

The Dark Knight. Screenplay by Jonathan and Christopher Nolan. Directed by Christopher Nolan.

The Dark Knight picks up where Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* left off, with Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) having committed wholeheartedly to his vigilante alter-ego, the Batman. Not much has changed in Gotham City: bad guys still rob banks, cops are still crooked, mob bosses still gather. Even the Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy) shows up in an early scene peddling his psychotropic drugs. The difference now is that Gotham is sticking up for itself, such that even some average Joes *without* trust funds and paramilitary labs in their basement are dressing up in black to fight criminals. There are cops, most importantly the reliable Lt. Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), who actually lock up the bad guys; and plucky lawyers, like Bruce's childhood friend Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal) and the new DA Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), willing to risk their lives to see that the bad guys stay locked up.

What a difference a hero makes. Two heroes in fact: the mysterious Batman and handsome DA Dent, the "white knight" to Batman's dark. With these two local celebs to act as role models, standing up to the crime bosses, the average Gothamite begins to feel hope that the city can recover. Thus, as we've come to expect from comic-born films, heroes, and hero-worship, is a central theme of the story. We see the positive changes Batman's presence has wrought from the criminals' point of view: hunted all but into a corner, the Mafioso now meet in broad daylight, too frightened to come out at night – Batman's time of day. Working together, Batman, Gordon, and Dent round up hundreds of offenders in a single dragnet.

Yet heroism has its drawbacks. There are the cuts and bruises we get to glimpse on Bale's shirtless torso, and the attention of others besides adoring fans. There are skeptics in Gotham who remain unconvinced that an anonymous vigilante equipped with body armor and a tank is really in the public's best interest. Lt. Gordon's official position must remain that Batman is a criminal who will be arrested on sight. More pressingly, Gotham's crime lords agree to pay the new sociopath on the block, the Joker (Heath Ledger), to kill Batman.

Where the movie works, it really works. And that is largely when the Joker is onscreen. His character is wildly unpredictable, but always menacing and always sadistic. We don't know whether he's about to off someone with a cell phone or a number two pencil. He has no back story, only an ever-shifting explanation of the scars on his white-faced cheeks. He has no motives we understand: unlike the movie's other villains, he doesn't act on greed, a fact he proves by gleefully torching a mountain of cash. His main objective, if he has one at all, is to reveal and revel in the heart of darkness beating beneath humanity's civilized façade. He is the supreme tempter: he wants to show Batman (and us) that society is a lie. Remove the bonds of human society – manners, laws – and principles go with them. Humans show their true colors, ready to turn on each other on a moment's notice to save their own skins. The Joker has declared himself free of such bonds. It is our heroes' temptation that to stop him, they may similarly have to forgo principles. Batman, a nocturnal figure operating outside of established law and custom, has already taken a step down that path. And for Harvey Dent, victimized and disfigured in the midst of the film, the temptation proves too great and he becomes the villain Two-Face, clearly an evocative name for the film's themes. It appears that no man can live up to the public's faith. No one

can truly be a hero "with a face," as Bruce puts it – a man who opposes brutality in the daylight, not solely in the shadows where no one pokes around his past too much.

Yet, stripped of their heroes (who are otherwise occupied), in one of those fantastic cinematic contrivances that forces ordinary humans to choose between sparing strangers' lives or sparing their own, Gotham's citizens prove that they can do the right thing. In parallel, Batman makes a similarly selfless decision, cementing his status as a man of principle even while he is an outlaw. The Joker's thesis is disproved: principle and selflessness are not the deceptive results of legal compulsion. By and large, people really are good at heart, even when the cops and lawyers aren't looking over their shoulder. A satisfying, if idealized ending.

Yet the film does not rest there. After showing us that while no mere mortal can live up to the demands of white knighthood, the average citizen is capable of personal heroism, the story backpedals. Instead of keeping heroism out in the open, where anyone is allowed to assume it as part of their human birthright and capacity, Bruce concludes that the people of Gotham *do* need a hero after all – a spotless, blond-haired and blue-eyed hero whose reputation remains impossibly clean. The people don't need the truth, they need "more than the truth." And in part Batman's final act of selflessness is simply to safeguard Harvey Dent's image, lest the public, learning how desperately flawed their hero was, become hopelessly disillusioned. A strange conclusion for a story whose triumph appeared to come earlier, when Batman and Gotham's citizens showed denied the Joker's view: people *can* be both true to themselves *and* compassionate. But perhaps it would be too radical for a summer blockbuster to suggest that heroism is not a trait restricted to an elite, ethically visionary few, but a value any ordinary person can live in everyday life.

In similar fashion, heroism remains a male prerogative throughout the film. While Gyllenhaal's Rachel manages to come off as both an admirable and lovable mature woman (in itself an accomplishment, perhaps), she is never held up on the same pedestal as her lover Dent. Though they prosecute criminals in the same courtroom and share the same danger, no one bothers to name her a white knight. Instead, while her personality is fully three dimensional, her role in the story adheres to the traditional female's: she is a prize for the male characters to fight over. Her importance in the plot remains in what happens *to* her, not the actions she herself takes. Other female characters exist largely off screen, fluttering on the periphery of the story. Tellingly, a subplot involving Lt. Gordon's family revolves chiefly around his son and the little boy's view of Batman, while Gordon's wife does what cops' wives have done on television and in movies since time began (worry and nag), and his daughter (who grows up to be Batgirl in the comics) remains safely out of the camera's focus. One wonders why the Nolans bothered to write her in at all, if not simply out of deference to the source material.

Even before Heath Ledger's death, *The Dark Knight* was among the most anticipated movies of the year. While Ledger's performance deserves all the accolades it has received and then some, perhaps it is appropriate that the film as a whole fails to meet the public's very high expectations. Too, I cannot criticize a film too stringently solely for telling a story different from the story I wish it had told. Still, it makes one wonder whether superheroes and movies about superheroes are ultimately very good for us;

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I left the theater feeling we might be better off powering down the Bat Signal and facing the Joker ourselves.