

# Reconfiguring the medieval knight in christopher nolan's batman begins



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Batman Begins, the first installment of Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight Trilogy, offers a Batman that reflects all the moral complexity and ambiguity of Gotham City's society. Compared to the Batman of previous films, Nolan presents a darker side of the "superhero" mythos in an effort to bring the humanity, and thus fallibility, of such figures to light (Johnson, 952). Indeed, the 2005 remake rejects much of the "traditional" Batman archetype and encourages novel interpretations of the vigilante's motivations against the standard grain of thought (952). Similarly, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a critique of the English romance, its ideals of chivalry, and all its attendant ethics. Two categories of medieval knighthood are of particular interest: a man's armor and his chivalric code. In Batman Begins, the concept and significance of the Batsuit is not an update to the armor of the medieval knight because both function in the same manner. Moreover, if the medieval knight for comparison is Sir Gawain, Batman can be viewed not so much as a modernization but a more flexible expression and application of a personal code of ethics.

On a practical level, Nolan's Batman is a reiteration of the late medieval and early Renaissance knightly image. Anglo-Saxon England of the late tenth century existed in a rudimentary division of society by occupation, which eventually came to be known as the three estates: those that prayed, those that fought, and those that labored, translating into monks, soldiers, and peasants (Allen, 25-26). According to the Christian theologian Honorius of Autun of the twelfth century, these divisions found ideological justification in Noah's sons Shem (freemen), Japheth (knights), and Ham (serfs); however, the estates followed old tribal patterns rather than resulting from Norman

invasion (26). The same social order persisted into the fourteenth century, evidenced by its appearance in *Piers Plowman* (26). For the soldiers of these times, overflowing wealth and a high social standing were essential in solidifying their identity as knights. As long as the knight was free of the economic burdens that plagued the third estate, he was able to focus on his sole vocation of battle through constant training, participation in tournaments, and ultimately war (Gearhart, 667). Likewise, Bruce Wayne's affluence and position as owner of Wayne Enterprises not only affords him the time and means to travel the world and train with the League of Shadows, but also gives him access to prototypes of defense technologies which he develops into the Batsuit and the Batmobile upon his return to Gotham. Moreover, Bruce deliberately makes a show of his wealth and leisurely lifestyle in order to allay suspicion of his vigilante activities.

Additionally, most knights of the Middle Ages provided their own equipment for battle, with the noblemen using the strongest war horses and the latest style of armor (668). In this way, armor became a central aspect to a knight's identity. Aside from protection and defense, critic Grant Gearhart postulates two more functions of armor for a knight: first, to symbolize the ritualistic transition from nonwarrior to warrior, and second, to enhance their silhouette as an exhibition of male physicality (666). The medieval knight necessarily conducted himself in a different manner in times of war than in times of peace - for example, armor could serve as a show of wealth at tournaments, but it also gave the knight license to kill in his role as protector (670). Similarly, the Batsuit redefines Wayne from his "playboy notoriety" to a man of moral virtue whenever he enters his crime-fighting mode. While still

preoccupied with vengeance for the death of his parents, Wayne boldly confronts mob boss Carmine Falcone; however, Falcone states that he rules Gotham with “ the power of fear,” (Batman Begins, 00: 29: 10) and that Wayne as an upper-class socialite couldn’t know about “ the ugly side of life” (00: 29: 37). “ This is a world you’ll never understand,” Falcone tells Wayne, “ and you always fear what you don’t understand” (00: 29: 51-57). Before he can reconcile his anger and confront the degradation of the city, Wayne must first shed his privileged veneer so as to understand the criminal world of men like Falcone. This is demonstrated in Wayne’s symbolic trading of his expensive coat for a homeless man’s jacket, which is done immediately before running aboard a ship (00: 30: 54). Therefore, the contrast between the scenes depicting the discarding of the coat and the later creation of the Batsuit signifies the movement from the civilian Bruce Wayne to the moral paragon Batman.

The detailing of a medieval knight’s plate armor morphed his body into a more imposing form, resulting in an artificial exaggeration of the traits used to determine the strength, masculinity, and dominance of the man within (Gearhart, 676). Thus, the warrior was able to adopt the physique and persona of a typical hero regardless of his actual body shape. When Wayne returns to Gotham City, Lucius Fox introduces him to the “ Nomex Survival Suit for Advanced Infantry” (Batman Begins, 00: 50: 52) that is manufactured from a “ Kevlar bi-weave” (00: 50: 54) which, while not entirely bulletproof, will protect him from everything except a “ straight shot” (00: 51: 00). The Batsuit, in combination with his seven years of rigorous training under with the League of Shadows, works to both literally and figuratively enhance

Wayne's physical prowess. Fox's description also highlights the utilitarian components of the suit, which allows it to function in the same way that battle armor did for the medieval knight (Gearhart, 676). Indeed, as Rachel Dressler contends, "Knights are most fully men only when they are completely encased in armor" (cited in Gearhart, 670).

Batman's cowl is somewhat paradoxical to the rest of the suit in its zoomorphic appearance. The large, straight nose, permanently furrowed brow, and pointed ears of the headpiece recall the motifs of medieval folklore which frequently modified a warrior's armor into an inhuman form (672). Gearhart contends that not only could such "perceived physical transformations create the illusion that one could transcend one's physical identity," but also "usually signal[led] a sudden spike in the warrior's martial capabilities in battle" (672). Norse and Celt folklore in particular often recount tales of warriors morphing into animals on the battlefield, and despite medieval writers denying the capacity of armor to turn a man into an animal or other monster, the inclusion of the trope suggests the importance of the psychological impact these distortions could produce in the midst of war (673). Thus, Wayne's choice of design for the cowl is rooted in an old practice that strives to dehumanize the armored man, while other components of the suit simultaneously work to augment the human image.

The concept of the Batsuit is credited in part to Duchard's training at the League of Shadows' complex. When the Ra's al Ghul decoy asks Wayne why he has come to them, he responds, "I seek the means to fight injustice ... to turn fear against those who prey on the fearful" (Batman Begins 00: 08: 29-38). Duchard tells him that "To manipulate the fears in others, you must first <https://assignbuster.com/reconfiguring-the-medieval-knight-in-christopher-nolans-batman-begins/>

master your own" (00: 09: 02-07). Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* describes courage as the mean between the opposing extremes of cowardice and rashness. It is therefore not the absence of fear, as some fears are considered noble, but the expression of a rational control over one's fear. An excess of this control does not result in a higher estimation of courage but instead indicates foolhardiness. At the same time, too little control is considered cowardice. Thus, an acknowledgment and regulation of fear are both necessary if one is to have courage. Duchard's requirement for Wayne to master his fear echoes Aristotle's judgement as well, and Wayne successfully comes to terms with his fear of bats in the final stage of his training. Thus, the bat-like appearance of his suit marks his successful control over his emotions when faced with his greatest fear and further enables him the ability to direct its power toward his enemies.

The theme of tempering cowardice and foolhardiness is also present in the Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. At the beginning of the poem, many lines are devoted to the description of King Arthur and his court. The Christmas celebration has all the makings of a sumptuous feast, but Arthur refuses to join in the festivities until he hears a tale of outstanding feats, "the tallest of tales, yet one ringing with truth," or witnesses two challengers "lay life on the line, to stare death face-to-face and accept defeat" (*Sir Gawain*, ll. 94, 97-98). Though the poet assures the reader that this is a common occurrence at festivals of Camelot's castle, and immediately depicts Arthur with "proud and fine" features as he stands "tall and straight," the stanza nonetheless suggests a negative aspect to Arthur's youthful cheer (ll. 100-104). By extension, the court and their representation

of romantic ideals is also potentially harmful in their careless revelry (Anderson, 342). When the Green Knight rides in, as if to fulfill the King's wish, the court is awed into silence - the poet notes that " They gaped and they gawked and were mute with amazement" (Sir Gawain, ll. 232-233). Even several of the high lords " were like statues in their seats, left speechless and rigid, not risking a response" (ll. 241-242).

Given no satisfactory answer, the Green Knight rebukes the court whose virtues are extolled across the lands: " Where's the fortitude and fearlessness you're so famous for? And the breathtaking bravery and the big-mouth bragging?" (ll. 311-312). In contrast to the others present at the feast, the Green Knight's words insult Arthur so much so that " Blood flowed to his fine-featured face and he raged inside," and he immediately seizes the Knight's axe in acceptance of the challenge (ll. 317-318). King Arthur and his court, therefore, situate themselves at opposite ends of the spectrum - King Arthur in his youth acts out of rashness, and the court holds their silence out of cowardice. Gawain finds Arthur's involvement in the Green Knight's game " unfitting" (l. 348) when other " brave, bold men are seated on these benches" (l. 351) and appeals to take up the trial in his humility as the " weakest of [Arthur's] warriors and feeblest of wit" (l. 354). Consequently, Gawain works to moderate his uncle's quick action and the court's lack thereof. In doing so, Gawain like Batman places himself at the median between rash action and paralyzing fear.

Yet Gawain later proves subject to his own mortal fear, evidenced in his acceptance of the green silk girdle. In fact, majority of the current critical interest in the poem centers on the moral status of his actions on the third <https://assignbuster.com/reconfiguring-the-medieval-knight-in-christopher-nolans-batman-begins/>

day spent in Bertilak's castle. And like Batman's embodiment of his individual fear in his Batsuit, Gawain's armor with the addition of the girdle also reflects his own internal conflict. But while Batman's armor is an external announcement that he has been purged of his fear, Gawain's material aspects reflect an ingrained sense of moral virtue that is associated with physical appearance. The description of his "gear which glimmered and gleamed" (l. 569) includes "highly polished plates [that] were knotted with gold thread" (ll. 577-578), a suit of "shimmering steel rings" (l. 580), and "glinting metal gloves" (l. 583). Fully armed, Gawain appears "fabulous, famous, every link looking golden to the very last loop" (ll. 590-591). Even more explicit is the pentangle of Gawain's shield, with each of its five points representing a set of five personal virtues. The first point stands for Gawain's flawless five senses, the second, his faultless five fingers, the third, that Gawain's faith is founded in the five wounds Christ received on the cross, the fourth, the five joys of Mary, and the fifth as the "five things which meant more to Gawain than to most other men": friendship, fraternity, purity, politeness, and pity (ll. 640-655). If the brightness of Gawain's armor does not imply his as yet untarnished ideals (Anderson, 350), then certainly his shield depicts him "as the noblest knight" (Sir Gawain, l. 639).

Recalling the tropes of Norse and Celtic folklore, the function of armor in both Sir Gawain and Batman Begins exceeds the limitations of the human form to become a reflection of Gawain's and Batman's respective moral codes. As mentioned above, Gawain's armor gives him a "new-minted quality" (Anderson, 350), and it is important to note that the poem focuses on the glint of the armor rather than the armor itself. By such descriptions,



the armor does not entirely fulfill any of Gearhart's proposed three functions of armor. Its purpose of protecting Gawain is suggested, but it does not mark the transition from nonwarrior to warrior, nor does it enhance Gawain's physique as the detailed abdominal section of the Batsuit does for Wayne. So much of Gawain's belief system is given physical significance in lieu of his masculine features that he becomes less a man and more a symbol of ideal knightly virtue. Likewise, Bruce Wayne needs to become more than a man if he is to restore justice to Gotham City. In his private jet back to Gotham, Wayne tells his butler Alfred, "As a man, I'm flesh and blood. I can be ignored. I can be destroyed. But as a symbol - as a symbol I can be incorruptible" (Batman Begins, 00: 42: 09-18). The implication of Nolan's and the Sir Gawainpoet's characterization, therefore, is to explore the efficacy of idealism in the face of moral ambiguity. Though Gawain and Batman make efforts to symbolically setcast their morality in stoneiron, the trials that each must face ultimately demand more from these knights than their armor alone can provide.

The difference in the context of those trials necessitates different reactions from Gawain and Batman, and this is where the two diverge from their similar depictions. Notably, Bertilak as the Green Knight and the lord of the castle oasis frames both of his challenges in terms of games. There is no direct combat in the first, but only a single strike of the axe. And there is no physical combat whatsoever in the latter, but a trading of spoils won each day. Gawain's armor, therefore, is not entirely necessary in its battle sense. The heightened functionality of the Nomex Survival Suit plays a significant role in comparison to Gawain's armor. Batman as being concerned

specifically with criminal activity cannot anticipate the actions of his enemies, a lesson learned on his first day in the complex and reinforced with the revelation of Henri Ducard as the real Ra's al Ghul. For this reason, he needs more in the way of defense and protection than Gawain requires. Furthermore, the Batsuit (and nearly all of Batman's accessories) is repainted black to grant him better secrecy under the cover of night, where Gawain's armor would negate all attempts at stealth. Thus, the armor of Arthur's court has been reconfigured in its service to the particular needs of Batman.

Those different reactions enact a succeeding difference in morality by the poem's and the film's end. J. J. Anderson critiques the three different judgements of Sir Gawain's performance under the tests to his virtue. The first is from the Green Knight who deems "Gawain has failed in part," the second judgement of "Gawain has failed completely" is from Gawain himself, and the third is from the court who judges that "Gawain has not failed at all," denoted in their laughter at Gawain's explanations and adoption of green girdles to their dress (Anderson, 338-339). Gawain's opinion of his actions indicate his ethos of chivalry to be rigidly defined, which is supported by the pentangle that adorns his shield. As the design of the pentangle is continuous, so too are the pentads of knighthood linked in Gawain. It cannot be separated into its components, and if one area should fail then the whole structure will fail (351). For Gawain then, there can be no tolerance of any slight to his code of ethics. He is a knight where the question of morality extends beyond the confines of the court and into the bedroom. Gawain's own harsh judgement speaks to chivalry as a system, one that is limited due

to its primarily social and ethical applications according to Anderson (353). Demonstrated in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's moral idealism is not feasible and such a system cannot cope with the eventuality of morality in particular.

Batman, on the other hand, exhibits a flexibility in judgement that Gawain does not in an effort to avoid the dangerous absolutism of Ra's al Ghul (Johnson, 964). Throughout the film, Batman seems to act out a kind of moral critique described by Friedrich Nietzsche where he tests the utility of various values (957). This is especially apparent in his refusal to kill a thief and murderer as proof of his "commitment to justice" (*Batman Begins*, 00:36:31) contrasted against his lack of action to save Ra's al Ghul's life.

Batman's reaction to Ra's al Ghul's imminent death is inconsistent with a belief that allowing a death is the same as causing a death, especially since Batman created the conditions that put Ra's life in danger. Not only does he lose "many assumptions about the simple nature of right and wrong" (00:31:39-45), but Batman also realizes that maintaining all of the positive value systems in less extreme scenarios is impossible in a heightened situation. Letting the thief-murderer live and Ra's al Ghul die signals a recognition that adherence to a strict moral code could potentially lead to unwanted outcomes, such as the perversion of justice that Ra's follows. Thus, through the two different responses, Batman is testing and rejecting various systems as they may apply in a city of rapid moral failure.

Using a knight's armor as the most basic unit of identity, Batman recalls many aspects of the medieval knight. The Batsuit and Sir Gawain's armor share similarities in function and appearance concurrently with significant <https://assignbuster.com/reconfiguring-the-medieval-knight-in-christopher-nolan-batman-begins/>

differences. Furthermore, Batman's faith in the potential of Gotham City not only distinguishes him from his enemies, but also from Sir Gawain. Gawain's moral idealism ignores the deeper morality which is informed by a sense of human frailty (Anderson, 353), while Batman's morality recognizes the difficulty in adopting moral absolutes in a city of such complexity as Gotham (Johnson, 958). In this city, some moral codes must be broken in order to preserve others, and in this way Nolan's Batman has become so morally ambiguous that he does not fit into the conventional definitions of heroism or knighthood. As the green girdle transforms from a mark of shame into a chivalric honor, so too does Gawain become reconfigured into the dark knight of Batman.

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