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The Dark Knight

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Abstract

This is a review of *The Dark Knight* (2008).

There was little doubt before its release in July that Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* was going to be a hit for Warner Bros. As the big-budget follow-up to the Memento auteur's brainy and emotionally affecting 2005 blockbuster Batman Begins, it was practically assured that there would be an excited reception from audiences and critics. The only surprise was the level of success: *The Dark Knight* currently stands as the U.S.'s second highest grossing film of all time, and one of the best reviewed films of the year thus far—inspiring the studio to re-release the film during Academy Awards voting this January, as they did with last year's multiple nominee Michael Clayton. What makes this unprecedented triumph all the more extraordinary and also worthy of attention is the quality of the material: as the title suggests, the film is an exceedingly dark, politically charged meditation on the problem of evil that speaks loudly and clearly to our troubled times. Much more than simply another entertaining diversion, *The Dark Knight* explodes the comic book superhero genre and sends its audience away mulling over important philosophical and spiritual questions.

Picking up several months after the conclusion of *Batman Begins*, the new film shows us what has become of Gotham City since billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) first donned the cape and cowl. The Falcone crime family, now led by Salvatore Maroni (Eric Roberts), is running scared. Things are so bad, in fact, that they have decided to launder their ill-gotten gains offshore through

crooked Chinese mogul Lau (Chin Han)—a move that threatens much-beloved District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart)'s case against the mob. Batman and Lt. Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), an ally in the police department's major crimes unit, are subsequently approached by Dent. With nothing left to do within the bounds of the law, he asks Batman to commit an act of extraordinary rendition, and bring Lau back from Hong Kong to testify for the prosecution. Soon Lau is in police custody and turning state's evidence, and Maroni and his colleagues have nowhere to turn but to the Joker (Heath Ledger)—a scarred, war paint-wearing psychopath who makes his living stealing from their syndicate. It quickly becomes clear that Pandora's box has been opened, as the Joker unleashes a brand of terrorism so singularly horrific and utterly insane that combating him practically demands further ethical breaches. Though he must rely as ever on his closest confidants— butler Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine), Wayne Enterprises CEO Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), and Assistant District Attorney Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal)—Batman "plays it close to the chest" as he faces a villain with no apparent agenda besides plunging Gotham City into complete anarchy. Will he keep any of his moral integrity? Or will he go the way of "white knight" Dent, who is slowly transformed by the Joker's madness into the vengeful, murderous Two-Face?

Superbly executed at every level of production, *The Dark Knight* is an impressively ambitious, gloriously overwrought, and hugely topical masterwork. Its greatest achievement, though, is as allegory: making excellent use of contemporary popular culture's foremost hero/villain pairing, Nolan has mounted a powerful, epic rumination on the problem of evil. Though a perennial theme in world cinema (last year's lauded Coen Brothers noir *No Country for Old Men* tackled the same issue), few films have given the subject as robust and visionary a treatment as *The Dark Knight*. Much has been made of the rather plausible world the director has created with his "reboot" of the *Batman* franchise: the more fantastical elements of the source material are eschewed in order to bring a greater degree of verisimilitude to the proceedings. Into this thoughtfully crafted world, the problem of evil is introduced in the form of the Joker. The preposterous, outlandish actions of this "agent of chaos" are as unexpected, unimaginable, and unfair as any real life evil, but also especially nightmarish in that they are somewhat out of step with the realism of these films. It helps too that Nolan has a show-stopper in Ledger: with his feral tics, punk-inspired savagery, and ghastly scars evoking the Black Dahlia, the late Method actor's Joker is the perfect personification of the problem of evil. It's a performance for the ages.

Because the stage has been set so well, a range of theological perspectives can be heard in *The Dark Knight*. The Joker, for example, understands his own

deranged behavior as part of a contrast theodicy. When they meet during a rough-and-tumble police interrogation, Batman asks, "Why do you want to kill me?" The Joker cackles back, "I don't want to kill you! What would I do without you? You complete me." When the Caped Crusader opts not to kill him in their final confrontation, Gotham's Clown Prince of Crime coos eerily, "I think you and I are destined to do this forever." The despairing "Harvey Two-Face" takes a comparatively Augustinian view of things, defining evil as the pervasive absence of good that has allowed both Batman and the Joker to come into being. "The Joker's just a mad dog," he says dismissively. "I want whoever let him off the leash." Two-Face thusly focuses most of his rage on those whose apathy and corruption have compounded Gotham's problems: flipping his two-headed coin to decide the fates of the cops and robbers who have allowed bad things to happen to good people, he tells Batman, "You thought we could be decent men in indecent times, but you were wrong. The world is cruel. And the only morality in a cruel world is chance—unbiased, unprejudiced, fair."

As for Nolan, his directorial perspective has more in common with the Buddhist understanding: in *The Dark Knight*, evil deeds are presented as largely the result of various causes and conditions. Evil doesn't occur in a vacuum here—even the Joker, if he's to be believed, is in part the result of severe emotional and physical abuse as a child. The absence of good that Two-Face perceives is

karmically constructed as well: because Gotham is in the middle of an economic depression, both Maroni and the Joker are able to keep a small army of law enforcement agents with sick relatives and steep hospital bills under their thumbs. Of course, the problem of evil is also to an extent the result of Batman's rule-breaking vigilantism. "This crosses the line," he mutters while watching news of the Joker's atrocities. "You crossed the line first, sir," the world-weary Alfred reminds him. It is only at the film's shocking conclusion that Batman seems to understand this: knowing that Gothamites will lose all hope if folk hero Dent's fall from grace is ever discovered, he willingly accepts the blame for Two-Face's murder spree. "I killed those people," he tells Gordon. "You'll hunt me. You'll condemn me. Set the dogs on me. Because that's what needs to happen." As the film ends with the wounded Batman fleeing into the night, it's not entirely clear whether he is trying to reward other people's faith or atone for his own costly transgressions…or both.

The problem of evil may be a well-worn cinematic motif, but it gets a rich and timely parable in *The Dark Knight*. Instead of recycling superhero clichés, Nolan mines his two archetypal characters for all the relevance they are worth and emerges with an essential work of post-9/11 art. That its success has been so incredible bodes well for both the future of American popular films and their study by scholars of religion. Indeed, there seems little doubt that *The Dark Knight's*

influence will be quite significant. As the Joker says to Batman, so we could say to

Nolan: "There's no going back now. You've changed things forever."