

Batman Is Just A Man
**An exploration of heroism in modern superhero storytelling through
comparative film analysis**

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (programme name). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

Superhero narratives have become a dominant form of contemporary popular culture, often functioning as modern mythologies that reflect evolving social values and cultural tensions. While classical theories of myth, particularly those proposed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, conceptualise heroism as a process of transformation through the heroic journey, contemporary superhero films complicate this assumption by presenting different models of psychological development. This dissertation examines how superhero narratives construct heroism by distinguishing between **static** and **transformational heroism**.

Through a comparative analysis of *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), the study explores how narrative structure, trauma representation, constructions of masculinity, and cinematic form shape distinct models of heroic identity. The analysis argues that Batman embodies static heroism grounded in control and stability, while Miles Morales embodies transformational heroism defined by uncertainty, relationality, and personal growth. By contrasting these two films, the dissertation demonstrates a broader shift in contemporary superhero storytelling, suggesting that modern audiences may respond increasingly to heroes who evolve and adapt rather than those who remain psychologically unchanged.

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Introduction

Superhero narratives dominate popular culture. (Brinker, 2022)¹ Although often seen as entertainment, they also reflect the social values, anxieties, and ethics of their societies. From early comic books to today's films, superheroes serve as modern myths that help audiences navigate morality, identity, and power. As society and our relationship to it change, heroism becomes more complex. Instead of portraying heroes as stable models of moral certainty, current storytelling explores the psychological and ethical tensions shaping heroic identity. (Moore, 2019)²

Mainstream theories of myth often see heroism as a physical transformation. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* outlines a narrative in which the hero leaves the world he knows, faces trials, undergoes a transformation, and returns changed. This pattern shapes modern blockbuster films, especially superhero stories. (Indick, 2018)³ Yet, while many movies use this mythic structure, the expected psychological change does not always follow. Some heroes finish the journey's stages but remain emotionally and ethically unchanged. This prompts questions about whether completing the hero's journey in a story actually entails genuine psychological transformation. (Hanafy, 2023)⁴

This dissertation proposes that contemporary superhero narratives can be better understood by clearly distinguishing between two models of heroism: static and transformational. Static heroism is characterised by emotional containment, adherence to inflexible moral codes, and resistance to internal or psychological change. These heroes may gain skills or status but fundamentally retain their original perspectives and values. In contrast, transformational

¹ Brinker, F. (2022) *Superhero blockbusters: Seriality and politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

² Moore, A. (2019) *With great power: A narrative analysis of ethical decisions in superhero films*. MA thesis. Temple University.

³ Indick, W. (2018) 'Classical heroes in modern movies: Mythological patterns of the superhero', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 51(1), pp. 3–22.

⁴ Hanafy, I.A. (2023) 'The hero's journey: A Jungian analysis of a documentary film *Murderball*', *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 12(1), pp. 1–10.

heroism emphasises ongoing psychological and ethical development. Heroes who fit this model actively engage with vulnerability and self-reflection, allowing challenges such as trauma and failure to inspire growth rather than to serve as fixed aspects of their identity. Thus, while static heroism centres on stability and constancy, transformational heroism redefines heroism itself as an evolving process shaped by internal change.

To explore this distinction, this dissertation undertakes a comparative study of two contemporary superhero films: *Batman Begins* (2005), directed by Christopher Nolan, and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), directed by Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, and Rodney Rothman. Although both films function as origin narratives within the wider superhero canon, they present majorly different interpretations of how heroes emerge and what constitutes heroic identity. Through analysis of narrative structure, representations of trauma, constructions of masculinity, and cinematic form, this dissertation argues that these two films embody contrasting models of heroism. While *Batman Begins* exemplifies static heroism rooted in control and stability, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* proposes a model of transformational heroism defined by adaptability, emotional openness, and ethical development. In doing so, the comparison reveals broader shifts in the effectiveness of contemporary superhero storytelling, suggesting that modern audiences respond better to heroes who evolve than to those who remain unchanged. (Qi, 2025)⁵ Heroism, in this piece, is not defined solely by the mastery of fear but by the willingness to confront uncertainty and grow beyond it.

⁵ Qi, T. (2025) 'Analysis of the influence of star effect on movies—taking Marvel series as an example', *Communications in Humanities Research*, 60, pp. 192–198.

Chapter 1
Historical Contexts of Batman and Spider-Man

Superheroes as Historical Texts

Superheroes should not be seen as culturally neutral entertainment. Instead, they are historically situated media engaging with the social, political, and ethical climates of their time. Since comic books began, and in today's films, superhero stories have reflected prevailing anxieties, values, and ideological tensions, translating these into accessible myths. Will Brooker (2000) argues that iconic superheroes survive not only through repetition but by adapting to societal changes while keeping a recognisable core identity. Superheroes are thus dynamic societal markers, offering insight into the cultures that create and consume them.⁶ This chapter establishes the historical and conceptual basis for comparing Batman and Spider-Man. It traces each character's growth from comic-book origins to the films *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). Both are central in the superhero canon, but their stories show different ties to history, culture, and heroism. This distinction is the basis for the study. Rather than privileging a sole theoretical model, this thesis adopts an integrative approach, treating heroism as a narrative, ethical, and emotional construct shaped through character development and cinematic form.

Conceptual Framework

In narrative cinema, elements such as structure, cinematography, composition, editing, and sound come together to shape the plot and emotion. They help viewers derive thematic and emotional meaning from film. This analysis uses hero narrative and myth theory as starting points. The Hero's Journey, as described by Joseph Campbell, is a cycle of departure, initiation, and return. While this structure remains influential in superhero cinema, this dissertation takes a critical stance toward it (Campbell, 2004).⁷ In particular, questioning whether structural completion always brings true psychological or ethical change. It examines how heroes may complete mythic arcs while remaining internally static, challenging traditional heroic models. The approach also draws on psychological and trauma-led film analysis. These methods explore how loss, fear, and

⁶ Brooker, W. (2000) *Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon*. London: Continuum / Bloomsbury Academic. pp 70-71

⁷ Campbell, J. (2004). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd edn. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

instability shape a character's identity and morals. Janet Walker describes trauma (Physical) as an intense event that overwhelms a person, affecting their psychological organisation for the long term. Instead of treating trauma solely as character backstory, this study examines how it shapes ethics, emotion, and growth in the film's story (Walker, 2005).⁸ This helps differentiate static heroism, in which trauma is a fixed anchor, from transformational heroism, in which trauma prompts change. Gender and masculinity add further insight, especially into how emotional control and vulnerability appear in hero identities. Film form theory sees elements like colour, framing, and movement as tools that reflect and shape a character's mind (Bordwell, 2020).⁹ By combining these approaches, this dissertation sets a clear distinction between static and transformational heroism. This framework grounds the analysis in the following chapters.

The Origins of Batman

Batman first appeared in Detective Comics #27 in 1939,¹⁰¹¹ created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger as World War II approached. He emerged as public fears about urban crime, financial instability, and modern life rose. Batman contrasts with Superman, who is often seen as a mythic or aspirational hero. Batman was a vigilante detective and a wealthy figure who responded to trauma through discipline, surveillance, and moral certainty. From the start, Batman's story centred on fear, crime, and retribution, not reform or social change.

A key part of Batman's early history is his resistance to historical adaptation. Unlike other heroes, Batman mostly kept his established story during WWII. Will Brooker notes that early comics only gave token nods to war themes, not true propaganda. In Detective Comics #65 (1942), Batman faces Axis saboteurs, but the story keeps propaganda light.

⁸ Walker, J. (2005). *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp 3

⁹ Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. (2020) *Film Art: An Introduction*. 12th edn. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. pp 4

¹⁰ Pearson, R. E. & Uricchio, W. (eds.) (1991) *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to A Superhero and His Media*. London / New York: Routledge / BFI Publishing. pp 13-14

¹¹ Brooker, W. (2000) *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. London: Continuum / Bloomsbury Academic. pp 33-37



Fig. 1: Detective Comics #65 (1942), Batman fights off enemy agents

These moments simply acknowledge wartime but aren't a deep engagement.¹² Batman did not become a nationalist symbol; he stayed Gotham's guardian, tied to urban order. This resistance made his story stable over time. In the 1940s, his moral code was refined but not restructured. Early comics depicted Batman using lethal methods, but this changed with the arrival of Robin and new editorial guidelines. Batman kept acting as a force imposing order rather than as a partner with the public.¹³ In the postwar era and 1950s, comics faced scrutiny, especially in Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and the start of the Comics Code Authority. Batman became part of a moral panic about youth culture, especially with Wertham's controversial ideas about Batman and Robin. Wertham's claims were later discredited, but they still had a significant impact. The comics became sanitised and less complex, but Batman's core identity stayed the same (Brooker, 2000).¹⁴ The 1960s TV series *Batman* (1966–68), starring Adam West, was a major stylistic shift. It embraced camp and pop art, echoing wider shifts in American popular culture.

¹² Detective Comics #65, New York: DC Comics (July 1942).

¹³ Batman #1, New York: DC Comics (Spring 1940).

¹⁴ Brooker, W. (2000) *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. London: Continuum / Bloomsbury Academic. ch 2



Fig. 2: Adam West and Burt Ward in Batman (1966)



Fig. 3: Caesar Romero, Ed Deemer, and Clint Ritchie in *Batman* (1966)



Fig. 4: Milton Berle, Karl Lukas and Lisa Seagram in *Batman* (1966)



Fig. 4: Adam West, Werner Klemperer, and Burt Ward in *Batman* (1966)

Still, this period is a stylistic shift, not a transformation; Batman stayed wealthy, authoritative, and certain (Gould, 2011).¹⁵ The 1970s brought a return to darker themes, notably by Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams, who restored Batman as a grim detective as urban crime and doubt grew in the wake of the Vietnam War.¹⁶



Fig. 6: Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams’ Batman



Fig. 7: The Romance of Talia and Batman in Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams’ Batman

¹⁵ Gould, C. (2011) 'Batman's Cultural Impact: Promoting Great Society Values', *PopMatters*, 12 July.

¹⁶ Detective Comments (2018) 'Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams' *Detective Comics/Batman (1970–1973)*, *Detective Comments*, 9 June.

Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) made Batman even more authoritarian and dark, mirroring Reagan-era fears (Pearson, 1991; Thurston, 2019).¹⁷¹⁸ For example, Miller includes inner dialogue—"This isn't a mud hole. It's an operating table. And I'm the surgeon."—showing Batman's harsh new edge (Miller, 2002).¹⁹

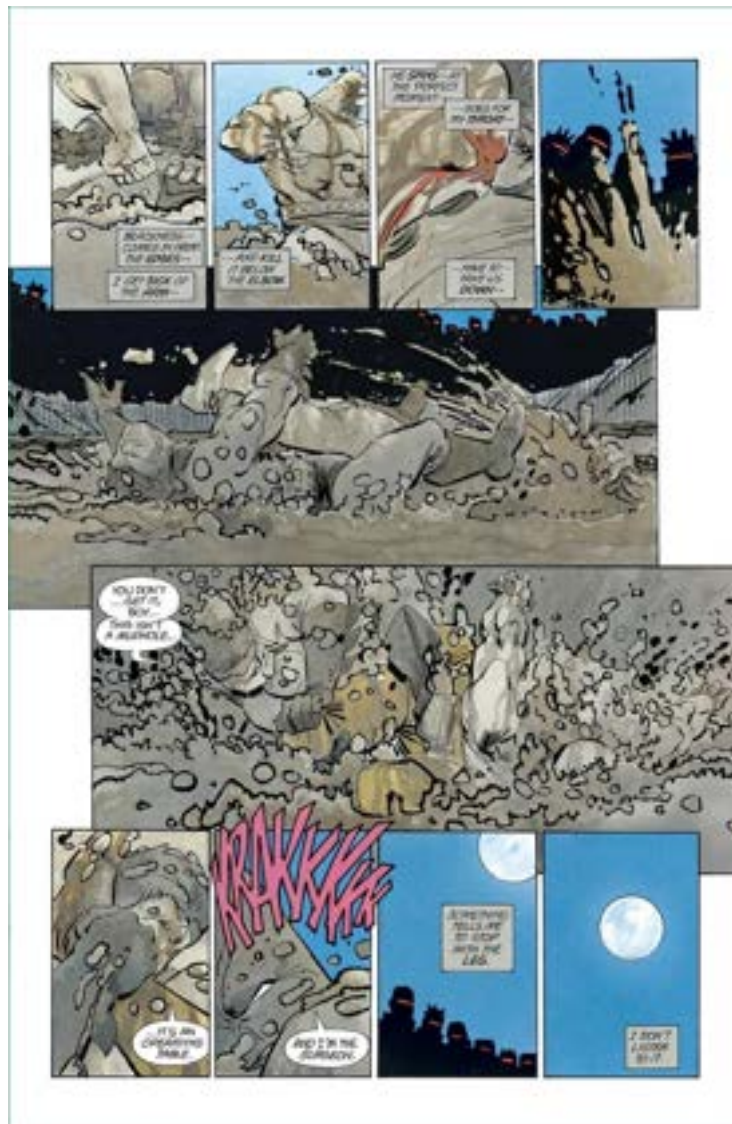


Fig. 8: "This isn't a mud hole. It's an operating table. And I'm the surgeon." - Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986)

¹⁷ Pearson, R. E. & Uricchio, W. (eds.) (1991) *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*. London / New York: Routledge / BFI Publishing. pp 1 and 5

¹⁸ Thurston, H. W. (2019) 'The Dark Knight Returns: Art Makes Sense If You Force It To', *The Comics Journal*, 1 May.

¹⁹ Miller, F., 2002. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. New York, NY: DC Comics.

Despite these changes in tone, the basic story stayed the same: trauma drives discipline, discipline creates control, and control brings order. Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) follows this tradition. Though it presents Batman's beginnings, it reasserts his consistent past. For example, it shows Bruce Wayne's alley trauma, echoing the comics' flashbacks from *Detective Comics* #33 (1939).²⁰ Bruce's values, rooted in childhood trauma and strict morals, do not greatly shift. Nolan adds modern style and psychological realism, but the main logic remains. Batman stands as a stable figure in a chaotic world.



Fig. 9: The Death of Bruce Wayne's Parents in *Detective Comics* #33 (1939)

²⁰ *Detective Comics* #33, New York: DC Comics (January 1939).



Fig. 10: Behind The Scenes: The Death of Bruce Wayne's Parents, Batman Begins (2005)

The Origins of Spider-Man

Spider-Man's debut in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962), created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, signified a considerable break from earlier superhero conventions (Wikipedia, 2024).²¹



Fig. 11: *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962), Cover Art

Emerging during the Cold War and amid growing youth-oriented social change, Spider-Man was introduced as a working-class adolescent defined by failure, guilt, and responsibility. Unlike Batman, whose heroism is grounded in discipline and authority, Spider-Man's moral foundation is rooted in moral error. Peter Parker becomes a hero not through destiny or rigorous training, but

²¹ Wikipedia 2024, *Amazing Fantasy*, Wikipedia, viewed 23 November 2025

through recognising his own culpability in the death of Uncle Ben. This origin positioned Spider-Man as a character deeply entangled in a historical context (Wright, 2001).²² As Wright notes, Spider-Man articulated the anxieties of Cold War youth culture, including fears surrounding communism, nuclear catastrophe, and adolescent alienation. Marvel's broader editorial philosophy reinforced this engagement with contemporary issues, privileging flawed and emotionally complex protagonists over the idealised heroes that had previously dominated the genre. Throughout the 1960s, Spider-Man narratives highlighted economic precarity, academic pressure, and social marginalisation. Peter Parker found it difficult to balance education, employment, and familial responsibility, representing the lived experiences of working-class readers in an increasingly urbanised America (Eliade, 1963; Campbell, 2004).²³²⁴ Notably, Spider-Man's successes were often temporary and accompanied by personal loss, strengthening his status as an "everyman" hero whose ethical significance derived from perseverance rather than dominance. Spider-Man's adaptability became especially clear in the 1970s. The publication of *Amazing Spider-Man* #96–98 (1971), which addressed drug addiction without the Comics Code Authority's approval, represented a decisive break from industry self-censorship.



Fig. 12: Panel from *Strange Adventures* #205 (1967), insinuating drug use

²² Wright, B. W., 2001, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Johns 1 Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. pp 71 and 110

²³ Eliade, M 1963, *Myth and Reality*, Harper & Row, New York. pp 186

²⁴ Campbell, J. (2004). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd edn. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp 23



Fig. 13: Letter from Michael F. White to Stan Lee, October 8, 1970 (Stan Lee Papers, American Heritage Centre, University of Wyoming)

A Comics Magazine Defies Code Ban on Drug Stories

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

For the first time since its adoption 15 years ago, the Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, which governs the contents of more than 300 million comic books published each year in the United States, has been overhauled.

As a result of revisions adopted last week, comic books now deal more easily with criminal acts by government officials and the police, with sex, with contemporary language and with the occult.

However, despite considerable pressure from some publishers and editors within the industry, the code continues to make no specific provisions for dealing with drug abuse.

Published Without Seal

Although a traditional ban on such stories remains, one publisher has defied the prohibition to publish without the code's seal of approval a comic book containing a story line dealing disapprovingly with drug abuse.

The May issue of The Amazing Spider-Man, published by the Marvel Comics Group of Magazine Management Company, a subsidiary



Seal of the Comics Magazine Association, which governs content of most comic books published in the United States.

of Cadmus Industries at 623 Madison Avenue, made the first time since adoption of the code that a subscribing member has published without its seal of approval.

The code was adopted by publishers of 50 per cent of the nation's comic books on Oct. 28, 1954, during a period when comic books were under attack from psychologists, legislators, clergymen and educators. Reminiscent of the strict Hays Code that governed Hollywood for many years, the Comics Code sharply limited depic-

tion of violence, gore and sex in comic books.

Consistent violation of the code could mean expulsion from membership in the Comics Magazine Association, accompanied by notification of newspapers, many of whom presumably would decline to handle the publishers' wares. In essence, the code is regarded by all its subscribing members as a beneficial standard, safeguarding their industry and prompting their allegiance.

Stan Lee, the editor of Spider-Man, said he was impelled to proceed with a story containing a subplot on drug abuse by a letter he received from an official of the National Institute of Mental Health, a branch of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Reason for Action

The letter suggested, in part, that a public service could be performed by assisting in the dissemination of factual information on drug abuse.

Although the seal of approval was refused for the proposed story, Mr. Lee said that he and Martin Goodman, Marvel's publisher, agreed to proceed with their plans for putting out Spider-Man.

Continued on Page 44, Column 3

Fig. 14: First section of the New York Times' Feb. 4, 1971, Comics Code story, which was accompanied by images from Amazing Spider-Man #96.

By interacting directly with real-world social issues, Spider-Man comics positioned the character as a vehicle for ethical realism rather than escapist fantasy. This trajectory culminated in *The Night Gwen Stacy Died* (1973), a storyline that introduced irreversible loss and moral failure into superhero storytelling (13th Dimension, 2021).²⁵



Fig. 15: *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (June 1973). Gerry Conway, script; Kane, pencils; Romita and Tony Mortellaro, inks.

The lasting significance of these themes is further demonstrated in contemporary adaptations such as *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), where Miles Morales faces personal loss and struggles with responsibility, reminiscent of the character's comic book origins, while re-contextualising them for new audiences. The film's depiction of Miles navigating familial expectations, self-doubt, and ethical conflicts demonstrates how the Spider-Man narrative

²⁵ 13th Dimension 2021, "The Night Gwen Stacy Died: Still shocking, still painful 50 years later", 13th Dimension, viewed 23 November 2025

continues to emphasise individual maturation and civic consciousness through both personal and collective challenges.

Unlike Batman's cyclical narrative stability, Spider-Man's story accumulates consequences over time. Trauma reshapes Peter Parker, rather than immobilising him within a fixed mythic framework. This receptiveness to change has enabled Spider-Man to remain culturally relevant across decades, accommodating evolving discussions of race, identity, and generational experience. The re-articulation of Spider-Man through Miles Morales in *Into the Spider-Verse* exemplifies this malleability, situating the principle that 'with great power comes great responsibility' within contemporary debates on ethnic identity and inclusion.

Re-contextualising Heroism

Hero narratives have traditionally emphasised external markers of courage, such as physical strength, tactical intelligence, moral certainty, and the defeat of visible antagonists. While these traits provide narrative clarity plus spectacle, they risk reducing heroism to mere performance rather than an ongoing process. To clarify the conceptual shift that follows, this dissertation moves beyond established interpretations and proposes that heroism is more productively understood as the readiness to confront and transform one's inner world. In this system, heroism is defined not by the capacity to defeat external enemies but by the ability to critically confront one's own fear, doubt, trauma, and inherited belief systems. Heroism thus becomes a developmental process, involving emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and a preparedness to relinquish stable identities to accommodate change. In the twenty-first century, audiences increasingly respond to characters who undergo meaningful transformation, as reflected in narrative studies which illustrate character development as a driver of emotional involvement, moral evaluation, and enjoyment in film narratives (Plantinga, n.d.; Cohen, 2001; Shafer and

Raney, 2016).²⁶²⁷²⁸ This shift is linked to wider cultural conversations about mental health, identity fluidity, trauma, and the value of vulnerability. In this context, a hero who resists transformation risks appearing emotionally distant and ethically unrelatable. Transformation, therefore, functions as a central mechanism through which characters and audiences access empowerment and self-understanding.

This conceptual reframing introduces two analytical categories that will inform the film analysis in subsequent chapters:

- **Static Heroism:** heroism defined mainly through external performance, anchored in fixed moral values, emotional containment, and resistance to internal change.
- **Transformational Heroism:** heroism defined through internal evolution, self-reflection, emotional openness, and moral flexibility.

Within this system, Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins* exemplifies static heroism: he is disciplined, capable, and morally driven, yet limited by unresolved childhood trauma. In contrast, Miles Morales in *Into the Spider-Verse* embodies transformational heroism, as his journey unfolds through stages of insecurity, growth, and change. The comparative study in the following chapters will explore how each character personifies these models of heroism, with particular attention to how their accounts and cinematic representations articulate the tension between stasis and transformation.

²⁶ Plantinga, C., 2018. 'Ethics and Character Engagement'. In: C. Plantinga, *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 193–210.

²⁷ Cohen, J. (2001) Audience identification with media characters.

²⁸ Shafer, D. and Raney, A. A. (2016) Explaining the role of character development in the evaluation of narratives: Moral evaluation, liking, and enjoyment *Poetics*

Chapter 2

Batman Begins: A case study on static heroism.

Introduction

Batman Begins (2005), the first film in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, presents itself as a psychologically grounded origin story. It frames Bruce Wayne's (Christian Bale) transformation into Batman as driven by trauma, such as the murder of his parents and his encounter with bats, rather than by mythic destiny.²⁹ The film uses realism and emotional depth to depict trauma and fear as central motivations for Bruce's actions. While the narrative borrows the classical mythic structure of departure, initiation, and return, Bruce's transformation appears functional rather than psychological.³⁰ He gains skills and discipline through mentorship from Ducard (Liam Neeson) and symbolically conquers his fear of bats by adopting their iconography, which he associates with overcoming his parents' deaths. Despite these developments, his worldview remains fixed, as the film reinforces rather than challenges his attitudes toward fear, morality, and justice. These qualities are consistently externalised through the Batman persona, rather than internally interrogated or changed.

In this chapter, I argue that *Batman Begins* exemplifies static heroism, in which the hero's core values and psychological state change little. I will support this argument in three main parts: first, by showing how Bruce's trauma remains a constant foundation for his identity; second, by analysing how his training and use of symbolism reinforce his psychological rigidity; and third, by examining how the film's setting and visual style stabilise both Bruce's sense of self and Gotham. Through this approach, I clarify that the film's version of heroism is about disciplined preservation of established values—demonstrated by performance of control and the suppression of vulnerability—rather than a journey of internal growth or transformation.

²⁹ Yilmaz and Fundlar discuss the relation between Bruce's past and his journey of becoming Batman - "*As Ducard puts it, a vigilante is a man who gets lost seeking gratification. Bruce, on the other hand, is on a quest to find himself—or at least the part or the version of himself that he can hold on to which is comprehensive and inclusive enough to cover up and hide the scared and angry reflection of his childhood trauma—in a self-reflexive manner.*" Yilmaz, G.E. & Fundalar, S., 2022. Constructing and deconstructing the modern hero in Christopher Nolan's *Batman*(*Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, etc.) pp 4

³⁰ Campbell, J. (2004). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd edn. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Trauma as Foundation, Not Catalyst

One of the central arguments in this chapter is that *Batman Begins* treats Bruce Wayne's trauma as both the foundation and the limit of his heroism. His parents' murder is not just an inciting incident; it is repeatedly portrayed as the emotional core explaining and justifying his alter ego. Instead of allowing this trauma to lead Bruce into a period of reflection and change, the narrative repeatedly returns to it as a fixed point of origin. The film's use of repeated flashbacks and visual echoes of the alley where his parents died emphasises that Bruce's identity remains closely attached to this formative trauma. This suggests that, here, trauma is not a catalyst for change but a steady reference rarely questioned. As a result, Bruce's worldview is tightly anchored to this trauma, defining his motivations and actions without true interrogation or growth. This fixation is most clearly shown through the film's repeated bat imagery.



Fig. 16: Bats flying in formation resembling the Batman logo in the opening shot of *Batman Begins* (2005)



Fig. 17: Bats flying in the Batcave; Batman Begins (2005)



Fig. 18: A close-up of a Batarang; Batman Begins (2005)



Fig. 19: Nolan's Bat Signal; Batman Begins (2005)

As a child, Bruce's fall into the cave marks an encounter with overwhelming fear and helplessness shortly before his parents' loss. When he grows up, Bruce does not explore the emotional meaning of this experience. Instead, he attempts to dominate it. The bat no longer represents vulnerability; it becomes a tool—a symbol that instils fear in others. (Brooks, 2022)³¹ Many viewers see this change as empowerment. However, it signals psychological rigidity. Bruce does not process or integrate fear; he simply inverts and projects it outward.³² He does not learn to live with fear. Instead, he focuses on controlling it. In doing so, he preserves the emotional logic of his childhood and never moves beyond it.³³

While previous theorists such as Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (2001) have emphasised that unresolved traumatic experiences can enforce repetitive patterns of thought and behaviour, more recent scholarship demonstrates how traumatic pasts may also create a complex overlap of temporalities that shape a subject's present identity (Bayoumy, 2023).³⁴ The film visually and narratively acknowledges the lasting presence of Bruce's trauma but, significantly, avoids depicting any resolution or integration. Instead, it emphasises what Caruth defines as the "insistence of trauma"—a tendency for trauma to be relived and reasserted, which prevents negotiation between dichotomous categories such as corruption and order, or fear and control (Joy, 2019).³⁵ Judith Herman similarly argues that trauma can promote a rigid morality and

³¹ CBR.com, 2022. How Batman Begins revolutionised the concept of fear.

³² Projection: *in psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories, the process by which one attributes one's own individual positive or negative characteristics, affects, and impulses to another person or group. This is often a defense mechanism in which unpleasant or unacceptable impulses, stressors, ideas, affects, or responsibilities are attributed to others.* American Psychological Association, n.d. *Projection*. In: *APA Dictionary of Psychology*.

³³ Kolk discusses the effects of trauma in the context of hysteria - *The names of some of the greatest pioneers in neurology and psychiatry, such as Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Sigmund Freud, are associated with the discovery that trauma is at the root of hysteria—a mental disorder characterised by emotional outbursts, susceptibility to suggestion, and contractions and paralyses of the muscles that could not be explained by simple anatomy—particularly the trauma of childhood sexual abuse. These early researchers referred to traumatic memories as “pathogenic secrets” or “mental parasites,” because as much as the sufferers wanted to forget whatever had happened, their memories kept forcing themselves into consciousness, trapping them in an ever-renewing present of existential horror.* Van der Kolk, B.A., 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking. pp 194

³⁴ Bayoumy, H.M., 2023. 'Trapped in the past: trauma in The Sins of the Mother and Outside Time', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, Article 88.

³⁵ *Journal of Trauma Studies*, 2019. 'The traumatic screen: The films of Christopher Nolan', *Journal of Trauma Studies*, 1(1), pp. 45–67.

discourage self-reflection and receptivity to complexity (Herman, 1992).³⁶ By synthesising these conceptual models, we see that Bruce's sense of justice does not result from philosophical moral development as theorised by Kohlberg (1981).³⁷ Instead, it is anchored in unresolved, affective loss. The film ultimately sidesteps the question of whether a hero whose worldview is formed by childhood trauma is capable of psychological or ethical growth, or what consequences such stasis entails for both the individual and the wider environment. The film repeatedly situates heroism not as a healing process or a journey of self-discovery, but as the disciplined maintenance of pain and established values.

The League of Shadows, as well as the Myth of Choice

Bruce Wayne's training under Henri Ducard is initially presented as a potential moment of self-realisation, visually constructed through scenes of guidance that emphasise philosophical and physical challenges. The film sequences Bruce's time with the League of Shadows as an opportunity for him to question and potentially reexamine his understanding of justice, fear, and responsibility. (Nolan, 2005)³⁸

³⁶ Herman, J.L., 1992. *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.

³⁷ Kohlberg, L., 1981. *The philosophy of moral development: Moral stages and the idea of justice*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

³⁸ Nolan, C. (dir.), 2005. *Batman Begins*. [Film] Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures.



Fig. 20: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) training with the League of Shadows; *Batman Begins* (2005)

However, closer analysis of these instances, particularly the exchange in which Ducard asks Bruce what he seeks, and Bruce replies, “I seek... the means to fight injustice, to turn fear against those who prey on the fearful,” reveals that the training is not transformative in a substantive sense. Ducard’s response, “To manipulate the fears of others... you must first master your own,” indicates an instrumental approach to fear that prioritises its control and redirection rather than any genuine interrogation or resolution of trauma.³⁹



Fig. 21: Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson) trains Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) in sword fighting; *Batman Begins* (2005)

³⁹ American Psychological Association, n.d. *Projection*. In: *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. Retrieved January 21, 2026

This critical pattern recurs earlier in the narrative, when Rachel (Katie Holmes) challenges Bruce after he conflates justice and revenge, insisting, “Justice is about harmony. Revenge is about you making yourself feel better.”



Fig. 22: Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes) talks to Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) about the difference between justice and revenge; *Batman Begins* (2005)

Although Bruce refuses the League of Shadows’ violent methods and ultimately rejects their demand to kill, the training he receives from the League is depicted as a strong shaping force in his development as Batman. Importantly, the League does not facilitate a reconsideration or dismantling of Bruce’s beliefs; rather, it reinforces his adherence to discipline, the suppression of vulnerability, and the conversion of trauma into aggression, supplying a formalised technique for the worldviews and ethics he already possesses. (Lucien, 2025)⁴⁰ In this way, the League of Shadows functions not as a site of critical transformation, but as an institution that sharpens and legitimises Bruce’s pre-existing perspectives.

⁴⁰ Undercurrents, 2025. Compelled by darkness: Batman, mental instability, and the blurred line of heroism.

This becomes clear during the execution trial—the turning point of Bruce’s moral awakening. Ordered to kill a criminal for initiation, Bruce refuses and rejects injustice. Still, Nolan’s Batman movies are less strict about Batman’s no-killing policy than other versions. In one scene, Bruce refuses to execute Ra’s al Ghul, instead choosing to leave him on a crashing train after he disables its brakes. The train collides with Gotham Tower, resulting in a fatal explosion that presumably kills Ra’s, and several others may also perish in the destruction.



Fig. 23: “I won’t kill you, but I don’t have to save you,” Batman (Christian Bale); Batman Begins (2005)

This sequence complicates Bruce's moral stance by illustrating the consequences of his refusal to directly kill (IMDb, 2005).⁴¹In the same scene, Batman states to his enemy, “I won’t kill you, but I don’t have to save you,” denoting a clear boundary in his actions; while he refuses to execute, he still chooses to intimidate and endanger opponents to achieve his goals, maintaining his underlying worldview (“Batman Begins (2005) – Mutant Reviewers”).^{42,43}

⁴¹ IMDb, n.d. Batman Begins (2005) – Plot summary.

⁴² Mutant Reviewers (2005) ‘Batman Begins (2005)’, Mutant Reviewers.

⁴³ *According to Shattered Assumptions Theory, traumatic experiences fundamentally disrupt individuals’ core beliefs about the world and the self. However, individuals do not automatically reconstruct these assumptions in a genuinely adaptive way; instead, they may assimilate the traumatic experience into their pre-existing emotional logic, preserving familiar beliefs in order to maintain a sense of control, meaning, and moral coherence.* Edmondson, D., Chadoir, S.R., Mills, M.A., Park, C.L., Holub, J., & Bartkowiak, J.M., 2011. From shattered assumptions to weakened worldviews: Trauma symptoms signal anxiety buffer disruption. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 16(4), pp.358–385



Fig. 24: Batman (Christian Bale) seconds before jumping out of the moving train, leaving Ra'as al-Ghul to his death; Batman Begins (2005)

This lets Bruce keep his sense of moral purity without questioning the emotional or ethical rigidity of his mission.

The visual style of these scenes serves an essential function in articulating Bruce's static psychological state. (Batman Begins (2005) - Cinematography Analysis, 2025)⁴⁴ During the execution trial, for example, Nolan makes repeated use of tight shots that place Bruce at the centre of the frame, surrounded by the shadowy, anonymous figures of League members, as seen when Bruce stands over the kneeling prisoner.



Fig. 25: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) prepares to execute a criminal as part of his initiation to the League of Shadows; Batman Begins (2005)

Stark compositions and deep shadows saturate the hall, while the harsh, directional lighting casts dramatic contrasts across Bruce's face, further isolating him and increasing the sense of moral severity.

⁴⁴ Colour Culture, 2023. Batman Begins (2005) cinematography analysis.

In a single extended shot, the distance between Bruce and the League is accentuated by wide framing, with Bruce appearing upright and illuminated, while others remain in shadow, visually reinforcing his emotional isolation and the rigidity of his position.



Fig. 26: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) meets Ra'as al Ghul; Batman Begins (2005)

The cinematography maintains a consistent palette of cold greys and subdued tones, particularly in the aerial shots of Ra'as al Ghul's lair, which evoke a pervasive sense of separation.



Fig. 27: Ra'as al Ghul's Lair, The Mountain Temple; *Batman Begins* (2005)



Fig. 28: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) climbing the mountain; *Batman Begins* (2005)

Close-ups capture Bruce's largely impassive facial expressions, particularly at the moment he refuses to carry out the execution—his jaw tightens, but his demeanour remains controlled and firm. These measured movements and controlled, subdued gestures accentuate the primacy of discipline over any hint of psychological turmoil or ethical uncertainty. (Batman Begins (2005) - Cinematography Analysis, 2025)⁴⁵



Fig. 29: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) prepares to execute a criminal as part of his initiation to the League of Shadows; *Batman Begins* (2005)

Collectively, these filmic choices—especially the central, distanced camera placement and the repeated use of impassive close-ups—demonstrate that Bruce's actions function to reaffirm his worldview without acknowledging internal conflict. The League of Shadows, rather than directly challenging Bruce's values, is depicted both visually and narratively as a distorted image of his beliefs, strengthening his moral rigidity and positioning Batman as an unrelenting hero. ("Batman Begins: The Batsuit").⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Colour Culture, 2025. *Batman Begins* (2005) cinematography analysis.

⁴⁶ Nolan, C. (dir.), 2005. *Batman Begins*. [Film] Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Armour and Masks

Approximately an hour into the film, Batman's first suit is introduced as a makeshift black ensemble that lacks the characteristic bat motifs ("Batman Begins: The Batsuit").⁴⁷



Fig. 30: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) prepares to meet James Gordon (Gary Oldman) in an early makeshift batsuit lacking the classic bat iconography; *Batman Begins* (2005)

In this scene, he approaches James Gordon (Gary Oldman). The shot stays on Gordon as Bruce's monotone voice says, "Wait for my sign." Though Batman appears earlier, this moment marks the start of his clear on-screen identity.



Fig. 31: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) conceals his identity from James Gordon (Gary Oldman); *Batman Begins* (2005)

⁴⁷ Nolan, C. (dir.), 2005. *Batman Begins*. [Film] Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures.

The following scenes show the origin of Batman's iconic armour: from the tumbler to his base-jumping material, and the bat mask and bat-shaped throwing knives. Everything comes together. Nolan introduces Batman with early provisional costuming within the Bat Cave, which is depicted as an actual cave beneath Wayne Manor, and utilises suspenseful direction to gradually reveal the character and setting (Ebert).⁴⁸



Fig. 32: Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) and Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) test drive the original Tumbler; Batman Begins (2005)



Fig. 33: An early prototype of the Bat-mask; Batman Begins (2005)

⁴⁸ Ebert, R. (2005) 'Batman Begins', RogerEbert.com.

We hear Batman, feel the fear, but do not see him. Even two and a half minutes into the tension, Batman fights Falcone's men, but we still do not fully see him. The scene ends with Batman meeting Carmine Falcone and knocking him out. "I am Batman."



Fig. 34: Batman (Christian Bale) knocks out Carmine Falcone (Tom Wilkinson); *Batman Begins* (2005)

While subsequent encounters between Batman and criminals further clarify the shifting power relations and the tactical use of fear, even this initial introduction establishes these themes. The zoomorphic design of Batman's costume creates a strong visual marker that signifies Bruce Wayne's internal struggle, while the external manifestation of his costume stresses the performative nature of his alter ego ("Scene Analysis: Psychological and Political Themes in *The Batman* (2022)").⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Scene Analysis: Psychological and Political Themes in *The Batman* (2022) (no date) [Online].



Fig. 35: Batman (Christian Bale) as Batman, surrounded by a number of bats; Batman Begins (2005)

The costume and vehicle are both heavy and rigid, rendered in black with no colour or vitality, emphasising containment and control. Batman projects his desire for vengeance and dominance into this alter ego, resulting in a split rather than an integrated self—a process that closely mirrors social constructs of American masculine identity characterised by strength, dominance, and protectiveness (Medrano).⁵⁰ As theorised by Connell (1995) in the concept of hegemonic masculinity, such models valorise qualities such as toughness, control, and the denial of vulnerability. More specifically, the form of honour-based masculinity referenced here corresponds to theoretical traditions that link honour cultures to contexts of resource scarcity and weak legal regulation (see Pomerantz, Foster, and Bell).⁵¹ As these scholars note, “Honour is hypothesised to emerge as a survival strategy within environments defined by resource scarcity and a lack of effective law enforcement. In similar environments, individuals bolster themselves against the risk of theft or attack by actively developing a reputation as someone who should not be ‘messed with.’ Honour-endorsing males seek a reputation for strength, toughness, competence, and intolerance of disrespect. It has also been observed that honour-endorsement men are more likely to seek out dangerous situations they perceive as likely to strengthen their reputation, and they rate such situations as less dangerous and themselves as more likely to endure prolonged risk in them.” Nolan’s cinematic choices reinforce this honour-based masculinity through shadowy framing, a desaturated colour palette, and the minimal emotional range in Bale’s performance (Batman Begins (2005) Cinematography Analysis, 2023).⁵² This form of masculinity is not only central to Batman’s persona but is also embedded within the film’s narrative structure. The plot’s emphasis on disciplined control and the suppression of vulnerability reflects the honour-based masculine ideals theorised by Connell and others (Medrano, n.d.). Consequently, the narrative enacts a pattern of repetitive mastery and performative heroism rather than psychological development or transformation. In this way, masculinity theory is evident in both Batman’s characterisation and the story’s structure, which privileges external demonstrations of control over significant internal change. The narrative

⁵⁰ Medrano, K., n.d. *He’s the hero we deserve: Batman as a figure of dominant masculinity*.

⁵¹ Pomerantz, A.L., Foster, S. & Bell, K., 2023. Invincible honor: masculine honor, perceived invulnerability, and risky decision-making. *Current Psychology*, 43(6)

⁵² Colour Culture, 2023. *Batman Begins (2005) cinematography analysis*.

affirms the construction and maintenance of a persona that allows Bruce Wayne to remain emotionally unchanged.

Gotham City

Gotham City's function isn't solely as a narrative backdrop for Batman's story, but also as an extension of Bruce Wayne's internal state, with the city's characteristics directly reflecting and supporting the rigidity of his heroic identity. (Syarif & Purnomo, 2025)⁵³ The film presents Gotham as deeply corrupt, a city locked in a perpetual cycle of crime, decay, and moral failure that closely parallels Bruce's own unresolved trauma and emotional stasis.⁵⁴ While Batman's intervention disrupts criminal activity, it does not actually initiate any meaningful social or ethical change. Instead, Batman operates as a stabilising force, restoring order without transformation; in effect, both Bruce and Gotham remain fixed in their respective cycles, unable to move beyond loss and control. This entwined stasis allows not only for the repetition of Batman narratives, but also treats Gotham as the external projection of Bruce's psychological struggle—as his attempts to manage crime mirror his efforts to master his own trauma. Gotham is portrayed in the film as an environment to be managed and controlled rather than comprehended or healed, a framing that parallels Bruce's approach to his psychological wounds. Gotham is rendered through a desaturated colour palette dominated by blacks, greys, and muted blues, forming an atmosphere that accentuates the film's thematic emphasis on stasis and containment. (Batman Begins Cinematography Analysis, 2023)⁵⁵ The city's oppressive, monumental architecture dwarfs individual figures and emphasises isolation, surveillance, and control, further aligning Gotham's environment with Bruce's emotional rigidity. (Designing Gotham, 2022)⁵⁶

⁵³ Syarif, A. and Purnomo, B., 2025. 'Trauma and the hero's mind: A Freudian ego analysis of Bruce Wayne in The Batman', *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 7(2)

⁵⁴ Russell, J., 2022. 'Defending the Status Quo in *The Dark Knight Rises*', *European Journal of American Studies*, 17(2).

⁵⁵ Colour Culture, 2023. Batman Begins (2005) cinematography analysis.

⁵⁶ The Ringer, 2022. *Designing Gotham*.



Fig. 36: Alleyway (Exterior); Batman Begins (2005)



Fig. 37: Elevated Transit Network (Exterior); Batman Begins (2005)



Fig. 38: Transit Station (Interior); Batman Begins (2005)

Spaces such as alleyways, industrial interiors, and elevated transit networks are narrow and enclosed, offering little sense of openness or possibility and visually strengthening the closed, unchanging world of heroic stasis argued in this chapter. Crucially, Gotham is consistently depicted as a decaying and alienating environment throughout the film; its visual identity does not evolve from Bruce's return to the final act. This persistent lack of visual transformation, which does not merely parallel Bruce Wayne's psychological state but also denotes the film's broader resistance to change at both individual and social levels ("Capitalism and Schizophrenia in Gotham City – The Fragile Masculinities" 1-15).⁵⁷ Thus, the visual strategies utilised in Gotham's depiction serve as evidence for the argument that *Batman Begins* presents heroism as a disciplined preservation of the status quo, with Gotham functioning as an externalised manifestation of Bruce's static emotional state and illustrating that neither personal nor collective healing is possible within the world of the film.

The ethical consequences of this relation are significant. By positioning Batman as Gotham's necessary guardian, the film ultimately neutralises Gotham's crime-laden fixity, presenting a world that needs constant control rather than one capable of development and transformation. Gotham, like Bruce, is preserved rather than transformed, allowing the maintenance of a particular version of Batman narration and strengthening a model of heroism defined by maintenance, rigidity, and emotional invulnerability. (Dyer, 2011)⁵⁸

Completion Without Change

Batman Begins closely adheres to the mythic structure outlined in Joseph Campbell's "The Hero's Journey". Bruce Wayne departs from his former life and undergoes an initiation through training and the acquisition of new skills. He returns to Gotham transformed. On a structural level, the film stages all the elements of the Hero's Journey: mastery of fear, acquisition of specialised

⁵⁷ Gender Forum, 2026. 'Capitalism and schizophrenia in Gotham City – The fragile masculinities', *Gender Forum*, 2026(1), pp. 1-15.

⁵⁸ Dyer, J., 2011. *Batman Begins – Esoteric analysis*.

knowledge, and assumption of a heroic role geared towards restoring order. (The Hero's Journey in *Batman Begins* (2005), 2018)⁵⁹ This story reinforces the illusion of transformation by presenting Bruce's journey as one of development and self-realisation. However, while the film fulfils the formal requirements of a Hero's story, it resists change on an internal level, hence presenting a resolution without reflection. (Dyer, 2011)⁶⁰

A closer analysis shows that Bruce Wayne's worldview in *Batman Begins* (2005) exhibits steady patterns with his historical characterisation, particularly in his relationship to trauma. His moral framework stays rigid, and his emotional life is characterised by suppression and a steady need for control, echoing analyses of Wayne's psyche through the lens of Freudian ego theory (Syarif and Purnomo, 2025).⁶¹ In this sense, *Batman Begins* exposes a limitation within traditional heroic structures: the completion of the myth does not guarantee self-transformation, and by critiquing the Hero's Journey via the lens of static heroism, the film reveals how a character can successfully perform heroism while remaining psychologically closed. Trauma becomes the main motivator for action, but does not cause growth; discipline replaces self-reflection as a mechanism for change. However, it is worth acknowledging that some viewers may interpret Bruce's disciplined reaction to trauma as a form of fortitude or practical adaptation, suggesting that heroic value can be found not only in internal transformation but also in steadfastness and consistency of purpose. This perspective complicates a strictly negative assessment of static heroism by opening the possibility that psychological stasis can, in particular contexts, function as a strategy for enduring adversity rather than merely signifying a refusal to change.

To summarise, the film's treatment of trauma, masculinity, and cinematic form collectively supports a model of static heroism, wherein both Batman and Gotham are stabilised rather than transformed. By preserving the established order and foregoing substantive ethical development, *Batman Begins* ultimately restricts the potential for authentic growth or renewal for both its

⁵⁹ Clapperboard, 2018. The hero's journey in *Batman Begins* (2005).

⁶⁰ Dyer, J., 2011. *Batman Begins* – Esoteric analysis.

⁶¹ Syarif, A. and Purnomo, B., 2025. 'Trauma and the hero's mind: A Freudian ego analysis of Bruce Wayne in *The Batman*', *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 7(2). pp 145-163

protagonist and the city. This analysis shows how the film exemplifies static heroism by privileging control and the outward performance of mastery over vulnerability and genuine psychological or ethical transformation. More broadly, this interpretation invites reconsideration of contemporary heroic narratives, raising the question of whether modern cinema confronts or perpetuates an ideal of heroism grounded in stasis and discipline rather than genuine transformation or adaptability. This issue carries substantial consequences for how audiences conceptualise the possibility of change within individuals and societies formed by trauma and loss.

Chapter 3
Into The Spiderverse: A case study on transformational heroism

Introduction

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018) presents a model of heroism defined by continual psychological, ethical, and emotional transformation rather than static mastery or fixed identity. The film constructs 'transformational heroism,' in which the hero's growth emerges from confronting failure, doubt, and trauma. Unlike *Batman Begins*, which exemplifies static heroism, *Into the Spider-Verse* emphasises adaptability, vulnerability, and relational experience as core values. This chapter argues that, by focusing on ongoing self-reinvention and collective identity, *Into the Spider-Verse* offers a dynamic model of heroism distinct from the traditional, mastery-driven approach. The film's treatment of psychological vulnerability, trauma, and collective identity reinterprets the heroic figure and aligns with recent theoretical perspectives in psychology and film studies that associate authentic heroism with the willingness to confront uncertainty and change.

According to Marvel, Miles Morales' story does not originate from a single traumatic event, as with Batman, but from his navigating challenges such as adapting to a new school, meeting parental expectations, and grappling with identity and belonging (Fandom, 2021).⁶² These pressures serve as preconditions that Miles must confront. He becomes Spider-Man not through the acquisition of powers or adherence to a heroic archetype, but by revising his understanding of his identity and potential. (Martínez, 2020)⁶³

This chapter examines how *Into the Spider-Verse* constructs heroism as a process shaped by trauma, failure, relationships, and self-doubt. Specifically, it analyses the film's narrative structure, character relationships, depiction of masculinity, and cinematic style. The analysis adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating formalist film analysis and psychoanalytic theory, with attention to trauma and masculinity studies. By outlining these focuses and

⁶² Fandom, 2021. *Belonging in the Spider-Verse: The psychology of Miles Morales*.

⁶³ Martínez, M.I.P., 2020. On comics, narratives and transmedia multiverses: Re-envisioning the wall-crawler in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. *Communication Journal*.

signalling its theoretical frameworks, the chapter demonstrates that *Into the Spider-Verse* presents transformational heroism as a more adaptable and emotionally nuanced model than Bruce Wayne's static heroism. Ultimately, the chapter argues that the film reinterprets Spider-Man for contemporary audiences, proposing heroism is defined by continual growth rather than a fixed identity.

Trauma as a Catalyst

Although *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* is frequently analysed for its distinctive visual style and comic-book aesthetics, Sam Summers' article exemplifies this focus by highlighting questions of animation and visual innovation, yet it overlooks how trauma operates as a crucial narrative and psychological engine within the film. This emphasis on visual innovation is characteristic of animation studies, where scholars such as Donald Crafton and Nancy Beiman have explored the narrative potential and expressive capacity of animated form in shaping character and emotion. (Beiman, 2016)⁶⁴ However, by neglecting trauma's role as a catalyst for Miles Morales' transformation, such analyses fail to fully engage with the film's negotiation of identity and subjectivity, which are central concerns in film theory regarding character development and audience identification.

Nevertheless, some scholars might argue that the film's visual style itself functions as a representation of trauma, with its fractured compositions and dissonant animation techniques mirroring Miles' psychological state. Alternative readings could also question the centrality of trauma, suggesting that the film's primary focus lies in its celebration of community and belonging, rather than psychological disruption (Gonzalez, 2023).⁶⁵ These perspectives offer valuable nuance by highlighting the film's aesthetics and narrative's multifaceted nature.

⁶⁴ Beiman, N., 2016. *Animated performance: Bringing imaginary animal, human and fantasy characters to life*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁶⁵ Gonzalez, A., 2023. *Into the Spider-Verse: Cultural identity in Spider-Man media*. *Whittier Scholars Program*.

In addressing this gap, my argument intervenes in existing scholarship by connecting the psychological facets of trauma with the film's visual strategies, extending prior work on form to also consider how narrative and character development are driven by emotional experience. By integrating trauma studies and identity theories into the analysis, I offer a framework that highlights both the film's aesthetic originality and the significance of psychological growth and vulnerability in its model of heroism.

The film underscores this distinction in the sequences surrounding Uncle Aaron's death. Upon discovering that his uncle is the Prowler, Miles' personal and heroic understanding is destabilised. During the rooftop confrontation, when Kingpin kills Aaron, the film visualises trauma through meticulous shot composition: the moment of loss is signalled by a sudden tightening of the camera onto Miles' face, isolating him from the chaotic environment with a shallow focus and muting the diegetic city sounds beneath a swelling, dissonant score.



Fig. 39: The Prowler, aka Uncle Aaron (Mahershala Ali), is shot by Kingpin (Liev Schreiber); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 40: Miles Morales (Close up; Shameik Moore); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

Vivid colour drains from the frame, the vibrant palette replaced by stark purples and shadows that envelop both Miles and Aaron, underscoring the abrupt rupture in Miles' world. When Miles cradles Aaron, the camera lingers in a low-angle close-up, heightening the sense of helplessness by dwarfing his figure against the angular rooftop structures and distant city lights. Rather than providing clarity or moral certainty, this trauma induces confusion and leaves Miles uncertain about his actions and identity, a state rendered palpable by his trembling hands and the distorted ambient sounds that blur into near-silence after Aaron dies.



Fig. 41: Miles Morales (Close up; Shameik Moore) comforts a dying Uncle Aaron (Mahershala Ali); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 42: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) cries after the death of Uncle Aaron (Mahershala Ali); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

This destabilisation is reinforced through associative visual motifs. When Miles returns to his room, the camera isolates his Great Expectations textbook and the graffiti sketch created with Aaron on the night he was bitten by the radioactive spider.



Fig. 43: The “Great Expectations” book is a nod to an earlier scene regarding questions surrounding identity; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 44: Sketches of the graffiti mural that Miles made with Uncle Aaron the night he was bitten by a radioactive spider; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

These objects evoke earlier moments of creative expression and identity conflict, connecting present grief to unresolved questions of meaning and belonging. In this context, trauma disrupts rather than consolidates Miles' heroic identity.

This aligns with Janet Walker's conceptualisation of trauma.⁶⁶⁶⁷ Miles' trauma is not resolved through action or mastery; rather, it persists. He neither weaponises his pain nor interprets it as destiny. While Bruce Wayne integrates trauma into a rigid moral framework, Miles is allowed to grieve before embracing heroism.

The community plays an important role in making this distinction possible. Within a relational framework, Miles' transformation is formed by the collective presence of the Spider-people. Mentorship, mutual vulnerability, and emotional support provide perspective, allowing trauma to be contextualised rather than internalised as identity. According to Van der Kolk, trauma is best integrated through relational processes that restore agency and meaning. Miles finds emotional mobility through connection—not isolation or control (Van Der Kolk, 2014).⁶⁸

Miles does not become Spider-Man as a direct result of trauma; rather, he learns to coexist with it. Trauma does not serve as an anchor for his worldview; rather, it initiates his growth, fostering openness and ethical development. Into the Spider-Verse posits that transformation, rather than pain, constitutes the essence of heroism.

⁶⁶ Posttraumatic stress disorder and the nature of trauma, 1993. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 6, pp.373–393.

⁶⁷ Walker, J. (2005). *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp 3

⁶⁸ Van der Kolk, B.A., 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking. pp 85-86

Failure and Choice

In *Into the Spider-Verse*, each instance in which Miles falls short prompts self-reflection; consequently, he is compelled to reassess his beliefs and let his experiences reshape his sense of self. Unlike traditional heroic narratives, in which initiation yields certainty, Miles' journey is characterised by instability, misjudgment, and self-doubt. Therefore, his failures operate not merely as obstacles but as catalysts, creating the very conditions that propel his continuing transformation and ultimately enable heroism.

From his initial inability to control his powers to unsuccessful training attempts with Peter B. Parker, Miles repeatedly falls short of heroic expectations. His body resists discipline: his webbing misfires, his invisibility activates involuntarily, and his movements lack precision. Although these moments are often presented humorously, they possess significant narrative weight. Such failures reveal the disparity between inherited heroic ideals and lived experience. Miles begins with an idealised conception of heroism that proves incompatible with his reality, and his repeated failures underscore this mismatch. (Sparks, 1996)⁶⁹

The narrative tension culminates when Miles leaves Aunt May's basement bunker, distancing himself from the other Spider-people. Miles is rendered powerless not by physical defeat but by self-doubt. He has not yet earned the right to participate in heroism defined by competence or mastery. Significantly, his return is not prompted by external pressure but by a redefinition of his relationship to failure. This decision marks a transition from imitation to self-authorship.

⁶⁹ Sparks, R., 1996. Masculinity and heroism in the Hollywood 'blockbuster'. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 36(3).



Fig. 45: The Other Spider-People; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

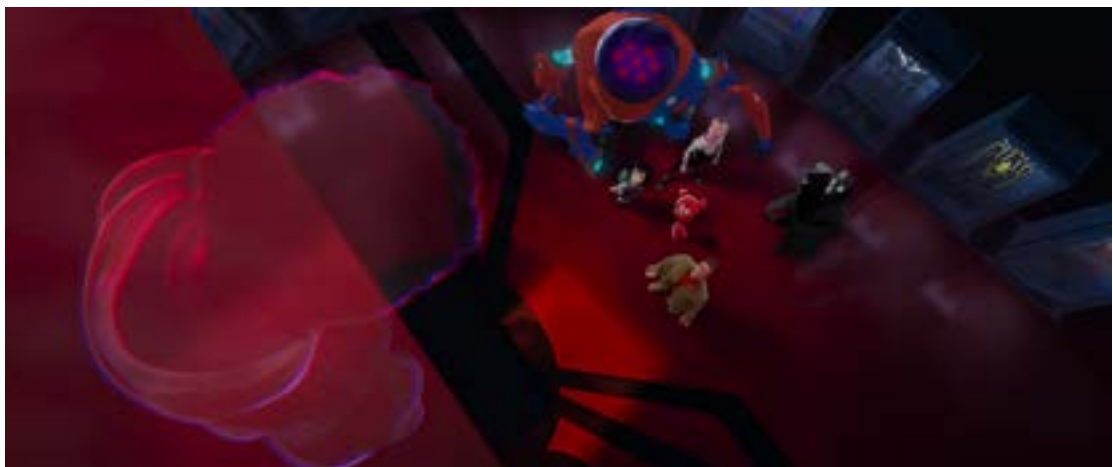


Fig. 46: Miles (Shameik Moore) leaves Aunt May's bunker with feelings of inadequacy surrounding his identity as Spider-Man; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

Choosing to act, rather than relying on destiny, sets Miles apart. The comparison with *Batman Begins* is particularly apt because that film is a foundational modern example of the Hero's Journey in popular cinema, highlighting the impact of trauma, ethical choice, and moral steadfastness as key elements in the formation of a superhero identity (Campbell, 2004).⁷⁰ Unlike many other superhero origin stories, *Batman Begins* devotes significant attention to psychological motivation, the transformative role of trauma, and the building of an icon through discipline and moral code. These features provide a clear contrast to *Into the Spider-Verse*, which reinterprets each aspect.

My choice to use *Batman Begins* as the primary point of comparison is intentional and methodologically significant. *Batman Begins* not only revitalised the superhero genre in the twenty-first century but also set a contemporary standard for cinematic representations of origin, trauma, and the construction of heroic identity. While many superhero films—such as *Iron Man* (2008), *Doctor Strange* (2016), and *Captain Marvel* (2019)—address themes of transformation and personal growth, *Batman Begins* is unique in its sustained focus on trauma and the ethical dilemmas the protagonist navigates throughout his journey. By juxtaposing *Into the Spider-Verse* with *Batman Begins*, I hope to highlight how each film constructs and negotiates the process of becoming a hero, highlighting the distinctions between static and transformational models of heroism. (Undercurrents, 2025) This comparison also provides greater clarity when analysing broader trends in the superhero genre, as *Batman Begins* serves as a touchstone for films that emphasise mastery, self-discipline, and mythic frameworks, in contrast to the more relational and dynamic approach in *Into the Spider-Verse*. (Smith, 2013)⁷¹

⁷⁰ Campbell, J. (2004). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd edn. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁷¹ Smith, T.D., 2013. *Batmessiah and Spider-Mensch*. *Convivium*.

The flexibility of redefining heroism through repeated self-reflection and growth in the face of failure contrasts with Batman's static approach and challenges Joseph Campbell's mythic model while still engaging with its familiar structure. The film upholds the initiation motif, but reframes it as a process of continual negotiation with fear, responsibility, and agency, rather than a final arrival at certainty. By concisely recapitulating the difference, Bruce Wayne embodies a hero who does not change, while Miles is defined by his willingness to question and transform himself. The narrative invites readers to anticipate how this dynamic unfolds through specific choices and experiences. In *Into the Spider-Verse*, heroism is rooted in humility and adaptability, and Miles ultimately achieves it by acting despite ongoing doubt. Failure, rather than success, becomes central to both his transformation and the audience's recognition of his heroism.

Relational Heroism and Community

A key distinction between static and transformational heroism lies in the role of relationality. *Batman Begins* presents heroism as a solitary pursuit, where isolation enables Bruce Wayne to maintain authority and psychological control but inhibits growth. In contrast, *Into the Spider-Verse* frames heroism as inherently relational. Connection, collaboration, and mutual vulnerability facilitate Miles Morales' journey to heroism, rather than isolation.

The film's ensemble structure emphasises its relational model. With multiple Spider-people, the notion of heroism as exceptionalism is destabilised (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2012).⁷² Rather than presenting Spider-Man as a uniform character type, the depiction of heroism is plural, adaptable, and context-dependent. Each Spider-variant engages with fear, failure, and responsibility differently, collectively challenging the idea that heroism requires adherence to a fixed template. (Williams, 2018)⁷³

⁷² Loftsdóttir, K. & Jensen, L., 2012. Introduction: Nordic exceptionalism and the Nordic 'others', in K. Loftsdóttir & L. Jensen (eds.) *Whiteness and postcolonialism in the Nordic region: Exceptionalism, migrant others and national identities*. London: Ashgate (Routledge), pp.9.

⁷³ Williams, 2018. *Form and belonging in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. *The Vault of Culture*.

Within this framework, Gwen Stacy is positioned as a peer rather than an emotional accessory. Her relationship with Miles is characterised by mutual recognition, in contrast to the narrative dependence seen in Rachel Dawes' role.



Fig. 47: Introduction to Gwen Stacey (Hailee Steinfeld); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

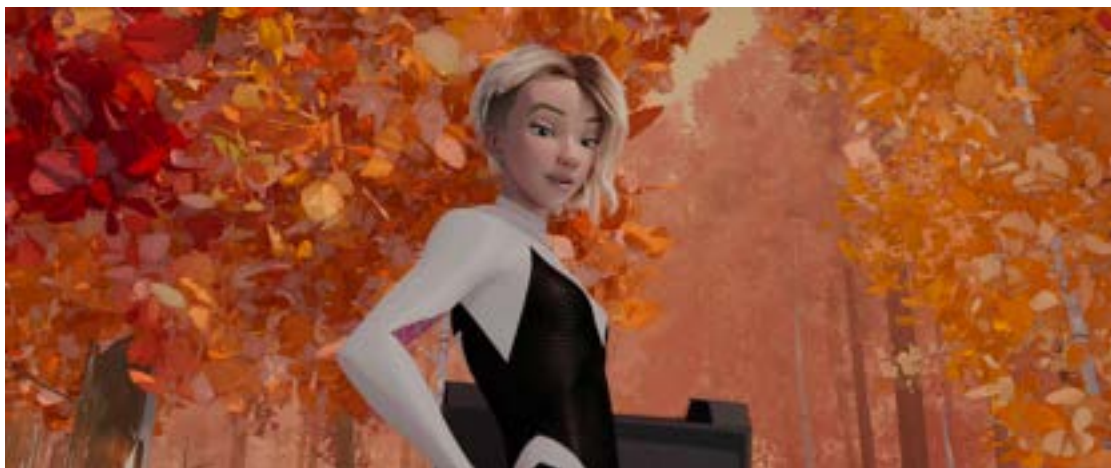


Fig. 48: Gwen Stacey (Hailee Steinfeld) reveals her identity; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

Gwen does not exist to stabilise Miles' moral compass or to be rescued; instead, she serves as an independent co-participant in the process of becoming, exemplifying vulnerability and agency. This stands in stark contrast to the gender dynamics of *Batman Begins*, in which female characters primarily serve as ethical mirrors rather than autonomous agents. (Beauregard et al., 2026)⁷⁴ Similarly, the portrayal of Peter B. Parker offers a novel perspective on mentorship. Unlike the idealised, infallible mentors of traditional hero narratives, Peter is depicted as a failed hero—divorced, disillusioned, and emotionally stagnant. His arc parallels Miles', presenting heroism as an ongoing process rather than a completed state. Peter does not instruct Miles from a position of moral certainty; instead, he learns alongside him, sharing experiences. This dynamic reinforces the film's rejection of singular moral truth. (Ni'mah & Kurniawati, 2022)⁷⁵



Fig. 49: A dishevelled Peter B. Parker (Jake Johnson); *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018)

⁷⁴ Beauregard, C.G., et al., 2026. Archetypes and gender in fiction: A data-driven mapping of gender stereotypes in stories. *arXiv preprint*.

⁷⁵ Ni'mah, H. and Kurniawati, D., 2022. The representation of masculinity through Peter Parker as the main character in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* movie. *Indonesian EFL Journal*, 8(1).

From a psychological perspective, this relational construction of heroism may enhance how audiences identify with the characters and the film as a whole. As Cohen argues, “Identifying with a character means feeling an affinity toward the character that is so strong that we become absorbed in the text and come to an empathic understanding of the feelings the character experiences, and for their motives and goals. We experience what happens to the characters as if it were happening to us, while, at least momentarily, forgetting ourselves as audience members, which intensifies our viewing experience. Thus, identification has both affective (empathy) and cognitive (understanding goals and motives, perspective-taking) components.” (Cohen, 2001) (Grodal, n.d.)⁷⁶ Similarly, Shafer and Raney suggest that narratives privileging character development and ethical negotiation increase moral engagement and enjoyment. (Shafer & Raney, 2017)⁷⁸ Into the Spider-Verse capitalises on this by forming heroism as an individual journey fuelled by community rather than isolation.

Masculinity and Cinematic Transformation

By rejecting isolation, singular authority, and mythic exceptionalism, Into the Spider-Verse articulates a democratic vision of heroism. Anyone can be Spider-Man, not because of inherent exceptionalism, but because heroism arises through connection, continual growth, the ongoing negotiation between one’s mission and internal state, and shared humanity. In this model, transformation is inherently collective. (Summers, 2019)⁷⁹ A key contrast between Bruce Wayne

⁷⁶ Grodal, T., n.d. Cognitive identification and empathy.

⁷⁷ Cohen, J. (2001). Audience identification with media characters. pp 184-185

⁷⁸ Shafer and Raney on “morally ambiguous characters” (MACs) *The moral predicaments faced by morally ambiguous characters may actually lead to greater moral engagement on the part of the viewer as the MACs grow and change throughout the film. This idea contrasts the notion put forward by Shafer and Raney (2012), among others, that viewers rely on moral disengagement to like and positively evaluate MACs. Instead, in our view, the viewer gets morally engaged with the main character because of the moral development and change displayed by the morally ambiguous character over the course of the narrative, which is evidenced by increasing moral deliberation and shifting moral priorities during the narrative. In line with Affective Disposition Theory, then, the moral challenges faced by the seemingly ambiguous protagonist simply increase viewer engagement and disposition toward the character as they progress from vice to virtue (or vice versa). As long as the ultimate outcome for the character is morally justified (cf. Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013), viewers can enjoy the narrative without needing to morally disengage.* Shafer, D.M. and Raney, A.A., 2017. Explaining the role of character development in the evaluation of morally ambiguous characters in entertainment media. *Poetics*, 60, pp.16–28.

⁷⁹ Summers, S., 2019. Adapting a retro comic aesthetic with *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*.

and Miles Morales lies in how masculinity is depicted and experienced in each film. In *Batman Begins*, masculinity functions as armour: a system of emotional preservation, authority, and control designed to protect a fixed sense of self. In *Into the Spider-Verse*, masculinity is instead portrayed as a malleable system, open to influence, relationality, critique, failure, and change. This distinction appears not only in the films' themes, but also in their visual storytelling. (Summers, 2019)⁸⁰ While the masculinity in *Batman Begins* is largely a facet of Bruce's character, Miles' evolving masculinity is inseparable from the transformative visual language of *Into the Spider-Verse*. The increasing emphasis on emotional openness, collaboration, and the fluidity of identity can be observed in a wider range of recent films and media, suggesting that the developments discussed here are indicative of a larger reimagining of heroic and masculine ideals. (Barnett et al.)⁸¹ Nevertheless, the specific cinematic strategies and character arcs analysed in this chapter remain distinctive to these texts, even as they contribute to ongoing cultural conversations about what it means to be a hero and how masculinity is constructed on screen.

Traditional models of hegemonic masculinity emphasise emotional suppression, dominance, and self-reliance, framing vulnerability as weakness (Connell, 1995; Nobis & Sandén, 2008).⁸²⁸³ Bruce Wayne exemplifies this paradigm; his heroism is predicated on emotional withdrawal and moral rigidity, visually reinforced by Gotham's dark, desaturated realism and imposing architecture. This form of masculinity stabilises identity but restricts growth. In contrast, Miles Morales represents an adaptive masculinity that integrates fear, doubt, and emotional expression as essential to both heroism and manhood. *Into the Spider-Verse* further develops Miles' journey by

⁸⁰ Summers, S., 2019. Adapting a retro comic aesthetic with *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*.

⁸¹ Barnett, B., et al., 2021. Traditional masculinity and toxic masculinity in superhero films: A content analysis. Pepperdine Digital Commons – Seaver College Research and Scholarly Achievement Symposium.

⁸² Nobis, R. and Sandén, I., 2008. Young men's health: A balance between self-reliance and vulnerability in the light of hegemonic masculinity. *Contemporary Nurse*, 29(2), pp.205–217.

⁸³ Connell on Hegemonic Masculinity: *Donaldson's unique (2003) study of 'the masculinity of the hegemonic', based on biographical sources about the very rich, emphasises emotional isolation. Donaldson traces a deliberate toughening of boys in the course of growing up; and documents a sense of social distance from the masses, a life of material abundance combined with a sense of entitlement and superiority.* Connell, R. W. (1995) *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp 23

redefining vulnerability as competence and emotional literacy as a heroic attribute. He is permitted to express fear, fail publicly, and seek support—qualities that contemporary masculinity studies identify as crucial for psychological resilience and ethical development (Shekhar, 2025).⁸⁴ Rather than undermining Miles' authority, this openness enhances it; his strength lies in his ability to adapt, reflect, and revise his self-concept.

This reconceptualisation of masculinity is inseparable from the film's visual form. As Paul Wells argues, animation is uniquely equipped to externalise interior states, making emotion, identity, and transformation visible. (Wells, 1998)⁸⁵ *Into the Spider-Verse* pushes this potential to the limit. Early scenes depicting Miles' school life are rendered in limited palettes and conventional compositions, visually encoding restriction and a sense of stasis. As Miles begins to accept his developing identity, the film's aesthetic expands: colour intensifies, motion becomes fluid and more explosive, and comic-book conventions—such as text, exaggerated perspective, and layered textures—are increasingly embodied within the diegesis. (Dartmouth Journeys, n.d.)⁸⁶

The iconic “leap of faith” sequence represents the culmination of Miles' transformation, visually uniting his internal development with physical action. This moment signifies understanding for both Miles and the audience. The scene begins with Miles hesitantly standing atop a skyscraper, the camera lingering in silence as his hand grips the edge, the weight of expectation conveyed through a tight close-up.

⁸⁴ Shekhar, A., 2025. Digital permission structures: How celebrity disclosure enables Black masculine vulnerability in online mental health discourse. *arXiv preprint*.

⁸⁵ Wells on the work of Winsor McCay: *McCay's animated films clearly represent a development in animation at the technical and artistic level, using self-conscious exploitation of the codes and conventions of the comic strip form to successfully conjoin the apparently surreal with the conditions of the real world. McCay's comic strips and films aspire to the condition of an interior state rationalised by external mechanisms, constructing narratives which reveal some of humankind's deep-rooted fears in the Modernist era.* Wells, P., 1998. *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge. pp 16

⁸⁶ Dartmouth Journeys, n.d. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse – Cinematic dissonance*.



Fig. 50: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

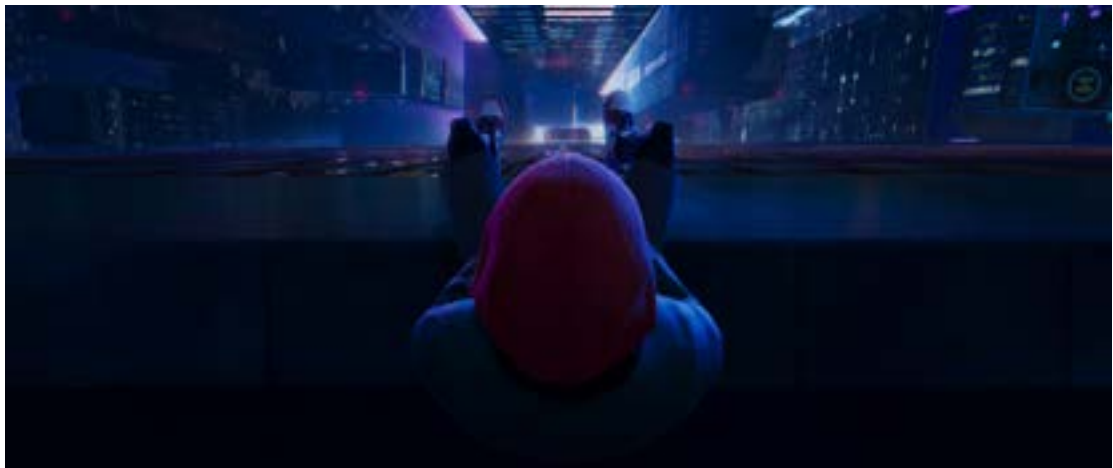


Fig. 51: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

As Miles gathers courage, the musical score swells, and the tension of the moment is reflected in the clouds and glass that surround him. He becomes Spider-Man not through power, but through belief and perspective. When he finally leaps, glass shatters beneath his fingertips, and light refracts around him, symbolising the breakthrough of self-doubt. The camera inverts the perspective: though Miles is falling toward the city below, the framing places him ascending, skyscrapers looming below like the sky, thus visually signifying his rise to heroism. The kinetic energy is amplified by sudden bursts of vibrant colour and dynamic comic-book effects that overlay the action, creating a sense of both exhilaration and transformation.



Fig. 52: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) prepares to jump; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 53: Shattering glass; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

During the freefall, close-ups alternate with wide aerial shots that visually situate Miles not as isolated, but as integrally connected to the world around him. The city is not portrayed as an obstacle to be conquered, but as a space to inhabit and understand; the soundtrack's rhythm matches the heartbeat-like pace of Miles' newfound confidence. As Miles swings through the city with increasing agility, the animation shifts from hesitant, staccato movements to a fluid, assured momentum that parallels his internal growth. As Bordwell and Thompson observe, cinematic style can serve as a conduit for character psychology, shaping perceptions and experiences of transformation (Bordwell & Thompson, 2017).⁸⁷ In *Into the Spider-Verse*, Miles' growth alters the audience's perspective. In contrast, Gotham remains visually static alongside Bruce Wayne, reflecting his psychological immobility. For contemporary audiences attuned to emotional nuance and identity fluidity, *Into the Spider-Verse* presents a model of heroism that is both more inclusive and more human.



Fig. 54: Camera Inverts as Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) leaps; *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018)

⁸⁷ Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K., 2017. *Film art: An introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.



Fig. 55: The ascension of Miles Morales (Shameik Moore); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 56: Close-up of Morales (Shameik Moore) as he free-falls; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 57: Close-up of Morales (Shameik Moore) as he free-falls; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 58: Morales (Shameik Moore) shoots a web; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018):



Fig. 59: Close-up in the city; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 60: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) gains confidence; Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)



Fig. 61: Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) battles Kingpin (Liev Schreiber); Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

The Mask is Yours

Collectively, the contrasts between *Batman Begins* and *Into the Spider-Verse* illustrate a fundamental shift in the depiction and valuation of heroism. Miles Morales' heroism arises through change, relationality, and ongoing self-assessment in response to experience and environment. Trauma, failure, and vulnerability—traditionally perceived as threats to heroic authority—are reinterpreted as mechanisms for growth. In Miles' narrative, heroism is a process continually shaped by choice, connection, and self-reflection.

This chapter has demonstrated that *Into the Spider-Verse* proposes a model of transformational heroism that rejects exceptionalism and static masculinity in favour of responsiveness and emotional literacy. Through its narrative structure and expressive cinematic form, the film externalises psychological development, enabling identity to remain dynamic. Anyone can wear the mask, not because all possess equal power, but because heroism is no longer defined by mastery, certainty, or power; it is defined by human experience and the willingness to be transformed by it. Thus, any audience member can envision themselves as a hero.

Conclusion

This dissertation examined how contemporary superhero narratives construct heroism through the protagonists' psychological development. By presenting two models of heroism, the study analysed how narrative frameworks guide heroes' responses to trauma, failure, and moral responsibility. Analyses of *Batman Begins* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* demonstrated that, while both films employ the classical mythic hero structure, they differ in their portrayal of psychological transformation. In *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne's personal journey proves strongly influenced by his confrontation with trauma, especially apparent in the scene where he ultimately chooses not to seek revenge on his parents' killer ("*Batman Begins*", 2005)⁸⁸. He channels his hurt into a mission for justice. Similarly, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* highlights internal growth through Miles Morales, especially in the decisive moment when he accepts his uncle Aaron's death and assumes responsibility as Spider-Man, signalling his transformation from a reluctant teenager to a confident hero ("*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*", 2018)⁸⁹. These specific scenes illustrate how each film highlights its protagonist's psychological development, supporting the study's central argument.

The two case studies indicate a major shift in contemporary superhero narratives. Earlier models emphasised authority, physical strength, restraint, and certainty, presenting heroes as stable figures who restore order without self-doubt. (Allison and Goethals 2014)⁹⁰ In contrast, recent narratives foreground vulnerability, self-reflection, and interpersonal relationships as central to heroism, echoing wider cultural conversations about mental health, identity, and emotional openness. (Theran, S.A., and Dour, 2022)⁹¹ As audiences progressively appreciate psychological complexity, transformative heroes resonate more than those characterised primarily by stability.

⁸⁸ *Batman Begins*, Nolan, C. (2005). *Batman Begins*. United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

⁸⁹ *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, Ramsey, P, Persichetti, B, Rothman, R. (2018). *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. United States: Sony Pictures

⁹⁰ Allison, S.T. and Goethals, G.R. (2014) 'Making heroes: The construction of courage, competence, and virtue', in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 50. San Diego: Academic Press, pp. 183–235.

⁹¹ Theran, S.A. and Dour, H. (2022) 'Superhero ideal, authenticity in relationships, and depressive symptoms: A multiple mediation analysis', *Acta Psychologica*, 226, 103559.

(Callahan, 2025)⁹² The comparison between Batman and Miles Morales demonstrates that heroism is not a fixed concept, but one that changes in response to cultural settings. In contemporary society, heroism is increasingly defined by its role in supporting creativity and leadership, especially through the interplay of collective and personal psychic factors that foster identity transformation and self-reflection. (Allison, Beggan, and Goethals, 2023)⁹³ Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that some recent superhero narratives still emphasise stability, tradition, and the restoration of order. For instance, characters such as Superman in recent adaptations or Wonder Woman in certain portrayals continue to embody steadfast moral certainty and classic heroic ideals. (Sardar and Yilmaz, 2024)⁹⁴ This shows that while the trend toward psychological complexity and transformation is increasingly prominent, classic models of heroism persist within the genre. (Zornado and Reilly, 2021)⁹⁵ Therefore, heroism can now be understood by many as an ongoing process of transformation instead of merely the maintenance of order, although both perspectives continue to coexist.

In the future, studies might explore how these models of heroism could be applied or challenged in other genres, such as science fiction or fantasy, or among different media, such as television, video games, or graphic novels. For instance, one relevant research question could be: How do video game narratives incorporate players' agency into their depiction of changing heroism? Another potential direction is to examine: In what ways do representations of heroism in television series differ from those in film, specifically about extended psychological development? What new insights shall emerge when the developing concept of heroism is tested beyond contemporary superhero narratives?

⁹² Callahan, K. (2025) 'A femininomenon: Leadership development through representation on-screen', *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2025(185).

⁹³ Allison, S.T., Beggan, J.K. and Goethals, G.R. (eds.) (2023). *Encyclopedia of Heroism Studies*.

⁹⁴ Sardar, Z. and Yilmaz, G. (2024) 'Portrayals of the "shero": A critical discourse analysis on the representation of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel', *Feminist Media Studies*, 24(1), pp. 1–15.

⁹⁵ Zornado, J. and Reilly, S. (2021) *The cinematic superhero as social practice*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

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