OVERCOMING TRAUMA

ABOUT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE BATMAN’S MYTH.
TALKING DR. TRAVIS LANGLEY AND MICHAŁ SIROMSKI

MICHAŁ SIROMSKI: About what exactly is the Batman’s story for you? About the power of the trauma, about the dark side of the human psyche, or the opposite - about the strength of the human will, or about raising from the great tragedy?
TRAVIS LANGLEY: It’s about heroism. The character’s creators clearly intended something positive. They designed him to be someone who built himself into the kind of hero who could help keep others from suffering the kind of tragedy that befell his family. They focused on the positive. It’s not about the power of trauma. It’s about the power of a person to overcome trauma and to find his life’s calling in helping others while also taking out his anger on evildoers in person. Batman is taking out his anger on criminals, yes, but his first motivation is to help the innocent. Given the choice between saving someone’s life and stopping a criminal from escaping, he will always move to save that life.

MS: So we are dealing with the mechanism of sublimation - the transformation of socially unacceptable impulse (anger) into socially acceptable action (fight against crime). Only if it is a positive mechanism? Is Batman just do want to take revenge on the world for what happened to him, and beating the criminals is just an easy excuse for violent behavior?
TL: Sublimation can be very positive. Batman’s first purpose is to keep people from suffering tragedies like the one that befell his family.

MS: Sublimation can be positive from a social point of view, but not necessarily from an individual point of view. This process does not eliminate the causes of negative emotions, only pushing them deep into the subconscious. Perhaps a better choice for Bruce would be psychotherapy?
TL: Batman has no interest in therapy. Not only is he short on respect for psychotherapy, but he’s skeptical about it considering how ineffective it has been for his enemies at Arkham Asylum. As he sees it, psychotherapy has nothing to offer him. Any time he spends in therapy can’t bring his parents back to life and it can’t protect other innocent victims. Even if therapy could make him happier, he doesn’t want to lose his edge as a crime fighter.

MS: What differs Batman from other superheroes?
TL: He’s the superhero without superpowers. Superman and Spider-Man are heroes because of their psychology, but they’re super because one’s an extraterrestrial and the other got bitten by a radioactive spider. Batman is both super and a hero because of
psychological factors. He chose to become something fantastic. He decided to build himself up into the world’s greatest crime fighter. He’s smug, he’s sly, he’s so intimidating that he can enter a room full of people who can fly, read minds, cast spells, or run faster than light, and yet they’re the ones daunted by him – and that’s part of what he love about him. Strong and smart, unfettered by fiscal limitations or anybody else’s rules, he brings a deep wish of ours to life. Batman’s the part of us that wants to scare all of life’s bullies away.

Ms. I think, that the moment of trauma experience is also important. Many superheroes decide to become a superhero under the influence of personal tragedy. But only in the case of Bruce Wayne it happen in his childhood. This is a key reason, because the child looks at the world and experiences differently, have a tendency to look for reasons in itself. Little Bruce was brutally robbed of a sense of security, not only losing closest persons, but also blamed himself for this tragedy. So he is not haunted by the thought of the parent’s death, but rather by the belief that he caused this death. The fight against crime is a form of atonement for this guilt, and at the same time is an attempt to recover lost in childhood safety, not only for himself but also for others. This process can be seen in the “Batman Begins” movie. What is your opinion about psychological realism of Christopher Nolan’s films?

Ms.: Nolan gives us the most realistic depiction of Batman we’ve ever seen, especially in its psychological realism. Batman Begins is my favorite Batman movie because it’s the first film where Bruce Wayne himself is a meaningful character as a person. Every depiction of Batman both on TV and in the movies gives us its own respective version of Gotham City where it makes sense for this guy to dress like a bat and fight crime, a city that needs a masked crime fighter to come along. Nolan’s Gotham comes closest to feeling real, and yet it’s still in a world where the League of Assassins forms, a world with sci-fi tech like the microwave emitter that doesn’t really exist in our world. In every depiction, Bruce Wayne decides that his city is so screwed up that it needs an anonymous hero to shake things, that it needs a heroic symbol that can inspire both hope in its good citizens and fear in its criminals.

Batman might seem very cynical, and yet he’s actually a bit optimistic about human nature. He believes most people deserve to live without having their lives thrown into upheaval by criminals. He has enough faith in people in general that he’s confident two boats full of people terrified for their lives will not kill each other in the movie The Dark Knight.

Ms.: Coexistence of Bruce Wayne and Batman is very similar to Jung’s concept of man and the Shadow archetype. I think that the process of becoming Batman (which can be seen even in Nolan’s film trilogy) can be likened to the Jung’s individuation process.

Ms.: Yes, but you must remember that Carl Jung’s Shadow archetype represents the dark side of human nature, not necessarily your evil side but rather the part of you that is hidden, out of the light, the sum of characteristics you hide from both the world and yourself. Jung felt that to develop fully as a human being, you had to confront different aspects of your own personality and learn to work with them. He believed this is important in the individuation process as we develop our personalities and in the therapeutic process as well. One of the first things the person has to do, according to Jung, is to explore his or her own Shadow. Batman is a Shadow character. Bruce Wayne confronts his own darkest nature early in life, chooses to work with it, and uses it to instill fear in evildoers. His bright and dark sides work together to fight crime.

Ms.: Some researchers believe that Batman’s opponents represent different elements of Batman’s personality. They are like splitting him. What do you think about that?

Ms.: I’m not sure they represent elements of his personality. That almost makes it sounds like he’s imagining them.

Ms.: But that would be agreed with the Jung’s concept, who believed that the typical defense mechanism for Shadow

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ARCHETYPE IS AN PROJECTION (ASSIGN ANOTHER PEOPLE OWN, MOSTLY NEGATIVE TRAITS). MAYBE INDEED WE OBSERVE HIS OPPONENTS ONLY FROM HIS SUBJECTIVE POINT OF VIEW?

I: I don’t think it’s correct interpretation.
Nevertheless, the best known villains in his rogues gallery do reflect and distort aspects of himself as Batman and as Bruce Wayne. The Penguin wants to stand out in high society like Bruce Wayne. The Riddler challenges Batman’s need to solve puzzles. Whereas Batman alternates between his roles as handsome Bruce Wayne and the hero who dresses like a monster, Two-Face is both a handsome man on one side and a monster at the same time. The Joker reflects only Batman, not the whole Batman/Bruce Wayne character. He doesn’t even want Batman to have an alter ego. In contrast to the grim hero who saves lives and does good while dressed like a monster, the Joker is a laughing monster who ends lives and perpetrates evil while looking like a clown.

MS: CHRISTOPHER NOLAN SAID, THAT IT’S NOT TRUE THAT BATMAN HAS NO SUPERPOWERS – HE HAS SUPERHUMAN SELF-DISCIPLINE.
I LIKE THIS STATEMENT, BECAUSE IT SHOWS THAT BATMAN CAN BE A MODEL FOR US, AND THAT WITH SUCH INNER POWER WE MAY DEFEAT, LIKE HIM, ANY, EVEN THE GREATEST TRAUMA. AND IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM BATMAN?

I: Do the right thing. Improve yourself, help others, and don’t let fear ruin your life.