly to civil society whereas Rule corresponds to the State; one involves cooperation and willingness to be governed and the other requires the public to be coerced into docility while repressing their natural desires.

In his writings, Marx also promotes the idea of a State Apparatus, or an organization that represses and forcefully organizes its citizens (Williams 1155). Althusser takes this idea and

applies his own perspective, giving birth to the idea of an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). According to Althusser, an Ideological State Apparatus is made up of a societal system, whether it is religion, education, the family, the legal system, the political system, or culture in general. These organizations repress us in non-violent ways, promoting social conformity through ideological means (Althusser 1187-88). These systems are controlled not by the public or the infrastructure, but by the private domain: rich, powerful corporations that typically have a single leader or a council. This, Althusser argues, is a dangerous principle; we stray away from a generalized democracy by allowing an insignificant portion of the population control the majority. In the real world, examples of this are common; the Catholic Church, an ancient and powerful organization that has held political, social, and religious power for centuries, is led by the Pope. The legal system of the United States is headed by a panel of judges known as the Supreme Court. Power lies in the hands of very few.

The existence of ISAs is prevalent in the city of Gotham, the most obvious of which is the legal system. Although the legal system of Gotham is rife with corruption and infiltration from the city's mafia, it still attempts to suppress Batman's vigilantism through a constant threat of ostracism and legal persecution. Bruce Wayne cannot lay claim to his alter-ego in any way without exposing himself to the ISAs of Gotham, all which would condemn him for his nonconformist attitude. To be an accepted member of society, Bruce Wayne would have to abide by all the rules of the legal ISA. "Batman" as we know him would not be able to exist. For example, he would have to give up his torture methods, put his mask on the mantel, have a warrant to enter private buildings, and would even need to read Miranda rights to criminals before taking them in for arrest. The Batman that we know, however, is a brutal, dark form of justice. He does not give criminals a fair trial or treat them in a politically correct way, and in

doing so he completely rejects the legal ISA's concept of justice. We see this repeatedly in the film, and in fact his persona is characterized by this draconian sense of right and wrong.

This brutality can be witnessed in one scene in *The Dark Knight*; Batman confronts Salvatore Maroni, the new leader of Gotham's mafia, in order to gain some needed information. Rather than interrogating him calmly in a room, he assaults him in the night and holds him off the edge of a building, threatening to drop him:

Maroni: From one professional to another: if you're trying to scare somebody, pick a better spot. From this height, the fall wouldn't kill me.

Batman: I'm counting on it.

[*he drops Maroni off the balcony, and the audience hears the audible cracks of breaking bones*] (Nolan 2008)

This scene is horrific and yet stimulating to the audience; Batman's unyielding barbarity is unorthodox and separates him from milder superheroes such as Superman and Spiderman. He tortures an unarmed man for information; this action does not exactly reflect the ideals of our justice system. Because Batman refuses to fit into the system, he is immediately ostracized by both the characters within the film and the ISA-subscribing audience. The system feels threatened by his nonconformity and immediately wants to destroy the insurgence. This is exactly what Althusser describes as an Ideological State Apparatus; it does not threaten Batman through violence, but it does not in any way condone his behavior.

Not all State Apparatuses, however, are characterized by non-violence. The police force, for instance, carries guns, tasers, pepper spray, and sometimes even batons. Marx fails to

comment in detail on this distinction, but Althusser certainly does, separating State Apparatuses into those that function by ideology and those that function by violence. He calls these violent systems Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), and they although they have the same goals as ISAs, these goals are accomplished through very different means (Althusser 1486-88). It is important to note that neither the ISAs nor the RSAs function strictly through violence or ideology; Althusser does not attempt to oversimplify these concepts. Rather, he argues that they function *primarily* through one of these means; he emphasizes that "there is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus" and "no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus" (Althusser 1487-88). The two are always intertwined in some fashion; Althusser lists family as an ISA, but can a father not spank a disobedient child? The Army is a classic example of an RSA, but does it not also instill ideological values upon its subscribers?

Gotham City police force constitutes a perfect example of an RSA. In all three films, Batman is at odds with the police; they repeatedly attempt to violently suppress his vigilantism, shooting at him on sight and putting out a warrant for his arrest. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman must constantly out-run and out-think the police or be arrested for his supposed crimes. The justice system makes an active effort to put him down and remove the threat he poses to the city; with the exception of Gordon and a few members of his team, the official policy is to "arrest the vigilante Batman on sight" (Nolan 2008).

Although the mafia behaves in a similar fashion, the underworld of crime in Gotham cannot constitute an RSA; by definition, a Repressive State Apparatus must in fact be a part of the state. Because the mafia is clearly an antagonist of the state, Althusser's terminology does not apply and he makes no effort to provide a more appropriate term. As an anti-state institution, however, Gotham's mafia is practically a reflection of the police force. They, too, attempt to

subdue the rise of the Batman through violent means, even going so far as to hire the Joker to kill

him in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008). In both the police and criminal systems, there is an

organized format and set of rules that each member must abide by. If these rules are not followed,

the rule-breaker must suffer severe consequences; for the mafia, this might involve some

gruesome torture or a killing. In the police force, the nonconforming officer might be suspended

or have his gun and badge permanently removed. There is also a hierarchy of power that exists in

each institution, whether the top man be a police commissioner or a mob boss. Although these

two systems oppose each other in basic principle, the goal of both systems seems to be one that

is shared between all of Althusser's state institutions: each system wants power over its

competitor. In this sense, while the mafia cannot be a true RSA, it is certainly mimics one.

Batman does not fit in with either of these institutions. By violently working against the

mafia, he alienates himself from their ranks and they spend ample time and money trying to

eliminate him—but this is an obvious example. What might be less clear that that Batman almost

completely alienates himself from the police force. Although Batman shares the same goals as

Gotham's police department and attempts to instill a sense of order and justice into the city, he

does so in a way that is unacceptable to the police. It is almost bizarre that the police force

should get so offended by the actions of Batman; is it not true that the police force and Batman

are striving toward the same goal? Both are attempting to recreate a sense of order where order

has been violated. Both want to see the mafia's world of crime shut down. Both seek a more

refined, civilized Gotham. However, their methodology is so different that the two cannot be

reconciled. It does not matter to the police force that Batman is helping them destroy the

underworld of crime; it only matters that he has broken the system's rules while doing so. This,

Althusser argues, is the crux of the matter. The reason that ISAs and RSAs are negative

influences on society is not due to their belief system, but due to the fact that the system itself takes precedence.

This insistence on conformity is addressed in *Ideology* through a question posed by Althusser: "why do men 'need' this imaginary transposition of their real conditions of existence in order to 'represent to themselves' their real conditions of existence?" (Althusser 1188). In relation to the Dark Knight films, why does Batman feel the need to impose an organized structure on himself? Why would he allow himself to be controlled by society? Why does he impose shallow, tenuous rules upon himself and then act as though they are laws of nature?

To answer this question, Althusser dives further into Marxist theory. The point of a system, he claims, is to maximize the production of the society.

> The role of the repressive State apparatus, insofar as it is a repressive apparatus, consists essentially in securing by force (physical or otherwise) the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production which are in the last resort relations of exploitation. Not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction (the capitalist State contains political dynasties, military dynasties, etc.), but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression (from the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses. (Althusser 158)

Althusser is basically arguing that the State Apparatuses exist solely to secure "the conditions of the reproduction of relations of production". Translated, this means that the production inherent

in a society will be protected and promoted by the system. It makes sense; if our society is not producing, then the entire structure behind the societal system will fall apart. The state must produce to ensure that the cycle continues, and in order for that to happen we must be willing cogs in the system. This in particular is the reason the system is so defensive of itself. Althusser explains that State Apparatuses will secure this production through "the most brutal physical force" if needed; the ISAs and RSAs will ensure production through any means necessary. If the general public does not subscribe to the system—if they reject it, as Batman's actions imply they should—then the system will attack the insurgence to insure its own survival.

This is the reason Batman is so hated by every member of Gotham's society. It is not that Batman is somehow inherently more evil or more corrupt than Gotham's other inhabitants, but simply that he rejects the paradigm that the other citizens subscribe to. Although he repeatedly attempts to save and better the society he loves, it shuns him without question. This is part of the reason that Batman's character is so fascinating; he rises above the state and his behavior alienates and intrigues the audience, but he is unable to completely sever ties with the society he cares for.

This is why Batman's attempt to save Gotham and instill systematic order is doomed. In order to recreate the system, he must attempt to go outside of it—the system is broken and cannot fix itself. By evading the system's rules, however, he ironically advocates a system-less society. This is an endless paradox and Batman is caught in the middle; he cannot fix society without undermining his own efforts, and by donning his vigilante mask he invokes the hatred of said society.

This paradox inspires questions concerning the roots of Batman's vigilantism. Althusser briefly comments on the issue of justice and conformity, explaining that if a person "believes in

Justice, he will submit unconditionally to the rules of the Law, and may even protest when they are violated, sign petitions, take part in a demonstration" (Althusser 1500). This is the direct opposite of Batman's vigilante approach. The very idea of vigilantism denotes taking a stand against conformity and taking upon oneself the power to rise above social rules. In no way would Batman ever consider unconditional submission; this violates the very core of his character. However, he ironically promotes this same ideology upon the rest of Gotham. Is this not a textbook example of hypocrisy? How can Batman simultaneously claim to support the system when he himself is somehow above it? What can he possibly hope to accomplish by restoring order when he has proven that he is incapable of obeying societal demands?

The disparity between Batman's desire for justice and his apparent scorn for it is seen throughout the films. Although it seems that he is promoting order, his actions say otherwise; where does he stand on the issue of systematic justice? In some ways, it is clear that Batman supports the legal and justice system, forcing it upon those who do not conform. In a scene from *The Dark Knight*, Batman encounters copycats who want to help him on his vigilante mission and rejects them immediately:

Batman: Don't let me find you out here again.

Copycat: We're trying to help you!

Batman: I don't need help.

Dr. Crane: Not my diagnosis!

Copycat: What gives you the right? What's the difference between you and me?

Batman: I'm not wearing hockey pants. (Nolan 2008)

It is clear that Batman is uncomfortable with the idea of fellow vigilantes, and in fact he responds to the occurrence with outright hostility. The problem posed by the copycat is one of the main questions inspired by Batman's nonconformity: what makes Bruce Wayne so special? If Bruce Wayne can rise above society, don a mask, and live by his own rules, why should the rest of us be condemned for doing the same? Batman's intense negative reaction to the copycats illuminates his priorities; he wants to maintain the system. The ISAs and RSAs cannot be maintained if everyone takes on their own set of rules and ignores the regulations given to them. By shutting down the other vigilantes, however, he completely contradicts himself. He also provides a vague and somewhat illogical response to the copycat's question; the copycat is somehow unworthy of vigilantism because he is "wearing hockey pants." What do hockey pants have to do with anything? Is Batman implying that wealth is the key to rising above society? Is it good gear? A proper helmet? This scene is a perfect example of Batman's hypocrisy; he attempts to ideologically repress insurgence while encouraging it through his own actions.

In a more subtle way, this scene also reinforces the fact that Batman *enjoys* rebelling against social constraints. If Batman allowed the addition of fellow vigilante crime-fighters, a new society of vigilantes would be created, rules would be established, and he would no longer be labeled as an outcast. Ultimately, this is not something Batman wants. His elevated position gives him power and freedom; if that position was taken away, he would merely be Bruce Wayne: Obedient Citizen of Gotham. As an audience, this gives us greater insight into his character's hypocritical nature. He promotes both rebellion and submission simultaneously because he understands the necessity of submission but cannot give up his personal freedom. It is for this reason that his character straddles a dual identity; Bruce Wayne, the fiscally responsible citizen and billionaire caught directly in the public eye, and Batman, the rule-breaking vigilante

who hands out his own form of justice. His character cannot be encompassed in a single entity

because he is caught between these two entirely different worlds.

Dissolution of Identity

Throughout the film trilogy, we see Bruce Wayne's identity dissolve as he embraces the character of Batman; Wayne does not regain any sense of self until the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), when he is finally able to shed his vigilante persona and resume living his life as a normal citizen. While the first film, *Batman Begins* (2005), details his descent into two separate identities, the second film in particular allows us to see our protagonist's confusion concerning his identity—Wayne's evolution becomes more and more mentally destabilizing as he moves into an "in-between" state, caught between the two characters he embodies. In *The Dark Knight* (2008), Batman discovers that he cannot successfully live within the social system while simultaneously disrupting it, which forces him to make a choice between his two identities or embrace a spiritual—and perhaps, as the films threaten—a physical death.

In *Batman Begins*, we learn that Bruce Wayne's thirst for a second identity originated in his boyhood; after witnessing the callous, meaningless murders of both his parents, Wayne cannot move past the atrocity and desperately desires vengeance. At the parole trial of his parents' killer, Wayne brings a gun, planning to shoot the murderer if the justice system did not perform its duty. Although the man is released, Wayne's underhanded plot is unnecessary; the killer is immediately assassinated by Gotham's mafia. This moment, however, is crucial to Wayne's journey outside of the system. He completely loses faith in the system as a whole and leaves Gotham to search for a solution. As the rest of the film details, Wayne's overwhelming need for vengeance coupled with his limited power as a citizen has created a need for a new identity. As Wayne explains, "They told me there was nothing out there, nothing to fear. But the night my parents were murdered I caught a glimpse of something. I've looked for it ever since. I went

around the world, searched in all the shadows. And there is something out there in the darkness, something terrifying, something that will not stop until it gets revenge: me." (Nolan 2005)

In this excerpt, we can see how obsessed Wayne is with the concept of revenge. He travels the world, unsatisfied with the death of his parents' murderer, still feeling as though the universe owes him something for his pain. Stereotypically in literature, revenge-driven individuals are never satisfied. The hunt for justice, or rather satiation of their desire for equal suffering, is never truly fulfilled. In this sense, Batman fulfills the Hamletian stereotype and is only setting himself up for failure. He is completely consumed with this "darkness" and has "looked for it ever since"; clearly, his animalistic obsession with revenge is not a healthy one, and this foreshadows that his search will not leave him fulfilled.

Wayne goes on to train in martial arts, build up a mental wall, and turn himself into a militaristic muscle man; when he returns to Gotham, it is as a completely different person with a need to "save" Gotham city from its own corruption and decadence. As Bruce explains to Alfred, his butler and longtime caretaker, his identity as "Bruce Wayne: The Billionaire Playboy" will simply no longer suffice:

Bruce Wayne: 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.

Alfred Pennyworth: What symbol?

Bruce Wayne: Something elemental. Something terrifying. (Nolan 2005)

At this point, Wayne is beginning to conceptualize his vigilante character. He explains that he cannot effect change in Gotham by playing by the rules; the city is so far gone that any action needs to be "dramatic… to shake them out of apathy". In order to inspire change, Wayne must rise above himself and provide Gotham with a "symbol" that is "incorruptible" and "everlasting". He must become something more than a man; he must become an ideal.

About halfway through the film, he dons his bat mask for the first time, choosing to base his character on "something terrifying"—in this case a bat—because he himself has an inordinate fear of the little creatures. The mask is symbolic in a thousand ways, but it most obviously represents a burgeoning vigilante identity and total freedom from the title of "Bruce Wayne" through his newfound anonymity; for the first time in his life, Wayne is someone other than himself. After being recognized in the street daily due to his wealth, power, and lofty social status, Wayne is invisible to the public and is able to move off of the official grid. He suits up in all black and confronts Falcone, the leader of the mafia, publicly accepting his new persona for the first time:

> **Carmine Falcone**: [*frantically loading his shotgun*] What the hell are you?
> [*Batman smashes the limo's sunroof and drags Falcone through the opening*]
> **Batman**: I'm Batman! (Nolan 2005)

Wayne finally utters his classic catch phrase—"I'm Batman!"—and in doing so, he embraces his newfound identity with certainty. He says it so plainly, as though he knows without a doubt that he is Batman and that this is an unchangeable fact. The truth, however, is much more muddled. By accepting his role as the Batman, Wayne takes on a separate character but does not relinquish

his original identity; he is thrust into the world of double identities and starts down the gritty path

of dissolution.

Both of Wayne's identities are inspired by the social institutions of Gotham. According to

Althusser, our identities are wholly centered on our surrounding institutions. We are subject to

the society we live in, and there is no individual that can exist outside of it. Even if a person is

trying to rebel and live entirely without social systems, this rebellion inherently reflects society

because society is so deeply ingrained in each of us:

> I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits'
>
> subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into
>
> subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have
>
> called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most
>
> commonplace every day police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser 1501)

In this excerpt, Althusser explains that ideology "transforms the individuals into subjects"

through "interpellation", which he also describes as "hailing". When an individual is subjected—

for example, by a policeman hailing him anonymously with a "Hey, you there!"—the subject

inexplicably knows it is *he* and no other individual that is being called and is pleased at this

realization. Through this process of interpellation, the subject willingly accepts the dominating

ideologies that surround him.

The idea of interpellation is also cyclical in nature; there is no escape from ideology

because it is a part of us. Althusser explains that "…ideology has always-already interpellated

individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already

interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last

proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*." (Althusser 1502) In other words, we are

unable to think of ourselves as separate from the societies we adhere to regardless of whether we

want to or not. There is no beginning or end to interpellation; we are born into this mode of

thought and it is therefore impossible to escape it. For Wayne, therefore, Batman is not and

cannot ever be separate from society and is a direct effect of the RSAs and ISAs of Gotham.

Although he alienates himself from the existing systems, they control him through that alienation.

The underworld crime syndicate has corrupted Gotham with such severity that a "dramatic"

symbol is necessary to combat the rising decadence, and Wayne takes this as a personal call to

action. Although Wayne approves of the ISAs, they limit themselves by imposing rules on their

police officers, lawyers, and judges. In order to preserve morality to the best of his ability, he

must go outside these laws to work against the mafia more efficiently. From this Althusserian

perspective, Wayne's identities are not his own; as he begins to dissolve between them, he loses

sight of himself.

In *The Dark Knight,* Batman's identity crisis is more fully developed, allowing for more

exploration into his mind as his sense of self crumbles. We are presented with three prominent

male characters in this film, each of whom inhabit three different social systems; Harvey Dent,

the Joker, and our protagonist, Batman. Each of these characters represents an ideal of some sort,

and each of them help to better conceive Batman's identity.

Harvey Dent, the newly elected DA of Gotham, is symbolic of an ideal citizen. He is

handsome, charming, good-hearted, and he fights Gotham's evils in the public eye while

following all the rules. Harvey Dent, "the white knight," is what Gotham City needs to be saved;

even Batman, in his desperation to be a hero to the people of his beloved city, sees and accepts

that in Dent lies Gotham's salvation. Dent represents everything that Batman can never be. Although Batman tries his best to uphold the ideals of the system, he is unable to do so through his own rule-breaking nature. Dent, however, obeys all the laws, wears a crisp tie, and proudly shows his face on every news channel. He is confident and fearless, settling healthily into a single identity. By remaining within the system, he is an acceptable savoir for the city.

Along these lines, Batman sees Dent as his own personal salvation. Being Batman is exhausting, and the confusion of identity slowly destroys our protagonist both mentally and physically. For Batman, Dent represents an out—a light at the end of the tunnel—and a possible reunion with his longtime love, Rachel Dawes. If a "white knight" exists, what use is there for a "dark knight"? Batman is an effective vigilante, but if the system can repair itself from inside then his services would no longer be required. This, more than anything else, is what Wayne desires. Although he was idealistic and proud of his vigilantism in the beginning, it has begun to wear upon him and he has grown tired of supporting both identities. Dent could possibly restore Wayne to his former security of self, and this is what makes him so valuable.

The Joker is Dent's antithesis; he advocates total anarchy, giving into his animal instincts and satiating himself whenever he pleases. He represents the death of a civilized society and tries to destroy the system through any means possible. Batman and the Joker are similar characters in several ways, but Batman's identity is not as solid as the Joker's; he exists as an "in-between". He is neither a law-abiding citizen nor a full-fledged criminal, but something else entirely. Neither social system can accept him because he does not abide by the required set of rules. Like the Joker, he is he attempts to put himself completely outside of social boundaries and free himself from the control of paltry, corrupt institutions.

Unlike the Joker, Batman refuses to see the ISAs of Gotham as paltry. As we see repeatedly in *The Dark Knight*, he flatly refuses to kill his adversaries or relinquish his own system of morality; while he has no problem going outside the law, he adopts his own idea of justice and allows that idea to totally control him. Several times, Batman has the opportunity to kill the Joker and put an end to all of the madness, but he cannot bring himself to commit this moral atrocity and condemn himself in the eyes of the society he loves.

In one action-filled scene, Batman rides ferociously toward the Joker on a motorcycle. The Joker, who wrecked his truck moments earlier, stands motionless in the middle of the street daring Batman to run him over. As he stumbles out of the wreckage, assault weapon in hand, he mutters, "Come on, I want you to do it. I want you to do it. Come on, hit me. Hit me!" (Nolan 2008) At the last moment, however, Batman pivots on his motorcycle to avoid hitting the Joker and injures himself in the process. The Joker walks over to the now unconscious Batman, victorious and disgusted simultaneously. He cannot understand why Batman would sacrifice his own life in place of his morality. How Batman can be free from society and still choose to obey rules? There is no obligation anymore. Why does he persist in his archaic idea of justice? The Joker's deepest desire, therefore, is to force Batman out of his repressive, systematic set of rules; he wants Batman to betray his own ideals and accept the senseless chaos that is life.

The Joker is characterized as a social outcast; in fact, nothing could be made more obvious in the film. The Joker's physical appearance is our first impression of him and it is extremely alienating to the audience. He wears a purple jacket, has greasy, green hair, and an ugly set of scars that makes his mouth a perpetual smile. He also wears clown makeup, rendering him grotesquely joyful in every scene. When he is first indicted by Gotham's police force, his lack of social identity is emphasized:

> **Mayor**: [*regarding The Joker*] What do we got?
>
> **Lt. James Gordon**: Nothing. No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias. (Nolan 2008)

In this interaction particularly, it is emphasized that the Joker has no identifying information whatsoever. This more than anything illuminates the fact that he has no identity within the social system, which is almost incomprehensible to us as an audience. As Althusser argues, it is impossible to exist outside of the social system. It is so ingrained in every human being's mind that it now completely molds our means of interpretation (Althusser 1501). By presenting the Joker as a mysterious, anti-establishmentarian, Nolan estranges him from both the characters in the movie and the law-abiding audience while stripping him of a social identity. Who doesn't have a driver's license? Who doesn't go shopping at the local department stores? Who doesn't get their teeth cleaned every once and a while? The Joker doesn't. In fact, he doesn't even possess a name. At this level of social exclusion, the audience is fascinated, shocked, and even horrified by what we consider obscene.

This obscenity is exemplified again and again throughout the film, but especially in a scene in which the Joker decides to smoke out the Batman's true identity. At Wayne's penthouse, the city's news channel is showing a story on the Joker. Wayne and Alfred pause mid-conversation and stare at the television, startled and horrified by what is occurring. It is a graphic video of the Joker toying with a man who is clearly being held against his will. He taunts him, asking, "Are you the real Batman? No? Then why do you dress up like him?" (Nolan 2008) It becomes clear to the audience that the Joker has captured a Batman copycat. The camera work is

jostled, unsteady, and jarring to the viewers; the Joker is filming, and this camera style is reminiscent of his insanity and lack of mental structure. The camera zooms in to his face, providing a close up of his cartoonish face paint and rendering his grotesque red and yellow smile the largest object on screen. The scene ends with the a blurry, tumbling camera; the audience cannot identify what is happening by anything but sound, which consists of the Joker's demonic, high-pitched laugh intermingled with the screams of his victim as he is tortured and killed. The screen changes; the screams are immediately silenced, and the camera moves to a long panning shot of Gotham City in complete muteness. This has a very sobering effect on the audience and shows us exactly how unpredictable and cruel the Joker can be.

The Joker is fascinated with Batman. In the first place, they have something in common; each of them, in their own separate ways, flouts the rules of the surrounding social systems. Neither of them is accepted by the RSAs or the ISAs of Gotham, and in the Joker's case, he does not want to be. At first, the Joker sees Batman as a fellow rule-breaker, and this draws his interest. As the two become better acquainted, however, it becomes apparent to the Joker that Batman has not completely shed the rules of his previous social system. Batman is like a bird who clips his own wings—the Joker does not understand why Batman continues to constrain himself. It becomes his new mission to destroy Batman's attachment to the system he loves. As we see several times in the film, The Joker relishes the idea of "corrupting" Batman, but after several failed attempts decides to go after Harvey Dent instead. Toward the end of the film, Batman throws the Joker off a building. As he falls, laughing maniacally at his imagined success, Batman catches him with a line and saves his life:

The Joker: Oh, you. You just couldn't let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you? 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.

Batman: You'll be in a padded cell forever.

The Joker: Maybe we can share one. You know, they'll be doubling up, the rate this city's inhabitants are losing their minds.

Batman: This city just showed you that it's full of people ready to believe in good.

The Joker: Until their spirit breaks completely. Until they get a good look at the real Harvey Dent, and all the heroic things he's done. You didn't think I'd risk losing the battle for Gotham's soul in a fistfight with you? No. You need an ace in the hole. Mine's Harvey.

Batman: What did you do?

The Joker: I took Gotham's white knight and I brought him down to our level. It wasn't hard. You see, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push! (Nolan 2008)

This dialogue between Batman and the Joker illuminates both Batman's sense of honor and justice and the Joker's disgust with his idealism. Again, Batman passes up an opportunity to put a definitive end to all the needless violence by killing the Joker. The Joker is so disgusted that he is almost amused, saying that Batman needs to get over his "misplaced sense of self-righteousness". The Joker is talking about his own life, but he still wants Batman to kill him; he would be satisfied in death knowing that he had corrupted the "incorruptible".

This conversation is also crucial because it allows the Joker to reveal his "ace in the hole". After killing Rachel Dawes, Dent's fiancé and Wayne's childhood love, and attempting to kill Harvey Dent, the Joker goes to see Dent in the hospital. The man who lays in the hospital bed, however, looks and acts nothing like Dent as we know him. Half-mad with rage and grief, Dent begins to slip out of his comfortable, single identity and asks that everyone call him "Two-Face". The Joker hands him a gun and sends him on his merry way, allowing Dent to completely lose his old identity and embrace his murdering counterpart. Through the corruption of Dent, the Joker proves that an unhealthy society cannot produce a healthy solution. The fix must come from outside society's walls, meaning that Batman is essentially Gotham's only hope. Although the Joker is arrested, his success with Dent has allowed him to achieved victory over Batman in a certain sense. Batman's one chance at salvation has now been completely eradicated. There is no out, no backdoor—he must continue to suffer through his lack of identity, accepted by neither world and longing for wholeness of being. In the first film, his love Rachel explains to him that "Batman" has ruined any possibility of a relationship between them:

Rachel Dawes: But then I found out about your mask.

Bruce Wayne: Batman's just a symbol, Rachel.

Rachel Dawes: [*Rachel touches Bruce's face*] No, *this* is your mask. Your real face is the one that criminals now fear. The man I loved - the man who vanished - he never came back at all. But maybe he's still out there, somewhere. Maybe someday, when Gotham no longer needs Batman, I'll see him again. (Nolan 2005)

Although this sounds like a rejection—and it is—Wayne understands her underlying promise. If he can save Gotham and return to his stable identity as Bruce, head of Wayne Enterprises, then Rachel will be there waiting for him. This thought carries him throughout the second movie, and although his separation from her is painful, the idea of Dent taking over allows him to hope for their eventual reunion. The Joker robs Batman of this hope. Even before killing Rachel, he destroys the possibility of a relationship between them. In a terse conversation between Rachel and Wayne, he tells her that their time is coming—Dent has provided an outlet for them to be together. Rachel, however, knows Wayne and responds, "When I told you that if Gotham no longer needed Batman we could be together, I meant it. But now I'm sure the day won't come when *you* no longer need Batman" (Nolan 2008). In an insightful look at Wayne, Rachel knows that somewhere deep down, Wayne secretly craves his social freedom and his lofty, symbolic image as the "dark knight" of Gotham. It is for this reason that she finally rejects him.

The Monster Within

Bruce Wayne's obsession with darkness and revenge must begin, of course, with the true origin of the Batman: the murder of Wayne's parents. At a young age, Bruce witnessed his parents' meaningless death at the hands of a petty criminal. Afterwards, he had to sit in the street with their dead bodies, horrified, scared, and alone. He was forced to hear the sirens of the police cars, be peppered with police questions as they interviewed him, and then finally, deal with the guilt of having made a decision that led to his parents' deaths. As a whole, this event traumatized him on a subconscious level and certainly contributed to his desire to violently suppress crime.

Travis Langley, the author of "Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight", explores the possibility that Wayne suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of this violent event:

> Does Batman have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? Some people think so. He broods, he's aloof, he's a grown man who dons a mask and regularly replays his parents' murder in his mind decades after they died. These add up to PTSD, right? …[Wayne is] repeatedly experiencing the disappointment of learning that no progress has been made in the case because, in most versions of the story, the Waynes' killer never faces justice for that particular crime. (Langley 40)

In the Nolan versions of the film, the murderer—Joe Chill—does not escape without facing some kind of justice. He is locked away for around two decades before he is given a chance to make parole, but this does not satisfy Wayne; this is why Langley's observation is still significant. Wayne blames him for ruining his life and wants a "justice" that forces Chill to suffer eternally.

When Chill is released, Wayne is so outraged at the flaws in the justice system that he separates himself from it entirely. It was this moment that created the lack of trust between Wayne and the police force and led him to search for a different kind of justice. His unwillingness to move past the event is a classic trait of PTSD.

Langley goes on to explains that PTSD is caused most often by "trauma of human design," which can refer to wars, murders, rapes, or anything that is done by one human being to another. PTSD is also provoked by the depth and length of the traumatic event; although the death of Wayne's family happens in a split second, it haunts him for the rest of his life (Langley 41). Therefore, according to these specifications, it is entirely possible that Wayne's evolution into a militarized vigilante was inspired by a mental and emotional disorder.

Throughout *Batman Begins*, Wayne's determination to suppress this emotional trauma feeds his internalized monster. Wayne slowly transforms into the Batman and begins to give in to his darker impulses and desires, allowing himself to be lost in rage and pain in moments of great emotional stress. As the Batman, Wayne can exact his revenge on all the criminals in Gotham for what was done to his family when he was a child. When Wayne's actions begin to endanger his life and the lives of those around him, Alfred feels that it is necessary to intervene. In an attempt to bring Wayne back to reality, Alfred bluntly tells him, "You're getting lost inside this monster of yours." Wayne simply brushes Alfred away, sarcastically saying that he "didn't have time to observe the rules of the road" that day (Nolan 2005). Once again, Wayne denies the fact that he has a problem and refuses to even discuss it; the continual repression of his inner demon only heightens its volatility, weakens the strength of his moral code, and makes him dangerous in times of emotional passion. In the third film, this concept is explained by Blake, a young police officer who, like Batman, is an orphan:

John Blake: Not a lot of people know what it feels like to be angry in your bones. I mean,

they understand—foster parents, everybody understands—for a while. But then they want

the angry little kid to do something he knows he can't do: move on. So after a while, they

stop understanding. They send the angry kid to a boy's home. I figured it out too late.

You've got to learn to hide the anger, practice smiling in the mirror. It's like putting on a

mask. (Nolan 2012)

Blake identifies with Wayne's inability to "move on" from the deaths of his parents and

overcome the anger that resides "in [his] bones". Instead of dealing with the pain in a therapeutic

way, Blake understands Wayne's compulsion to "hide the anger" and "practice smiling in the

mirror." He understands the need to don a protective outer mask to keep the monster locked

away. Otherwise, as Batman learns throughout the films, that monster will roam free and destroy

all it touches.

We have established that Wayne enjoys the freedom and brutal power that Batman

provides; however, the pleasure that he drives from acting out is so hidden within his psyche that

it is necessary to take a deeper psychoanalytical look at his unconscious. As Althusser explains,

the theory of the subject is very similar to Freud's theory of the unconscious:

It is clear that this ideological constraint and pre-appointment, and all the rituals of

rearing and then education in the family, have some relationship with what Freud studied

in the forms of the pre-genital and genital 'stages' of sexuality, i.e. in the 'grip' of what

Freud registered by its effects as being the unconscious. (Althusser 1499)

Essentially, the Althusserian theory of interpellation parallels the Freudian thoery of the unconscious mind; in each theory, human beings are driven by desires outside of their immediate realm of control, whether it is the ideology of the state or the base wants of the "id" monster. I will argue in this chapter that Batman is not solely driven by either, but a mixture of the two. His total dependence on Gotham's ideologies and institutions is paired with childhood trauma and an ingrained desire for revenge, and this strips him of any control over himself.

Freud divides the mind into three categories: the preconscious, the conscious, and the unconscious. These are also referred to as the "superego," "ego," and "id"; each of them functions differently and controls different levels of the mind, but the division between them "is neither absolute nor permanent" (Freud 34). The superego is essentially a person's conscience; it wants to do the right thing, remain in bounds of social constraints, and make sure that a person's goals are being achieved. The id is the exact opposite, comprised of a person's deepest pleasures, fantasies, and illogical, animalistic desires. The needs of the superego and the id are therefore "always divergent and often seem quite incompatible" (Freud 35). The ego serves as a mediator between these two apparatuses; when it can, it compromises the needs of both to find a happy medium.

Unfortunately, as we see in the Batman story, the ego is not always successful in achieving a healthy compromise. As Freud explains, "When the ego is forced to acknowledge its weakness, it breaks out into anxiety: reality anxiety in face of the external world, normal anxiety in face of the super- ego, and neurotic anxiety in face of the strength of the passions in the id." (Freud 36) The mind begins to break down from the stress of constantly balancing what it *should* do with what it *wants* to do, resulting in panic and extreme anxiety due to its loss of control.

Throughout the first two films, Batman is characterized by a lack of control over the self. In one scene in *The Dark Knight*, Batman is allowed to interview the Joker while he is in custody of the police. He enters the room while it is completely dark, standing behind the Joker; even the audience cannot see him until Gordon flicks the light switch on. Batman immediately dispels any doubts about the interview being a standard face-to-face discussion by violently slamming the Joker's head down on the table. The interview quickly devolves into physical brutality:

Batman: Where is Dent?

The Joker: You have all these rules and you think they'll save you.

Lt. James Gordon: [*as Batman slams the Joker against the wall*] He's in control.

Batman: I have one rule.

The Joker: Oh, then that's the rule you'll have to break to know the truth.

Batman: Which is?

The Joker: The only sensible way to live in this world is without rules, and tonight you're going to break your one rule!

Batman: I'm considering it.

The Joker: Oh, there's only minutes left, so you're going to have to play my little game if you want to save one of them.

Batman: [*pauses*] Them?

The Joker: You know for a while there, I thought you really were Dent… the way you threw yourself after her!

Although Batman tries to keep his temper under wraps, it explodes from him in a moment of weakness and he begins to physically punish the Joker for his transgressions, pinning him to the

wall in a vain attempt at domination. At this point, Gordon feels that it is necessary to reassure the rest of the observers, telling them decisively that "[Batman] is in control" of the situation.

Unfortunately, the opposite could not be truer. When the Joker reveals that Rachel's life is in danger, Batman snaps; Rachel is his greatest trigger. He flips the Joker onto the table in a desperate rage, throwing the full grown man as though he is a toy doll. He immediately places a chair against the door of the interviewing room to keep the police from being able to intervene, walks back to the Joker, and slams his head so hard into the interviewing window that the glass cracks. Whereas before, his voice and questions were calm and purposeful, he now frantically screams, "WHERE IS SHE? WHERE IS RACHEL?" His mouth, pulled into a deep frown, is now quivering with the force of his repressed emotion. He hits the Joker a few more times, but it has no effect; the Joker is growing more and more animated and delighted with Batman's display of passion, thrilled to pieces that he has inspired such an animalistic reaction. He cackles, taunting Batman by saying that he has "nothing to threaten [him] with—nothing to do with all that strength." (Nolan 2008) He strips Batman of all power before finally telling him the location of Dent and Rachel.

This scene exemplifies the lack of discipline that Batman has over himself, especially in relation to his pleasure principle. When his anger is triggered, even if the trigger itself is petty, he is completely consumed and his behavior is guided by his "id" monster. Bruce Wayne could not be subject to such violent outbursts, as he would have to suffer the criminal consequences; he is the face of the superego, constantly holding himself in check. Inversely, Batman's masked identity allows him the freedom to do whatever he wishes. Rather than forcibly controlling his base emotions and desires, Batman allows them to rise to the surface; after all, if there are no real consequences, then what reason does he have to resist the temptation?

Paul Asay, author of "God on the Streets of Gotham," explains to us that Batman's stony demeanor does not consistently reflect the way he interprets events. The more recent renditions of Batman, he explains,

> …have painted a gloomy portrait of the Dark Knight as a silent, solemn superhero who'd rather go three rounds with Bane than crack a smile. And while this shadowy, solitary figure fits modern sensibilities, it has almost obliterated the sense that there could be a little bit of fun this this crazy gig of his too. That maybe, just maybe, Batman likes the work. (Asay 210)

This analysis gets at the crux of Batman's pleasure principle; although he presents himself as a tortured, miserable loner, the fact of the matter is that he can do whatever he wants. Whenever he is angry, he can physically strike out. Whenever he needs information, he can torture his victims until he learns what he needs to know. Batman is free to fulfill each and every one of his base desires because, in his anonymity, he is free from repercussion.

In another scene in the movie, Commissioner Gordon has been shot and is believed to be dead. When the police inform his wife and children, Batman accompanies them silently, sitting in the shadows and watching. He is forced to watch Gordon's family fall apart as they are told of the death of their husband and father; when Gordon's wife sees Batman in the dark, she turns to him in her grief, screaming, "Are you happy now? Are you? *You* brought this craziness on us! You did!" (Nolan 2008) Batman remains silent and unmoving as though these words have no effect upon him. In reality, his mind is undergoing a brutal severance as his ego is overwhelmed in the power struggle between the superego and the id.

In the scene that directly follows, it becomes evident that his id monster has surfaced. He is at a night club, looking for Falcone; the club is dark, lit only by flashing strobe lights. Batman

fights his way to Falcone in this mix of light and dark, appearing and disappearing rapidly as the lights illuminate him sporadically. At this point, Batman is boiling with uncontrollable rage and is completely dominated by the id. He viciously beats a dozen men into the ground before reaching Falcone. The entire scene is terrifying on an elemental level; this creature emerges from the dark, ravages men in a terrible rage, and cannot be reasoned with on any rational level.

At the end of *The Dark Knight*, Bruce Wayne has become completely immersed in his second identity. He cannot bring himself to let go of his "real world" identity, as the Joker has done—he plans on returning to his life as a dutiful citizen at some point. However, he is now so deeply ingrained in his Batman character that it seems as though there is no returning. His love has been murdered, his salvation corrupted, and his own sense of identity ruined through his barbaric actions. Even the society he defends has begun to hate him; Batman takes the blame for Dent's killings and Dent's death in an attempt to preserve the "white knight" in memory, and he is now being hunted by the police. His lack of identity or any solid ties to the city he loves leaves him in total despair; it becomes apparent that he cannot survive much longer while inhabiting both identities.

Stabilization: The Cleansing Power of Death

In the last film, *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne must consciously confront the dissolution of both identities as the ground beneath him begins to give way. To survive his crumbling surroundings, Wayne must let go of his feeble hold on the Batman and return to a single identity. As the film illuminates, this proves extremely difficult for him; the two identities are so blurred together that, unable to separate them, Wayne is forced to renounce both in order to save Gotham and himself.

Due to his sacrifice at the end of *The Dark Knight*, Batman is no longer even moderately accepted by the institutions of Gotham. Although Batman is innocent, he takes the blame for the atrocities committed by Harvey Dent to keep Dent's name clear in the public eye. Batman is also indirectly responsible for Dent's murder; he tackles him to protect Commissioner Gordon's child, causing Dent to fall to his death. By breaking the moral code he set for himself—even if only in the eyes of the public—Batman inspires Gotham's total hatred and disgust. Inversely, this only serves to bring the audience closer to Batman in sympathy and understanding; by martyring himself for a greater cause, Batman alienates his world but creates a connection to ours.

The Dark Knight Rises does not begin exactly where the second film leaves off. We immediately get the sense that a large amount of time has passed—eight years, to be precise—and the Batman we knew and loved simply no longer exists. This is evident in the first scene of the film, which takes place at the scene of the Harvey Dent memorial gathering. This scene is important because it is the first time we are introduced to Bruce Wayne in the third film. He is seen silhouetted in a long shot on the roof of a nearby building—not in full gear with his cape, mind you—but as the shadow of a man. He is not a part of the crowd honoring Harvey Dent. In direct contrast with the portrait of Harvey Dent, which is brightly lit and framed with red roses,

Wayne is an expressionless outline backlit only by a dark blue sky. Although he is clearly watching the ceremony as it takes place, he is not a part of it. He is distant, separated, and completely immersed in the darkness.

Wayne watches Commissioner Gordon as he gives a speech about Dent, the "fallen hero"; we see Gordon struggling to contain the lie about Dent's death, but he ultimately decides to save the truth for another day and slips his speech into the lapel of his jacket. Gordon is hard pressed to preserve the lie; with a single word of truth, he could free Batman from Gotham's hatred and condemnation. When he makes the decision to continue hiding the truth from the public, the camera flashes back to the silhouette. Wayne slowly turns and walks away, disappearing again into the anonymous black, signifying that the Batman remains imprisoned. This establishes what we as viewers already know; Batman is no longer welcome in the spotlight.

The villain of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bane, is also introduced anonymously. In an early action scene on a plane, the CIA has captured several men that claim to work for the "masked man" (Nolan 2012). In an attempt to glean information about this mystery man, the agents cover their heads with black cloths and threaten the men with violence. When Bane speaks from under his head covering, the scene completely changes; his voice is inhumanly loud, as though he is speaking through a megaphone. When his head cover is removed, the audience is greeted with his unique physical appearance. A metal, spider-like tube contraption envelops the entire lower part of his face. Straps run around the neck and between the eyes to keep the grotesque machine attached; it looks as though he is wearing a gas mask. In this sense, he portrays the sickening, monstrous face of war.

Although the interrogating agent is forced to yell over the sound of the airplane, Bane's strange, resonating voice carries easily and without effort. He is cool, calm, and collected when

he explains that he will kill everyone on board. In comparison to the slim, polo-shirt-wearing agent, Bane looks like a human tank. He speaks to the agent very matter-of-factly:

Bane: No one cared who I was until I put on the mask.

CIA Agent: If I pull that off, would you die?

Bane: It would be extremely painful.

CIA Agent: You're a big guy!

Bane: For you. (Nolan 2012)

Bane explains that until he made himself anonymous—until he became a veiled threat—that he carried no power over anyone. After donning the costume of anonymity, however, people began to fear him. He proceeds to murder each person on board the plane. This presents Bane as a machine; aside from the fact that he is faceless, he possesses an alien, cold intelligence and he has no empathy for the men he kills. This scene sets up Bane as an immediate antagonist for our passionate, angry, and overwhelmingly emotional protagonist.

As the film progresses, we realize what a traumatizing effect Rachel's death has had upon Wayne. He is a recluse who never leaves his room, he has retired from his vigilantism, his company is in shambles, he walks with a cane due to his physical deterioration, and perhaps most importantly, he is completely alone. We revisit the 'fallen hero' theme from the first film. In a conversation with Commissioner Gordon, the broken down Wayne explains that he is not prepared to bring himself out of retirement:

Bruce Wayne: The Batman wasn't needed anymore. We won.

Jim Gordon: Based on a lie. Now this evil rises from where we tried to bury it. The Batman has to come back.

Bruce Wayne: What if he doesn't exist anymore?

Jim Gordon: He must… He must. (Nolan 2012)

The "evil" Gordon refers to is the League of Shadows, reanimated through Bane and his henchmen. Because their headquarters are located in the sewer system of Gotham, the evil is quite literally rising from the ground. Bane attacks the foundation of Gotham in an attempt to bring the rest of the city crashing down. This "buried evil" also hearkens back to a Freudian understanding of repression (Freud 35); Batman and Gordon repressed the truth about Dent, sweeping it under a rug instead of coming clean about what happened. Although this gave them several years of clean streets, the chained monster begins to free itself in *The Dark Knight Rises.*

In the opening scene of *Batman Begins*, Bruce falls down a well and breaks his arm. He lies terrified in the darkness until his father—lit unnaturally well, as though he is larger than life—reaches out a hand to pull Bruce from the darkness. There is moment in which Bruce's hand is gripped by his father's from above; their two hands are the only objects on screen. As Thomas Wayne's hand wraps around Bruce's wrist, one finger extends, the shot bearing a striking resemblance to the famous image of God and Adam from Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam." This image, paired with the celestial lighting, creates a strong religious metaphor. In this sense, Thomas Wayne serves as an angelic, god-like savior, breathing life into Bruce with the touch of his hand and pulling him from darkness into light.

Throughout the three films, Wayne has several flashbacks to this scene. It serves as an appropriate metaphor for the difficulties that surround him later in life; as an adult man, unfortunately, there is no one to help him escape the darkness. The most obvious reference to the well scene takes place toward the end of the *The Dark Knight Rises*, when Wayne is imprisoned by Bane. The prison is essentially an adult version of his childhood well; it is a cylindrical, bricked hole in the ground that allows in very little light. By recreating the horror of Wayne's youth, Nolan brings his story full circle; this time, Wayne must figure out how to pull himself from the darkness with no help from his father.

Wayne's physical journey out of the prison mimics his spiritual one. Wayne must confront his fears and overcome the threat of death to free himself from both his physical and his mental prisons. As he prepares for the climb, the other inmates begin a primal chant:

> **Crowd**: Deh-shay, deh-shay bah-sah-rah, bah-sah-rah.
>
> **Bruce Wayne**: What does that mean?
>
> **Prisoner**: Rise. (Nolan 2012)

The title of the movie centers around this climatic scene as Wayne empowers himself once more. As he climbs upward, preparing himself for the inhuman jump he must make, he startles bats out of the prison wall. They circle around him and he slowly stands, a master of his fear—this time he does not need the help of others. He makes the leap and pulls himself out of the darkness, symbolizing that he has overcome his inner weakness.

This inner strength provides Wayne with the will to save Gotham city one last time before his two identities completely break apart.

> **Catwoman**: Come with me. Save yourself. You don't owe these people anymore. You've given them everything.
>
> **Batman**: Not everything. Not yet. (2012)

In this dialogue, Batman foreshadows his own death. Although Catwoman pleads with him to let go of the Batman and escape with her, he is unable to do so because he refuses to abandon his city. This loyalty and willingness to sacrifice himself is honorable, but it is difficult to tell if this is the only reason Batman chooses to stay in Gotham. He has been made a monster in the eyes of the public, and he wants to redeem himself and be accepted by society once and for all. To do that, he makes a spectacle of his martyrdom; he takes the nuclear bomb, attaches it to his "Bat" aircraft, and flies across the harbor to take it outside the confines of the city. When it explodes, the aircraft goes up in flames; the entire city watches as their savior disappears into a mushroom cloud of smoke.

In the next scene, we discover that Batman was successful in his desire for redemption. The city puts up an enormous statue of him in Gotham's city hall to memorialize their martyr. In Batman's death, he is cleansed of all guilt; he made the ultimate sacrifice for the city, and the city rewards him with post-mortem glory. Bruce Wayne, too, is "killed" at the end of the film; Alfred, along with a few close friends, attends a private funeral at the Wayne mansion and Bruce's tombstone is clearly visible as they mourn him.

However, it is revealed at the very end that Wayne did not die in the explosion. Although he explained to Catwoman that the autopilot did not work in the "Bat" aircraft, Lucius Fox discovers that Wayne fixed the autopilot patch six months before the explosion. Why, then, does Wayne lie to Catwoman? Why does he choose to accompany the nuclear bomb across the harbor?

To put it simply, Batman wanted to "go out with a bang". He is finally provided with an opportunity to free himself from his limiting identities. Batman can offer him nothing now, nor can Bruce Wayne; each of these characters have made him miserable in different ways, and he is ready to be free of them. The faked explosive death offers him eternal glory as a "martyred hero" and gives him what he truly desires—the freedom to move on.

Conclusion

If, as I argue, Batman is a dark, cruel, and power-obsessed individual, why do we treat him as though he is flawless? What is it about the Batman, as opposed to Superman, Spiderman, or Aquaman, that attracts us? Is Batman a hero or just a glorified vigilante? The exploration of Batman's environment and deteriorating mental condition reveals that he cannot be solely categorized under one title. Throughout the Nolan films, Batman evolves into an indefinable mixture—a grey character. He is inconsistent, emotional, and sometimes blinded by egotism; his traumatic childhood leaves him damaged and creates a deep set desire for revenge. However, it would be an injustice to say that Batman is a "bad guy." It cannot be denied that he takes on a higher purpose in an effort to do and promote goodness, and even if he fights crime for the wrong reasons it still affects the city positively. There is a constant battle being waged between his desire to save and his desire to destroy; although he is at times lost in this struggle, he redeems himself through a spiritual death in the end of the series.

As Michael Uslan, the executive producer of *The Dark Knight Rises*, explains, the Batman story is universal: "…It's what everyone around the world can relate to: a powerful thing that motivates someone, that drive someone to the brink, that can make someone put on a bat mask, that can get us all to suspend our disbelief and believe in Bruce Wayne and take this journey with him" (Langley 35).

The story of Batman speaks to all of us. Batman is in no way perfect, and in fact embodies imperfection; this, more than anything else, is what makes him so admirable. Although he does not instill Gotham with the level of justice that he wishes to, Batman inspires its citizens as a normal man who becomes a legend. So what is Batman? Perhaps, as Gordon explains to his son, "[Batman] is not being the hero. He's being something more." (Nolan 2008)

Bibliography

Althusser, Louis. Excerpt from "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. By Vincent B. Leitch et al, eds. 1st ed. New York: Norton, 2001.1486-1506. Print.

Asay, Paul. *God on the Streets of Gotham: What the Big Screen Batman Can Teach Us about God and Ourselves*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2012. Print.

Barry, Peter. "Psychoanalytic Criticism" and "Structuralism". *Beginning Theory*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. 39-60, 96-118. Print.

Batman Begins. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Liam Neeson, and Katie Holmes. Warner Bros., 2005. DVD.

Brooker, Will. *Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon*. London: Continuum, 2000. Print.

Brooker, Will. *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-first Century Batman*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012. Print.

"Chris Nolan Speaks at the Hero Complex Film Festival." Interview by Geoff Boucher.*Hero Complex: Pop Culture Unmasked*. Los Angeles Times, 2010. Web.

Crutcher, Paul A. "Complexity in the Comic and Graphic Novel Medium: Inquiry Through Bestselling Batman Stories." *Journal of Popular Culture* 4.1 (2011): n. pag. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 7 Oct. 2012.

The Dark Knight. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Michael Caine, Aaron Eckhart, and Christian Bale. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008.

The Dark Knight Rises. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Tom Hardy, Anne Hathaway. Warner Bros, 2012. DVD.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Structure of the Unconscious." *An Outline of Psychoanalysis.* Trans.

 James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1949. 34-39. Print.

Gocsik, Karen, Richard Barsam, and Dave Monahan. *Writing About Movies*. 3rd ed. New York:

 W. W. Norton &, 2013. Print.

Langley, Travis. *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley

 & Sons, 2012. Print.

Morrison, Grant. "Celluloid Hero." *Rolling Stone* 2 Aug. 2012: n. pag. *Academic Search Premier*.

 Web. 7 Oct. 2012.

Williams, Raymond. "Marxist Criticism." *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford, Eng.: Oxford UP,

 1977. 1154-1172. Print.