

Batman: Psychic Trauma and Its Solution

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People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning in life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive.
—Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* 3

In May 1939, a new superhero was introduced in *Detective Comics* (Kane). Unlike his alien predecessor, Superman, this hero was human and vulnerable. His name was Bruce Wayne. Through hard work, he disciplined his mind for science and his body for strength. His huge inheritance provided the means to equip a crime fighter's laboratory on a grand scale, while maintaining secrecy. Searching for a symbol both to frighten others and to mask himself, Wayne chose the bat. However, he did not consciously choose his life's work. Witnessing with "shocked eyes" his parents' murders, Bruce vowed to avenge their deaths with a war on crime. Thus, Batman was born.

Bob Kane, his creator, had a hit comic, and more than 50 years later the success continues. As *Batman The Movie* grosses \$50 million in just 10 days, a new generation watches reruns of Batman on television, and a new darker version of the caped crusader in comic book form now sells for \$12.95. While studied previously from an economic, artistic, and cinematic perspective, certainly a psychological evaluation of Batman is warranted.¹

Psychic Trauma

The film tells the story backwards, beginning with the solution—Batman rescuing a family—and climaxing with the problem—Wayne's helpless witnessing of his parents' murders.

In her review of the film, Pauline Kael praises Michael Keaton's portrayal of Bruce Wayne (Batman) as the only human being in the movie, giving his role gravity and emotional coloring. I agree when she states, "This is a man whose mission has taken over his life" (84).

The first Batman story appeared in comic book form. *The Legend of The Batman and How He Came to Be* more clearly illustrates the trauma

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and the preparation for the mission. In the first comic panel, the Wayne family is confronted by a robber who approaches Mrs. Wayne. The father begins to protect his wife and in the second and third panels, we see the villain murder Dr. and Mrs. Wayne. We see the back of Bruce's head, while he is watching the entire scene from a direct frontal position. The next two panels are of Bruce with wide tearful eyes, viewing the horror before him (Kane 1).

Freud's work on psychic trauma remains valuable in understanding Bruce's mental state (Freud, Sigmund 7-16). Freud wrote about the flooding of the psychic apparatus with large amounts of stimuli and the helplessness experienced when the ego is overwhelmed. Anna Freud focused more on the helplessness of the ego and felt that "suddenness and unexpectedness" are essential, as well as tangible signs of the disruption of the ego. She highlights the importance of developmental concerns and describes how external trauma can be converted into internal trauma if the trauma fulfills either deep-seated anxieties or wishes. She feels that a truly traumatic event is never fully resolved and may show up later in life (Freud, Anna 222-23). We don't know from the film what immediately happens to young Bruce. Late in the movie, reporter Knox is reviewing old newspapers about the Wayne family tragedy. As he does, we can only rhetorically question what something like this does to a kid.

In her article "Children of Chowchilla," Lenore Terr attempts to answer that exact question when she describes the kidnapping of 26 children in the summer of 1976 and the long-term sequela for them and their families. The children, ranging in age from 5 to 14, were held for 26 hours, transferred from their school bus to two vans, then placed in a hole in the ground, remaining buried with the bus driver for 16 hours (552). While the children did not experience any of the physical responses or emotional reactions anticipated by Anna Freud, such as paralysis and numbness of feeling, they did show signs of ego misperception and hallucinations. The children also developed long-term fears, cognitive dysfunctions and problems with repetitive, monotonous ineffective play (554-60).

Unlike the Chowchilla kidnapping, Lifton and Olson describe a trauma where people died, as did Bruce Wayne's parents. The authors enumerated the various sequela of the Buffalo Creek Disaster. This flood resulted from the dumping of coal in a mountain stream. A subsequent "wall of black water" killed 125 people and left 5,000 homeless. The victims described feeling beyond protest and despair (1). There was a lack of continuity and connectedness. Healing did not take place in Buffalo Creek and people became mentally disturbed. Lifton and Olson

believe that the regenerative ability of the ego is not limitless, and some traumas are beyond repair (16). The suddenness of the flood, the isolation of the community, and the irresponsibility of authority all caused a shattering of the illusion of invulnerability. This same effect occurs when children experience a parental death, divorce, are sexually abused, or are very ill. The shield of protective innocence cracks. The child is even more devastated by the helplessness he perceives in his parents. A sense of trust in the world is lost.

Bruce Wayne, like most of Lifton's and Olson's subjects, is a survivor. The investigators at Buffalo Creek reported on a phenomena termed "death guilt," a state of mind the same researchers witnessed while studying Holocaust and Hiroshima victims (3). Survivors blame themselves for having lived while others died. People with "death guilt" feel they should have saved those who perished. The guilt can become even more severe if the survivors feel they were spared as a result of someone else's death. This guilt infused itself into both the dream-state and waking hours of the survivors' lives. As portrayed so well in the movie *The Pawnbroker*, these people are "living a half-life devoid of pleasure and with limited vitality" (5).

This guilt is also described by Mary Bergen in a case report of a four-year-old child who "got out" before her father murdered her mother (407-29). It is also dramatically depicted in Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Wonderland*, where Jesse goes to school, only to return home to find his family murdered.

Imagine the plight of "lucky" Bruce in *Batman* as he escapes the robber's gun because there is no time to kill him. He escapes death because the time was used to murder his parents.

The Solution

The original comic describes how young Wayne almost immediately integrates this tragedy. In a prayer-like position with a candle highlighting the solemnity of the occasion, Bruce vows to dedicate his life to fighting crime. Perhaps Bruce's premorbid personality was intact enough to bear any blow, hence his quick recovery. But the solution, because of its quickness (the creation of a Batman) indicates problems and perhaps even a pseudo-recovery. It is both bizarre and psychologically over-determined.

The Chowchilla study described compensatory fantasies that the youngsters had about their trauma. Actual fantasies of revenge were observed in six of the 23 children. They wanted the kidnapers starved, put in a hole, and subjected to a firing squad and finally placed in a gas chamber (Terr 597).

Fantasies of heroism or omnipotence were observed in five of the Chowchilla children. Several engaged in large-scale heroic and religious daydreams. Bob, the real hero who climbed out of the pit and went for help, reenacted his heroism in a dangerous manner 18 months after the kidnapping. When a Japanese tourist's car broke down near his family's property, Bob shot him, believing that the man meant to harm his parents. He didn't wait as he had done during the kidnapping; he acted quickly. Fortunately, the tourist was not seriously injured (Terr 598).

Bruce Wayne's vow to fight crime is a compensatory wish. He identified with the aggressor and like Bob's BB gun assault, he acted out this wish in the movie's first scene. There is a conversion from the passive child to an active mastery of the adult Batman who now renders the robbers helpless. As seen in the original comic-book story, young Bruce uses sublimation to harness his rage and anger. He controls his impulses by learning to become a master scientist and by training to achieve the prowess of a superb athlete.

As part of the crime-fighter project, Bruce chooses a symbol to represent his mission, perhaps to serve as a constant reminder, a signal to scare criminals. Bruce may after all have understood Proustian involuntary memory triggers. Rado writes of certain sensory stimuli evoking the original psychic trauma (362-68), where certain objects and odors remind the victims of their personal nightmares. The children of Chowchilla avoided the stale smell of basements reminiscent of the hole of their captivity and refused to eat peanut butter, the only food the kidnapers gave them.

Bruce chooses a bat as one flies in the window, seeing its appearance as an omen. The Chowchilla children and their parents also post-traumatically looked more closely for omens. The seating arrangement on the bus or fights with a parent on the day of the kidnapping all held special meaning (Terr 618). Interpreting the most commonplace omens as signals was an effort to predict and control terrible events. It is then not really odd that several panels after Bruce accuses criminals of being superstitious, he, himself, is influenced by an omen.

The bat has long been a symbol of superstition and folklore. Bats also have the ability for true flight that has enabled this mammal, like Bruce Wayne, to survive.²

In the beginning of *Batman The Movie*, the audience feels the sensation of flying. This is not the same smooth experience of flying that one has while viewing *Star Wars* or *Superman*. The flight is constantly shifting, and the audience gets a feel for the blindness of a bat. One can only speculate as to Bruce's need not to see or possibly to see with

another sense when others cannot. Because he witnessed his parents' murders, Bruce may want to cover his eyes. Both Feiffer, who has done remarkable work on the comic superheroes, and Kael remark on how the Batman mask reveals only eye slits in the comic and movie (Feiffer 25; Kael 83). Again, is it an attempt at blindness or as with the use of sunglasses, to avoid being seen? Is it a paranoid notion, where one sees but is not seen? But what is the significance of Bruce in the movie, looking through a one-way mirror and his video taping everything that occurs in the mansion. Even the Batman logo for the movie has confused and frustrated its audiences. One has to be very field independent to pick the bat out of the background. Some see teeth or even Mickey Mouse, but no bat. It is another perceptual trick, similar to the U.S. Air Force's use of a bat-like design for the B-2 Stealth bomber.

Nonintegrated Personality

When we first meet Bruce Wayne in the movie, he is in a fog-like state. At a party, he is distracted and constantly being helped by Alfred, his loyal butler and caretaker. Although immediately attracted to Vicki Vale, he is nonresponsive when she asks if he knows who Bruce Wayne is. Apparently Bruce does not. His first date with Vicki starts absurdly. Vicki refers to some of the things in the mansion as "not you." Bruce replies that "some of it is." Bruce exudes a sense of loneliness and preoccupation. He appears to be half-dead with "limited vitality." Even after sex with Vicki, we find him hanging from a bar like a bat, trying to relax, probably not able to feel real pleasure, like many survivors.

The next day we find Bruce in even more of a trance, going through a set of rituals at the site of his parents' murders. Being more connected to the event, he honors the site of their deaths, not his parents. Still acting as though in a dream, Bruce stumbles on the Joker and his men assassinating a fellow mob boss. Bruce seems unaware of the flying bullets, and the Joker regards his indifference with a puzzled expression.

Later with Vicki Vale at her apartment, Bruce tries to tell Vicki that he is Batman. He stutters and fails, but succeeds in tricking the Joker to shoot into a silver plate. Bruce looks less foolish and is really not kidding when the Joker recognizes him as "Bruce Wayne" and Bruce says "sometimes." Batman begins to emerge in full force now, taking over Wayne's persona.

Pauline Kael is in error when she states that the "picture doesn't give us any help on the question of why Bruce Wayne is creating an alternative identity" (84). Bruce needs the extra identity to heal and act out his rage. He needs the menacing armored costume and various Bat toys. This equipment allows Wayne to overcome his inhibitions and be

active. He is no longer depressed, a bumbler, a half person. When he says "I'm Batman," he is no longer uncertain. Batman is more pathological than a Halloween or Mardi Gras costume but less than a Mr. Hyde or Son of Sam. Bruce appears to be in the throes of a dissociative phenomenon, but not a total identity diffusion. In fact, at this point in the movie, various aspects of his character seem to fuse, seemingly in response to Vicki's love. He appears quite serious and is dressed in black, moving ever closer to his Batman identity. In fact, after he recognizes the truth about his parents' murders, Bruce Wayne no longer appears in the film. There is now only Batman.

The trauma of his parents' deaths is filmed in slow motion from a low angle as if in the mind's eye of a child who sees the danger first. It is no wonder that during the exciting battle that ends the film, when the Joker accuses Batman of "making me," Bruce replies, "You killed my parents, you made be first." He is one, Bruce Wayne and Batman. He is alive. But is he cured? No. The film closes with a bright Batman signal. Things are clearer but nothing has been resolved. As the beautiful Vicki goes off in the Rolls Royce with champagne, accompanied by Alfred, we see Batman standing alone, on guard, mission not completed, masochistically isolated, staring out at the night.

Discussion

Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist, comic-book basher, and author of *Seduction of the Innocent* (whose chapters include "Retooling for Illiteracy," "Design for Delinquency," and "Homicide at Home") not so innocently stresses the homoerotic appearance of Batman and his young sidekick Robin. They spend their time rescuing each other and living an idyllic life in the Wayne mansion. Dr. Wertham believes the story line is a "wish dream" of homosexuals (190). He does not believe that the colorful red-and-green-costumed Robin was created to brighten up the gloomy dark Batman, nor to serve as a source of identification for young adolescents. Wertham describes the violence and the anti-feminism of the character. He relates numerous clinical anecdotes about homosexuals who identify with Robin (192).

Dr. Wertham seems all wrong. The issue of Batman is not one of sexual orientation, but more of a question of balance. There is a lack of sexual interest, all sublimated into his rage and crime-fighting.

Jules Feiffer focuses more on Batman's humanness. He bleeds, he hurts and needs to persevere to triumph over adversity. Since Batman is human, it is easier for children to identify with Batman than the immortal heroes with various superpowers. Feiffer even suspects that kids involved with Batman have "healthier egos." To be a fan of Super-

man, however, was safer. You didn't have to be good in science (as was Batman) to escape from a tight situation. Super-strength or x-ray vision was enough. Batman stressed the ideals of hard work and maximum effort. Comic book critic Feiffer also credits Batman's initial popularity to Bob Kane's superior story lines, great villains and what he calls a cinematic (how prophetic) eye in his drawings with angle shots and long shadows (27).

In her masterful explanation of Superman as a modern-day myth, Elaine Caruth begins to appreciate developmental forces as the appeal of the early comic-book heroes. "The comic books, specifically the action comics with which I am primarily concerned here, are of particular appeal to the older latency and preadolescent child who is in more of a transitional phase between primary and secondary fantasy interests, between infantile sexuality and latency, between role playing and identity formation" (8). To appreciate Superman, primary process must predominate because of its reliance on prelogical magical thinking. It is the thinking of dreams and fairy tales, x-ray vision and Krypton.

Batman's appeal relates to secondary processes. More realistic, it is plausible and human. Even gravity works. While its young audiences struggle between primary and secondary process thinking, Batman may help toward the realistic shift and a stronger ego.

Caruth disagrees with Wertham in declaring comics to be an "integral part of today's literature for children...and [fulfilling] an important psychic function" (10). Like myths and fairy tales, they provide an externalization of inner conflicts. The child can see his inner difficulties more clearly and reflect on a variety of solutions.

Bender and Lourie agree with Caruth in describing Tess who used the "funnies" to clarify personal problems, like Batman providing the basic psychological truth of trauma. They note the identification and catharsis that comics provide for some readers and sum up their work by declaring "comics [are] the folklore of their time" (550).

Batman successfully plugs into the unconscious of its vast audience because its psychology remains credible. Batman's symptoms, personality fragmenting, and recovery, are all consistent with the psychiatric trauma literature, specifically the work of Terr and Lifton and Olson. As a result, the Batman character, like his alter ego Bruce Wayne, has survived comics, television, and the movies. His traumatized childhood also serves to make Batman a true myth. From his isolation and his trials, to his metaphorical elements including his transcendence into the sublime and mysterious, this durable pop-culture hero sheds light on all our stories.

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Notes

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¹For these references, see Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (New York: Bonanza, 1982). L. Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza, 1971); and Pauline Kael, "The City Gone Psycho," *The New Yorker*, 10 July 1989: 83-85.

²This definition was taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia* 1975 ed., s.v. "A.N. Chiroptera."

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