

# Research on the Image Construction of Superhero Characters in the American Superhero Film "The Dark Knight"

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**Abstract.** In 2008, the Dark Knight set off an unstoppable dark wind on the screen under the combined effect of British director Nolan's direction, and excellent casting, sweeping a number of awards and leaving a colorful mark on film history. Many scholars have expressed their views on this classic film and made a series of studies. This paper shows the unprecedented limitations, degodliness, and tragedy of other superhero images through the protagonist Batman's various behaviours, emotions, and his final ending in the film. The superhero image of Batman was destined to have limitations under the rule of law from the very beginning of his creation because his way is to abuse lynching in the dark of the night. Vigilantes may be able to play a momentary role, but ultimately it is not a long-term solution. At the same time, the film magnifies the real person behind the superhero's mask, in addition to the responsibility he shoulders, there are also his own true feelings. Finally, the tragic ending gives the film an anti-climax that makes the character even more deeply felt, countering the greatness and uniqueness of the character with a sad ending almost never seen before in the history of superhero films.

**Keywords:** Superhero Film, Superhero Characters, Image Construction.

## 1. Introduction

In 2008, Christopher Nolan wrote, produced, and directed the superhero film "The Dark Knight," the second installment in his Batman trilogy featuring the DC Comics character Batman as the central figure. Starring Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Michael Caine, Aaron Eckhart, Gary Oldman, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and Morgan Freeman, the film follows Bruce Wayne/Batman, James Gordon, and Harvey Dent as they unite to combat crime in Gotham City. Their efforts are challenged by the high-intelligence criminal Joker, who seeks to disrupt Batman's influence and throw Gotham into turmoil. Nolan drew inspiration from the Joker's original comic book debut in 1940 and the stories from the renowned comics "Deadly Joking" and "The Long Halloween".

Upon its release, "The Dark Knight" received critical acclaim, with many considering it one of the best films of the 2000s and a standout in the superhero genre. It also achieved significant commercial success, becoming the first Batman film to surpass \$1 billion in worldwide box office earnings and Christopher Nolan's first film to achieve this milestone. At the 81st Academy Awards, the film earned eight nominations and won Best Supporting Actor for Heath Ledger's iconic portrayal of the Joker, who tragically passed away post-production. The film also won the Best Sound Editing award.

The trilogy concluded with "The Dark Knight Rises", released in 2012, while in 2020, "The Dark Knight" was selected for preservation by the National Film Registry due to its cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance.

The superhero film genre revolves around characters with extraordinary abilities who use their powers to protect society and maintain peace. While the classic superhero archetype originated in comic books, the genre has expanded to include adaptations in television series and films. Superheroes are symbolic figures deeply rooted in American social culture, representing ideals of heroism, courage, and justice.

These characters often face off against supervillains in narratives that blend elements of action, fantasy, and science fiction. Some of the most iconic superhero franchises come from publishers like Marvel Comics, DC Comics, Dark Horse Comics, and Icon Comics.

Superheroes typically possess unique abilities that set them apart from ordinary individuals, allowing them to perform incredible feats and engage in heroic acts. They often wear distinctive costumes that reflect their powers and personalities and are known by names that embody their character traits. For instance, Superman, who made his debut in 1938, remains one of the most recognizable and enduring superhero figures in popular culture.

Over the years, the superhero narrative has evolved and adapted across various media platforms, including films, television shows, video games, and more. This enduring popularity underscores the enduring appeal of superheroes as symbols of hope, strength, and resilience in the face of adversity.

Batman is a fictional superhero created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in the DC Comics universe, making his debut in *Detective Comics* #27 in May 1939. Originally known as "Bat-Man," he later earned monikers like "The Dark Knight" and "the world's greatest detective." Batman's alter ego is Bruce Wayne, a wealthy entrepreneur and philanthropist residing in Gotham City, USA. Tragically, Bruce witnessed his parents' murder by gangsters at a young age, igniting his mission to avenge their deaths by fighting crime.

As he grew older, Bruce honed his physical and mental prowess, crafting the iconic Batsuit and an arsenal of cutting-edge technology to combat Gotham's criminal underworld. Batman's operations are primarily focused in Gotham City, where he is supported by allies such as butler Alfred Pennyworth, sidekick Robin, Police Commissioner James Gordon, and Batgirl. His rogues' gallery includes iconic villains like the Joker, Penguin, Riddler, Catwoman, Freeze, Two-Face, Ninja Master, Scarecrow, Poison Ivy, Deathstroke, Mudface, and Bane.

Unlike many superheroes, Batman possesses no superpowers. Instead, he relies on his genius intellect, rigorous physical training, mastery of martial arts and ninjutsu, scientific expertise, investigative skills, advanced technology, wealth, perseverance, psychological tactics, and determination to confront and outsmart his adversaries.

Following Batman's overwhelming popularity, DC Comics launched its independent comic book series in 1940. Throughout the decades that followed, numerous authors depicted Batman in various settings and time periods. After the conclusion of the Batman television series in the late 1960s, the character experienced a period of subdued interest. However, efforts by creators revitalized Batman's appeal, returning him to his original darker tone in works like Frank Miller's 1986 comic "Batman: The Dark Knight Returns" and Alan Moore's "Batman: The Killing Joke".

In 1989, the Warner Bros. film "Batman" catapulted the character to new heights of cultural significance. Batman emerged as an iconic figure in American comics, leading to adaptations across television, film, toys, and video games. Psychiatrists and scholars have extensively studied Batman's character, reflecting his impact on popular culture and societal perceptions. Notably, IGN ranked Batman second on its Top 100 Comic Book Heroes list in May 2011, while FanSided named him the greatest superhero in comic book history in 2015.

## 2. Literature Review

Considering the growing prominence and influence of superhero films in the film market, numerous scholars have conducted research on the construction of superhero characters. According to Li Hui's research, she posits that in recent years, the DC expanded Universe's superhero films have delved deeply into the image construction of heroes, presenting us with more humanized superheroes [1]. Mondello demonstrates that teenage superheroes, such as Flash, Robin, and Bucky, existed long before Spider-Man. In addition, spiders like Spider, animals feared by both the police and the underworld, were common fictional characters in old pulp magazines and movie series. Furthermore, revenge is a common strategy employed by these characters after a family member is killed. It is evident that numerous comic book heroes, such as Batman and Black Hawk, are among the most renowned. It is a common occurrence in comics for orphans to become superheroes. Superman is arguably the most prominent example of this phenomenon [2]. Philip Orr also pays attention to Batman. According to him, "The Dark Knight" is far more unsettling than Keaton or Burton. This is

the most disappointing aspect of the initial film. Batman Bruce Wayne is not a virtuous character; he does not care for Superman, who represents the traditional American values. He is, in fact, a personification of a split personality [3].

Although there are numerous scholars engaged in the study of this field, few have addressed the image construction of superhero characters in the American superhero movie "The Dark Knight". The Green Lantern hate crime storyline provides a compelling opportunity to examine the reader's response to an important moment in the history of the American comic book industry. It also provides one opportunity to contribute to the study of masculinity, which is currently generally lacking, and gay masculinity in mainstream comic books. This will be addressed in the next section. To assess the reader's response to anti-gay hate crime storylines, the authors analysed 20 unpublished letters written by Bob Schrecker and Judd in response to the storyline. In their analysis of the letters, there is a meaningful level of understanding of the concerns of these letter writers for the gay community. Firstly, the authors outline the emerging research on masculinity and find masculinity in gay comic books in this literature.

The hate crime storyline is employed to provide context for the subsequent analysis of the letters. Finally, the authors present and examine letters grouped according to content and tone [4]. In contrast to Green Lantern, the Batman mythos is characterized by a pervasive fear of the unknown. He is perceived as a monster, devoid of feelings, sex, and familiarity. In contrast to his rival, Big Blue Boy, Batman lacks a steady Lois Lane to legitimise his sexuality. This has led to considerable surprise among the world's straight Frederic Werthams (recall his public accusations). In the mid-1950s, Batman's relationship with his guardian Robin was marked by sexual "transgression". There are very few revisionist Batman stories that indicate the hero's "sex drive". Therefore, his sublimated emotional state is such that he is unable to engage in any other emotional activity, not because he is homosexual, but because he was born with this disposition. Batman's body is attuned to a private universe where "sex equals death," where he is content to drift like a ghost. We must admit that his body was vaguely masculine, but his constitution was almost transient and consisted mainly of shadows [5].

The image of superheroes is in a constant state of flux, influenced by a multitude of factors, including different historical periods and social status. Directors and audiences alike are increasingly engaged with the representation of superheroes, which has led to a continued evolution and diversification of superhero movies. This evolution is a testament to the necessity of research in this field. Superheroes are a highly prescriptive genre, both in terms of visual representation and narrative structure. Such narratives frequently exhibit strongly stereotypical plots that ultimately revolve around the defence of private property. This concept was previously elucidated by Umberto Eco, who posited that the moral model underlying superhero narratives can be defined as a Manichaeic ideology, deriving from a belief in the inalienable nature of private property. Consequently, the values identified as "good" are those that uphold the "legitimate" property connection between people and goods, whereas those identified as "bad" are those that are antithetical to this connection [6]. Superhero comic books have historically catered to introverted children, predominantly boys, who are gifted. Their imaginations often lead them to play characters such as St. George, Neil Armstrong, and of course Batman and Superman. Charles Atlas, an ordinary man, is presented as a "magical" figure. Even the poorest people can be transformed. The term "90-pound weakling" is used to describe someone who is physically weak. Prior to the four-color heroes' defeat of Lex Luthor, the four-color heroes were able to dress up the refinement of their idol [7]. Furthermore, there is a tendency to deny the impact of 9/11, even though its impact is evident throughout the narrative. In *Invincible Iron Man* # 88, a reporter observed Tony Stark falling from the sky and reproduced the image of the "falling man" who jumps from the burning. However, in contrast to the victims of 9/11, Stark was protected by his steel, which prevented him from sustaining any damage. The superhero genre allows an attack to be controlled in a familiar environment, its results evoked but resolved without any adverse effects. Life may never be the same again, but Stark's armor and the superhuman laws it follows provide a sense of control. Injecting an element of control into the narrative is a trauma-avoidance effect [8].

Additionally, several authors have conducted research on Batman in "The Dark Knight." Wandtke, for instance, authored an anthology entitled "Frank Miller Strikes Again, Batman Becomes a Postmodern Antihero: The Dark Knight's Tragic (Comic Book) Reinvention," which employs psychoanalytic theory to elucidate the divergences in tone between the two futuristic Batman narratives by writer and artist Miller [9]. The representation of Batman and his associated elements as a "Dark Knight" who conceals his identity and employs oriental fighting techniques and high technology to combat evil, while simultaneously suggesting that the limitations of law enforcement within the system necessitate individual acts of justice to create a "pillar of justice" at the spiritual level of the public, can be considered a "symbolic" representation. Concurrently, the metaphor posits that the limitations of institutional law enforcement must be supplemented by individual acts of justice to create a "pillar of justice" in the public spirit. This imbues the "symbol of justice" of Batman with a deeper practical meaning, thereby enriching the connotation of the symbol of Batman. Moreover, as the narrative progresses, the symbol undergoes a transformation in its character and the atmosphere it evokes, maintaining a consistent evolution. The symbol of Batman in *The Hour of War* represents the spirit of adventure and vigor of blood, while *The Dark Knight* exudes the emotion of being during confusion, embodying the weaknesses of human nature and the glory of personality. *The Dark Knight Rises* gives people a sense of limit and is full of classical tragedy. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, there is a sense of limit and a pervasive atmosphere of classical tragedy. Such an in-depth personalization of the character's pictorial symbols makes the Dark Knight Batman's "symbol", together with other famous pictorial symbols in Hollywood series, a classic symbolic label in the history of cinema [10].

### 3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative analysis methodology to investigate the nuanced aspects of Batman's superhero image as depicted in "The Dark Knight." It focuses on exploring the limitations inherent in his character, delving into the ethical dilemmas arising from his use of violence, and examining the portrayal of his complex emotional struggles throughout the narrative. Additionally, the paper delves into the de-godliness of Batman's persona, considering how the character's fallibility and vulnerabilities contribute to a more humanized depiction of a superhero. Furthermore, it explores the tragic elements within Batman's story arc, particularly his journey towards a tragic ending, and how these elements collectively shape the depth and complexity of his superhero image in "The Dark Knight."

### 4. Results

First and foremost, Batman is an alternate hero who carries the original sin of violence and cannot be recognized by civilized law and order. As in this movie, the justice system is a get-out-of-jail-free card for the forces of evil. The crime syndicates control the lifeblood of the city. Eventually, the Gotham Police Department becomes a subordinate organ of the forces of evil. The Gotham Court became a whitewashing organization for the snakes. In this environment, Batman chooses to fight violence with violence.

Furthermore, Batman is a superhero who is both chivalrous and self-interested, heroic and fearless, but also has worldly emotions. When Bruce meets Harvey Dent, the cynical, iron-fisted Judge. During the day Bruce throws money at Harvey, fueling his campaign with money and fame. In the night, Batman saddles Harvey with his fists and body to fight off the malice of the world. Bruce has put the entire future of Gotham and the rest of his life on the shoulders of Harvey, the prosecutor of light and justice. And, Bruce remembers the pact he made with Rachel. The day Gotham no longer needs Batman, perhaps he'll deliver for love as well, even though she and Harvey have made a life-long pact.

Finally, in this version of Batman, apart from the director pulling Batman down from the altar without secularizing him wholesale, he retains that familiar classical heroism that exalts rationality and restraint as well as chivalry that is romantic to the extreme, thus also deepening the tragedy of the character. For example, at the end of this installment, the Joker succeeds in his treacherous plan, and Harvey falls to the altar. The warrior who slays the dragon grows the scales of the evil dragon. All the bloodshed and hard work along the way can't stand up to a fatal joke after all. And with the collapse of the Knight of Light's persona and the shattering of his myth, the rule of law in Gotham will be set back decades overnight. Just as this crisis of faith is about to erupt, a lone savior is born. Batman righteously takes the blame for the murder of the Knight of Light, keeping the darkness and the scorn for himself so that light and hope may live on.

## 5. Discussion

Batman's actions are a strong medicine to the criminals, but ultimately the cure is not the root of the problem, after all, violence is with the original sin, and cannot be on the stage. What Gotham City really needs in the movie is a Knight of Light who is perfect from the inside out. Through legitimate political means, sound legal restraints and dazzling personal charisma, he leads Gotham through the transition between civilization and the rule of law. This is something that a lone wolf like Batman, who plows through the darkness and commits lynchings, cannot accomplish. So, he is a superhero with limitations. This movie's reflection and emphasis on the limitations of superheroes set this movie apart. The traditional idea of fighting violence with violence has hardly been questioned by the many Batmen on screen before, or even by the superheroes on screen. Nor has the director ever put obstacles in their way on a judicial level. It wasn't until this movie that the audience saw the director's serious thoughts on the nature of superheroes for the first time.

Since Batman knows that justice in the form of original sin will not bring peace to Gotham, he wants to be replaced by the Knight of Light, who rides a high horse and wears eye-catching armor. This ambivalence and self-denial, as well as the dual role of the rescuer and the rescued, not only gives Batman the tragic color of an ancient Greek hero, but also allows the audience to enter the inner world of the masked vigilante for the first time, and to understand the vision and demands of this hard-blooded tough guy.

Batman knows that Gotham has been struggling through the storm for a long time and deserves a caped hero who combines the eight virtues of knighthood. But at this critical time of social transformation, a masked vigilante like him, burdened with original sin, is not the face of justice that Gotham needs right now to be the face of the new Gotham. The citizens of Gotham, who are deep in the gutter but still look to the stars, deserve better than the truth. Although this is contrary to the audience's stereotypical image of Batman, the front of the screen, they just need to prepare popcorn and watch the king from the point of view of the thrilling through, but in this film, Batman had to kill the way for Gotham to weave well-intentioned lies, to preserve a period of myths that should have been in the ground, and all of them are not reflective of the role of the strong color of the tragedy.

## 6. Conclusion

Nolan completed the trio of Batman's destiny in this movie, as a director he first revealed the necessity and rationality of violent vigilantes in a turbulent and chaotic world and elucidated the limitations and tragedy of superheroes in civilized society. After that, Nolan displays Batman in morality and law, justice and emotion between the entanglement and choice, and finally to a romantic and sad ending, with Bruce's self-sacrifice to complete the ultimate myth of Batman "The Dark Knight". This kind of rooted, helps the faith of the will fall of the salvation plot, far more than any one superhero to save the earth countless times the visual spectacle is more tragic, more stirring. The character's success is due to the complexity of the director's construction and thinking about him.

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