
Study Guide

The Dark Knight



Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in *The Dark Knight* episode of *Beyond the Screen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

Plot synopsis: Billionaire Bruce Wayne has invented a superhero secret identity to frighten criminals and inspire citizens. His plans go awry when copycat Batman get in his way and an anarchist takes over the mob.

When he tries to shift the responsibility of law enforcement back onto the police and legal system, things get worse instead of better.

'In their desperation, they turned to a man they didn't fully understand.'

A. Prequel Knowledge

The same creative team, including director, writer, cinematographer, composer, costume design and production design, worked on *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*.

What information from *Batman Begins* helps viewers make sense of the characters and actions in *The Dark Knight*?

What themes and characterizations from *Batman Begins* are continued and developed in *The Dark Knight*?

Rachel Dawes was played by Katie Holmes in *Batman Begins* and by Maggie Gyllenhaal in *The Dark Knight*. Did the two actors represent Rachel in the same ways, or were there significant differences in their interpretations of the role? Explain.

Why might audiences be attracted to *The Dark Knight* if they knew that the same creative team had made *Batman Begins*?

B. Music

Batman and The Joker have different musical themes. Batman's theme has rapid-bowed, regular strings with strong drumbeats. The melody moves slowly, step-by-step through the scale.

Do you hear non-musical sounds in Batman's theme, e.g., the flutter of wings?

How does this music make you feel? How does the music represent Batman's character?

Does the music inspire audiences to like Batman? Have confidence in him?

Does the music make it hard to look away from the screen? Why?

The Joker's theme is very unusual. Some viewers might think it is not musical because it has no beat and no discernable melody. The theme starts with a low buzz and gradually slides up the scale, moving through rather than onto notes as it crescendos (gets louder and louder). The instruments used to create the theme are hard to identify.

How does this music make you feel? How does the music represent The Joker's character?

Does the music inspire audiences to fear The Joker?

Does the music make it hard to look away from the screen? Why?

Does a steadily rising and loudening note match the anarchistic quality of The Joker's personality?

Might a cacophony of unorganized sounds, such as what you might hear as an orchestra warms up, have better represented the Joker's insanity? Why?

The film uses The Joker's theme when he appears to wreak havoc. It also uses the theme in the scene where groups of people on two ferries are invited by The Joker to decide one another's fates. As one passenger volunteers to detonate the bomb that will destroy the other boat, The Joker's theme begins and continues as the passenger picks the detonator out of its box. The Joker is not on the boat.

Why might the movie use The Joker's theme if he were not present?

How might audiences interpret The Joker's theme at this point?

C. Editing

1. Parallel editing

Parallel editing occurs when two events are intercut with one another, so that audiences see alternating scenes from each story.

Parallel editing is used to suggest that two stories are developing simultaneously and to enhance suspense. It can also be used to have one event contrast to or comment on the one with which it is intercut.

When is parallel editing used in *The Dark Knight* to develop simultaneous stories?

When is parallel editing used to create suspense?

When is parallel editing used for both?

Parallel editing is used effectively when Alfred reads Rachel's letter to Bruce.

What other events are intercut with Rachel's voice?

How does parallel editing add to the power and meaning of each scene?

2. Continuity editing

Action scenes are usually built from many short shots. The short shots have been used to allow the camera to focus on key actions and to ensure the safety of actors and stunt persons. The many short shots must then be assembled into what audiences will believe is one continuous series of events. Editors must choose shots and make cuts that will feel continuous and will not cause audiences to become disoriented.

How did continuity editing help audiences believe that the attacks on Harvey Dent's paddy wagon was one continu-

ous chase through the streets of Gotham?

How did continuity editing (and dialogue between Batman and Lucius Fox) help audiences believe that Batman saving the clown-masked hostages from the SWAT teams was a continuous action?

D. Cinematography

1. 360 Degree Camera Sweep

Two of the ongoing themes in *The Dark Knight* are that things are rarely what they seem and perspective (point of view) changes our understanding of reality. The cinematographer used a 360 camera sweep (the camera circling continuously around characters) in several scenes.

How might this camera move help viewers understand that perspective changes our understanding of reality?

Which scene used the 360 camera sweep most effectively? Why?

2. DIY Video

The Joker sends two videos to GCN (Gotham City News). One shows the fate of Brian Douglas, a Batman copycat. The other one shows the fate of Mike Engels, a reporter who went missing in the hospital explosion.

How did the cinematographer use camera movement and framing to indicate that the videos were made by an amateur with only one camera?

3. Hand-held Camera

Hand-held cameras are the hallmark of news and documentary reports and often send the message that the video is unrehearsed. Movie cinematographers use hand-held cameras when they want audiences to feel the excitement of a scene, e.g., in fights or battles.

The Dark Knight uses hand-held cameras during its many fight scenes, but it uses them at other times as well. One of these times is the scene in which the Joker and his henchmen invade Bruce Wayne's Harvey Dent Fundraiser. The camera is hand-held when The Joker is terrorizing the guests, but not when Bruce Wayne disarms a henchman or disappears behind a panel in his bedroom wall.

Why might the cinematographer have used a steady camera for Bruce Wayne but a hand-held camera for The Joker?

Where else did you notice hand-held camera use? Why was it effective?

E. Villains and Heroes and Villains Again

1. Values And Behaviours

The Dark Knight provides audiences with wonderful opportunities to consider some very profound questions about values and behaviours:

What is good and what is evil?

What is a hero and what is a villain?

Do heroes inspire others to do good things, or to let the heroes do the dirty work?

Can a hero do evil things?

Can a villain do good things?

Do villains expose others' villainy and hypocrisy?

Who decides what is good and bad, hero and villain?

2. Vigilantism

Batman is a vigilante, meaning that he operates outside the law, without permission to break the speed limit, destroy property or assault anyone. He is technically a criminal, and is wanted by the Gotham police.

How can Batman be a criminal AND a hero?

What have the Gotham police done (or not done) that makes a vigilante in Gotham necessary or justifiable?

What have the people of Gotham done (or not done) that makes a vigilante in Gotham necessary or justifiable?

Does *The Dark Knight* send the message to audiences that vigilantism is OK if the authorities are not fulfilling their duties to the people?

If Batman thinks that his vigilantism is justified, and is hoping to inspire the people of Gotham to fight crime, why does he attack rather than encourage the copycat Batmen at the beginning of the movie?

How might Batman have helped the copycat Batmen redirect their good intentions to become the kind of citizens he wants to see in Gotham?

3. 'You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become a villain.'

Harvey Dent predicts events in the story when he tells Bruce Wayne, 'You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become a villain.'

How does this prediction play out for Harvey Dent? Jim Gordon? Rachel Dawes? Batman?

4. 'Madness is like gravity. All it takes is a little push.'

The Joker helps Bruce Wayne understand some very important ideas. He tells Batman, 'Madness is like gravity. All it takes is a little push.'

How does The Joker's statement apply to the mob bosses? Bruce Wayne? Harvey Dent? The ferry passengers? Detective Ramirez? Constable Berg?

What other stories do you know that demonstrate the truth of The Joker's statement? How does The Joker's statement apply to experiences in your own life?

5. Anarchy

Maroni tells Batman he is not as afraid of him as he is of The Joker because, 'He (The Joker) has no rules.' Do you agree that The Joker has no rules, no reason to act the way he does?

What might The Joker mean when he says, 'It's not about money. It's about sending a message?'

What message might The Joker be sending?

What other clues does the movie provide that shows audiences that The Joker has rules?

Batman tells The Joker that he only has one rule. The Joker replies, "Then you'll have to break it."

What is Batman's rule? Why must he break it to defeat The Joker?

6. What is heroism?

'I have one rule.'

'Then you're going to have to break it.'

Does Batman break his one rule?

Does Batman break his one rule directly? Indirectly?

Is Batman responsible for deaths because he allows others to act?

Is Batman responsible for the deaths of Rachel and Harvey?

Bruce Wayne has great difficulty deciding how to define Batman's heroism.

He is disappointed when he sees the copycat Batmen and mortified when his actions contribute to Rachel's death.

He decides to shut down the Bat Cave and cease his Batman activities.

Bruce and Alfred dialogue about Batman's next move. Alfred helps Bruce to understand that Batman can be more than a hero, making choices and taking actions that the police cannot. Alfred tells Bruce, 'The outcast can make the choice that no one else can.'

How does Batman become more than a hero?

Who else in literature declined the opportunity to be a hero to become something more?

What is the cost of becoming more than a hero?

F. Mediated Experiences

The Dark Knight uses mediated experiences often to help tell its story. How many can you recall? Did your list include newscasts, talk shows, phone calls, text messages, press conferences, newspaper articles, internet searches and online communications?

Which of these mediated experiences did you think were the most effective? Why?

Did you think that any of them were too artificial? Why?

The Joker sends two videos to GCN (Gotham City News). One shows the fate of Brian Douglas, a Batman copycat.

The other one shows the fate of Mike Engels, a reporter who went missing in the hospital explosion.

How do these videos help viewers understand The Joker's character?

How do they help to tell the story?

Do you think the movie might have effectively used a social networking website such as Facebook?

Which characters would definitely NOT have social network accounts?

Which characters might have social network accounts?

What might their pages look like?

How might the movie have used their pages to tell its story?

G. Sequel Setup

We know that there is a long-standing Batman franchise, i.e., a long history of Batman movies that will continue into the future. We also know that *The Dark Knight* has been successful critically (94% good on rottentomatoes.com) and financially. These factors ensure that the creative team will be invited to produce the next Batman movie.

Some of the major characters are dead at the end of *The Dark Knight*, but many are still alive.

What 'loose ends' have been left at the end of *The Dark Knight* that might be story opportunities for the next Batman movie?

If Christian Bale was not cast to play Batman again, who might be able to successfully replace him? Why?

Jim Gordon's role greatly expanded from *Batman Begins* to *The Dark Knight*. How might the next Batman story develop his character in new and exciting ways?

Gary Oldman, who plays Jim Gordon, has said that he would like to try The Joker role. Might it be believable if Jim Gordon were infected with a mystery disease that turned him into The Joker?

Does Bruce Wayne require a love interest, or could his character be successfully *uninvolved* with a woman? Who might be his new love interest? Why?

How might Bruce Wayne's new love interest help viewers understand his character and move the plot?

Heath Ledger created a masterful and chilling Joker. Should the sequel present a new Joker or a completely different villain?

If there were a new Joker, would fans be attracted to the movie to see how well the new actor had captured Ledger's portrayal, or would they be so distracted by comparing his performance with Ledger's that they would not enjoy the new movie?

If there were a new Joker, whom would you want to be auditioned: Brad Pitt? Jim Carrey? Tobey Maguire? Corey Haim? Justin Timberlake? Jake Gyllenhaal? Ryan Gosling? Scott Speedman? Adrien Brody? Forrest Whittaker? Ewen Macgregor? Hayden Christensen? Don Cheadle? Alec Baldwin? Seth Rogen? Michael Jackson?

Which of these actors would be the best choice to attract an audience?

For more information on *The Dark Knight*, visit www.thedarkknight.warnerbros.com