

# Catharsis In A Cape: On Comic-Book Heroes And Real-World Violence

Glen Weldon - JULY 20, 2012



What is Batman for?

[...] His city is a grim, brutal place with a sociopath on every street corner, wreaking senseless havoc, murdering innocent bystanders in cold blood.

In a Batman story, this violence exists for a reason: It is the triggering action, the set of conditions that spur our hero into battle. Without it, Batman would spend the whole movie brooding on a rooftop.

As the New Yorker's Anthony Lane points out, it's easy to draw connections between film violence and a staggeringly senseless act like the one that took place in Aurora on Friday morning. Too easy. We look for reasons where no reason exists; we gaze in abject horror at an effect and comfort ourselves by imagining we can divine its cause.

But madness isn't so tidy. No reason will satisfy; no reason can, because the act occurred in reason's absence. We are left in its wake to guess and blame and, ultimately, finally, helplessly, to mourn.

Batman didn't create this act of random violence. In a very real sense, he exists to help us respond to it.

True, comic-book heroes are childish notions. But this is exactly what lends them a simple, primal purity of meaning. They are a means by which we vicariously confront — and defeat — what threatens us. Batman is our agent, our proxy, our sense that Good exists and that it invariably wins out over Evil. On the streets of Gotham he will be met by Fear (The Scarecrow), Greed (The Penguin), Wrath (Bane) and, inevitably, repeatedly, Insanity (The Joker).

But he — and thus, we — will win. Always. Every time. That knowledge is what he gives us. That is what he is for.

And how he wins is just as important as that he wins: He seeks not vengeance, but justice — which is to say, he does not kill. Instead, he subdues his foes. Contains them.

Because that's his greater symbolic role, as well — to help us contain the abject horror of violence like this, to provide a cathartic pressure valve. So, for example, we thrill as we watch him swoop down upon some vile fiend seconds before the killing stroke lands.

"Never again," he whispers, and for a moment, a millisecond, we imagine a world where such a patently ridiculous, childish promise could be kept, where unimaginable violence never erupts, where no innocents die.

(Source : <http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2012/07/20/157115707/catharsis-in-a-cape-on-comic-book-heroes-and-real-world-violence>)