

READING FILM



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Corruption Creep: Adaptation Effects in *Batman Begins*

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In any iteration of his story, Batman is a character who fights for justice using extra-legal means, but Frank Miller's comics are widely understood to have shifted this foundation in a darker direction, with grittier and more realistic settings and greater moral ambiguity. Miller's *Batman: Year One* (1987) lingers in such an atmosphere, exploring the vigilante's development by extending the space between Bruce Wayne's childhood and his full realization as Batman. Though not direct adaptations of Miller's comics, Christopher Nolan's Batman films embrace this turn, lending greater psychological depth to the hero than prior film and television iterations had. *Batman Begins* (2005) adapts many aspects of *Batman: Year One*. However, if the comic takes its cues from film noir, *Batman Begins* is more clearly bound to the superhero action film genre. Though both explore systemic corruption, the film's characters become simultaneously more symbolically weighted and flatter, while the nature of corruption at the center of the story drifts away from mundane, human roots toward more bombastic good-and-evil tropes.

The most obvious casualty in the adaptation is the character of Jim Gordon, introduced in *Batman: Year One* as a complex moral beacon for Gotham City on par with Batman. Miller's story arc in fact creates a balancing act between Wayne and Gordon, with the two men serving as parallels to each other as they slowly build up to joining forces. At times, Gordon's role in the comic trumps



Batman's, as he undertakes an effort to clean up the police force while simultaneously trying to overcome his own corruption. The personal side of this battle is distilled in the plot point of an affair with his colleague, Sarah Essen, which he begins even while he struggles with guilt over having brought his pregnant wife into the corrupt atmosphere of Gotham. For a reader, this structure has the effect that Batman's character is developed as much through Gordon's evolution as through his own storyline. To Gordon, Batman at first stands as his opposite—the criminal to his cop—as in the image on the last page. Increasingly, though, Gordon starts to see him as a mirror, and thinking about him tends to spur a bit of self-reflection. Then finally, in the last panels of the comic, he can speak of Batman as a “friend” who will show up to help.



Arguably the main character of *Batman: Year One*, then, Gordon shifts into a supporting role in *Batman Begins*. The plot of the film focuses more fully on Bruce Wayne's journey toward becoming Batman, with his relationship to Gordon being a feature of said journey. Gordon is cast as a loyal family man, doing away with the morally questionable actions of his involvement with Essen. Instead, Gordon's main conflicts revolve around his fellow officers in Gotham's police department, and particularly Detective Flass. Flass, a character imported directly from the comic, is a corrupt officer who moonlights for crime boss Carmine “The Roman” Falcone. Many of Flass and Gordon's interactions are lifted from the comic, as Gordon must play along with Flass's crooked ways in order to keep his job. In both the comic and the film, a key element of Gordon's story is overcoming

the rooted corruption of Gotham's police force, which contributes to his eventual alliance with Batman. In the film, however, Gordon's gradual path toward accepting Batman and tolerating the gray areas between law and justice is condensed, and he is quicker to accept any help he can get.

The film's plot is what drives this change, given that the criminal threat—the poisoning of Gotham's water supply—is more catastrophically pressing than the comic's focus on corruption and organized crime. A second major deviation of the film adaptation, therefore, is the addition of characters who ramp up this criminal threat—notably, the antagonists Ra's al Ghul and Scarecrow. While *Batman: Year One* focuses more upon both Wayne and Gordon getting their footing in the realm of Gotham by dealing with its forms of corruption, *Batman Begins* imports these more bombastic villainous forces from other parts of the Batman universe. They, in turn, require more of Batman's advanced skills and implements to overcome. Therefore, his journey must unfold faster, and Gordon must accept his help more easily, so the inner conflicts that both Wayne and Gordon face are severely diminished. Scarecrow and Ra's al Ghul heighten the drama and action of *Batman Begins* but overshadow the grounded, noir nature of the comic, prioritizing a starker hero vs. villain construct over more nuanced ethics.

In fact, Nolan's introduction of Ra's al Ghul explains much of the material in the film that is not adapted from the comic. Bruce Wayne's relationship with Ra's frames the film's plot, and Ra's replaces, or at least equals, Gordon as his mirror figure. This shifts the subject of Batman's internal struggle away from the nuances separating law and justice toward the opposing forces of good and evil. Nolan leans into this through symbolism, including an early break from most other Batman adaptations: the theatre performance the Waynes see on the night Bruce's parents are killed is usually staged as *The Mask of Zorro*, but Nolan has them attending Arrigo Boito's opera, *Mefistofele*. This recasts our masked hero not as Zorro, but as Faust, a man who brokers a deal with an incarnation of the devil—in this case, Ra's al Ghul. Nolan extends the metaphor throughout the film, reaching beyond the source material of *Batman: Year One*. In the opening sequences, for instance, Wayne is a prisoner in Bhutan, threatened by a fellow inmate who says, "You're in hell, little man, and I am the devil." Wayne responds, "You're not the devil. You're practice," and, in fact, it is immediately after this fight that Ra's arrives, inviting him to train at the League's temple. Later, Wayne and Ra's face off in the visual hellscape of Wayne Manor as the League burns it to the ground. But through the opera scene itself, Nolan signals that these good-and-evil stakes were already formative for the





young Bruce. The scene shows the devil's domineering of the stage, as well as bat imagery, which causes Bruce to panic and want to leave, thus leading to his parents' deaths. The idea of a dominating evil is an intentional comparison to Gotham, as it is consistently proven to be overrun with corruption. Gotham acts as the stage for Wayne, who eventually succumbs to its corruption and unintentionally allows it to take his parents. Once Wayne makes his deal with the proverbial devil, he is left to see how his actions affect those close to him.

In *Batman: Year One*, Miller prioritizes commentary on how corruption can affect people, both on an individual level and a larger societal level. By drawing from the outside source of *Mefistofele* in *Batman Begins*, Nolan emphasizes a more traditionally heroic image of Batman and the idea of his being the solution to corruption. *Batman Begins* and its themes stray from those of the original comic, drowning them in a sea of action and intensity closer to what most audiences would expect from a superhero film. What gets lost—through character, plot, and symbolism—is the comic's focus on human corruption and the everyday struggle to do the right thing. ☠

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