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Why They Wear the Mask: The Mouthpieces of Nolan's Batman Trilogy

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In Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo's graphic novel *Joker* (2008), the Clown Prince of Crime comments on the ironies of Batman's costume noting how his mask leaves his chin and mouth unconcealed:

> You wear your shame like a badge, because you don't have the balls to pin it on. Yes...Just look at you...desperate to be feared, you want to be perceived as a monster, draped in black...and yet...you leave that little window...a glimpse at the perfection underneath. Obvious-- the chiseled good looks-- not the jaw, the mouth of a monster...why do you let it be seen? Tell me why.

Released around the same time, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005-2012) shows Batman and several of his nemeses wearing masks or scars that alter or accentuate their mouths. While Batman's costume continues to leave that window into his "chiseled good looks," Scarecrow in *Batman Begins* (2005), the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008), and Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) all alter their faces and mouths through distorting makeup or masks. In these masks, the mouth functions as a symbol of identity representing the character's voice in the world. While Batman's enemies' masks suggest a permanent change to identity, Batman leaves a window into his reality revealing a layering of identities that allows him to navigate the somber world of Gotham.

In Nolan's trilogy, Batman's understanding of the mask is linked intimately to the use of masks by his enemies. In his essay "Terrorist, Technocrat, and Feudal Lord: Batman in Comic Book and Film Adaptation," Marc DiPaolo observes that, "Batman's villains are connected to him in a [...] visceral, symbolic way. The vast majority of them are dark reflections of Batman himself and they frequently parody or pervert his intentions and method of operation" (DiPaolo 205). However, DiPaolo observes this in terms of actions; the masks that the villains wear function as a mimic of Batman's own pain. The villains' mouths are altered through their masks, whereas Batman leaves his "chiseled good looks" visible. In *Batman Begins*, Scarecrow's mask is a means of inflicting pain—the mouth is the only definable feature in the patchy sack he wears to terrify his patients. When he sprays Batman with his fear toxin, bats claw their way through the wire mouthpiece in the mask, distorting his mouth. Unlike Scarecrow or Bane, the Joker's mouth is physically scarred and accentuated through makeup; this mask of sorts becomes a recognizable feature of the Joker, who tells lies about the origins of the scars to the people he kills in *The Dark Knight*. The Joker's mask is a means of fabricating a (false) past pain and instilling a present fear. Bane also wears a mask that covers his mouth, but his mask fulfills a purpose outside of terror: Bane's mask provides him with analgesic gas for his immobilizing pain. In the prologues for *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, multiple characters question the reason behind the Joker's "warpaint" and why Bane wears his mask. With each villain, these masks become a central part of the character's identity—Bane comments in *The Dark Knight Rises*, "nobody cared who I was until I put on the mask." For these villains, the mask, and by extension, their reactions to pain, are their identity. Bane's identity is so linked into the mask that he literally cannot function without

it and becomes completely powerless when his mask is broken. Likewise, after the Joker's bank robbery, the Joker removes his clown mask in view of the security cameras, Ramirez commenting, "He can't resist showing us his face," implying that the Joker's face is the warpaint. Batman shares in this understanding of a mask presenting the true self. At the end of *Batman Begins,* Rachel Dawes tells him, "[Bruce Wayne] is your mask. Your true face is the one that criminals now fear."However, Bruce Wayne/Batman's understanding of the mask and pain is different from his nemeses'.

Granted, not all of Batman's enemies wear masks. Ra's Al-Ghul, Talia Al-Ghul, and Two-Face present a different threat, not to Batman, but rather, to Bruce Wayne. Ra's and Talia, like Wayne, have multiple identities—Henri Ducard and Miranda Tate—who reflect on Wayne's own multiple personas. They strike at the vulnerable Bruce Wayne persona: Ra's burning down his house and Talia taking over his corporation, Wayne Enterprises. Likewise, Two-Face presents another threat to Bruce Wayne as Harvey functions as both a romantic rival for Rachel Dawes' affections and a denial of Wayne's desire to create "a Gotham that no longer needs Batman." While the threat they pose is different than his masked enemies, Wayne confronts them and "breaks his one rule": killing—either intentionally or unintentionally—each of these enemies as Batman, suggesting a breaking and transforming of the Batman persona.

In Scott Bukatman's essay, "Why I Hate the Superhero Movies," he notes, "The central fascination in the superhero film is the transforming body, whether of a hero or villain" (121). However, in Nolan's films, Batman is the only character for whom the transformation is central—when talking to Lucius Fox while wearing Batman's gear in *The Dark Knight*, who is aware of Batman's alter-ego of Bruce Wayne, Batman still speaks in his gruff voice signifying that the transformation between his personas is a mental as well as a spiritual change. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne explains to Officer Blake that the mask was to "protect the people closest to [him]" and that "the idea was to be a symbol—Batman could be anybody." For Scarecrow, the Joker, and Bane, the mask is not a symbol of anonymity but represents their individuality. These enemies have one identity that does not change between environments, unlike Bruce Wayne, who switches between his identity as a public and private person and his superhero alter-ego. Bukatman writes in regards to how superhero masks functioned as a sign of transformation in previous superhero films, such as Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002), noting how CGI separates the human and superhero body: "After Tobey Maguire pulls Spider-Man's mask over his face, the figure onscreen literally ceases to be Tobey Maguire. This has the unfortunate effect of severing the connection between the inexpressive body and the liberated, expressive one" (121). However, this is not the only way that the mask has functioned in superhero movies. In Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie* (1978), Superman's mask is the glasses and hat that disguise him as Clark Kent. In contrast to Spider-Man, whose mask conceals his identity as Peter Parker, Clark Kent must conceal his true identity as Superman by wearing glasses and a hat. In Nolan's films this notion of a separation between the inexpressive and the expressive body is blurred. Unlike other superhero films, Nolan presents a realistic aesthetic: the superhuman body is not CGI and moves in a way that is different from Bukatman's understanding of superheroes. Batman does not cheer while swinging through the city streets like Spider-Man, or majestically leap over buildings like the Hulk in Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003). This controlled expressivity is shared

by Batman's foes; when the Joker and Bane confront and kill their enemies, Gambol and John Dagget, respectively, the camera explicitly focuses on their mouths and shoots them from the same angle—they are shown from over the shoulder of their respective victims and also elevated above them. Their expressivity is not seen in their entire bodies, rather only in their masks and voice.

In Sarah K. Donovan and Nicholas P. Richardson's essay, "Under the Mask: How Any Person Can Become Batman," the true identity behind Bruce Wayne/Batman's character is challenged, "Following Nietzsche and Foucault, [Donovan and Richardson] think that both Bruce Wayne and Batman are performances. [They] are rejecting the idea that there is some 'true' self underneath Wayne or Batman that connects them" (131). This idea is central to understanding Nolan's presentation of Bruce Wayne and Batman. In *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne reveals his identity of Batman to Rachel, telling her, "It's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me." The context of this line reveals the inner turmoil within Batman's identity; he rejects the notion that who he is underneath the mask matters to reveal to Rachel his identity as Bruce Wayne. The rest of the series bears witness to the struggle for Bruce Wayne's multiple performances over which one is valid. In his essay, "'I Think You and I Are Destined to Do This Forever': A Reading of the Batman/Joker Comic and Film Tradition through the Combat Myth," Michael Nichols explores how "Batman's efforts to achieve order seem to have engendered a newer, deadlier form of chaos" (246). While Nichols applies this idea specifically to how Batman functions in society, on a personal level, Wayne's attempts to bring order to his personas create a chaos within that after eight years, still dominates his character. *The Dark Knight* shows Wayne suppressing the Batman persona through "betting it all on" Harvey Dent and trying to turn him into a "hero with a face" for Gotham with the goal of returning to a civilian life with his childhood sweetheart, Rachel Dawes. This plan fails; Rachel is killed by the Joker and Harvey Dent becomes the villain Two-Face and forces Batman to take on his sins in order to defeat the mafia. While Gotham no longer needs Batman in *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne cannot settle back into modern society without Rachel. Through his unwillingness to help Gotham recover, Wayne creates the circumstances necessitating Batman's return. The crisis in *The Dark Knight Rises* is entirely a product of his own inner turmoil, his butler, Alfred, criticizing, "[He has] hung up his cape and his cowl but [he hasn't] moved on." In his fight with Bane, the mask is broken, symbolizing the breaking down of the Bruce Wayne/Batman personas. Nolan's films show the window Batman leaves in his mask to his double life as Bruce Wayne exists to reveal the inner turmoil of his character. Batman wears his pain in his mask—it does not inflict pain, lie about it, or alleviate it. Rather, his mask is an acceptance of the pain he experienced, but also a statement that it is not the pain that exists underneath, but what he does that defines Batman.

In Azzarello's graphic novel, Batman responds to the Joker's question, saying that he leaves that window to mock the Joker. Similarly, In Nolan's films, Batman is "an unstoppable force" that forces his enemies to face their own masks: he sprays Scarecrow with his own fear toxin, denies the Joker's belief that everyone is corruptible, and breaks Bane's mask forcing him to confront his own suppressed pain. Batman/Bruce Wayne's mask is unique in terms of how superheroes and villains use their masks, while other characters such as Spider-Man and Superman use the mask to reveal or conceal a hyper-expressive identity. Batman's mask is an amalgamation of his personas. It is neither the monstrous creature of Batman or the painful past of Bruce Wayne and it does not

cure the madness of a concrete identity created through a mask.

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