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Superheroes, with Big Bad John Sheehy
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Batman's Becoming

The idea of Batman was a response to the death of Bruce Wayne's parents, but the eventual result of this transformation involved many more factors. Everybody knows that Wayne donned his cape and cowl after years of training in order to symbolically avenge the deaths of his parents, but few analyze the elements that turned a man wearing a mask into a legend in human form. Two of the most often cited Batman texts – Frank Miller's Batman: Year One and The Dark Knight returns are commonly referred to as the definitive examples of Batman mythology, but the years that take place between these two texts – the majority of Batman's career – more fully illustrate the forces that drove him to being the mythic figure we see in Miller's Dark Knight Returns.

I: Enemies

“Your fear your own power. You fear your anger...the drive to do great or terrible things.” – R'as Al'Ghul, *Batman Begins*

In Batman: Year One Wayne begins his crusade against Gotham's criminal underworld. While he wears the costume and develops some of his methods, Batman is not yet fully realized at this point. It is not until other figures emerge from the shadowy ether of Gotham's dark side that Batman is able to realize his full potential. The most symbolically powerful of these figures is essentially Batman's own shadow, the Joker.

The Joker embodies all of Batman's key character traits – he is relentless, fearless, incredibly intelligent, and possessed of a super-human amount of willpower. Perhaps more important than all of these is the fact that the Joker, too, had to experience a horrific event to unleash all of these traits. While the Joker's past remains mysterious – another important element of his character – the difference we are allowed to see is that while Batman's personal tragedy happened to somebody else at the hands of a (currently) anonymous criminal, the Joker's happened to him directly, at the hands of Batman. Whatever else happened before this we cannot know, but although it may have been bad, we must assume that he focuses all of it – all of his hatred, pain, and malice – directly at Batman.

The Joker therefore does everything in his power to hurt Batman, whether this involves harming him directly, or as he seems to prefer, harming those around him to harm him psychologically. The Joker uses his remarkable insight to find the things that will hurt Batman the most, then turns them against him in the most painful manner he can manage.

The Joker, therefore, becomes the perfect dramatic opposition to Batman. Sharing all of his most important traits, the Joker is the best able to attack Batman, but he is also able to show us that tragedy alone could not have created Batman; rather, something that was already inside Bruce Wayne reacted to his parents murder and led him to change himself. Something inside the young Wayne chose to change into a personification of justice, just as something inside the man who became the Joker led him to become a personification of chaos. It is not until they find each other, however, that these forces find their opposite and fully define themselves within each respective man.

When he begins fighting the Joker, Batman moves from being a man in a mask into being an identity in himself. Like every aspect of Batman/Bruce Wayne's character, a personification of this duality exists outside of our hero in the form of Two-Face. Two-Face, like Batman and the Joker, also experienced a horrific accident that sent him over the edge. The difference between Two-face and the Joker, however, is that Two-Face managed to hold on to part of himself, as represented by his half-ruined face and body. The warring identities of Two-Face and Harvey Dent, the good man within, show us again what Batman could have been if his tragedy had twisted him toward the bad. Harvey Dent desperately tries to cling to his former self – the District Attorney of Gotham, and a good man. However, his rage, pain, and humiliation at having his face ruined brew an intense hatred inside of him, turning him to violent crime.

The disparity between these two sides of Harvey Dent is more severe than that between Bruce Wayne and Batman, but it serves to illustrate the difficulties involved with living a double life. As Two-Face is forced by his mania to settle his decisions with a coin toss, Bruce Wayne must find a balance between his personal relationships and his duty as Batman. These decisions make for painful balancing acts for both men, though eventually (in Miller's [The Dark Knight Returns](#)) both men finally choose a side permanently. More on this later.

II: Allies

All of Batman's great villains mirror some trait within Batman himself: the Riddler embodies Batman's uncanny detective skills, the Penguin shows a bastardized

version of Wayne's aristocracy, the Scarecrow embodies Batman's use of – indeed, his dependency on – fear against his enemies. These figures all serve to develop Batman's combatative side, but he has just as many figures that bring out the positive aspects of his character as well.

Robin, originally written as a figure who children reading Batman comics could identify with, eventually became a link by which Batman was better able to relate to his own past. Dick Grayson, the boy who became Robin, had a childhood quite unlike that of Bruce Wayne's in that he was raised not as a rich boy, but as the youngest in a family of circus performers. This flamboyant lifestyle served as its own unique sort of training, so when Dick's parents were murdered at the age of twelve he was able to respond more quickly than Bruce. This serves as a double-edged sword for Robin. Whereas Bruce's anger was tempered and reinforced into a more effective tool over the years of his training, Dick's anger at his loss is less controlled. At times this serves to make him more of an outwardly caring character while Bruce is more cold and calculating, but it also makes him reckless and often irresponsible.

The differences between their characters are only magnified by their similarities. Both are possessed of a phenomenal drive to do good, compounded with a profound sense of guilt at failing their parents. Batman deals with this by living vicariously through Dick, trying to make the boy into a "better" version of himself. Dick does not respond well to this pressure, lashing out because he feels he cannot live up to Bruce's standards, in effect failing his new surrogate father just as he had failed his old one.

Despite all of the tension and negative emotion that seems to surround the two of them, Batman is better able to hold on to his Bruce Wayne identity more firmly with the

presence of the ever-emotional Robin. In fact, it seems Robin is actually a necessary component of Batman; every time a Robin leaves (or dies), Bruce does not take too long to recruit a new one. On top of the aid these children give Batman in his crusade against crime, they also keep him from slipping too far away from the rest of Gotham's "normal" citizens.

Similarly, Batman *does* need a love interest that can keep up with him. Bruce Wayne has tried to have relationships, all of which have failed because of the secrecy that must shroud his nocturnal perambulations. Fortunately, Catwoman finds him.

Catwoman embodies a decidedly female spirit that acts as a counterpart to Batman's masculine one. Whereas Batman forces himself to be methodical, calculating, and threatening, Catwoman is capricious, impulsive, and seductive. Though she is a master thief, the two *do* share a similar set of values, protecting the weak and avenging the innocent. Catwoman is the feminine response to all of the traits Batman represses within himself. He is therefore drawn to her inevitably, and she to him. Whereas Batman normally sees women as an unnecessary distraction and Catwoman sees men as simple playthings, both are able to recognize their equal within the other and develop a mutual attraction that fills the otherwise romantic void within them.

James Gordon is also essential to Batman's success both as a crime fighter and as a character. Without Gordon, Batman would be a figure not unlike Alan Moore's anti-hero, Rorschach – alone in his mission, feared and hated not only by his enemies but also by most of his would-be allies. Gordon's help, understanding, and approval allow Batman to function as a positive force in Gotham city rather than a bizarre and dangerous freak marauding the darkened streets in a horned mask.

Gordon – like all of Batman’s allies (and enemies) – represents another facet of Batman’s legendary persona. In Miller’s Batman: Year One, Gordon is shown as the best of the few good cops surrounded by the otherwise corrupt Gotham City Police. Likewise, Batman – even at his best moments a vigilante – is the best of the few good criminals living in Gotham’s underworld. While Gordon usually follows the rules, he understands and respects the need for someone like Batman to work outside of the city’s corrupt law. Conversely, Batman recognizes the need for someone to uphold the law itself, even if it means working with corrupt beaurocrats. Both men serve the ultimate good of the society, but operate within a different set of rules. Batman strikes where the law will not suffice, but Gordon does his best to make sure the law *will* suffice when it is possible.

III. Legend

“I am Vengeance. I am the Night. I am Batman.” – Batman, Batman: The Animated Series

All of these figures and ideas aim toward an ultimate goal – a final result that must become more than the sum of its parts. This is where Batman moves from being a Halloween mask to being a legend made flesh. Unlike Superman, or Alan Moore’s Doc Manhattan, Batman is not born or created accidentally; Batman is forged. He is forged in the minds of his enemies, and those of his allies. He is forged in the eyes of the media and the pounding hearts of the criminals upon which he preys. Most importantly, Batman is forged within the very soul of Bruce Wayne.

In year one, Bruce Wayne struggles desperately to find the right way to put his training to use. He muses to himself as he kicks a tree apart in his yard, thinking:

“I’m not ready. I have the means, the skill – but not the method...No, that’s not true. I have hundreds of methods. But something’s missing...Something’s not right. I have to wait. I have to wait...” Miller, Batman: Year One, 7.

But he cannot wait. The monstrous thing growing inside of him will not be silenced, and he must act. After a botched attempt at saving a girl from a violent pimp, Bruce Wayne is left seriously wounded and considers letting himself die for being such an amateur...until he sees a sign. A bat crashes through the window, reminding him of an experience as a boy where he was attacked by a swarm of bats in a cave in his yard. As he recalls his fear – his *terror* – at this attack in his youth, he finally sees the face of the beast within himself. He grins to himself, speaking to the memory of his father “...yes father. I shall become a bat.” (Miller, Year One, 22)

During the course of the book, Batman slowly emerges from the shadows of Wayne’s tormented psyche. Though his attempts are initially clumsy, we *do* see something of the Batman we know tearing through. Perhaps the most stunning of these moments comes when Batman threatens a drug dealer, growling:

“You can never escape me. Bullets don’t harm me. Nothing harms me. But I know pain. I know pain. Sometimes I share it. With someone like you.” – Miller, 78

In this moment we see Bruce Wayne clearly identifying himself as something more than a man, or even a winged creature of the night. He identifies himself as something invulnerable, immortal, and inevitable. He identifies himself as a myth, and over the course of his life as Batman, it becomes truer and truer until he has no Bruce Wayne left in him.

This is most clear in Frank Miller’s revolutionary The Darn Knight Returns. In this story, Bruce Wayne has, by necessity, quit being Batman for ten years. As he ages, he realizes that Batman had become more a part of him than Bruce Wayne, and lashes out at himself, risking his life unnecessarily racing cars and the like, no longer valuing his

existence. Eventually, he comes to a breaking point and, as the title suggests, returns as Batman.

At this point Batman is clearly legendary in the criminal's eyes – to the point where many of the younger ones do not even believe in him....until they see him. Soon rumors abound about how – or why – he may have returned, and he becomes a force of terror among Gotham's newer and less experienced criminals. Wayne has never felt better.

The extent of his transformation into Batman is demonstrated most powerfully in his final confrontation with Two-Face, who has gone through plastic surgery to fix his ruined face and body. Psychologists assume that repairing his destroyed body will repair his shattered mind, but this turns out to be false. The second he is released, Two-Face turns back to violent crime once more.

Batman does not want to believe this, however, as Harvey Dent was a good friend of his. He goes after Two-Face – whose face is obscured by bandages – and captures him. He tears away the bandages, *needing* to see his face, needing to know if it really is Harvey once again. Their exchange is unforgettable:

“Dent: “Take a look...Have a laugh. I'm fixed all right. At least...both sides match.”
Batman: (internal) I close my eyes and listen. Not fooled by sight, I see him as he is. —Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns*, 55

The panel shows Batman closing his eyes, and seeing the scarred and terrible visage of Two-Face, having consumed Harvey Dent entirely at last. Just under the panel depicting Two-Face's burned and disgusting face, we see the face of a bat, all shadows and hellfire, screaming out at us. Batman says to Harvey “I see... a *reflection*, Harvey. A reflection.” (Miller, 55)

Seeing Harvey consumed fully at last, Batman realizes that, as always, Harvey merely serves as a physical reminder of his own dual nature. Both have been entirely consumed by the fearsome shadows within themselves.

At the end of the book, Batman destroys Wayne manor and reveals himself to the public even as he fakes his own death. In this manner, he is able to do away with his duality at last. Beyond this, in symbolically destroying his physical self, he fully assumes the mythic role of Batman, no longer tied to a physical form but purely as an idea – a nightmare for those who prey on the weak. The very end of the story shows him training an army of youths in the ways of the Batman.

His life as Batman, and those who contribute to the Batman identity, whether they be friend or foe, all slowly strip away Bruce Wayne from the bat that has lived in him since he was a boy. In a world as twisted and dangerous as Gotham, Batman seems to be not only useful, but completely *necessary* to the very life of the city. The legend of The Batman has become so strong as to become a legend even within our own culture.