

Evil can be hard to see in this modern age of tolerance of all viewpoints and acceptance of every choice, and suffering makes no sense in the age of anesthesia, euthanasia, and our society of instant gratification. Sometimes a concept is best understood when given a face, a name, and a story—even if the story is horrifying. The Joker from the recent Batman blockbuster offers what may be the best portrayal of the Devil ever. This offers the perfect vehicle for a discussion of evil. In the interests of time, I shall attach a brief discussion of suffering at the end.

The opening scene of *The Dark Knight* establishes the whole of the Joker's character arc remarkably well. He has successfully slaughtered his confederates or manipulated them into slaughtering each other. We are presented with the liar and the destroyer. As he is sauntering towards his get-away bus, the banker/mobster on the floor behind him calls, "The criminals in this town used to believe in things. Honor. Respect. Look at you! What do you believe in? What do you believe in?"<sup>1</sup> The Joker unveils his painted mask for the first time in the movie and grins, "I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you... stranger." Here in this telling one liner at the start of the movie, we are given a glimpse of the heart of the beast. Does everything short of death simply twist us, make us stranger, and divert us further from the "normal"? The Joker believes in corruption—a point reinforced at each and every turn of the movie.

He is clearly the Devil figure in this spiritual drama, the tempter, the tester, set loose for a time in Gotham to act as an acid on everyone within. "You'll see. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these people... these, uh... *civilized* people, they'll eat each other. You see, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve." The rest of the

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<sup>1</sup> Movie quotes are either from the IMDB site for *The Dark Knight* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/quotes>, accessed 10/16/08) or pulled together from memory.

world is just as scarred and just as ugly as he is. “Y’see, madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little...push.” His faith is in faithlessness, in evil and distortion. In a sense, the Joker is the ultimate anti-hypocrite: he knows as a dogmatic article of faith that the entire world is one weeping sore, one massive scar that we paint over in an attempt to conceal it, in an attempt to look like something we’re not. So he is determined to rip away the mask, to dissect and probe with a scalpel, to expose the true face of the world.

The Joker believes that by proving Gotham’s citizens are, when pressed, just as animalistic as he, the spirit of the city will break and be damned. Liberty will be denied, either by the law’s efforts to restore order or by the anarchistic chaos descending on a totally corrupt, irredeemable city. But the citizens of Gotham collectively are better than that. The captain of the vessel *Liberty* realizes what it means to still be alive: the passengers on the prisoner ship have not taken their lives. Similarly, on *Spirit*, one prisoner talks the government official holding the trigger to the other ship’s explosives into handing it over and proceeds to throw it over the side. In both cases, the strength, sanity, and essential human decency of the common man defeat the Joker’s expectations.

But his faith is not shattered. An anomaly, nothing more! Indeed, he has even planned for failure with the “social experiment” by destroying the spirit and the liberty of Harvey Dent, described by Gordon as “the best of us”. *The Dark Knight* presents us with a fairly clear Christian “symbolist drama,” where the whole plot is, as the Joker says while dangling upside down over a fall into the abyss, “the battle for Gotham’s soul” between the Devil/Joker and Christ/Guardian Angel/Batman. The way the Joker tempts and tests people the entire way through, the lies regarding his scars, the intricate,

inhumanly complex and yet successful plans, his rather dramatic role--playing as high priest on the Aztec style pyramid made out of money on which Lau is burned alive in retribution for his treachery, the whole aspect of the anarchist breaking every rule, shattering every boundary, overturning every authority all the way up to God himself—this is the Devil as he deserved to be played.

To those of us who believe that in the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and it was good, we see the Joker's efforts as akin to the calculated blasphemies of a practitioner of black magic, or the sort of "training in objectivity" described by Lewis in that *Hideous Strength*:

Never before had he known the frightful strength of the movement opposite to Nature which now had him in its grip; the impulse to reverse all reluctances and to draw every circle anti-clockwise. The meaning of certain pictures, of Frost's talk about 'objectivity', of the things done by witches in old times, became clear to him... the process whereby all specifically human reactions were killed in a man so that he might become fit for the fastidious society of the Macrobes. Higher degrees in the asceticism of anti-Nature would doubtless follow: the eating of abominable food, the dabbling in dirt and blood, the ritual performances of calculated obscenities.<sup>2</sup>

From the first sequence of the movie to the end, the Joker attempts to prove the truth of his faith in faithlessness, in the twisting of all things from their proper orientation to disorder. The goal is not mere chaos—the goal is the breaking of the law.

In a universe ordered by an ultimately good and loving lawgiver, set in motion by utter Truth and Justice, deviations from the norm do not reveal originality or creativity. A being is never creative by cutting themselves off from the Creator himself. Rather, all that comes out is sterility and death, a terrible, wasted depression calling from the depths of a self imposed exile from all that gives existence meaning. As Lewis described in *The Screwtape Letters*, one of the most terrible realizations of the souls afforded the peculiar

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, New York: J. J. Little & Ives Company, 1947. pgs. 315, 353.

clarity of the Miserific vision is the realization that they had spent their lives doing neither what they wanted, nor what they ought. The great goal of the tempters, says Screwtape, is to bring the “patients” to the point where they will sin and receive nothing in return—no pleasure, no distraction, no ease or comfort.

The Joker takes a crazed delight in his work, but there is no true satisfaction there for him. He got bored with the old way crime worked in Gotham and had to raise the stakes in the card game for Gotham’s soul. He occasionally betrays by a look or a gesture exactly how desolate he is internally, reduced from humanity to a mere hunger, a need for...what? He’s a dog chasing cars—he wouldn’t know what to do with one if he caught it. He’s an animal, throwing himself in harm’s way because he may loathe himself more than he loathes the rest of the world. He bristles angrily at the suggestion that he’s a freak—and then gleefully informs Batman that the two of them together are the freaks of the city, both of whom are equally despised by the “civilized people”. There’s hell for you, all wrapped up in one cackling package. If he ever succeeded in his anarchistic quest to break the world and destroy the civilized people, if he ever gained the world, it would profit him nothing—because he wouldn’t know what to do with it once he’d broken it.

As Thomas and Aristotle knew, evil is mere privation. It cannot exist on its own. Ayn Rand, with the little clarity she had left from Aristotle, used that truth as the centerpiece of *Atlas Shrugged*. When the Creator falls silent, all the noise of the devil cannot even be heard. When Christ dies, the devil is hurled to a fate worse than death—being ultimately powerless.

So much for evil. On suffering—we live in a world gone awry way back at the beginning of things, distorted from what it should have been. As with all great injuries, there's a great deal of therapy involved, and therapy means pain. To what extent was it all part of the plan at the beginning? God only knows. Perhaps suffering was to have been a mere tool, not a burden, and now in this economy of salvation we are faced with terrible costs, terrible choices to make and prices to pay. But prices must be paid. This is wisdom from all the ages, and cultures, and nations. There is no way to forever put aside paying debt. There is no eternal rise towards utopia. There are good times and bad times, rising and falling, strength and weakness, youth and old age. The price one generation refuses to pay must be paid by a later generation at many times the cost. Not only is the suffering of the day sufficient—it must be endured so that the times to come shall be endurable. The highest price of all, that debt which no one of us could have paid, has been offered up by God to God, of course. But there's still a great deal to be built, to be endured. There are evils to fight, and works to undertake, and prayers to be said, and people to be loved in spite of all the reasons not to. There's love's labor to be done, and love's labors are never lost. God sees to that.