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Batman Begins: "My Enemies Will Share My Dread"

by Patrick Caulfield

(English 1101)

The Assignment: The assignment was to write an essay of evaluation on a film, book or restaurant. The essay was to state a judgment, which is based on generally accepted criteria, and to support that judgment with examples. The review was to be written for a general audience.

For almost seventy years, the crime-fighting adventures of Batman have captivated young and old alike. Only brief glimpses of Batman's youth have been shared with his fans on film and in the comics. In 2005, Batman's origin story was finally told; acclaimed director Christopher Nolan co-wrote the film *Batman Begins* with David S. Goyer. The film brings new elements to the Batman character that Bob Kane created in the 1930's. Excellent casting and performances enhance the rich and dark story of how Bruce Wayne turns his own greatest fear against evil-doers who pry on the vulnerable in Gotham City. The result is a compelling and believable drama that I feel both men and women would enjoy.

The film begins with a childhood memory in which young Bruce Wayne is playing at his family's manor with his friend, Rachel. Bruce accidentally falls down a well, which is the entrance to a cave where numerous bats dwell. As Bruce is surrounded by a whirlwind of screeching bats, he develops an intense fear of the creatures. After Bruce is rescued from the well, he is comforted by his father, Thomas Wayne. Thomas explains to his flustered son that the bats are just as afraid of him as he is of them and that, "all creatures are afraid of something". Using heartwarming scenes such as this, Nolan and Goyer do a wonderful job of portraying the family closeness of Bruce's early years. Soothing music provided by Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard adds a soft touch to these scenes. However, make no mistake; the story of young Bruce's transformation into Batman, the Dark Knight, is a solemn tale.

One of the best attributes of the film is that audiences do not need to know anything about Batman to understand and enjoy the story. Nolan and Goyer nicely incorporate key events from Bruce Wayne's history that are known and fill in the gaps with their own interpretation of how Bruce transforms into Batman. The result is thoroughly entertaining. Most of the credit goes to Goyer, who is known for writing the *Blade* trilogy. Obviously, Goyer has considerable talent at portraying dark characters, and he creates a thrilling origin story for Batman. Men are typically fans of the Batman franchise, but I feel that the rich story of *Batman Begins* will interest women as well.

Bruce witnesses the murder of his loving parents when he is eight years old. As he matures into a young man, Bruce (Christian Bale) blames himself for the death of his parents and plans to seek vengeance against their murderer. He shares his thoughts with Rachel (Katie Holmes), who is the current assistant district attorney of Gotham. Rachel tells Bruce that his parents did not raise him to be a vengeful person, and his father would be ashamed of him. This is a turning point for Bruce; as Gotham is now being dominated by crime bosses and corrupt politicians, he realizes that retaliation is not the solution. He knows that his parents helped the less fortunate and resisted corruption in Gotham. Bruce decides that he must continue his parents' kindhearted efforts and steadfastness.

Bruce Wayne vanishes from Gotham and secretly wanders the world, seeking to understand the ways of the criminal mind. He lives among criminals in Asia and learns that they experience fear before they commit a crime and the thrill of success afterwards. Bruce is recruited by a group of

vigilantes known as the League of Shadows, headed by a mysterious leader named Ra's al Ghul (Ken Watanabe). While training in their snowy mountain retreat, Bruce is mentored by a man named Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson) in the mastery of various physical and mental disciplines; these skills will empower Bruce to help fight injustice. Neeson is perfect for this role, having played a Jedi master in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* who similarly teaches this student how to use the power of the force to maintain peace in the galaxy. Ducard teaches Bruce that the criminal mind is not complicated, and if he wishes to manipulate the fear of others, Bruce must first learn to master his own fears.

Nolan does an excellent job of limiting the number of computer-generated images in the film; as a result, the story maintains a sense of realism. The wintry Asian mountains through which Bruce journeys are simply breathtaking. If you pay close attention, you will recognize a number of downtown Chicago buildings and Lower Wacker Drive in Gotham.

Bale's effortless transformation into the caped crusader is credited to the performances of his supporting actors. Michael Caine plays the Wayne family butler, Alfred, who never loses hope that Bruce will achieve great things in life. Cool batgadgets are provided by Morgan Freeman who plays Lucius Fox, a gifted inventor at Wayne Enterprises. The good cop, James Gordon, is played by Gary Oldham. As the bad guy, Cillian Murphy brings a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde performance to the story with his Dr. Crane and Scarecrow characters. This scariness comes from his eyes; he looks as though he is hiding something evil deep inside. If the eyes are truly the windows to the soul, then believe me, you do not want to meet Murphy in Scarecrow mode in a dark alley.

Other superhero movies feature characters that possess superpowers to help them fight villains. For example, in the 2000 movies *The X-Men* directed by Bryan Singer, one character emits a laser beam from his eyes, while another commands the weather. Batman has no superpowers; instead, he has only world-class athleticism, lightning-sharp intelligence, and a personal armory of cool gadgets to aid him. Batman relies on the batsuit for protection, as well as to intimidate bad guys. Even if Bruce did not use a batsuit or any batgadgets, he would still be very effective in battling bad guys, as witnessed in several scenes throughout the film. This is why I feel that audiences will relate to the story of *Batman Begins* as believable in some respects. Except for having wealthy parents, Bruce is simply a regular person who can bruise and bleed like the rest of us.

In 1989, Tim Burton directed the movie *Batman* with Michael Keaton as Batman. Keaton did a near perfect job of filling the boots of the Dark Knight, except he lacked the physical stature and sheer determination of the character. Without the batsuit, Keaton would have his hands full trying to beat-up Alfred. Bale, on the other hand, gained sixty pounds of muscle for *Batman Begins* and plays the part perfectly, transforming into a tormented, angry, menacing figure that commands both fear and respect. Batman is more serious and determined than audiences have ever seen him before. The mouth beneath the mask is most distinctive since Michael Keaton's, and Bale's Bat voice is strong and deep. Tim Burton's Batman movies are considered dark, but they pale in comparison to Nolan's and Goyer's vision. Nolan and Goyer have reinvented a franchise that was all but left for dead after the 1997 flop *Batman and Robin*.

Bruce Wayne is committed to showing the people of Gotham that the city does not belong to criminals and the corrupt. Bruce realizes that as flesh and blood, he can be ignored, destroyed, and have those he loves put in harm's way. Bruce chooses to portray himself as a bat because, as a symbol, he will be incorruptible and everlasting. The villains of Gotham come to fear Batman, just as Bruce feared bats as a young boy.

Batman Begins works on multiple levels, something that other films in the franchise failed to do. Its thrilling plot shows how one man handles his feelings of fear, love, madness, corruption, greed, power, and revenge. *Batman Begins* is absolutely compelling entertainment that I highly recommend.

Works Cited

Batman Begins. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Michael Caine and Liam Neeson. 2005. DVD. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005.