

# Duplicity: Exploring the many faces of Gotham

“And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*

*The Dark Knight*, Christopher Nolan's follow up to 2005's convention-busting *Batman Begins*, has just broken the earlier box office record set by *Spiderman 3* with a massive opening weekend haul of \$158 million. While the figures say much about this franchise's impact on the popular imagination, critical reception has also been in a rare instance overwhelmingly concurrent. What is even more telling is that the old and new opening records were both set by superhero movies. Much has already been discussed in the media about the late Heath Ledger's brave performance and how *The Dark Knight* is a gritty new template for all future comic-to-movie adaptations, so we won't go into much more of that here. Instead, let's take a hard and fast look at absolutes and motives: old, new, black, white and a few in between.

The brutality of *The Dark Knight* is also the brutality of America post-9/11: the inevitable conflict of idealism and reality, a frustrating political comedy of errors, and a rueful Wodehouseian reconciliation of the improbable with the impossible. Even as the film's convoluted and always engaging plot breaks down some preconceptions about the psychology of the powerful, others are renewed (at times without logical basis) – that politicians are corruptible, that heroes are intrinsically flawed, that what you cannot readily comprehend is evil incarnate – and it isn't always clear if this is an attempt at subtle irony or a weary concession to formula.

Of the film's three central characters, Batman and the Joker share a common contempt for society and its puny laws; but while Batman has to constantly battle the inherent contradictions of his Übermensch persona – a superior man whose will and powers transcend accepted social codes, and yet is never too far removed, perhaps to his own detriment, from the humanity in himself – the Joker is more elemental, truly boundless, an irresistible force of nature. Batman's protection of Gotham City is the outcome of a selfish love – he perceives the city's stewardship as his birthright, and other alpha males should be aggressively dealt with. The Joker's vision of the world stems from a similarly distorted imperative, except that it is manifested in chaos and destruction, freedom at its most extreme. The Nolan brothers' screenplay, as we all do, wears several masks. Some are masks that conceal true natures, others affirm and sometimes multiply an irreconcilable inner darkness. Bruce Wayne, a slick penthouse-dwelling playboy, is the outer expression of a brooding, crime-fighting Batman. The Joker is all masks and no

face. Harvey Dent, the third central character, has his own mask of sincerity and optimism melted off to reveal a similar distaste for common morals, now combined with a desperate cynicism. When panicked by the madness of opposites, resigning oneself to relativity is just one teetering step away. As a defaced Dent concludes, “the only morality in a cruel world is chance.”

Batman, of course, is an archetype, an abstract idea given form. In comic books, old world mythologies of meddling gods, confused heroes and chaos-mongering demons are transferred to present day settings. Until recently, the narrative results of such a transference were as two-dimensional as the paper it was inked on; where the good citizens of whatever random metropolis would always naturally be in unquestioning awe of its splendidly spandexed saviours and their exalted deeds; disbelief was outlawed, and the average reader was wide-eyed and pubescent. But times, and with it the scope of superhero fiction, have changed: the 1980s hence, with assistance from pioneering writers like Frank Miller, Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, comics have grown up to acknowledge the complexities of modern society as well as a wider market, an upgrade that has been at once intellectually and financially rewarding for creators and readers alike.

Over the years since their creation and recent emancipation, Superman, Batman, Spiderman and others, like all successful archetypes, have been interpreted Ramayana-like in a thousand different ways by as many artists and writers. The interpretation of archetypes, however, can be dangerously subjective. From a reader/viewer perspective, some might argue that the current rise of the American superhero pantheon in Hollywood is a subsiding superpower’s way of externalising its fears and insecurities, creating impossible heroes and ideals in a perilously convergent world of opposing philosophies. Towards the end of *The Dark Knight*, crowning a shaky victory pulled off by Batman over the infinitely resourceful Joker, the two stop to have a quick conversation about their shared future and that of history’s recursive spiral. The Joker is dangling by his foot over the edge of a skyscraper, secured only by a slender bat-rope, still cackling maniacally and licking at his scars. “You just couldn’t let me go, could you?” he taunts Batman, “You won’t kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness, and I won’t kill you because you’re just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.” The camera slowly rotates like a clockwork ballerina to the madman’s unsettling singsong speech, until both he and the upright Batman are seen framed identically. Behind them, swaying drunkenly from side to side, is the giant metropolis. And you can no longer reliably tell who is upside down and who is right side up.

*The Bengaluru Pages, August 2008*

**Vinayak Varma**