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# Batman's Remarkable Hero's Journey: The Dark Knight Trilogy

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## BATMAN'S REMARKABLE HERO'S JOURNEY: THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY

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Bruce lands on the cold soil of the well. He slowly rises and looks into the dark abyss in front of him. Suddenly loud screeches and the flapping wings are all he can hear; then blackness. Nolan's trilogy of Batman is quite unique because it takes a comic book hero, places him in the real world, and presents him with real world problems. The villains that Batman faces throughout the sequence are not silly or unrealistic; they are human. Instead of making Bruce the powerful and mighty Batman who is perfect and always stands for good, Nolan shows the human side of the hero. A man who is broken, scarred, and truly flawed. Nolan delivers a realistic version of a hero who is terribly damaged, yet he manages to become a masked vigilante that Gotham city relies on to keep the streets safe.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the journey and transformations that turn an ordinary man, Bruce Wayne, into a civil-hero (Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011). Bruce takes three specific pathways to transformation: dependence to autonomy, egocentricity to sociocentricity, and stagnation to growth. Through his journey he experiences multiple transformations that are moral, intellectual, emotional, and physical in nature (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Goethals & Allison, 2014). With each pathway taken and transformation completed, Bruce becomes more than just a man; he becomes a legend. His journey has three main stages: departure, initiation, and return (Allison, Goethals & Kramer, 2017). With the completion of each phase in his expedition, Bruce grows further from ordinary and gets closer to achieving true heroism.

#### BATMAN'S HERO'S JOURNEY

##### The Departure from the Ordinary World

This first phase of the journey represents the period in the hero's life where the audience is introduced to the character's normal world before his adventures begin (Campbell, 1949). Bruce is shown in his true nature and crucial details about him are revealed. The audience can relate to his life, which helps us later sympathize with him when he is enduring his plight (Campbell, 1949). The journey begins when Bruce is a mere child. While he and best friend and love interest, Rachel Dawes, are playing outside the Wayne Mansion, an accident occurs. Bruce falls down a well in his garden that leaves him stranded about 20 feet below the surface. Rachel runs for help as Bruce lies at the bottom of the well, at the mouth of a small underground cave. He looks into the empty darkness as he waits in fear for what is to come. Suddenly a colony of bats flies out and surrounds him. Afterwards, they escape the darkness into the light. Bruce lets out terrifying screams but is not heard until he falls unconscious. When he wakes up his father, Thomas Wayne, is descending into the well reaching his hand out to grab his son. This incident sparks Bruce's fear of bats and is the true start of his journey to heroism (Nolan, 2005).

## The Call to Adventure

This stage of the journey occurs when the hero receives a metaphorical call that casts the character out of his ordinary world (Campbell, 1949). This departure challenges the hero to take action and make strides toward accomplishing his mission.

In *Batman Begins*, the city of Gotham is stricken by poverty and is overrun by crime. From low level robberies to intricate organized crime groups, the city is in shambles. While attending the local theater with his parents, Bruce is reminded of his biggest fear. The acrobatic performers come from the sky like bats and he has flashbacks of being terrorized by the innocent creatures. He becomes so fearful of the play that he asks his father if they can leave the theater. Being a sympathetic man, Thomas does not bat an eye and takes both Bruce and his wife to the back exit (Nolan, 2005). However, as the three leave, they are confronted by a robber, Joe Chill. The man takes out a gun and tells the family to give him all their valuables. Thomas Wayne stays serene and tells the man to calm down while he hands him his wallet. Chill then tries to steal Martha Wayne's pearl necklace but is distracted by Thomas trying to stop him. He then shoots both of Bruce's parents. He looks at a young Bruce and runs away to escape the crime scene. Bruce is devastated and sits by both his dead parents and cries.

Years later, Bruce gets word of Chill's release from prison and decides to make an appearance at the court hearing. He is determined to avenge his parents' death even if it means he will be put into jail himself. Bruce comes to the Gotham City courthouse in a trench coat with a gun at his side, ready to kill the man that shattered his world so many years before. While Chill is leaving the courtroom, he is surrounded by crowds of reporters and citizens. As Bruce gets ready to finally shoot the man, someone else does the deed for him. Bruce is happy that Joe Chill is dead, but he is unsatisfied with the way it happened. This drives Bruce to meet with the leader of the mob in Gotham, Carmine Falcone (Nolan, 2005). He realizes he has much less control over his life than he thought, propelling him into a life of crime and fighting.

While this appears to be a giant step backwards, it is actually a small step forward. Bruce's pathway from dependence to autonomy is complete at this point

in the trilogy (Allison & Goethals, 2017). He is stripped of his innocence when his parents are killed and he can no longer depend on them to help him with his needs. Although he has Alfred, the family's longtime butler, no kid should have to grow up without their parents. Bruce is forced to be independent, and he does not handle it well (Allison & Goethals, 2017). However, his journey toward heroism continues without him realizing it.

### The Refusal of the Call

When the protagonist of a story suffers a tragedy in his life, he may decide to refuse the call and turn to a life of crime, or he may simply isolate himself from society. The challenges ahead that are involved in becoming a hero may seem unimportant to him and he may have doubts of ever being the same man again (Campbell, 1949). Sure enough, while his city struggles, Bruce disappears to escape his horrible past.

He finds himself halfway across the world in a Bhutanese prison for stealing electronics. With nothing to lose, Bruce spends his time provoking other inmates and fighting groups of them. He is an excellent fighter and is never defeated by the malicious men around him, but he continues to stay hidden from the world he once came from and has no intentions of ever returning (Nolan, 2005). The fear and doubt that surrounds Bruce ensure that he can feel content just being a prisoner.

### Meeting of the Mentor

During the challenging parts of the journey, the hero becomes in desperate need of guidance from anyone (Campbell, 1949). Whether the mentor provides an item, knowledge, or even self-confidence, it is all Bruce needs to transform his fears and doubts into something more positive and special (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Gray et al., 2018).

After a prison gang tries to kill Bruce, he is put into solitary confinement where he is left to rot away. That is until Henri Ducard comes to him and offers him a chance to train with the League of Shadows (Nolan, 2005). This opportunity would allow him to overcome and master his greatest fears. After little convincing, Bruce decides to join him. Ducard shows him that he is meant for much

more than he ever imagined and that he is truly the decider of his own fate. While he is training, he slowly begins to understand his path to greatness and altruism.

### Crossing the First Threshold

At this stage, the hero finally understands the path that must be taken and chooses to accept the challenge. During this process, the hero will undergo a transformation that pushes him out of his comfort even more and allows him to enter the new world (Campbell, 1949).

After intense training with Ducard and other members of the League of Shadows, Bruce finally learns his path and discovers his true potential. His last test to become a member of the league is to execute a man who stole from a village (Nolan, 2005). While this may seem like justice to many, Bruce decides to leave his mentor and the League of Shadows because of their immoral views. He escapes the base of operations and leaves it in flames with a person he believes to be Ra's al Ghul. The only man Bruce saves is his mentor Ducard, but little does he know, the man he saved has not been honest about his true identity (Nolan, 2005).

Bruce goes through his first hero transformation while he is training with the League of Shadows, and this metamorphosis is an intellectual one (Allison & Goethals, 2017). He understands his life in a worldlier view and changes his opinions about his true purpose. He sees that hiding away from his fears is selfish when his city needs a hero to make the world safe. This idea helps him build his self-confidence to do the right thing, every time.

Once he leaves the League of Shadows, Bruce understands that his purpose is to help the city of Gotham and rid the streets of its petty crime. While he was a self-centered prisoner who only a few months earlier had nothing to live for, he decides to put his past behind him and help the people. His transformation from egocentricity to sociocentricity is just beginning (Allison & Goethals, 2014, 2017).

After being absent for almost seven years, Bruce returns to Gotham city where he begins to fight crime after the sun falls. He dresses entirely in black and

looks like a bat because of his mask and spiked cape. After this "job" becomes more important to Bruce, he becomes known as "the Batman", the cities vigilante. Even the Gotham Police Department works with Batman because he never kills the people he takes out. His strict moral code calls for him to leave his victims tied up or stuck for the police to apprehend (Nolan, 2005). This further proves Batman's heroic mentality and dedication to keeping the city safe in a way unlike that of the League of Shadows. His character follows a similar mentality of the Buddhist teachings of bodhicitta, which speaks of an awakened mind "that inspires a promise, a vow to advance step by step to help others" (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Mercer, 2016).

### Belly of the Whale

The stage can be seen as the hero's final commitment to become more than an ordinary person (Campbell, 1949). By entering this portion of the quest, Bruce shows his willingness to undergo a complete metamorphosis. Toward the end of *Batman Begins*, Bruce is at the height of his skillset and ability to fight crime. Now he is forced to face something much greater: his old mentor. Henri Ducard travels to Gotham to release a toxin into the city's water supply. This poison causes hallucinations of people's worst fears if exposed to it. Bruce is forced to overcome the toxin's harsh effects while also attempting to stop Ducard (Nolan, 2005). The people of Gotham begin destroying the city and Ducard reveals himself to Bruce as Ra's al Ghul. Batman has a final showdown with his old mentor and leaves him on a train that crashes and explodes. This act also stops the toxin from being released fully, which saves the city. The destruction and chaos almost swallows Gotham whole, but with the help of Batman, the city lives to see another day.

### The Initiation and the Road of Trials

After surviving the initial obstacle in the "Belly of the Whale," the hero is tested rigorously through a series of trials (Campbell, 1949). In Batman's case, these trials appear in the form of criminals who try to disturb the peace and safety of the city of Gotham. Batman has been fighting crime for quite a while when *The Dark Knight* begins, and he has continued to help the city thrive while he sweeps the streets of criminals every night. Harvey Dent, the new district attorney, has stepped up as Gotham's newest crime fighting powerhouse and

is even coined the name "The White Knight" by some (Nolan, 2008). His position as a public figure puts him in harm's way, but he does not seem affected by this potential threat. The coming of Harvey incentivizes Batman to retire from his life as a vigilante because Bruce believes that Gotham deserves a new hero "with a face" (Nolan, 2008). However, he has yet to meet his newest threat, whose presence is now being felt throughout the city.

The hero understands that unlike his previous tests, this one is different. A villain that the Batman cannot take down alone has risen to power. Bruce is forced to make allies and work together with other people in order to defeat the new criminal mastermind (Campbell, 1949). Bruce soon learns more about the man known as the Joker, a fiendish villain who has been running the city's crime and is only growing stronger. He has a bizarre disposition and belongs in an insane asylum due to his rough past. Eventually the Joker proposes an ultimatum: either Batman reveals his true identity, or the he is going to kill someone every night (Nolan, 2008).

While questioning mob boss Sal Maroni for more information about the Joker, Batman is told, "You got rules.... the Joker, he's got no rules.... if you want this guy you got one way, but you already know what that is...." (Nolan, 2008). Bruce is torn between hanging up his cape and continuing his mission as Gotham's dark knight. After the judge and police commissioner are assassinated by the Joker, the men who should have been locked up by Harvey run free because sources are terrified of what will happen to them if they stand as a witness. When Bruce asks Alfred what he should do, he replies with, "Endure.... they will hate you for it, but that's the point of Batman; he can be the outcast, he can make the choice...the right choice" (Nolan, 2008). After hearing this advice, Bruce is able to see the broader picture and understands that he must stop the Joker and remain as the Batman. Being a leader and being a hero are two independent roles. Bruce understands this concept but is unsure of what he will become if he proceeds (Decter-Frain, Vanstone & Frimer, 2017).

Batman reaches out to Detective Gordon who had helped him with Ra's al Ghul. The two men work together to stop the Joker from killing Harvey Dent, while Dent is transported to the Police Department. Luckily Batman is there and deters the Joker from actually doing any harm, but his men still manage to take both Rachel and Harvey. Detective Gordon captures the Joker as he is



unveiling Batman's identity and places him in a cell until further questioning (Nolan, 2008).

### The Ordeal

The hero is forced to face his greatest fear yet: losing the love of his life (Campbell, 1949). Bruce has loved Rachel since he was a child and would do anything to save her, but he must also ensure Harvey's safety due to Bruce's strong belief that if Dent falls, the city will follow (Nolan, 2008).

Batman interrogates the Joker on the whereabouts of the two-missing people with his own strategy: force. After suffering multiple head slams and punches to the face, the Joker tells Batman where the victims are and is put back into a cell at the police department. Gordon leads the police department to go save Rachel from one warehouse, while Batman attempts to save Harvey at a separate warehouse. Both of the victims are surrounded by gasoline and a small bomb that will ignite everything when it blows. With most of the force out looking for Rachel, the Joker blows up a cell and escapes the prison (Nolan, 2008). The police department fails to get to Rachel on time, but Batman is able to save Harvey. However, Harvey's face has gasoline on it, which ignites after they leave the building. This causes half of his face to burn off. After the news of Rachel's death reaches the two men, they both are devastated. Bruce becomes extremely depressed and almost loses his mind. This is mostly due to the fact that he could have been with Rachel if he had hung up his cape earlier. Harvey, unfortunately, takes a turn for the worst (Nolan, 2008).

While Dent is in the hospital recovering from his burn wounds, he is visited by the Joker disguised as a nurse. He corrupts Harvey's clearly vulnerable and weak mind, which reminds the audience of an earlier scene in the movie. At a fancy dinner the District Attorney tells Rachel and Bruce that, "You either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become a villain" (Nolan, 2008). This foreshadows Harvey's transformation from a hero to Gotham's new villain. He becomes known for flipping a coin to decide his victims' fate. Harvey eventually captures Detective Gordon's family because he believes he is at fault for

Rachel's death. While he prepares to kill members of Gordon's family, he is stopped by Batman. He tackles Harvey over a ledge where Harvey drops to his death.

### The Reward

At this point in the story the hero must become more than just a man after facing a near death situation (Campbell, 1949). He is forced to play the role of the villain in order to give his city the peace it has been waiting for.

The Joker has been captured by the police after a standoff that almost left numerous innocent people killed. Although his fate is never explicitly stated, it is inferred that the Joker is put in the newly built insane asylum ("The Dark Knight Trilogy," 2012). Batman has killed the public hero of Gotham and understands that in order to keep the city from losing faith, he must present himself as a villain and Harvey as a hero. He tells Gordon to say that Harvey died trying to defend the detective's family. He then runs away from the police and retires his suit for the greater good of the city. Harvey is praised for being a hero who died protecting his city, while Batman is now seen as nothing but a vicious outlaw (Nolan, 2008).

Batman undergoes a moral transformation when he decides to take the blame for everything that Harvey had done. He demonstrates that a hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice everything just to do what is right for the people and the place he loves. Bruce understands that by taking the fall he is no longer acting in concert with the police and must retire his cape once and for all (Allison & Goethals, 2017).

### The Return: The Dark Knight Rises

After years of retirement and aging, the hero is hesitant to return to the chaotic world that he once left (Campbell, 1949). However, a hero knows that his duties are never truly finished until all of the enemies are vanquished. In the beginning of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce is portrayed as obsolete. He is at a state where he cannot fight crime as well because he is

older now. He believes that with all that he has done for Gotham, he deserves to be at peace. However, he has a ceremony at his estate each year in honor of Gotham's greatest hero, Harvey Dent. Bruce meets a woman named Selina Kyle on an upper level floor in his house, who swipes his mother's pearl necklace from a safe. She escapes out the window and leaves Bruce dumbfounded. Although this does not contribute to his coming back, she later becomes the woman he loves (Nolan, 2012). As of now he is unaware that he must return due to the city's newest threat whom he has yet to meet.

### The Magic Flight

A new threat has emerged that is even greater than the previous one. This is the ultimate challenge for the hero and the last one in the case of Batman. Although he has faced many obstacles before, this is the most formidable one yet (Campbell, 1949).

Bruce is indirectly convinced by Officer Blake of the Gotham Police Department that he needs to return to Gotham as Batman. His reasoning is the looming threat, Bane, a mercenary who once trained with the League of Shadows but was exiled by Ra's al Ghul. In Batman's second encounter with Selina Kyle, he learns that she is a common thief with an advanced skillset. She tricks Batman into going to Bane's underground base where he is waiting for him. A gate drops behind Batman and Selina watches as he meets Bane for the first time (Nolan, 2012). The new villain is younger, bigger, and stronger than Batman and soon he breaks Bruce both physically and spiritually before throwing Bruce into a pit. The pit is a small prison that is located in India. Bane had been in this same prison years before coming to Gotham (Nolan, 2012). The imprisonment of Bruce is similar to the beginning of his hero's journey when he was captive in the Bhutanese prison (Campbell, 1949).

### The Road Back

The hero is trapped and must find his way home. For Bruce this means he must regain his physical strength and confidence to be the hero he knows he once was (Campbell, 1949). Even at his lowest point, he must rise to save Gotham.

Bruce is forced to watch his city burn and fall into the hands of Bane. Gotham is completely taken over by the rebel army and they lose all contact with the outside world due to a bomb that will detonate if anyone enters the city from the outside. Almost the entire city's police department has been lured and trapped underground by Bane. Bruce tries to escape the prison by "making the jump"; however, he fails not once but twice (Nolan, 2012). The older wiser prisoners in adjacent jail cells explain to Bruce that he must embrace his fear and fight through it so that he may make the jump. This means that he must remove the safety rope that has kept him safe on the jump and risk it all, for this is what makes life worth living.

During this endeavor Bruce goes through a physical hero's transformation. When he is left in the cell originally, his back is broken and so is his spirit (Allison & Goethals, 2017). He is forced to wait and let his back heal so he can train to get stronger. Once he is healthy, he manages to perform exercises in his cell, such as pushups, pullups, and crunches. He becomes stronger than he was before and even more confident. The third attempt of the jump, he goes without the rope in order to overcome his fear of dying in the prison. On this try he reaches the second ledge and completes the jump to escape the pit and return to Gotham (Nolan, 2012).

### Resurrection

This is the final test for the hero, but also the most intense. He must use all the knowledge and skills he has developed over the years to destroy his last enemy (Campbell, 1949). The city is on the line, and Bruce is pushed to his limits to save it from destruction. Batman reenters the city just in time to save Officer Blake from a few of Bane's men. The Gotham Police are secretly released from their underground trap. The force prepares to have one final battle with everything they have against Bane's army. Civilians also volunteer from all over to help fight for their city (Nolan, 2012).

Batman is forced not only to face Bane, but also Talia who he believed to be an ally. However, she reveals herself as the daughter of Ra's al Ghul after she stabs Batman in the ribs. She had been working with Bane the entire time. Her plan to destroy the city with a remote detonator fails due to the work of Detective Gordon who stops the signal from reaching the bomb. Nevertheless, Bruce is

informed that the bomb has no off switch and will detonate even if the controller is not activated. The bombs clock is ticking and Batman does the only thing he can. Using his plane, he takes the bomb far enough away from Gotham that it will safely explode without killing anyone except the pilot: himself (Nolan, 2012). He appears to make the ultimate heroic sacrifice in the interest of preserving the well-being of society (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018).

Batman's transformation from stagnation to growth occurs, here because he has become more than the hero he once was. He has become a legend. A statue is put in place to show the community's ever growing gratitude towards him (Kinsella et al., 2017). This is the final transformation Batman endures in his hero's journey (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Davis et al., 2011).

The hero may live a life of peace and have no fear of death. Often the character lives in the moment, with no regard for what is to come or any regret of what happened in the past (Campbell, 1949). Bruce is finally able to be himself without any concern or worry about his beloved city. The Batman is gone, but Bruce has yet to fall. It is revealed to Lucius Fox, Bruce's equipment specialist, that the autopilot of Batman's aircraft had been installed months before he took the bomb away from Gotham, which means Bruce was never aboard the ship (Nolan, 2012). He is finally at peace in a foreign country with his love Selina Kyle whom he is pictured with at a restaurant in the final scene of the trilogy (Nolan, 2012). Batman's final chapter has finally closed and the end of his hero's journey has finally arrived. While Bruce is not technically known for his heroic actions by the public, his actions as Batman will live on for generations.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout his journey, Bruce faces villains who are very similar to him in ways he does not realize. Both the Joker and Bane had troubled childhoods. The Joker was abused by his father, while Bane was put into a prison to serve his father's sentence. Bruce was not abused or imprisoned as a child, but he lost his parents and at a very young age and struggled immensely growing up. The difference

between Bruce versus the Joker and Bane is that Bruce made the individual choice to change his life for the better. Instead of allowing the darkness to swallow him whole, he faced his fears and rose to become a hero.

Bruce is a normal human being, a humble hero (Worthington & Allison, 2018) who took a personal oath to become a protector of millions of innocent civilians. He journeys from his comfortable ordinary life to a completely different country just to discern his true path in life. He understands that the world is much broader than he ever imagined and proves that he is committed to only one goal: to keep Gotham safe. His dedication to keeping the people of his city safe is unmatched by any person in his universe. Bruce understands that Gotham city and the world need more than the average hero. They need Batman.

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