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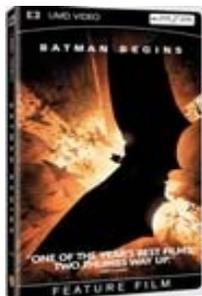
*American Psychological Association*

# The Layers of Transformation

A review of the film

**Batman Begins**
(2005)
Christopher Nolan (Director)

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Superheroes fill a gap in the pop culture psyche, similar to the role of Greek mythology. There isn't really anything else that does the job in modern terms. For me, Batman is the one that can most clearly be taken seriously. He's not from another planet, or filled with radioactive gunk. I mean, Superman is essentially a god, but Batman is more like Hercules: He's a human being, very flawed, and bridges the divide.

—Christopher Nolan, Internet Movie Database

After success with the mind-bending independent film *Memento* (Nolan, 2000), director Christopher Nolan has diverted his attention to making Hollywood films, first the star-packed mystery *Insomnia* (Nolan, 2002) and now *Batman Begins*. Although many independent film directors and producers might say he has sold his soul to Hollywood, Nolan certainly has not sacrificed his penchant for savvy exploration of the human mind. *Batman Begins*, the prequel to the series of Batman movies of the 1990s, is a superior film with considerable depth. An integration of traditional and contemporary theoretical approaches to psychotherapy can elucidate important layers of the film, particularly in the study of the lead character, Bruce Wayne—or Batman (Christian Bale).

## The Nature of Fear

Fear resides at the center of most psychological distress. It is what leads people to engage in constant patterns of avoidance of aversive emotions and stimuli and prevents their understanding that the prison within which they feel trapped is a mental construct of their own design. When appropriately harnessed, fear can motivate people into productive action, but when left unmanaged, it can consume and destroy them. *Batman Begins* tackles this thematic element and demonstrates how fear can be transmuted into either good or evil.

The story follows Bruce Wayne, a young multibillionaire who inherits his fortune after the murder of his parents. Initially, Bruce blames himself for his parents' death, which occurred after he experienced flashbacks in the form of terrifying bats, which led his parents to leave an opera they were attending and placed them in a fatal situation. These images are related to an earlier incident in which Bruce fell into a hole in the ground while playing with a childhood friend and was then attacked by bats. Through flashbacks, the viewer is given glimpses into Bruce's father's philanthropic ventures and comes to appreciate the father's devotion to his family and to Gotham City.

As a young man preparing to enter college, Bruce plans to take advantage of an opportunity to avenge his parents when their killer goes to court for early parole. However, the murderer is assassinated before Bruce can carry out his mission. This leaves his desire for vengeance unfulfilled. Following this, he attempts to express his anger toward the criminal mob boss who had ordered the assassination of his parents' killer. It is in this confrontation that Bruce realizes a certain truth: He does not know what it is like to be a criminal or a killer. He does not know what drives a man to do such things, and he realizes that he still harbors fear and anger that will not be transmuted until he can understand them.

Bruce begins a personal quest to understand the criminal mind, traveling to the most remote regions of the world. Eventually imprisoned, he is sought out by Henri Ducard, who, on the surface, desires the same thing Bruce desires and who claims he can show Bruce how to purge his fear and allow him the justice he seeks. Bruce trains with Ducard, but differences in their concept of justice lead them to separate, and Bruce returns to Gotham, now armed

with the necessary training to bring criminals to justice—as Batman.

A dynamic approach to this film reveals internal conflicts in key characters, a cognitive-behavioral perspective allows the viewer to understand the mechanics of change that occur in the film, and a spiritual approach underscores the transformation of the character's search for meaning and purpose in his life.

## Internal Character Conflicts

Throughout Bruce's quest, the viewer becomes aware of the internal conflict enveloping Bruce and his efforts to understand and bring to consciousness his darker nature—the shadow (Jung, 1993). Scharff and Scharff (1998) discussed Ronald Fairbairn's theory of internal object relations, a theory that helps the viewer understand Bruce's internal conflict. According to Fairbairn, positive and aversive experiences are filtered through the ego, which acts as the central processing unit and organizes experiences to create objects composing a sense of self. Negative or aversive experiences are split off from the self and repressed from consciousness. The individual experiences anxiety whenever these repressed elements attempt to push their way into consciousness. In the case of Bruce Wayne, feelings of guilt are closely tied to his parents' death. The constant pressure of this guilt forcing its way into consciousness creates anxiety, which, in turn, motivates Bruce to take action to resolve this conflict. His father likely forms Bruce's *ego ideal*—the person Bruce strives to become. However, intense anxiety results from the distance between his repressed emotions and the ego ideal.

Bruce attempts to resolve this conflict by projecting guilt onto those whom he believes to be criminals. Now, anger that was once directed at himself for his parents' death can safely be directed at others. This dynamic is illustrated by Ducard when he tells Bruce, "You have learned to cover your guilt with anger." Bruce cannot kill criminals, as this would create an internal conflict with his good internal objects. For example, Rachel, his childhood friend, is disapproving of his motives following the assassination of his parents' killer, and she tells him, "Your father would be ashamed." From this point on, the viewer can hypothesize that the reason

Bruce/Batman does not kill his enemies is because it conflicts with his internalized good objects and his ego ideal, represented by Rachel, Alfred (his servant and caretaker), and his father.

Bruce then decides to become Batman and resolves his phobia of bats with another defense, known as *introjective identification*. He takes in the qualities of the bats and identifies with them. Alfred asks him, "Why bats, Master Wayne?" to which he replies, "Because bats frighten me, and this time my enemies will share my dread." Introjecting the bat allows Bruce to take control of the feared object.

Bruce, as Batman, is now able to manage the conflict between his internalized objects. Projection manages his guilt, and introjection handles his fear of bats. This allows him to continue striving toward the ego ideal—hence, the preservation of Gotham and the protection of those who cannot fight for themselves.

## Exposure Therapy and Change

Elements of in vivo exposure and response prevention, the empirically validated treatment of choice for the management of specific phobia (Hollen & Beck, 1994), not only are depicted in the film but appear to reflect the critical change agent in Bruce's confrontation of his fears. As a young boy, Bruce fell into a hole, and several bats rushed at him; he reacted by cowering in a fetal position until he was rescued by his father, and this incident was the beginning of his bat phobia. The pathogenesis of his anxiety disorder unfolds when he begins to hyperventilate while watching a theater production in which the characters remind him of bats and his traumatic event. Bruce responds with a typical response to anxiety—avoidance—insisting his family leave in the middle of the production.

The film flashes forward to Bruce as an incarcerated young man displaying pure aggression by taking on and defeating several prisoners in physical combat; Bruce has responded to the death of his parents with pure rage. After being released from prison, Bruce begins physical and mental training with Ducard. Acting as a pseudotherapist, Ducard quickly uncovers Bruce's phobia and begins a process of desensitization. He instructs Bruce, "Breathe in your fears... face them... to conquer

them." Bruce imagines the bats from the traumatic experience but then blocks them out of his mind while continuing to train. Ducard pushes him further: "Embrace your worst fear... become one with the unknown... focus...concentrate... master your senses." Hundreds of bats fly out of a trunk, inundating Bruce as he falls backward to the ground. Bruce picks himself up and skillfully outwits his mentor. This symbolizes his mastery of anxiety management coping skills.

On returning to Gotham, Bruce builds the bat suit, equipment, car, and persona—all symbols of his newfound coping and mastery skills—before he continues his new life mission, no longer held back by his fear. Bruce then challenges himself with the top fear in his exposure hierarchy. He goes to the site of his original encounter with bats, entering the dark tunnel he fell into as a boy. As he goes further underground, he is forced to face the darkness directly. The film's depiction of flooding is impressive and rarely seen in cinema. Bruce stimulates the bats with light, and they fly directly at him. He stands and opens his arms unfailingly as he is enveloped and surrounded by thousands of shrieking bats. This use of exposure via flooding is intense and realistic.

Subsequent scenes document that Bruce has continued to master his fears. For example, he is able to live among the bats without experiencing anxiety. Also, he decides to become a symbol of the fear he has conquered; becoming a "bat-man" represents a deep sense of mastery. In addition, it is clear he has developed the skills necessary to manage anxiety-inducing experiences when he is sprayed with a hallucinogen in aerosol form. Whereas others suffer permanent brain damage from this panic-inducing substance, Bruce copes by quickly finding a way to escape, survive, and position himself to receive the antidote. A person with debilitating anxiety would not have been so successful.

Ultimately, the exposure approach saves him— transforming him cognitively and emotionally—and propels him to move forward with his life mission. Isn't this what all clinical psychologists want for their patients with anxiety disorders? It is this behavioral level that makes the film a useful teaching tool for patients. Regardless of a patient's phobia or anxiety condition, most can readily identify with Bruce

Wayne's fears and subsequent avoidance as well as make the connection between progressive exposure to anxiety-evoking situations and mastery of fear. Films are natural, clinically powerful teaching tools (Berg-Cross, Jennings, & Baruch, 1990; Hesley & Hesley, 1998; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003), and we have already started using this film to help our patients understand anxiety and appreciate the value of exposure techniques.

## Broadening the Transformation Through Spirituality and Meaning

We have spoken of transformation on a dynamic, cognitive, and behavioral level, but does this fully account for the completeness of such a change as Bruce Wayne's into Batman? Probably it does not. The important level of spirituality, meaning, and purpose can fill in most of the remaining holes. Spirituality is an evolving area of contemporary psychology and is rapidly becoming accepted into current psychotherapy theory and practice (Cox, Ervin-Cox, & Hoffman, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005; Weiner, Cooper, & Barbre, 2005). Movies can educate one about meaning, purpose, and virtue; transform one's personality; and help one develop hope, faith, curiosity, resiliency, compassion, and peace.

Sperry and Shafranske (2005) noted, "The search for the self and the quest for meaning are integrally associated" (p. 22). As previously noted, Bruce was lost in a literal and metaphoric prison of meaningless violence and numbed emotions. Below this apparent void was a base—a foundation of virtues instilled by his father and Alfred—of honor and compassion. Bruce builds on these virtues through the practice of courage and the increased self-control he learned from Ducard. These virtues buffer the psychopathology of his phobic struggles and build his psychological resilience (Seligman & Peterson, 2003). In a moment of great dissonance, in which Ducard insists Bruce enforce justice by murdering a guilty man, Bruce uses his resources—physical, psychological, and spiritual strength (i.e., collectively, wisdom)—to reject his mentor's demands. Bruce becomes a man of integrity and consequently opens a door to deeper meaning and purpose in his life.

## The Role of the Psychiatrist

A review of this film cannot exclude the disappointing yet all too common shortcoming found in many films—the portrayal of the mental health professional (see Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Niemiec & Wedding, in press). Although there is no psychologist involved in treating Bruce's phobia, there is a psychiatrist, Dr. Jonathan Crane, who poisons unsuspecting patients with hallucinogens; puts on a grotesque, Halloween-like mask to intensify the mental "trip"; and uses his patients to perform diabolical research. He also defends serial-killing thugs with not guilty by reason of insanity pleas, enabling them to be released to his hospital, where he can use them for the experiments. He clearly fits the *dangerous and omniscient* category proposed by Wedding and Niemiec (2003).

It is disappointing that mental health professionals continue to be misrepresented in films. Perhaps when the portrayal is so outrageous, as in *Batman Begins*, there is less stigma than occurs in those films in which a mental health professional treating patients performs highly unethical acts (e.g., *Prince of Tides*; Streisand, 1991; *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself*; Scherfig, 2002).

Even though the psychiatrist is stigmatized, the film is redeemed by its psychological depth and character analysis as well as counterbalanced by its portrayal of a hero with a mental illness (i.e., specific phobia) realistically overcoming his disorder and self-actualizing.

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