

# THE DARK KNIGHT

Directed by Christopher Nolan  
Produced by Christopher Nolan, Charles Roven, and Emma Thomas  
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures  
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**W**e revere the truth. Liars are despised, along with hypocrites and anyone who isn't 'true to himself.'

But are not liars necessary?

Consider the President. He knows a great deal that is secret about the threats to the country, including his own preferences for responding to those threats.

Yet he is often asked about how the country is situated strategically. Now, a lot of issues have only two possible outcomes. And for those issues with only two outcomes, one answer is humdrum (we will continue negotiations) while the other is explosive (we will attack).

Unless the President has established a pattern of not answering innocuous questions ("Mr. President, will you be taking your dog to Camp David?"/"No comment") then when the President declines to answer a serious yes/no question, the answer would seem obvious ("We will attack").

Thus, the President is forced to lie.

Is the truth necessary?

Where the defining theme of *Batman Begins* was fear, the defining theme of *The Dark Knight* is trust. Lies corrode trust, and without trust there can be no order for, eventually, each man will live totally for himself, never letting his guard down.

The key is hiding the lie.

*The Dark Knight* reminds us that the truth should be preserved at all costs only if it is the supreme value. For if another value such as security comes into conflict with the truth, maintaining the truth just fosters chaos. That's the situation Batman and Commissioner Gordon find themselves in as the film concludes. Harvey Dent was the hope of Gotham, the one person in power who wouldn't give in to the fear.

The citizens of Gotham City had proved they could show restraint and do the right thing, even when their lives were on the line. (The Joker is right in saying that we reveal our true colors just before we die.) But did the ferries remain intact merely because the passengers had hope? Perhaps without the shining example of Harvey Dent all hope would be lost. But it isn't hope that restrained the ferry-goers. It was the restraint of the conscience.

Maybe Gordon isn't giving the people of Gotham credit. Batman, from the time of *Batman Begins*, has been defending the character of the citizens of his city, always asserting their collective right to a second chance. If Harvey Dent is exposed as a brutal, vindictive thug could it be too much for the citizenry to handle?

Perhaps the conflict rests in the nature of the wrong. On the ferry, the majority of the passengers wanted the boat load of prisoners to die. That's the benefit of the anonymity of the mob. Individual wrongs are swallowed whole in that surging mass of humanity. But one person was needed to trigger the explosion. That one person, alone, would then be responsible

(for this can hardly be equated to an executioner carrying out capital punishment ordained by the state—justice is dispassionate and unhurried).

Batman doesn't know what happened on the ferries, just that those people did the right thing. But we are privileged omniscient observers. We know that in the security of the mob, when individual wrongdoing can be subsumed into an indistinguishable mass of humanity in which the constraints of the conscience are outweighed by the hypnotic lure of filthy gains, there are far less checks on evil.

So even though Batman, given his longstanding confidence in Gothamites, should not be expected to think the loss of Dent so momentous, we know that it is. Therefore, the security of the city is compromised. And, ironically, things were safer with the Joker on the loose. As he explained, so long as he announces what is going to happen, as long as mass killings are predictable, people will accept it. *Everyone else can die as long as I know I'll be okay.* Indeed, the Joker was well on his way to controlling not just the criminal elements of Gotham, but the entire city.

But now he's off the street and will be housed someplace far more secure than the police station. So that means the Mob can re-assert itself. And that means the people will lose hope, because they will be back where they started, now vindicated in their lamentations that no public servant will stand up for them.

Thus, the elegant solution: Pin Dent's crimes on Batman (maybe even accuse Batman of killing Dent!). After all, Batman is already viewed with suspicion by the populace. And with Gothamites emboldened by Dent's 'sacrifice' and the defeat of the Joker they themselves will end the Mob's rule once and for all. Therefore Batman will no longer be indispensable. While he was once necessary just to keep Gotham from imploding, the chain of events he set into motion has emboldened the populace, empowering them to finally get their house in order. And while Batman may be vilified, Bruce Wayne, understandably grateful that his dual existence is still secret, can escape the pressures that would otherwise drive him to ruin.

So this is a major theme of a very rich, complicated movie—*The Dark Knight* asks us to reckon the value of truth. An unexposed lie, oftentimes, is not a problem. For it is the revelation of the deficient character of the liar that hurts the victim, not the sudden understanding that that which was once thought true is not. What we don't know can't hurt us, indeed. Richard Nixon is the perfect example. If he had confessed to his limited complicity in the actual Watergate break-in, the country would have been upset, but would have forgiven him (no one was hurt, nothing was stolen, no intelligence was gathered). But he chose to engage in two years of obfuscation, misdirection, and lies (ironically enough, hiding behind the veil of national security [again, truth sacrificed for security]). While this theme of maintaining strength by preserving trust through lies is most elegantly expressed in Harvey Dent's relationship with the citizens of Gotham, a less baroque component of the story re-enforces the theme.

Bruce Wayne is an echo of the supreme example of Christ, for Batman is destined to bear the sins of humanity for the sake of our collective salvation. But Christ knew all and fully understood what He was doing, even as He was left utterly alone on the cross, forsaken even by His Father.

Bruce Wayne is not that strong. He believes that Rachel was going to marry him. He says that Harvey Dent can never find this out. A letter explaining her decision is destroyed by Alfred after her death. For Alfred knows that if the melancholy Bruce, who, while being in total control of his body is already plagued by a tortured mind, were to find this out he might never recover. So just as Gotham needs a lie to keep going, Bruce needs to be denied the truth lest he, too, falter. He thinks of himself as Gotham's great protector, but he also serves the story as a representative Gotham citizen who has reached the breaking point and cannot take any more.

Sometimes even the protector needs protection.