

“The Dark Knight” (2008) By Mark Dujsik



“The Dark Knight” answers a question few people would probably consider asking: Can a superhero film relegate its protagonist to a supporting character and still succeed? The Batman (The article, which accompanies many references to the man in the cape and cowl here, is important; it turns our hero into something of a myth) is only one element of a sprawling look at crime in Gotham City. He cannot serve as the be-all and end-all of justice, no matter how hard he tries. As such, the Batman is one part of a triumvirate of men of law and order who believe they can change their city for the better. A madman disagrees.

It's an unexpected but perfectly logical turn for the film to take, especially given how co-writer/director Christopher Nolan's predecessor, the remarkable origin story “Batman Begins,” explored how the Batman developed his own code of how to dole out justice while avoiding becoming a vigilante and how his alter-ego Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) masked himself in the life of a billionaire playboy to keep everyone from knowing that his true face is the one that dons the literal

mask. The question is no longer who the Batman is but how his existence has affected the society in which he operates and, reciprocally, how those changes will shape him.

By the story's conclusion, many people will have died (or appeared to have been killed in one illogical but still effective surprise that ends a major action sequence). Many, including Bruce himself, blame the Batman for this. Even his most trustworthy companion, his butler Alfred (Michael Caine), must concede that Bruce's nocturnal crime-fighting started the chain of events that have led to a murderous psychopath running wild and free through the city by pushing the wrong people to a point of total desperation. Brothers Christopher and Jonathan Nolan's screenplay dives headlong into such moral shades of gray throughout the film. If the previous film asked how the Batman came to be, this one openly wonders if Gotham is the better or the worse for him.

Some time has passed since the events of the last film. The Batman has continued to fight the mob's presence in Gotham with the direct help of Lt. Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman). A new district attorney named Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) has made it his own personal crusade to put as many mobsters behind bars as he can. Like the Batman, Dent has a flair for theatricality; he punches and disarms a witness on the stand after the man pulls a gun on him. When the judge calls for recess, Dent insists that he hasn't finished questioning him yet.

Bruce's childhood friend Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal, taking over the role from Katie Holmes), who knows Bruce's secret, has been dating Dent. The billionaire would hate the man, if only he weren't so appreciative of the Batman's work and the only real possibility that the city could have a legitimate hero who would take on crime through the proper legal channels. Meanwhile, a group of vigilantes dressed as the Batman have started to roam the streets with guns. Bruce wanted the Batman to inspire people but not like this.

The first of the two central plot threads follow Bruce's attempt to bring down the mob, now that there is a public official willing to put himself out on the line to prosecute its members. This leads to a trip to Hong Kong, where the Batman swoops through the air and into a corrupt accountant's (Chin Han) office (One of several sequences that gloriously take advantage of the IMAX format). As in the first film, the Batman's gadgets have some basis in reality—at least more so than one typically expects from a comic book movie. His escape plan involves an old

CIA technique for getting covert agents out of troublesome scenarios. A fight that pits him against one of the nemeses from the previous film includes a moment in which a pneumatic device gives him super-strength.

The Batmobile remains a rejected military vehicle and once again gives the Batman an excuse to cause havoc while protecting a police motorcade before mounting a far more agile mode of transportation (Chicago becomes Gotham, and, as must be contractually obligated, Lower Wacker Drive is the backdrop for the chase). That sequence in particular is a virtuoso set-piece that barely gives us time to breathe before coming up with another novel sight (A semi-trailer flips over lengthwise immediately before the Batman's motorcycle does its own seemingly impossible maneuver).

The second and eventually primary plot thread involves the schemes of a man known only as the Joker (Heath Ledger, in a literally show-stopping performance—Nolan stages the character's every entrance and exit with a theatrical touch), who wants the Batman to unmask himself. The Nolans envision the Batman's most famous archnemesis as a complete mystery from the start in which the masked participants in a bank robbery gossip about their employer before killing each other off one by one, as per the maniac's plan. Ledger imbues the Joker with a slithery voice and physicality, always licking his chops or darting his tongue in between spouting lies about his origin or a philosophy of anarchy that suggests some method in his undeniable madness.

It's a "battle for Gotham's soul," the Joker tells the Batman in one of their many confrontations, which slowly drive our hero to suspect he will have to drop to his enemy's level to defeat the foe (Alfred tells his friend, "Some men just want to watch the world burn," and to defeat such men, there is only one solution). Those with knowledge of the source material are certain to know one character will change for the worse, and instead of simply turning him into yet another villain to face, the screenplay deftly uses him to continue the debate of how far is too far in the search for justice (Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), Bruce's co-conspirator in all things related to the Batman's technology, is confronted with that very dilemma in the form of an intrusive surveillance system that puts the Patriot Act to shame).

“The Dark Knight” is the best kind of sequel—one that uses its predecessor as a gateway to explore new facets of its characters and its world. At once filled with ideas that challenge our preconceived notions of superhero lore and dynamic action sequences, this is an exceptional film.

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