

A Ray of Hope in a World of Darkness

A review of the film



The Dark Knight Rises

(2012)

Christopher Nolan (Director)



Reviewed by

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The highly anticipated film *The Dark Knight Rises* has somehow managed to surpass expectations to become a fittingly epic conclusion to arguably the best superhero series in cinematic history. This most recent Christopher Nolan installment sets an exhaustively dark and dreary tone. As the saying goes, “The sweet is never as sweet without the sour,” and Nolan spends much of the film embroiled in the “sour” to drive home a particularly poignant and eloquent message about the “sweet.”

The “sweet” relates to the positive psychology character strength of hope, as *The Dark Knight Rises* offers a sophisticated commentary on this psychological variable, which merges with current psychological research to teach us much about its nature and effects. Hope becomes a prominent weapon in Bruce/Batman’s armory, a notion foreshadowed by a setup in *The Dark Knight* that established a profound sense of hopelessness.

The Dark Knight Rises begins eight years later. Bruce/Batman is now a cast-out, discarded recluse—physically defeated by a decaying body and psychologically defeated by the moral fall of Harvey Dent/Two Face and the death of his beloved Rachel Dawes. He rarely leaves the manor, disengages from Wayne Enterprises, and even pushes away his trusty butler, Alfred, following a dispute about his struggle to experience and inspire hope.

The layer of hopelessness that pervasively oozes over this introductory phase is thickened by a richly complex and coordinated attack on Gotham. First, a clever Wall Street heist, involving fraudulent trades of Wayne Enterprises stocks, causes Bruce/Batman to go bankrupt. Then, Bruce/Batman is forced to shut down his primary humanitarian effort, a clean energy project that harnesses fusion power, upon learning of its capacity to be maliciously transformed into an atomic bomb.

Finally, Bane—the diabolically calculating and monstrously strong villain who took over the League of Shadows following Ra's al Ghul's death (you'll want to rewatch *Batman Begins* to refresh your memory)—physically cripples Bruce/Batman in a breathless hand-to-hand combat sequence and dumps him in a foreign prison to writhe helplessly as Ra's al Ghul's mission to annihilate Gotham is completed. It is here, in the Pit, aptly nicknamed Hell on Earth, where the sense of hopelessness peaks. Consequently, it is where Bruce/Batman begins to explicitly sharpen and use his most valuable and valued weapon—hope.

Contrary to popular opinion, hope is not some whimsical, indefinable, or simplistic process. Hope, according to the VIA Institute on Character, is a specific attitude about the future that involves a sense of optimism and controllability (Niemiec & Wedding, 2008); according to hope theory (Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 2005), it is a process grounded in strategies of goal identification, problem solving, and motivation enhancement.

Hope theory dictates that hope is a human strength manifested in capacities to (a) clearly conceptualize goals (goals thinking), (b) develop the specific strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking), and (c) initiate and sustain the motivation for using those strategies (Snyder et al., 2005). Hope theory refines the adage “Where there's a will, there's a way” to suggest that hope is both the will and the way.

When Bruce/Batman awakens in the Pit, he comes face to face with a series of daunting obstacles. He must rehab a broken back, escape from a bottomless pit deemed inescapable by its inhabitants, and foil a villain who has not only taken over Gotham via a series of bombings, a well-organized army, and the possession of an active atomic bomb, but also has induced a sense of hopelessness in the collective psyche of Gotham by exposing Harvey Dent/Two Face as a false idol and nudging the preexisting sense of economic depression and disparity into a full-on socialistic frenzy.

Intentionally or not, Bruce/Batman begins his ascent to hope and triumph by engaging in the very steps and strategies mirrored in research on the mechanisms of hope construction. The first step is goal formulation, a deceptively complicated process that requires the goal to be specific and concrete so that it can be managed and measured. The goal needs to be personally meaningful, aimed at approaching an obstacle, and challenging enough to stretch

one's comfort zone but not so challenging as to become implausible (Lopez et al., 2004). Viewers watch Bruce/Batman construct an invisible checklist of goals that meet these stringent criteria—build up his body, persist in climbing the Pit walls to freedom, return to Gotham, defeat Bane's army, restabilize the bomb, and, of course, reinstate a sense of hope.

Bruce/Batman engages in the final two features of hope theory—the development of diverse and effective pathways and motivation—as he prepares to escape the Pit. He starts with morning push-ups to strengthen his body for the climb. Cutting up long-term goals into manageable chunks with one-step-at-a-time logic is termed *stepping* and is considered a useful approach to effective pathway building (Snyder et al., 2005).

Bruce/Batman uses two other common mechanisms of hope—positive self-talk (e.g., “I will not give up,” “I refuse to watch my city burn”) and persistent practice (e.g., he fails at climbing out of the Pit twice before succeeding). And he sustains motivation by effectively channeling his anger at Bane into a fearless decision to risk his life and by recalling previous positive experiences of overcoming obstacles similar to the Pit (e.g., surviving his childhood fall into a cave). He uses emotional intelligence and reminiscence—empirically supported tools for hope building (Lopez et al., 2004).

Films typically use light to symbolize hope, and Nolan employs this motif generously in the form of daylight, which greets Bruce/Batman as he climbs out of the Pit, and of the bat-shaped flash of fire that is ignited upon his reentry into Gotham. Nolan even brings out fine distinctions between hope and its antitheses—false hope or blind faith. When Bane takes over Gotham, he induces a sense of apathy in the war-torn citizens by promising a peaceful resolution if his rules are followed. As John Blake/Robin, Commissioner Gordon, and others try to mount a resistance within the city, many of Gotham's finest, and all of the government officials on the outside looking in, are seduced by this false hope. Only when Bruce/Batman reenters town with his embodiment of healthy hope does the grip of Bane's manipulation weaken.

The contagion effect reflects a final and critical point of the film's commentary on hope. Hope survives and thrives not within the individual but across the group, which is why it has been deemed a socially primed phenomenon (Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997). This notion is embodied in John Blake/Robin, who spends much of the film advocating his “hopeful beliefs” in Batman's return and chalking the symbol of Batman on buildings. He even takes up the mantle of Guardian of Gotham after Bruce/Batman's unofficial retirement.

The inexplicable nature of hope as a group process is further noted in research suggesting that those who possess high levels of hope exhibit an inherent tendency to spread it to others. This process is vividly portrayed in Bruce/Batman's exchanges with Selina/Catwoman. She represents the scorned have-nots, a by-product of Gotham's unfair political-economic system, and is initially hopeless about Gotham's humanity.

A tug-of-war unfolds between them throughout as she continuously wishes to leave Gotham and he continuously convinces her to stay and help. He slowly injects hope into her mind-set through forgiveness, modeling a hopeful attitude, and a series of charming

observations and explicit pleas about the humanity of both Gotham and her own character. Hope as social contagion is driven home by the film's final montage, as a shift is made from a lone figure, Bruce/Batman, flying the atomic bomb out over Gotham Bay to a city rebuilding itself.

Nolan is a master director, and this film is nothing short of masterful as it includes vibrant characters, thought-provoking moral quandaries, emotional transformations, and subtextual examinations of such important psychological processes as hope.

As I watched the film in a packed theater, I observed a number of moments when the audience burst into unprompted applause. I mention this not only as supporting evidence of the film's high entertainment value but also as an indication that the moments of triumph and hope, which can be so generically typical and expected of a superhero movie, were experienced in a uniquely genuine way. An outcome of such rich audience engagement, I believe, stems from Nolan's ability to skillfully construct a tone of hopelessness while accurately and vividly portraying the in-depth operations of hope.

References

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Editor's Note: This review addresses only the artistic merits and psychological relevance of *The Dark Knight Rises*. However, years from now the film will be remembered not for its artistry or plot but rather for the opening-day midnight shootings that occurred in Aurora, Colorado, killing 12 people and injuring 58 others. James Holmes, a 24-year-old

neuroscience graduate student, allegedly committed the murders. A *PsycCRITIQUES* blog post (go to <http://PsycCRITIQUESBlog.apa.org/2012/09/darkness-violence-and-hope-connected-with-the-dark-knight-rises.html>) explores the relationship between this particular film and the shootings, the mental state of James Holmes, and the generic links between media portrayals of violence and actual violent crimes. D. W.
