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Batman, The Dark Knight Rises: An Allegory for September 11th and its Aftermath

**Abstract**

One of the most thrilling movies of the decade is not normally considered to contain criticisms of America and post-9/11 opinions, but it’s shocking how much *The Dark Knight* really does. The Joker parallels misconceptions and stereotypes about Al Qaeda, Batman can be related to our National Defense, and Harvey Dent symbolizes American culture. Through these parallels, the producers of *Batman: The Dark Knight* explore concerns with open discourse and emphasize its correlation to the national myth of invincibility that the war on terror has exposed. They also hint at the unguaranteed nature of a return to normalcy in terms of our culture after 9/11. With these I will prove that *Batman: The Dark Knight* is a statement about how massive our misunderstanding of Al Qaeda’s motive is, and what the war on terror has done to our culture and artwork: they’ve been forever altered because of 9/11, and a return to normalcy may not be possible.

**Batman: The Dark Knight Rises**

Almost everyone out there loves The Batman Trilogy, and *The Dark Knight* has been argued to be the best one of the three, but has it ever struck you as an opinion on post-9/11 culture from the producers? Batman is this fearless character who consistently puts Gotham City and its inhabitants before himself; maybe it’s because he has nothing left to lose because he’s a billionaire with no family, or maybe it’s because he truly wants to continue on what his father started, but in a different manner. Bruce Wayne is the last person anyone would expect to be Batman, but it makes a lot of sense if he’s seeking to further his father’s work, which was keeping the city safe and happy before he died in the first movie when Bruce was only a boy. Now he’s been left with the largest company in the city, a mansion, and billions of dollars. Instead of keeping to himself, he’s uses his resources to fight for his city and keep its people safe from villains like the Joker.

The Joker is a very different type of villain because of one huge difference: he has no motivation other than to “watch the world burn.” He doesn’t want money, fame, or even power, he creates chaos only because he enjoys it. Throughout *The Dark Knight,* the Joker consistently terrorizes Gotham City and schemes against the governing figures and Batman for the love of the “sport.” His actions are unpredictable, and his plans have no purpose other than chaos; this makes him extremely difficult for the city to deal with and fight against. In many ways, the Joker is most of America’s perception of Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda uses similar chaotic tactics, , and the majority of American citizens misunderstand their actual motive. They also come off as rather heartless because of the way that they use suicide bombers and terrorize cities, and this is very closely related to how the Joker kills his men in the beginning of the movie during the bank robbery. Finally, the Joker is a genius in the ways that he hides his men or himself in plain site through the use of double agents and deception, and this is one of Al Qaeda’s characterizing attributes. After 9/11, we learned that Al Qaeda actually had double agents in important positions in our society that allowed them to hijack the planes and bring down the Twin Towers in New York City.

Along these lines, Batman protects Gotham City in a similar fashion that our national defense protects the United States of America. Our national defense is composed of millions of ordinary citizens who put their country before themselves, and there are so many of them that we truly don’t know who is fighting for the U.S. and its people. This concept is almost identical to Batman because his identity is also a mystery, yet he’s just an ordinary citizen of Gotham City who puts everyone else before himself. Batman protects Gotham City from villains like the Joker in the same way that our national defense protects America from terrorists like Al Qaeda.

Finally, Harvey Dent is a symbol in *The Dark Knight* for the culture before and after September 11th. Before the Joker directly affects his life, he’s this white beacon that everyone looks up to and uses to determine how their city is doing; but after the Joker burns half of his face off, his actions are forever reminiscent of the Joker’s crimes. Just like how no one can look at Harvey Dent’s face anymore without thinking about the Joker, post-9/11 culture and artwork can’t be looked at without somehow reminding us of that tragic day. Harvey’s face is forever inscribed with the Joker’s evil, and our culture is forever tainted by 9/11. *Batman: The Dark Knight* is a statement about what Al Qaeda and their attacks on our country did to our culture and artwork: they’ve been forever altered because of 9/11, and a return to normalcy may not be possible.

**The Joker**

The Joker is a representation of the way that America in general perceives Al Qaeda, which the producers argue is a misunderstanding. Throughout the film, the Joker uses particular tactics that line up exactly with how Al Qaeda acts. He is chaotic, fearless, unpredictable, appears to be motivated by pure evil and he loves to induce fear as a warfare tactic. For example, midway through the movie he lights a huge mound of money on fire for the mob to witness, further proving that he is only motivated by terrorizing Gotham City. The Joker’s character was best put by Bordoloi in his article “Re-packaging Disaster Post 9/11 and Christopher Nolan's: The Dark Knight Trilogy”: “He seems to be a misanthrope bent upon the destruction of Gotham merely because he detests the individualistic, materialistic, corrupt, self-centred mode of urban existence with hypocritical values attached” (92-93). This is exactly how American citizens perceive Al Qaeda; we do not understand their motive and we only know that they use similar tactics to the Joker.

In general, most of America does not realize what we’ve done to Middle Eastern countries in the past, so we assume that their acts of terrorism are random and out of pure, purposeless hatred. We are mostly oblivious because we’ve been raised on the belief that America is the ideal country and we don’t do anything wrong. Our government hides all of their actions that wouldn’t be perceived as “positive” in the eyes of Americans, so we’ve been bred from birth to believe that we are perfect and isolated from the rest of the world. Faludi covers this topic in her novel *The Terror Dream,* and refers to it as “our elaborately constructed myth of invincibility” (14). She claims that 9/11 revealed this myth because of our reaction to the event: all women were suddenly victims, men were forced to the foreground to “protect our nation,” and the “call for domesticity.” All of these things are also mentioned in some way or another in *The Dark Knight.*  Towards the end of the film, the Joker turns Rachel into a helpless victim after being portrayed as a very independent and strong woman the entire movie. In addition to this, all of the police officers that come to save her are men, and even though they fail, there were no women put into power in that scene. It is clear that the movie pokes at this strange reliance on men in a time of distress not only in this example, but even Batman himself: he’s a man. The Joker is a symbol for our misunderstandings involving the war on terror and Al Qaeda, which is why the movie points out these flaws in the citizens. Faludi’s ideas are not alone either, Miller also writes about this protective bubble that Americans falsely perceive.

In her article, “Why we haven’t seen a great 9/11 novel,” Miller takes a slightly different approach to the myth that is seen in Faludi’s novel and *Batman: The Dark Knight,* but brings up a very interesting point. She criticizes Americans for not recognizing the “bubble” even after the catastrophic event we faced in 2001, “The 9/11 attacks could have reminded us of how delusional this dream is, but instead they became an occasion for citizens to demand a ludicrous promise of safety from their government” (3). The Joker also causes the citizens of Gotham City to revert to the government and Batman, seeking for help. This is reminiscent of all the people who criticize the U.S. Government, but always look for support when they’re in distress. Similar to how Al Qaeda caused us to do this, the Joker causes Gotham City to do the same thing.

From this, it should be clear that the Joker is actually a representation of all of our false stereotypes about the war on terror and Al Qaeda. The producers are making it a point that the Joker’s qualities are what we stereotype Al Qaeda to be like, and it’s a direct result of this myth of invincibility. The film is not the only source for this criticism either, Faludi and Miller argue the same ideas. At the same time, the Joker is not the only character used to illustrate the producers views on post-9/11; there are more to be covered.

**Batman**

Batman is a symbol for our National Defense because he protects Gotham City the same way that our nation’s defense fights to protect the U.S. Batman is this mystery protector of the city, which is actually more similar than it would seem to our national defense. The department that protects our country is composed of millions of individuals who consistently put their nation before themselves, and are driven by this internal morality. In the same manner, the citizens of Gotham are protected by Batman, someone who receives nothing for protecting his city other than peace of mind. These protectors are selfless and motivated by something more than their appearance among others, they are internally driven by what’s right.

These are the parallels, but what does this mean about the producers’ opinion? They use Batman as a way of showing what Americans look like from the outside; we develop an attachment for him because of his bravery, so we are on his side the whole movie. Batman acts as Gotham’s protector, and likewise treats them like his children. This relationship is a direct insult towards America because if Gotham is a representation of the U.S. and they’re treated like children, what is that saying about our reality versus our mentality? This myth of invincibility that we’ve come to believe has turned us into infants with a wild imagination who require someone to look after us. This is why Batman’s internal morality is meant to be a beacon, yet also a lesson. The producers also take advantage of our love for Batman to show us what it’s like being on the “protector’s” side, by exploiting the absurdity of Americans’ actions at the end of the movie (through the citizens of Gotham). The citizens of Gotham plead for Batman’s help in the beginning when the Joker is terrorizing the city, but towards the end, they ostracize him. The threat of the Joker is no longer there and they need someone to hate… so the Batman steps in place. Almost identically, Americans consistently seek help when they feel pressure on them, but once we return to an equilibrium, we immediately find a flaw to pick on in the government. In the film, the Joker explains exactly this, “To them you’re a freak like me... they just need you right now... But as soon as they don’t, they’ll cast you out like a leper” (*Batman: The Dark Knight*). This is yet another criticism of America from the producers: we are quick to turn on those that have proven themselves helpful. And if the film is trying to communicate what 9/11 has showed us, then it’s saying the source of it is internal; which can be supported by authors like Rothberg and Gray.

Both Rothberg and Gray argue that the problem stems from a failure in our imagination in response to the traumas from 9/11. They are firm on their belief that Americans are naive and need more fictional culture that expresses international views of the United States. Since most people only know what the government tells them, our understanding of our relationship with other countries is vastly incorrect. Along these lines, Rothberg claims, “... We need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship” (153). Gray talks about similar ideas to Rothberg, also agreeing that the real problem won’t go away until we change ourselves, “The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated” (134), meaning we are worried about Al Qaeda and the war on terror, but the real problem exists within the country.

In reference to the plot, Batman stopped the Joker, but still ended up losing because Harvey Dent was killed. Our national defense can fight for us, but the problem is never resolved unless we recognize the internal issues that are fueling the situation. Harvey Dent’s death was also important because it reflects the producer’s views on the fate of our culture after 9/11, and this requires a more in-depth discussion of Harvey Dent: “Gotham’s white knight.” (*Batman: The Dark Knight).*

**Harvey Dent**

Finally, the last parallel I see relevant is that of Harvey Dent and American culture. Before the Joker terrorizes Gotham, the city looks up to Harvey as a role model in the media. But after the chaotic events that take place throughout the movie, Harvey is scarred for life. In the same way that Harvey is changed forever by the Joker, our culture was changed forever by 9/11, the real war on terror. After September 11th, modern artwork and films seem to be reminiscent of that day no matter what they’re about. This parallels Harvey because after what the Joker did to him, you can’t look at him without remembering the Joker. After getting out of the hospital, he went around Gotham City to find everyone involved in Rachel’s death, and flipped a coin to determine their fate (life or death). This is not what the previous Harvey would’ve done; he never would have stooped to the Joker’s level, but things changed. Not only his appearance reminded us of the Joker, but also his actions. This reflects our culture before and after 9/11 almost perfectly.

This begs the question of what the producers are trying to say if this is the case with Harvey. I’m asserting that it’s a warning of what not to let happen. Harvey Dent was destroyed by the Joker because of an internal failure: Batman and the police of Gotham were too late. The producers are foreshadowing a future where no one stops the “death of Harvey” (the end of pre-9/11 culture). This call to action should be seen as a demand for open discourse; the event must be understood and discussed. Versluys would applaud this demand because he values discourse more than any of the other authors we’ve covered. Versluys fears that the art behind novels is at stake if, “this search for a triangulating discourse that avoids the bland polarity of ‘us-versus-them’ isn’t sought out and found”(17). Which is essentially saying that a return to normalcy would be difficult for our culture if the artistic issue in this post-9/11 era isn’t resolved, like the producers of *The Dark Knight* are suggesting.

The producers of *The Dark Knight* want Harvey Dent’s death to be avoided in real life; they don’t want to see American culture disappear because we weren’t there to save it. In the film they’re communicating that this return to normalcy isn’t a guarantee, and it’s important for us to see that and act accordingly. In fact, Spigel talks about what she thinks American culture has done so far after 9/11 and where the return to normalcy idea becomes important. She asserts that media has played a role in attempting to bring America back to the “norm” with TV shows and cartoons by down-playing the magnitude of 9/11. She thinks that this fallacy is a reason “to interrogate the limits of nationalist myths in the post-network” (239). Thus, it’s clear that the producers are not alone to notice the eminent threats that lie around the corner; they’re hoping to communicate the danger ahead if we fail to recognize the opportunities we have.

**That’s a Wrap!**

*Batman: The Dark Knight* was more than an opinion about 9/11 and its aftermath, it was a warning and a call to action. It makes claims on the grounds of September 11th’s affect on our nation, but more importantly it allows us to look in from the outside to see how we are perceived as a nation. The characters are developed and used for this exact reason: to show us what we look like from an international view. The Joker is pressure applied to Gotham City (America) which instills fear upon the citizens to the point where they’re reliant on Batman (national defense), but immediately turn on him when the danger is no longer eminent (after the Joker is captured for good). But also, Gotham’s citizens ignored the demise of Harvey Dent because they were too focused on who to hate next, which happened to be Batman. The entire plot is an elaborate criticism of America and the film does a great job showing how ignorant we are to make all these assumptions about the war on terror and Al Qaeda (Joker’s depiction in the film) when the real problem isn’t located overseas, it’s in our backyards. If we continue to ignore the conflicts within the country, the return to normalcy will fade and pre-9/11 culture will be lost the same way Harvey Dent faded and was forgotten about when he was in the most need. *Batman: The Dark Knight* is a call to action that cannot be ignored if we wish to save our culture in America after the traumatic events of September 11th, 2001.

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