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The Joker: A Character Study of a Modern Madman

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ABSTRACT

When the Joker first appeared in the pages of Batman on April 25, 1940, he was intended to be little more than a throwaway villain for the hero to face. Since his debut, the Joker has appeared in countless comics, TV shows, and movies. He has become a cultural icon unlike any other and is recognized around the world. The Joker has been studied through the lens of psychology, and has been used as an example of evil, villainy, and moral bankruptcy. The complexity of this comic book villain is unparalleled by even his closest villainous analog.

This thesis examines the Joker through various lenses. The Joker's existence creates an antagonistic binary in which he mirrors his heroic counterpart. This mirroring between good and evil, hero and villain, has ancient roots the combat myth; pitting the monster against the God-like hero in a repeating cycle of life and death.

As a comic book villain, the Joker exceeds our definition of villainy and can only be categorized as the supervillain. The prefix of "super" in this case invokes the ideas of not only the Transhuman that exceeds human potential, but that of Donna Haraway's cyborg model of hybridization by blurring the lines between the human body and the genetically other. At the same time that he is exceeding the human condition, the Joker's madness and physical deformities mark him as a Posthuman outsider and toxic contaminant to society's status quo.

From a psychological point of view, the Joker's madness is the most pronounced aspect of his character. In the perception of popular culture, it is this madness that defines him not only as evil, but as the villain. The trait of madness has been vilified and placed in association with criminals since the 15th century. The result of this association is the displacement of the mad as a threat to society, who therefore has become outsiders to be feared and despised. These views of madness are reified through our lay understandings that are perpetuated by mass media depictions of the mad. This has led many to make an attempt at defining the Joker through a singular diagnosis of his potential mental ailment, but the complex character not only resists, but defies simple definition of this sort.

To my Mom and Dad, who have always supported me, acted as a sounding board for ideas, and

pretended to be interested while I read sections of my writings to them.

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Introduction

In 1940, the creators of the Joker could not have foreseen the impact the character would have on, not only the comic book world, but popular culture as both a literary and film icon. The Joker has been dissected and examined by psychologists and critics alike with an eye towards defining and diagnosing his various mental illnesses. Some scholars have attempted to examine him from a moral stance, while others have depicted him as a chaos spreading agent of evil. Still others have tried to categorize him in mythological terms by equating him to primordial monsters, placing him within the combat myth scenario. Although there is little doubt that the Joker is often presented to the reader as the villain, or at times the sympathetic monster, this character bears an uncanny morphability that almost demands being examined through multiple lenses. Books such as Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke*, Jim Starlin's *Batman: A Death in the Family* and the graphic novel *The Joker: Death of the Family* are not only definitive works in the Joker mythos, but they lend themselves to the exploration of the character as not only a villain, but also in regards to madness and its relationship with post-humanism.

The Joker is perhaps one of the most bizarre and terrifying villains to descend upon the comic book city of Gotham in the last seventy-five years. He has committed robberies in which he escaped via pogo stick, kidnapped cartoonists, poisoned Gotham's water supply, threatened city officials with a giant explosive birthday cake, and committed multiple counts of mass murder. Yet despite his offenses, he has become one of the most recognizable and influential characters in pop culture today. A simple search on the website Amazon.com provides testament to his appeal by resulting in over 30,000 different Joker related items including toys, Halloween costumes, Christmas ornaments and articles of clothing for men, women, and children. This number of merchandising opportunities does not include the numerous other online storefronts

dedicated strictly to pop-culture apparel and collectibles. The character has been featured in several films and TV shows over the past forty-nine years and has been played or voiced by some of Hollywood's biggest names such as Jack Nicholson and Mark Hamill. His name was even invoked when shooter James Holmes claimed that he was the Joker after the 2012 cinema shootings in Aurora, Colorado during the premier of the Batman movie, *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Credit for the creation of the criminal clown generally goes to Bob Kane, who created Batman the previous year. Some, including blogger and comic historian Brian Cronin and Mike Gold, have claimed that Kane was inspired by his assistant Jerry Robinson's production drawing of a joker playing card, while others have stated that the character was created by Bill Finger and is based upon the 1928 film, *The Man Who Laughs*, featuring Conrad Veidt. Finger was hired by Kane to assist in the monthly writing of Batman comics and did the bulk of Batman writing in 1940 when the Joker first appeared. Brian Cronin states that "Finger was not one for recurring villains. If you went up against the Batman, odds were you were going to end up dying in some manner at the end of the issue" (Cronin 36). The untimely death of the Joker was prevented by the then editor of Batman comics, Whitney Ellsworth who, "felt that it would be a waste to kill off the character so soon" (Cronin 37). Since this editorial decision, the Joker has gone through many transformations to become what Grant Morrison has described as, "Batman's most enduring, accommodating, and iconic nemesis" (Morrison 23). He was so successful in this role that, at a time when the comic industry was focused on the hero, he was granted his own book that compiled his greatest tales.

In the introduction to the 1988 comics compilation, *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told*, DC comics senior editor Mike Gold posed the question of why the Joker has been so successful for, at the time, nearly five decades. His answer comes in three parts; first, he says that the Joker

is scary. Crime and criminals are frightening aspects of society and most comic book villains have a threatening appearance or one of power, yet few instill fear the way the Joker does. This is, according to Gold, because "the Joker started out doing real scary things: he killed people. Moreover, when he killed them, they died with a great big smile on their faces - a smile that resembled the unchanging grin of the Joker himself!" (Gold 7). The second aspect of the Joker's success, as illustrated by Gold, is the weirdness of the character. He looks unusual, he acts strange, and he has an unnervingly giddy glee towards his criminal deeds. This oddity of the clown prince of crime "virtually assures an unusual story" (Gold 7). The third reason that Gold points to is that "all great arch-villains have a particular "in" for the good guy who defeats them constantly; but, whereas the Joker clearly hates The Batman, that is not the sole reason for his existence. Criminal acts defy logic, even if criminals do not. But the Joker enjoys evil because evil is as deranged as he is" (Gold 7). In Gold's assessment, staying faithful to this formula has allowed the Joker to surpass all other comic book villains.

Throughout this thesis I will explore aspects of the Joker as he is represented in Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke*, Jim Starlin's *Batman: A Death in the Family* and the graphic novel *The Joker: Death of the Family* in regards to this villain's relationship with madness and morality, the way these relate to and influence one another, and their connection to post-humanism. Chapter one will bring about an understanding of what it is to be evil and what that means in regards to the role that evil plays in both literature and popular culture today. This will be applied to the Joker while looking at potential causations for the Joker's evil. Chapter one will also discuss the villain and the difference between one being evil and being villainous. The appeal of villainy to readers, the idea of the villain as a mirror for the hero, as well as the Joker being myth, monster, and metaphor. Chapter two will continue this discussion, moving from the

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villain to the super villain. To do this, this chapter will explore Donna Haraway's Cyborg model in relation to the Joker. This will be followed by an exploration of both transhumanism and the posthuman and the ways in which the Joker can simultaneously represent both categories by examining him through his deformities which relate him to the creature, his relationship to his environment, and his infectious chemical toxicity to all around him. Chapter three will delve into a study of madness, the ways in which it was portrayed and received throughout Europe beginning in the 15th century, and the ways that these antiquated perceptions continue to form our pop cultural view of madness today. This chapter will also look at the posthuman aspects of madness and the manner in which it was received as a sign of evil before exploring modern psychiatry and possible diagnoses for the Joker's various mental ailments.

Chapter 1

Of Evil and Villainy

The Joker is such a unique character that he often subverts our ideas of the villain and evil, completely defying our expectations while pushing the envelope so far that we are forced to redefine the way we see him. At its base, the villain is the antagonist of the story; acting as a foil for the protagonist. Whether the antagonist is a person, creature, or aspect of nature, it is their duty to perform acts that drive the plot forward by hindering the story's protagonist. While sharing many of the antagonist's attributes, the villain differs from the antagonist in that the villain's actions and motivations are often perceived as evil. In most Batman stories, Batman acts as the heroic protagonist, but in accordance with storytelling methods found in Western culture, he needs a villainous antagonist before he can be embraced as a popular icon. In order to become a noteworthy hero he must not only confront, but overcome evil.

The assessment that villains are greedy, evil, or, at the least, lacking in morals is one that has been molded by popular culture made in error based on the fact that the villain is still the antagonist that can take several forms including nature, the self, or another person. The modern villain is seen as malevolent only when perceived as a person that is immoral, wicked, or depraved. Greg Garrett, Baylor University professor and author of *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film* states that the nature of evil has been a concern for philosophy and religious practitioners for millennium. According to Garrett, to be evil was to go against the will of the gods in early ethical systems. The position evil took morally in society grew more important with the development of ethical monotheism among the Hebrews to whom "evil was held to be a given, a natural part of the universe. The Hebrew words for moral evil and calamity are all but identical, and evil was 'anything that is unpleasant, repulsive, or distorted,'"

(Garrett 56). This vast definition encompasses everything that might become a threat to either society or the individual whether natural or created by humans. In this sense, wild animals, natural disasters, and human acts of violence are considered evil and fall in line with the antagonist's role as obstacle. Evil by this definition was not necessarily something that inspired fear. It was a given, natural part of the universe and a necessity for society. By temporarily disrupting society, evil strengthened what it threatened.

In *Vader, Voldemort and Other Villains: Essays on Evil in Popular Media*, Jamey Heit argues that the purpose of evil "is not to doom the victim, but to provide a gauge that upsets an established moral order" (5). Much like the Hebrew idea that evil was a necessary component of the universe, the presence of evil in literature is charged with the responsibility of upsetting the status quo and disturbing established morality within the society to which it speaks. The disruption forces the examination of good and evil by challenging the previously established ideas of good and exposing inconsistencies within those ideas. A moral binary results in which evil's presence cannot be denied when placed in direct opposition to good. This opposition occurs as a natural event that illustrates the extent of that society's concept of good.

While events considered evil under the Hebrew definition -- in that they are unpleasant -- can provide the catalyst for massive reorganization of a society's infrastructure or culture, the evil individual can perform the same function. This is accomplished by disrupting the status quo and exposing flaws within the society that initially allowed the evil figure to come into existence. Crimes such as robberies and murders escalate tension within literature until the protagonist hero arrives to defend society's virtues through the elimination of the antagonist/s posing a threat/s to that society's moral code. Heit claims this characterization of evil is relatively consistent within

popular culture. These characters often bear an inherent trait that makes them predisposed towards evil. He alleges that

> evil people cannot help what they do, which, in a tradition that emphasizes free will, disrupts how we evaluate the perpetrators in question. This dislocation usually emerges alongside plans to acquire power, or money, or sex. In each of these notions, there exists a culturally accepted guideline for what is appropriate and what is not. (8)

Acquiring excess eliminates the figure's ability to recognize that he has gone against the previously established cultural status quo. The negative value of this acquisition of excess is positively reinforced within that individual when he fails to receive significant consequences for his actions. By reinforcing the negative behavior, the evil individual is encouraged to remain outside of the societal status quo. In literature, this demonstrates potential problems within the reader's society that might lead to similar actions, while also attempting to reinforce culturally acceptable behavior.

Disruption of the status quo that results in a reassessment of good and evil can be found in Heath Ledger's 2012 filmic depiction of the Joker (perhaps one of the most analyzed versions of the character in terms of his morality and evilness). In his article for *The Expository Times* entitled *Batman and (the Evilness of) Evil*, Ash Cocksworth declares that this portrayal of the Joker simply bursts onto the scene with no explanation for his personification of evil. In accordance with the way Heit claims evil disrupts the status quo, Cocksworth states "the Joker calls into question very categories of morality we employ to measure the (seemingly) 'good' and 'bad'" (Cocksworth 2). He goes on to say however, that the Joker is the most senseless character in the movie with his excessive wickedness ruining our idea of evil. "The Joker's motivation," says Cocksworth, "however, is simply to cause boundless terror and chaos for no reason (and following no strict plan) other than for the sake of terrorizing" (Cocksworth 2). He asserts that

the Joker appears to be beyond our established perception of evil for two reasons. First, contrary to Heit's assessment of evil's motivation, this Joker has none of the external inclination's that fuel other criminal's desires such as financial gain. Harvey Roy Greenberg echoes this sentiment in his review of the film found in *Clinical Psychiatry News*: "He's the pure embodiment of manic malevolence. His raison d'etre is not loot, nor vengeance, but a stupendous appetite for anarchic violence, the wrecking of havoc for its own sweet sake" (Greenberg 14). Jamey Heit aligns with these thoughts in his article, "No Laughing Matter," when he declares that not only is the Joker disinterested in money and power that motivates the average criminal, but he has no regard for his actions or their consequences either. He goes on to suggest that this is the secret genesis of the criminal clown's chosen name. "Crime is a joke; the evil he [the Joker] perpetuates is merely a game, played for its immediacy, with little regard for its outcome" (Heit 177). This notion that the Joker totally disregards the established moral code of conduct is often echoed by the Joker himself. In *The Dark Knight*, he says "their morals, their code, it's a bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble. ... I'll show ya, when the chips are down, these, uh, civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster – I'm just ahead of the curve." Heit continues, saying "to adhere to a moral code is to cede one's freedom by submitting oneself to standards that essentially determine a priori whether one falls within the good or the bad category, the result of the supposed choice is, actually, to belie in the name of good the virtues that society understands to be good" (181). Refusing to adhere to a code that he sees as a joke serving no real purpose, the Joker is allowing himself the freedom to act without prohibition while at the same time his choice of freedom over societal standards determines that he falls into evil's definition through disruption.

The second reason Cocksworth gives for the Joker's evilness is his unknown origin. He has no name beyond "The Joker" and, when asked about his facial scars, he presents a variant story with each retelling. The Joker eluding his origin is also found in *The Killing Joke* when he announces, "if I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!" (39). The multiplicity of deceptions betrays honesty, a quality that is held up by our culture as a trait of the morally good. Cocksworth goes on to claim that due to his namelessness the Joker has no humanity and should be considered inhuman stating, "a name would humanize and naturalize the evil we see in the Joker" (Cocksworth 3). To maintain the mystique that makes the Joker popular, he cannot be seen or presented in the same light as other humans. Vilja Johnson in "'It's What You Do that Defines You:' Christopher Nolan's Batman as Moral Philosopher," quotes Randolph Dreyer as saying, "if we can learn more about him, maybe we can understand or even care about him" (V. Johnson 955). She further explores this idea by saying we have "an instinct to produce a history for violent individuals that would allow society to locate and isolate the causes of apparently senseless violence... If the Joker's actions could be found to cleanly stem from a history of personal trauma, then audience members could understand, label and contain his brand of moral chaos" (V. Johnson 955-56). If there were clear-cut motivations or a definitive origin to the character, he would lose some of his wicked edge and become the regular comic book bad guy that is scary in some aspects, but not quite the epitome of evil.

In *The Killing Joke*, an unnamed comedian turns to a life of crime in order to provide for his wife and unborn child, only to become the Joker. The comedian's namelessness reflects his powerlessness within society making it difficult to believe he could threaten society prior to transforming into the Joker. Author Peter Watts says that, when it comes to impending disasters:

> There's this cognitive disconnect between what we know to be true and what we feel to be true, no matter how convincing the data are, we won't act unless we feel

the danger in our guts - but we evolved to fear approaching predators with big teeth... Only when the danger is as imminent as an attacking a grizzly will we really believe in it, and of course by then it'll be far too late (609-10)

Readers see the comedian and ultimately know his fate, but they cannot trust in that fate until they see the metamorphosis occur. Only then can the threat of the Joker become reality. Had the comedian remained a petty criminal, or been adequately punished, the event would be insignificant, an isolated incident easily dismissed, "but when evil unfolds from within a culture, such a presence implicates those who permit (in whatever capacity) evil to swell unchecked" (Heit 185). The Joker's genesis implicates many people, including Batman, and ultimately the society that failed him.

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As Batman's most notorious adversary and the first to survive his vigilante justice, the Joker plays the most important role in defining Batman as a hero. The term villain is equated to one who is evil, or at the least, the hero's antagonist. However, the word itself does not necessitate evil either in action or intent. Rather, villain bears the same etymological root as the word "Village," and was originally understood as implying a baseness or average ruralness associated with peasantry. Over time the term came to represent rebellious troublemakers and ne'er-do-wells before reaching our current understanding as the bad guy.

Enrique Cámara Arenas, one of the "villainess ones" who presented at the Global Villains and Villainy Conference in 2009, attempted to define what a villain is. He presents two definitions of the word. The first, which he states is weak, "would be such that it encompasses all possible metaphorical uses of the term villain. If we regard a real flesh and blood acquaintance of ours as a real villain we would be using the term in its weak sense" (Arenas 6). This weak definition can be used similarly to the Hebrew definition of evil, encompassing all things found

unpleasant, including natural disasters and specific ideas. Due to the vastness of this weak

definition, Arenas claims that it cannot differentiate between "a political system and Darth

Vader" (Arenas 6). It is therefore necessary that a stronger, more precise definition be crafted.

Under Arenas' strong definition, the villain must first, and most importantly, be a

character rather than an object or an event. To illustrate the difference, Arenas points to Greimas'

Actantial Model:

> According to this model, the Opponent Actant is whatever force – personal or
> impersonal – that hinders the hero's attainment of the object, the satisfaction of his
> search, etc. The villain shares this functional gap within the plot with many other
> things: a hungry lion, a sandstorm, the hero's lack of humility, etc. But this cannot
> justify the synecdochal replacement of the term villain for the whole actant" (7)

By this model the villain acts as an obstacle to be overcome before the hero can proceed, thus

rendering the villain simultaneously character and object and performing a distinctly different

sort of hindrance than that of the hungry lion or the hero's hubris.

In addition to standing in the way of the hero's success, villains must be allowed a

dimension of motivation for their actions in opposition to the hero.

> They must have the ability to transform the world around by exercising their will.
> And they must have some sort of reactive and adaptive intelligence, so that they
> can choose alternative ways of reaching their goals, defend their interests, and
> fight back. (Arenas 7)

Villains must also bear at least a modicum of self-awareness. Being self-aware imparts intent

within the actions of the villain. This intentional behavior separates villains from such things as

catastrophes and wild animals by connecting them to ethics and morality rather than

circumstance and instinct. The villain's actions can be measured against what has previously

been determined to be socially acceptable behavior. To simplify Arenas' definition, villains are

characters, people, who intentionally stand in opposition to the hero's goals in order to achieve

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their own ends by enforcing their will upon their environment while being able to adapt and react to direct confrontation with the hero or other obstacles in the attainment of their goal.

When Ash Cocksworth makes the claim that the Joker belies our understanding of evil based on the fact that he is not motivated by any of the stereotypical drives that prompt average criminals, he is privileging evil over villainy and failing to recognize that the Joker is both. The two concepts seemingly go hand-in-hand, but based on the Hebrew definition of evil, anything that is unpleasant would fall under that category. There is no doubt that, under our societal dictates, the Joker should be considered evil, but a villain is something altogether different than a natural disaster. As has already been said at the beginning of this chapter, within our culture the protagonist needs to overcome a villainous antagonist in order to be considered a hero. Without an opponent, the hero can never truly exist. In their introduction to *Villains and Villainy: Embodiments of Evil in Literature, Popular Culture and Media*, Anna Fahraeus and Dikmen Yakah-Çamoglu claim that "villainy is integral in narratives that reflect the innermost fears of human psyche, and is often a significant part of the construction of loss, whether it is loss of innocence, loss of loved ones, loss of power, or loss of self and/or identity" (vii). It is well established within DC comics that Bruce Wayne's parents were killed by a mugger. This event, centered around loss, is often pointed to as the catalyst that created Batman. However, without true villains to defeat, Bruce Wayne remains nothing more than a costumed vigilante and can never be elevated to the status of hero. The Joker's relation to loss and the ways in which that loss influences his villainy will be explored later in this chapter.

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If villains are the embodiment of reactive opposition, why do they hold such appeal for their audience? After all, the hero of the tale is the good guy and should be lauded as such. Yet

characters such as the Joker, Darth Vader, and Freddy Krueger, tend to be more popular icons than their heroic counterparts. Arenas claims that both "heroes and villains have been created for us to suffer and celebrate them, for us to discuss them and speculate about their motives, their traits, their vices and virtues" (3). In "The Aesthetics of Evil," Daniel Forbes says that when he was a kid he liked villains much more simply because they were cooler than the heroes (13). However, being "cooler" is not enough to explain the mass appeal villains seem to have in popular culture today. Forbes expresses the notion that it seems strange to find appeal in the bad guy because, after all, they are bad. Not only should their wickedness not be idolized or identified with, but we are supposed to reject them as society dictates. According to Forbes, most villains are destined to fail in every endeavor that brings them into contact with the hero. "They are fated to be defeated in the vast majority of movie and television plots – the bad guys are simply not supposed to win" (Forbes 13). Reality is different from the fantasy worlds of most movies, television, and literature with the boundaries between good and evil often blurred in the real world. Forbes suggests that the lack of clarity between the two terms stems from our own judgments and perspectives in relation to the situation rather than on essential characteristics of the individual and their actions. As a result, he suggests that our interest in villains is due to an "interest in a different perspective" (Forbes 13). It is not that we want to admire the villain, but rather we delight in knowing that an alternate world view exists that we can discuss and speculate on.

Ethicist Steve Brie explores the idea of varying perspectives in relation to the Joker when he uses "the claim made by ethical relativists that morality can only be understood in relation to individual points of view" (213). He continues by saying:

> If this [claim] is indeed the case, then it can be suggested that from the Joker's perspective he simply operates logically within his own [distorted] moral and

ethical parameters. In *Batman: The Killing Joke* he articulates the divide which he feels exists between himself and the rest of humanity; in one of his trademark polemics he questions the sanity of the "average man" who, he claims, works to "a deformed set of values" within what he terms a collective "club-footed social conscience." The Joker sees the concept of adherence to conventional morality as nothing more than a blind collective obedience to custom" (213)

Brie's understanding of the Joker aligns with Heit's illustration that evil is to "provide a gauge that upsets an established moral order" (Heit 5). These blurred boundaries between what is good and bad appeal to the average person because they allow for a deeper discussion of the alternate perspectives that we desire.

Despite the fact that we are not supposed to, we can relate to villains on some level. Whether that relatability comes from feelings of personal loss, tragedy, or a notion of powerlessness, the audience manages to find something within the villain's background that appeals to them. For example, in *The Killing Joke*, before he becomes the Joker the comedian is powerless after a personal lose. As the Joker, he has the power and confidence to challenge aspects of society that he attributes to causing his previously weak incarnation. Power, and the ability to exercise it, may be the aspect of the Joker that appeals to some his readers. In *Batman: The Man Who Laughs*, the Joker threatens the city by targeting Gotham's wealthy elite. After two successful assassinations, he goes on T.V. appealing to the average citizen of Gotham by placing himself among their numbers. "The rich and powerful have lorded it over us little people for too damn long.... Tonight it's their turn to suffer!" (Brubaker 53). Here he provides a voice for the voiceless, challenging the status quo. Referring to himself and Gotham's citizenry as "little people," the Joker adds himself to their ranks and takes his place as their champion, willing to use his power to stand against those who would allow them to continuously suffer.

Arenas explains the potential appeal of the villain by using H. H. Kelley's covariant model of causal attribution to explore the villain's actions: "(1) The direct response to a given

stimulus that justifies it; or as (2) A way of acting which is being influenced by a set of circumstances; or as (3) A manifestation of the villain's personal dispositions" (18). Readers and villains both make fundamental attribution errors in this way. That is,

> we tend to justify our own failures and wrong doings by alluding to our circumstances - 'I had a very bad day', etc. - the conflicting behaviors of others are invariably linked to their inner dispositions. In the case of villains, they behave badly just because they are bad. (Arenas 19)

For Arenas, this statement is valid when dealing with the majority of villains who fit into the stereotype of what it is to be villainous and echoes Heit's sentiment that evil people cannot help themselves.

When dealing with a more complex character, such as the Joker, Arenas' statement must be qualified. In many instances, the Joker is guilty of making the "one bad day" fundamental attribution error. In *The Killing Joke*, the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon (a.k.a. Batgirl), photographs her wounded naked body, kidnaps her father, (Commissioner James Gordon) and tries to drive him insane by caging, beating, and tormenting him with the photographs of his dying daughter. Batman arrives and after their brief fight, the Joker leads him through a carnival fun house of traps. During this time he delivers his "one bad day" monologue to Batman: "All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day" (Moore 38). In the Joker's mind, this scenario of one bad day is valid reasoning for one's resulting actions. Not only does this substantiate the Joker's entry into villainy, but it justifies Batman's initial decision to dress as a bat and fight crime. The Joker then attempts to legitimize his claim to Batman: "I can tell you had a bad day and everything changed. Why else would you dress up like a flying rat? You had a bad day, and it drove you as crazy as everybody else only you won't admit it" (Moore 38). It is only then that the Joker admits his bad day caused him to become the villainous clown he is.

During his "one bad day" speech, the Joker divulges that he believes he and Batman are the same. Throughout his history, the Joker repeatedly asserts the idea that the two are opposites reflecting one another. The bond is also found in *The Dark Knight* when the Joker tells Batman, "Don't talk like one of them. You're not, even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak, like me." In the graphic novel *The Joker: Death of the Family*, the Joker once again attempts to prove to Batman that they are the same. After capturing Batman's former sidekicks and holding them hostage he says, "That's what this is about. Reminding you of the bond we share, you and I!" (382). Joseph Michael Sommers claims that in *The Killing Joke*, the two men represent "opposing sides on the same two-headed coin, one dark and the other darker, cut from the same narrative of the loss of family" (41). He goes on to say that Moore challenges reader's preconceived notions of the two characters by showing that as individuals they are fractured, but together they are interdependent, unable to exist one without the other. This reinforces the concept that the hero needs the villain to complete him as a popular icon.

Our culture promotes interest in villains based on this interdependency between heroes and villains. We recognize the evil perpetrated by villains as important and required for the maintenance of society. Without evil present for comparison, we would not effectively know what it was to be good. To illustrate this binary, villains are interpreted as a mirror to the hero. The intent of mirroring is for the reader to see the hero as representing goodness and light, that which is morally acceptable, while his counterpart is one of darkness and evil, the morally corrupt. Forbes expands on this idea when he says that,

> we usually take the familiar distinction between good and evil to be a particular instance of a position, like heat and cold, or light and dark. But perhaps good and evil are simply labels for a position itself when it comes to human motivations -

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that is, perhaps they identify incompatible differences in perspective or purpose. (16)

Many tropes of antagonistic binary can be found throughout literature, especially within comics. Science and magic, human and alien, God and mortal; all are binaries that are often pitted against one another in comic panels. Steve Brie states that because of a "close relationship with the conventions of realism, [Batman] has become the most recognizably human [of all comic book heroes] and therefore the most open to moral and ethical interrogation" (204). Comic author Grant Morrison precisely sums up the duo's binary opposition:

> The Joker was the perfect dissolute European response to Batman's essentially can-do New World determination, toned physique, and outrageous wealth. While Batman cut a swath through blackened streets and leapt between skyscrapers, the Joker had to hunch beneath bear bulbs like a heroin addict facing a nightmare comedown with an acid tongue and a graveyard wit. He dressed like a riverboat gambler, his face composed to suggest some unhallowed marriage of showbiz, drag culture, and the art of the mortician. (24)

If Batman closely embodies reality, the Joker is so obscenely opposite that he cannot be considered real by readers. Yet he still exists as a threat to society's status quo represented by Batman.

Alan Moore employs mirroring from a social aspect of the Joker's relationship with Batman. In *The Killing Joke*, the reader is introduced to the pre-Joker Joker. The man who would one day become "Batman's most implacable foe, a mad criminal genius whose bizarre rampages baffle even the world's greatest detective," is presented as a struggling common man (inside cover). Throughout the first half of Moore's graphic novel are several sepia tone flashbacks that reveal the Joker's potential origin to the reader. In the first flashback, an unnamed man returns home to his pregnant wife. The cramped quarters of a rundown tenement apartment unfold with laundry hanging above the dining room table and a space heater on the floor. The room is made smaller by pipes running across the bare brick wall and over the single sink that hosts a cracked

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mirror. The author and artist combine these elements with a solitary light bulb; presented in conjunction with the tight three-quarter view of the residents that dominates every panel; the reader is visually forced into a claustrophobic situation. The man reveals to his wife that he has once again failed to obtain any work as a comedian. As a potential worker, his self-perceived value to his family and to society can be explained with the works of Karl Marx who states, "the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production" (652). As an out-of-work comedian, this particular worker has no production value to either society or his family because he produces nothing. His wretchedness is directly proportional to his lack of production; totally lacking makes him completely wretched. Within his wretchedness we see him as the villain in terms of the peasant.

His wretched misery is displayed in the third panel, continuing into the fifth. The man's expression changes from fear to anger then pain before he falls to his knees sobbing and apologizes. "You're suh-suffering enough, being married to a loser... I can't support you... I've got to get you out of here before the baby comes... I just want enough money to get set up in a decent neighborhood" (Moore 6-7). This will never happen because, as a worker, the comedian is spending all of his energies working at finding employment in order to satisfy someone else. Marx makes the claim that the labor of the worker is not his own, but belongs to someone else. This alienates him from society, as he cannot take any personal pride in his own production. What this means is that the work produced, in this instance the work of finding work, is not a part of the comedian's essential being. "He does not affirm himself, but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energies but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (Marx 654-55). To reflect these premises, the final panel of this

flashback mirrors the final panel of the page. In the former, the man's arm is seen reaching towards his wife's outstretched hand as she smiles, his dower reflection seen in the mirror behind her. The last panel reverts back to color and the Joker, wordless from the nostalgia of his memories, reaches his hand out towards a smiling clown carnival attraction, his reflection grimly staring back at him.

<p align="center">***</p>

While the contrast between the wealthy and the poor is a familiar binary to most modern readers, a more primitive variation of the antagonist can be found in tales of evil gods and beasts such as the Babylonian demon Pazuzu and the monstrous Greek Minotaur manifested in the monster/hero binary relationship. "The primordial oppositions depicted in myth and high art for millennia – good vs. evil; order vs. disorder; eros vs. thanatos – have resonated across American popular culture at least since *The Last of the Mohicans,"* and centuries before that (Greenberg 14). In *The Structural Study of Myth*, Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that the monster as villain stems from the metaphor of humanity's triumph over the earth. The hero's triumph over this enemy allows humanity to accomplish such feats as agriculture. With the dragon as his example, Lévi-Strauss claims,

> the dragon is a chthonian [living within or under the earth] being which has to be killed in order that mankind be born from the earth" and that, "since the monsters are overcome by men, we may thus say [this] is a *denial of the autochthonous* [born from the earth] *origin of man*. (865)

The hero is placed above the earth through the act of denial by killing the monster to complete the metaphor.

Michael Nichols continues to work within this metaphor with an eye towards the "combat myth." He declares that the popularity of Batman and the Joker's relationship is the result of "deep-seated social and psychological tensions" (Nichols 236). These combat myth tensions are

similar in nature to those presented by Lévi-Strauss in that the villain is elemental in nature. Nichols quotes Norman Cohn to define the combat myth as a religious narrative that "tells how a god [or hero] defended the ordered world against the onslaught of chaos" (Nichols 236). The agent of chaos is generally a monster, often represented as a reptilian creature such as a dragon. Rather than coming from the earth, this creature rises from the water to threaten society. The hero/God, representing the sky and storms, battles and defeats the monster which is then banished beneath the waves until the day he returns to once again threaten society. To solidify the allusion that the Joker is an example of the water born dragon in the combat myth equation, Nichols sites *The Killing Joke*, *Batman: The Man Who Laughs*, and Tim Burton's 1989 film, all of which depict the Joker rising from the depths after being plunged into chemical laced waters.

The genesis of Batman and the Joker's combat myth can be found in the story of *The Killing Joke*, which begins in the rain. Batman has gone to Arkham Asylum to discuss the future with the Joker. He has begun to recognize the nature of their relationship and is worried as to its outcome. In a darkened cell, the Joker silently plays a game of solitaire. Batman sits across the table from him. Both men are deeply recessed in the shadows. The first panel of the page is from the Joker's point of view as he holds the Jack of Clubs playing card in his hand and looks directly at his foe. In the second panel the image is flipped, an almost exact mirror of the first as the Joker lays the card down. "I've been thinking lately. About you and me. About what's going to happen to us, in the end." The table laden with cards takes up the majority of the third panel, the Joker's hands are visible on one side in stark white, Batman's hands are visible directly opposite in a dark bluish black. "We're going to kill each other, aren't we?" The Joker's silent response is to flip down another card. "Perhaps you'll kill me. Perhaps I'll kill you. Perhaps sooner. Perhaps later." Commissioner Gordon silently watches the duo from a barred window in

the cell's door. Water drips from Batman's black cape, forming puddles on the floor as he says, "I just wanted to know that I'd made a genuine attempt to talk things over and avert that outcome. Just once." The Joker silently flips another card to the table. Batman's fist clench tight, his teeth grit, and he slams his hand down upon the Joker's. "Are you listening to me? Its life and death that I'm discussing here. Maybe my death, maybe yours." The Joker silently smiles and draws his hand back. The game of solitaire is scattered across the table and Batman points his finger accusingly at the clown. "I don't fully understand why ours should be such a fatal relationship, but I don't want your murder on my... hands." Batman realizes in the final panel that there is something wrong. He looks to his own hands and discovers that there is white grease paint on his hands. The Joker has somehow escaped to once again threaten Gotham city and left a patsy in his place (Moore 4).

This, however, is not the first time the Joker has risen as a threat to the city of Gotham. After being forced by his impoverished situation to make a deal with a couple of mafia goons in order to make ends meet, the man who would become the clown prince of crime is informed by a couple of police officers that his wife "had an accident this morning, apparently testing a baby-bottle heater. There was an electrical short. And, uh... Well, she died, sir" (Moore 22). Grief-stricken and desperate, the future villain dons the attire of the Red Hood, a costume sporadically worn by various criminals to grant "additional anonymity" (Moore 16). It is raining when the caper begins and the trio of criminals are quickly foiled by local police. While the other criminals are getting shot, the Red Hood dodges his way through a hail of bullets. Unable to subdue the red hooded comedian, local authorities are replaced when the hero Batman arrives. Thinking that he is facing the same Red Hood that he has met before, Batman looms over the fearful and anxiety ridden man who has lost nearly everything.

In *Ecological Anxiety Disorder: Diagnosing the Politics of the Anthropocene*, Paul

Robbins and Sarah A. Moore claim that:

> Anxiety, in the psychoanalytic view developed by Jacques Lacan, is a normal
> condition and guiding motivation for science. Distinguished from fear, which has
> a specific cause and is associated with adaptive behaviors (fight or flight), anxiety
> presents the sufferer with the disintegration of the self. Rather than having a
> specific object, anxiety is connected to the threat (actual or impending) loss of
> something critical to the subject" (9)

In the case of the unnamed man wearing the guise of the Red Hood, the threat of loss is a threat

to the last two things he has in his possession, his health and his life. In order to avoid being

physically beaten by the black clad hero, the man jumps from a railing, plunges into a pool of

chemical run-off and takes his chances.

When he emerges, we witness the disintegration of his self begin. Seeing his reflection in

a rain splattered puddle, he rises from his knees and begins to laugh. The final panel of the page

reveals him as the newly born Joker: his lips drawn tight in a garish red smile, his skin bleached

white, his eyes wide and yellowed. Green hair snakes its way through his fingers as his hands

clutch at the sides of his head. Brown water drips from his clothing and blood drips from his eyes

like tears. Another trickle of blood rolls down his chin as a result of the poisoning he has just

received. The background of the panel is filled with large letters repeatedly spelling out "ha ha

ha" (32). The weight of these letters and their varying angles mirror the intensity and

oppressiveness of the insanity that has just been unleashed upon the world. He is no longer the

nameless and powerless man he once was. According to Robbins and Moore, the type of anxiety

centered around lose felt by the comedian when he faced Batman at the chemical plant is

commonly replaced by a phobia, or fear, that is dedicated to the particular object that

symbolically represents that fear. They go on to say that this displacement is problematic

because it irrationally directs energy toward the object that should otherwise be considered

harmless. In the Joker's case, the symbolic representation of displaced fear is Batman who, for all intents and purposes as the protector of Gotham City, is harmless to the average citizen. Rather than giving into his fear, or avoiding it altogether, the Joker directly confronts the object of his fear on a semi-regular basis in what Robbins and Moore would refer to as Lacan's "psychoanalytic treatment of affects" which is "not the reliving of past experiences, nor the abreaction of affect, but the articulation in speech of the truth about desire" (Robbins and Moore 12). The drawn out joke that explains a portion of his worldview, the truth as he sees it, or, as seen in *Death of The Family*, his confession of love and desire for Batman, has become a recurring event in the exploits of the Joker as he denies the existence of his past, attempts to transcend his fears and articulates his wishes for the future.

In many ways the antagonist, evil, and the villain appear to be related to one another with only minor deviations to the base structure of its predecessor. The antagonist is anything that stands in the way of the protagonist whether that is a person, creature, the environment, or even the protagonist's own mind. That which is evil is anything unpleasant that serves to disrupt the status quo and elicit change within the society that it rises from. Like the antagonist, evil can take any form and often serves as a challenge. The villain, at its base, appears to be something of a hybrid of the two concepts. However, the villain is perhaps the most complex of the three, requiring that it not only impedes the progress of the protagonist, but that it must take the form of a character rather than a creature or event and intentionally oppose the protagonist's goals in order to achieve its own while still being able to react and change with confrontation. Participating in a tradition that predates the comic art form, the Joker fulfills the necessary role of all three of these (evil, villain, and antagonist) by not only hindering and challenging Batman through the continued reenactment of the combat myth, but challenging the status quo of Gotham

City that is represented by Batman and resulting in change to both the hero and the city that he threatens. It stands to reason that repeated interactions between the protagonist and the villain would result in the transformation of both as they adapt individually to their oppositional counterpart. This continued back and forth adapting to effectively confront the opposition naturally leads, in a literary form of evolution, to the next stage of the villain in which they exceed the previously established limits of villainy and become the supervillain by transcending the human condition. The next chapter will examine how the Joker surpasses the average villain by looking at aspects of the comic book industry's "supervillain" and what being "super" means in relation to humanity through the lens of transhumanist thought. While the Joker is considered to be superhuman, the next chapter will also explore the ways in which his humanity is decentered and even depleted in favor of a more creaturely representation due to his physical appearance.

Chapter 2

Supervillainy and the Inhuman Human

If we set aside the mirrors, myths, and monsters, all we have left of the Joker is a villain. The Joker was created during the "Golden Age of Comics." During this time the world saw the birth of costumed heroes: Superman, followed by Batman and others. All of these heroes began by fighting everyday criminals; Superman battled the mafia and Batman's first case was a murder mystery. Shortly afterwards the tales of these heroes involved mad scientists, giant robots, mystics, and monsters of all sorts. Comic book heroes continued to fight average criminals who, to set themselves apart, employed colorful and bizarre costumes/gadgets that echoed science fiction. Wearing a suit of all purple and painting his face like a clown, the Joker was one of these criminals; initially depicted as a genius with a mind for crime, a Moriarty to foil Batman's Sherlock Holmes.

In 1954, the comic book industry came under attack for reportedly promoting juvenile delinquency and homosexuality in young readers. After an investigation conducted by a US Senate subcommittee, the comic book industry participated in hearings pertaining to the matter of juvenile delinquency and decided to impose a self-regulating code of conduct known as the Comic Code Authority, or CCA. Under this code, several of the so-called "supervillains" were changed into psychopaths and monsters, many of whom were mutated or deformed in some manner. The code stated that "crime was always to be presented as 'a sordid and unpleasant activity.' Criminals were never to be presented as glamorous" (Fennell 309). Jack Fennell of the University of Limerick claims that

> crime was to be unpleasant and nasty, never profitable, objectively 'evil' and totally unattractive, and there would be no logical reason given why anyone *should* engage in criminal activity. Crime simply happened because it was what 'bad people' did; 'evil' was the compulsion to engage in crime for its own sake. (308)

The mandate of the CCA to dehumanize criminals by making them "unattractive" took characters such as the Joker into the realm of posthumanism by accentuating their deformities and depicting them as both human and monster.

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Chapter 1 illustrated that villains are a necessary component in creating and defining heroes. Under Enrique Arenas' strong definition, a villain is a person who stands in the way of the hero's goals in order to achieve his/her own by imposing their will upon the surroundings. The villain also has the ability to adapt and react to obstacles (such as the hero) that stand in the way of attaining these goals. The comic book industry distinguishes their superhero genre villains from the rest of villainy by calling them "supervillains." These "super" villains stand out from the norm by employing advanced technology, magic, and/or superhuman abilities.

The Joker, having a genius level intellect for crime, has been, since his conception, considered a supervillain under these parameters. He has maintained this status through the use of gadgets and gimmicks that are silly yet sophisticated. In the DC comics publication event known as "The New 52," the Joker's supervillain status was reified by displaying physical abilities far exceeding the average human. Not only do these powers allow the Joker to stand toe-to-toe with Batman, they allow him to successfully engage others who transcend the human condition with their own superhuman gifts.

The term supervillain indicates that the villainous character has more-than-human capabilities that range from genius level intellect to increased physical attributes rivaling those of Greek gods. The supervillain's abilities are used to attain selfish goals through the hindrance or attempted destruction of heroes and disrupting the status quo of society. Their designs generally far exceed the aspirations of average criminals in scope. Rather than pursuing criminal activity

for vengeance or personal financial gain, supervillains aim at more ambitious goals such the

destruction of humanity or the ushering in of a new age of superhumanity. This does not,

however, exclude them from partaking in mundane crimes as a means to an end. The

motivational roots can generally be found bearing similar origins as the average criminal

magnified to extraordinary proportions. A regular criminal may have grown up poor, turning to

crime as a way out, but the supervillain who grew up poor may view all financial institutions as

an affront to humanity, committing elaborate crimes intended to destabilize the economy. For

most supervillains, it is this difference in scale that separates them from the everyday.

In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds attempts to provide a more in-

depth definition of the superhero genre beyond the idea that "super" simply means the *exceeding

of*. This "first stage working definition" posited by Reynolds consists of seven notable markers.

According to this model, when superhero aspects are reversed, particularly three and six, a

working definition of the supervillain emerges. Reynolds seven keys to superheroes are as

follows:

> 1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
> 2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
> 3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
> 4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
> 5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter egos.
> 6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
> 7. The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder. (16)

These markers do not apply to all heroes and villains, but they provide an excellent starting point to begin a character's examination. Specifically, keys one, three, four, five, and six prove to be particularly useful in the examination of the Joker.

The Joker, as he is presented in *The Killing Joke*, is best approached through this lens of reversal. The first key states that the character is an outcast and an orphan, but there is no visible or implied evidence to indicate the latter. The story's Joker begins as an out-of-work comedian living in a slum apartment who turns against society by resorting to crime in pursuit of a better life. This act directly violates what is deemed as appropriate behavior within his society, marking him as a societal outcast.

Key three conveys that the hero is more devoted to justice than he is to the law. Turning this idea on its head results in Cocksworth's assessment that the Joker is the personification of evil beyond our current scope. He has stated that the Joker ruins our idea of evil by surpassing all of our moral categories with his particular brand of wickedness. Under this assessment, the Joker's sole motivation is terror and chaos with no logic or regard for the law.

When Reynold's fourth, fifth, and sixth laws are reversed, they can be grouped together in a single category for the Joker. Alan Moore's depiction of the Joker contrasts the character's extraordinariness with the mundane nature of his alter ego and surroundings. The memory of an argument with his former wife over money precedes a page depicting the Joker poisoning a man to procure an abandoned carnival for future plans. Moore gradually increases the contrast between past and present as the story unfolds. The Joker shooting Commissioner Gordon's daughter, Barbara, and raising a shot glass toasting crime while undressing her is followed by the memory of his reluctant entry into crime. Later, receiving news of his wife's death is preceded by

a rant against the reliability of memories, rationality, and sanity. This same scene is followed by a speech about fear and the disparity of life that promotes madness as a viable alternative.

The taboos that should exist to prevent the Joker's actions and that govern his alter ego are virtually nonexistent because the Joker essentially has no alter ego, at least not one that matters post-transformation. During the robbery of a chemical plant, the comedian jumps from a catwalk into a pool of chemical run-off. The final panel on page 30 shows him climbing out of a pond as rain pours down around him. The shore is littered with refuse; a twisted line of barbwire and a work boot with a hole in the sole lay casually discarded among dying weeds. As the comedian emerges from the pool, the trash serves as metaphor for him being similarly discarded by society. The next page begins with a close-up of his shadowed reflection in a rain splattered puddle as he removes the red hood that previously concealed his identity. The second panel shows him hoodless, but the image is distorted by droplets of rain so that the man's face is obscured.

Employing silhouettes and deep shadows, the artist Brian Bolland is able to completely conceal the man's transformation by having the comedian's back partially to the reader until the sixth panel. Dripping chemicals and rain, the man convulses as he begins to laugh, turning to face the reader. His skin is bleached white and a hint of green can be seen in his hair. The final panel of the page reveals the Joker with yellow eyes dripping blood, his laughter graphically filling the panel. The lettering is large and bold, consuming the panel with its typographical weight. The purpose of this heavy lettering is to imply sound for the reader while also serving as background. Filling the panel with seemingly physical manifest words exaggerates the intensity of the Joker's newly maddened mind.

Critic Joseph Michael Sommers explores this scene, concluding that

whoever jumped into the chemicals dissolved in them, and the man who Alan Moore has catching his reflection in a rain puddle after rising from the muck, now no longer remembered in black and white but constructed fully-formed and in full-color, conflating his memories of the past with what's going on in the present time line, is the Joker as we know him. (48)

Lacking a name does not matter because the Joker's alter ego is in effect dead, "dissolved" in the chemical bath. The absence of an alter ego frees the newly created ego from any previously established social taboos that would govern his actions within the social contract. The Joker is the Joker from beginning to end, with any moral infractions falling directly on his shoulders rather than those of the man he used to be. Freedom from socially dictated moral taboos allows the Joker to create his own social guidelines and presumably places him above the law by placing him outside of society. With no loyalty to any state or government the Joker is beholden to no one but himself, creating within himself Derrida's "parergon" which Cary Wolfe states as "that 'which simultaneously constitutes and destroys' what it frames, paradoxically supplementing that which is already complete" (*Before the Law* 6). The Joker is separate from society while connected to it, making both interdependent. By refusing society's mandates, the Joker serves to define and reinforce which actions are considered acceptable within that society.

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An essential aspect of the superhero genre is the idea of beings having "super" powers. These extraordinary abilities emerge from a variety of sources, from biological experimentation to naturally occurring endowments of alien physiology. Perhaps the most often used device in the superhuman genesis is the radiation/chemical accident. The origin of many superheroes features the accidental exposure to toxic levels of chemicals resulting in that individual gaining powers. Like these heroes, the Joker's exposure to chemicals unlocks greater potential within him. In many instances where a character is transformed from the average to the super, the

results are a hybridization of the human body and technology, animal, or plant. These characters exemplify Donna Haraway's cyborg model by blurring the lines between their formerly human aspect and that which is genetically alien to them in a new system that "exceeds and encompasses the boundary not just between human and animal but also between living or organic and the mechanical or technical" (What is Posthumanism xviii). The Joker is no exception as he hybridizes the union between chemical and flesh.

While the Joker's fusion with foreign chemicals does not mark him as the traditional cyborg in the sense that he exceeds and encompasses the boundary between human and animal or even the mechanical, he can still be considered a cyborg. Haraway asserts that "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 2269). She goes on to say that "contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs – creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted" (Haraway 2269). The cyborg creature is often included in literature as an ironic post-human blurring of lines that allows for transhuman enhancements.

Haraway states that the cyborg is a struggle between life and death and has no genesis or gender. These aspects allow the cyborg to make use of social collective consciousness exploiting the imagination towards the fear of oppression and the dangerous possibility thereof. The Joker, being a combination of the human animal and the chemical poisons that transformed him, represents this function of the cyborg. Although Alan Moore provides a possible origin for the Joker in which the former self dies and is reborn, the Joker negates this origin when he makes the statement concerning memories of how he came to be and that he prefers it to be multiple-choice. Through this negation, the Joker is denying his own genesis by implying that reality is potentially a lie. This act of denial is part of what Haraway calls "the main trouble with cyborgs."

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She says the trouble is "that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal

capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly

unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (Haraway 2271). As a cyborg,

the Joker does not need a point of origin. In his mind, memory and the past are dangerous,

worrisome and anxiety producing elements. He addresses this with the statement,

> one moment you're lost in a carnival of delights with poignant childhood aromas,
> the flashing neon of puberty, all that sentimental candy floss. The next, it leads
> you somewhere you don't want to go, somewhere dark and cold, filled with the
> damp, ambiguous shapes of things you'd hoped were forgotten. (Moore 21)

The fact that the origin presented by Alan Moore is simply one of many possibilities in the

Joker's mind helps to illustrate how inessential his origin is to the character.

  With no name, morals, or origin that he accepts, the Joker is free to commit any social

atrocity he desires. Committing secular blasphemy is at the center of the cyborg which,

according to Haraway, "protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the

need for community" (Haraway 2269). The cyborg is devoutly partial and incomplete, yet as

wary as it is of being part of a whole, Haraway claims that cyborgs need connections. The Joker

repeatedly seeks this connection with Batman. The "one bad day" speech in *The Killing Joke* is

his attempt to illustrate this connection with Batman by proving the only difference between the

two is the way they reacted to having one bad day. In DC's The New 52 publication of *Death of

The Family*, the Joker once again attempts to define his connection with Batman by using

Batman's collection of sidekicks. With Batman's protégés tied to chairs around a dinner table,

their heads bloody and bandaged, the Joker reveals what appears to be their faces cut from their

bodies and presented on serving platters. When Batman asks how he could do such a thing, the

Joker tells him it was an easy thirty minute recipe and that "they're not like you and me, you see,

not under the skin" (Snyder 382). He then says they are soft, that he and Batman have something

of more substance beneath their faces. By denouncing the sidekicks and praising his connection

with Batman, he is at once proving his wariness of being a part of the whole of humanity and the

community of super beings while at the same time emphasizing his need for a connection as a

cyborg. In an attempt to solidify this connection and further reduce the sidekicks, he addresses

them directly, "The ugly truth of it, kiddies, is that deep down, beneath it all, Batman loves me

more than he loves you" (Snyder 383). His intent is to break their willingness to be Batman's

family, eliminating any competition that might exist for the hero's affections. His ultimate goal

in this scenario is the struggle between life and death by forcing Batman to choose who dies; the

children or the Joker.

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The complex creature that is the Joker is more than just a variation on the Haraway

cyborg. Cary Wolfe states: "arguably the best-known inheritor of the 'cyborg' strand of

posthumanism is what is now being called "transhumanism" (What is Posthumanism xiii). The

Joker is an example of this transhuman inheritor.

Julian Huxley appears to be the first individual to use the term transhumanism. In 1927,

he writes:

> The human species can, if it wishes, transcendent self - not only sporadically, an
> individual here in one way, and individual there in another way - but in its
> entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps
> *transhumanism* will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by
> realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature. (qtd. in Bostrom 7)

Quoting Joel Garreau, Wolfe defines transhumanism as "the enhancement of human intellectual,

physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and

the dramatic extension of lifespan" (What is Posthumanism xiii). As an emerging strand of

posthumanism, it is the "belief in the engineered evolution of 'post-humans,' defined as beings

'whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards," and "transhuman is their description of those who are in the process of becoming posthuman" (What is Posthumanism xiii). According to F. M. Esfandairy, transhumanism is a state of a "'transitional human,' someone who by virtue of their technology usage, cultural values, and lifestyle constitutes an evolutionary link to the coming era of posthumanity" (qtd. in Bostrom 14). In many ways, this is the very definition used by comics for "super."

Transhumanist thought is not new to the human species. Oxford professor of philosophy Nick Bostrom declares that the "desire to acquire new capabilities is as ancient as our species itself. We have always sought to expand the boundaries of our existence, be it socially, geographically, or mentally" (1). Mystics, magicians, scientists, and alchemists have long blurred the lines between life and death and the natural world. The roots of transhumanism can be found in the rational humanism of the Renaissance, when people were encouraged to make their own judgments and observations rather than relying on religious authorities for answers. "Renaissance humanism also created the ideal of the well-rounded person, one who is highly developed scientifically, morally, culturally, and spiritually" (Bostrom 2). The Age of Enlightenment encouraged the mindset of question everything based on empirical evidence. With that came "the idea that even humans themselves can be developed through the appliance of science" (Bostrom 3). In his book *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, the Marquis de Condorcet asks,

> Would it be absurd now to suppose that the improvement of the human race should be regarded as capable of unlimited progress? ... No doubt man will not become immortal, but cannot the span constantly increase between the moment he begins to live and the time when naturally, without illness or accident, he finds life a burden? (qtd. in Bostrom 3)

From seeking the scientific expansion of humanity's lifespan to Nietzsche's overman, we find the ideas presented by early 20th century science-fiction writers depicting imagined benefits to the human condition through genetic manipulation, bionic implants, and improved social science resulting in greater mental abilities. The world sees in the early 20th century, racially and culturally inspired genetic cleansings and State sponsored eugenics to remove certain qualities and individuals seen as unfit for continued breeding. Comics of the time began to explore the same societal fears as those presented in science-fiction. The idea of science gone awry manifested in comics as an increased presence of mad scientists and the dawning of physical transformation through chemical, biological or radioactive accidents that lead to super powers such as the event that created the Joker.

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Posthumanism, like transhumanism, was born from Renaissance and Enlightenment era humanism and the ideas of the physically and mentally perfect and rational human. Under humanism, humans are placed above nonhuman animals culturally, biologically, and evolutionarily. Humanism, according to Wolfe,

> is founded and fed upon the hierarchal binary opposition between 'human' and 'animal,' and 'the aspiration of *human* freedom, extended to all, regardless of race or class or gender, has as its material condition of possibility absolute control over the lives of *nonhuman* others. (qtd. in Badmington 378; emphases in original)

Humans are thought to physically and mentally surpass the bonds of animality. Based on this, Wolfe states that his "sense of posthumanism is the opposite of transhumanism, and in this light, transhumanism should be seen as an intensification of humanism" (Wolfe xv). In other words, the simplistic difference is that posthumanism decenters the human to that of the animal while transhumanism emphasizes exceeding the boundaries of the human. Author Alan Moore is well known for tapping into the transhumanist aspect of superheroes to relate his stories in a social

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and political realm. He has often employed "Physically, mentally, emotionally and technologically advanced beings, who are above ordinary men in every being of their existence," to restore order to a dystopian state (Sil). At the same time he presents superhumans as social saviors, he illustrates them as a potential threat to society and humanity's continued existence as we know it.

According to Badmington, Francis Fukuyama expressed a similar concern for the potential of real life super humanity:

> Modern biotechnology, for Fukuyama, is a "threat" because it will possibly "alter human nature and thereby move us into a "posthuman" stage of history. This is important ... because human nature exists, is a meaningful concept, and this provided a stable continuity to our experience as a species." (qtd. in Badmington 380)

The threat is not a posthuman decentering of the human animal, but rather a humanist invasion of the posthuman mentality resulting in a humanist expression of transhumanism that would potentially threatening society and our interconnected biosphere.

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When examining the Joker, most individuals fail to recognize him as a transhuman entity. Instead, much of the focus has been on traits that have historically been viewed as less than human, such as his deformities. Physical traits such as the Joker's ghastly grimace, often depicted as oral scarification, and his chemically bleached white skin are combined with the mental deformity of his madness to become the focus of study that serves to dehumanize the character. Decentering the Joker's humanity based on his deformities transforms him into a posthuman monster which "invites also the lengthy exploration of a wide range of potential cognitive effects weakly suggested by it – a rich source of barely hinted horrors and dangers – and we do so because this kind of processing 'feels good'" (Arenas 12). The reader who

witnesses the monster uses the process of personal projection to create the horrors contained within that creature's flesh. "Fears and anxieties, as well as [the reader's] subconscious and forbidden desires - power, freedom, vitality, independence," are reproduced within the monstrousness of the villain as a mirror of their own emotions (Arenas 12). The zombie, for example, represents "everything we existentially detest, the corruption of our flesh, illness, physical limitation, incapacity to sustain a life worth living" (Arenas 10). The Joker's white pallor of his skin and his lanky skeletal frame reflects many of the zombie's aspects reminding us of the dead and dying or those who are chronically ill. This elicits personal anxieties of death and helps contribute to fear that further removes the Joker from humanity.

Physical deformities in Western culture are seen as disabilities for the individuals who possess them. Our culture tends to look down on and pity those unfortunate enough to bear physical traits seen as abnormal. In fact, according to Jack Fennell of the University of Limerick,

> When they first appeared during the 'Golden Age of Comics' (1938 to 1954), 'supervillains' were little more than eccentric gangsters. Criminals with clear motives, they were distinguished from the norm by their use of technological gimmicks or weird costumes rather than special powers. Genuinely 'monstrous' supervillains such as the Joker, Two-Face and the undead Solomon Grundy were in the minority. (305)

The rare disfigurement of characters, such as the Joker, were, according to Fennell, the modern remnants of medieval punitive mutilations that not only visibly marked the individual as criminal, but also announced the nature of his crime, as "state-sanctioned punitive mutilation stigmatized the criminal by advertising his wrongdoing. In other words, it made his criminal nature physically manifest, in effect rendering him into something identifiably non-human" (Fennell 312). When a reader sees the deformities of the villain, sympathy is removed and replaced by fear and the accusation of "what did you do to deserve that?" (Fennell 311). Much

like the idea of mutilation being equated to criminal wrongdoing, disabilities are often presented

in film and literature as the physical manifestation of a moral flaw present in villains.

Concerning the reasoning for the appearance of modern comic villains, Baylor University

professor Greg Garrett writes:

> We want to know where evil comes from, and we like to put a face on it,
> particularly when it's a face that doesn't look like ours. In comics, we make the
> villains grotesque, like the Joker or the Red Skull; we make them obviously
> beyond the pale so we can distance ourselves from them and their actions. (57)

The distancing of ourselves through the use of appearances to dehumanize the villain effectively

turns the Joker, and other characters like him, into a creature. Julia Lupton defines the creature as

"Derived from the future-active participle of the Latin verb *creare* ("to create"), *creature*

indicates a made or fashioned thing but with the sense of continued or potential process, action,

or emergence built into the future thrust of its active verbal form" (1). The creature is thus

always in flux, constantly changing and evolving. As the ever-changing creature, the human

represents the transhuman as Garreau defines it, as "those who are in the process of becoming

posthuman" (qtd. in Wolfe xiii). Lupton goes on to say, "In modern usage *creature* borders on

the monstrous and unnatural, increasingly applying to those created things that warped the proper

canons of creation" (1). In the case of the Joker, this unnatural warping of the "canon of creation"

is the result of his accidental chemical bath. Discussing Caliban, she continues by saying that the

creature forever stands between what is human and the inhuman, marking the differences

between the two, yet never belonging to either group. Instead, this creature acts on its own

accord, creating situations that disrupt the status quo. This disruption invokes an emergency "in

which forms are no longer fixed, when new – potentially dangerous, revolutionary, or

counterrevolutionary – forms of political life can arise" (Lupton 6). The creation of an emerging

chaos is the Joker's tool to teach, to expand, or re-create that which is already known, as when he

denies societally conceived moral taboos. Continuously returning to threaten the status quo of society, the Joker is fulfilling his role as the waterborne dragon in the combat myth scenario presented by Nichols and explored in the previous chapter. By enacting the duties of the creature through the challenging of Batman to learn something new or to redefine the nature of their relationship, the Joker is actively propelling Gotham into the future by including the city as the focus of his machinations.

Being a creature not only places the Joker between the human and inhuman, but also allows the villainous clown to fall outside of the realm of the law and social contract. "Legal rights," [Posner] argues, "have been designed to serve the needs and interests of human beings, having the usual human capacities, and so make a poor fit with the needs and interests of animals" (Before the Law 14). Madness and physical deformities mark the Joker as less-than-human and as creature, he is therefore not considered to have "the usual human capacities" that these legal right have been designed to serve.

Even without his madness, the Joker's appearance marks him outcast as explained by the ideas of Arenas and Fennell. Yet, the body is the central governing agent in modern society. Sherryl Vint claims that "this new political relevance of the body forces us to confront our continuity with other animals, and to rethink the nature of governance in a biopolitical era in which power acts upon bodies and forms subjects through this action" (444). The division between human and animal forms the central idea of the social contract based on the state of nature that was violent and insecure. The use of force in the state was the only means of gaining legitimacy. The Joker's state of being nonhuman compels him to use force in order to regain any form of legitimacy within the society that he is a part of. As both an outsider to the social

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contract and a member of society, the Joker confounds the social contract by both violating its

terms and remaining immune to it.

> Violence against fellow members of the social contract constitutes a violation of
> its terms, but violence against those who remain in the state of nature is
> unquestioned. This structure of the social contract explains why the discourse of
> animality is so often invoked against marginalized social groups, serving as it
> does to justify violence and to exclude those so labeled from the realm of ethical
> consideration. (Vint 445)

For this reason, Batman's methods in combating the clown remain unquestioned. By removing

the Joker from the social contract based on the unpleasantness of his appearance and on the

repulsiveness that we find in his madness, we marginalize him and are able to dismiss actions

taken against him.

The "creature" is exempt from the judgment of law because it existed prior to laws that

establish both who is included and excluded within the law's frame,

> but also because it disavows its own contingency through violence: namely, the
> violence of sacrifice for which distinction between human and animal has
> historically been bedrock, providing for the law the 'foundation' for its exclusions
> that the law cannot provide for itself. (*Before the Law* 9)

In other words, the ability to commit violent acts of sacrifice separates humans from animals.

Humans are able to commit sacrifice and non-human animals, as a result, have the ability to

suffer from that sacrifice. Those who fall outside of inclusion are "marked by differences of race,

or species, or gender, or religion, or nationality" (9) and are subject to punishment under that

law. In the case of the man who would be the Joker, his financial status rather than race or

species places him on the outside. He does not have the power to make his own sacrifice, but he

suffers the results of those made by others. Quoting Richard Posner, Cary Wolfe states, "legal

rights have been designed to serve the needs and interests of human beings, having the usual

human capacities, and so make a poor fit with the needs and interests of animal" (13-14). In

accordance with the idea that "animals are things and not persons" and are therefore not subject to the law, if the Joker is inhuman, he is also not subject to the law. This animality within the character makes it impossible for him to not only be stopped and captured by the authorities, but to be successfully tried under the laws that he falls outside of. With no other recourse society turns to Batman who, as a vigilante, has placed himself outside of the law in the guise of the creature allowing him to unquestioningly enact violence against another creature.

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Lupton makes the claim that the creature warps the cannon of creation. Applying this concept to the Joker requires that we acknowledge his birth rather than the birth of the comedian. To do this is to reorder his creation, not as a natural act, but as a folly of humanity's impact on the environment. The resulting creature born from human-made toxicity has not only been greatly influenced by his environment, but he in turn seeks to further impact that environment by spreading his own infection to other parts of society. When the man wearing the red hood rises from the chemical soup, he emerges as an amplified representation of trans-corporeality. Stacy Alaimo asks that we imagine "human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world," and that by "thinking across bodies [we] may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions" (Alaimo 2). Recognizing that trans means a "movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors" (Alaimo 2). What this means is that the human body is a sensitive and porous construct that, like all other nonhuman entities in the environment, is easily affected by the environmental

conditions surrounding it. Should a pollutant be introduced into an environment, that pollutant has the ability to affect every aspect of that environment, causing a chain reaction that begins with the smallest inhabitant and continues through to the most biologically complex. The Joker, being non-human, becomes pollutant to society. Generally, his crimes begin with an assault on someone or something considered insignificant by society. Gradually, they grow in scope until he has managed to affect and/or infect a significant portion of the populace. From this point, he continues towards his ultimate end goal, which is often a high stakes target such as a city mayor or the entire UN council.

We often hear the term "product of their environment" or some variation of the phrase. It is usually taken to mean that the individual in question has been influenced by the environment in which they were raised and the parenting techniques employed. Whether negative or positive, the end result is the subject being referenced. This is often used dismissively in the case of criminals and is usually based on race and economic positioning; implying that the individual had no choice but to become a criminal as predetermined by their socio-economic destiny. The term "a product of our environment" takes on a literal meaning when viewed through the lens of trans-corporeality. As Edward Casey asserts, "places serve as the condition of all living things" (Alaimo 8). The sentiment is echoed by Lawrence Buell when he says that "human beings are biocultural creatures constructing themselves in interaction with surroundings they cannot not inhabit. All their artifacts may be expected to bear traces of that" (Alaimo 8). The Joker is no exception. The toxic chemical bath cannot solely be held responsible for the Joker's genesis; Gotham City should, at least in part, be held accountable for the creation of the clown prince of crime.

Mirroring the chemical run-off pool, Gotham City is presented as a cesspool of corruption, where crime runs unchecked and even the police and other government agencies are tainted by the influence of criminality. Greg Garrett refers to this comic book metropolis as "every nightmare vision of every great urban area ever created" (Garrett 55). Based on a publication in 1937 anticipating the 1939 New York World's Fair, Siobhan Fitzgerald suggests that:

> Gotham is "a thinly veiled New York:" [i]n these canyons fortunes are daily won and lost. Nestling in the shadows of tall cliffs and fringing the waters of the harbor are battery Park and the aquarium while, [i]mprisoned in the offices of midtown Manhattan's masses of cubes and towering shafts men and women work and scheme and telephone. (qtd. in Fitzgerald 70)

It is a dystopian representation of the future placed in the here-and-now and is used to "explore contemporary anxieties – such as crime, pollution or political oppression" (M. Johnson). The city is populated by 1920s noiresque mafia gangsters, costumed criminals, and violent madmen of all sorts. The city is dark and unwelcoming to both visitors and its own citizens.

> A city street is presented as a gaping chasm, murky and mysterious the text conveys the noirish atmosphere of the city. ... Batman writer Dennis O'Neil said that 'Batman's Gotham city is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November.' (M. Johnson)

When Tim Burton adapted the comic book into his 1989 movie, "he said that he wanted Gotham to look as if hell had erupted through the streets and kept on going" (M. Johnson). The towering Gothic architecture that makes up the city landscape oppresses the average human by its sheer magnitude.

The corrupt city perpetuates the necessity of Batman through its faceless form of unidentifiable violence and acts as a vehicle in which societal fears of the city can easily be explored. "It is far easier to be judgmental of criminals, murders and villains than the more obvious perpetrators of crime, the destitute, the mentally ill and the people we know best"

(Fitzgerald 72). This is the environment of fear and oppression that gave birth to the Joker, fears

of financial instability, becoming lost within society, losing all personal power, fear of the police

and government, and getting beaten down repeatedly not only by the city itself but by those with

the power to make significant changes. The way a city such as Gotham can affect and infect an

individual is hinted at as Alaimo quotes Edward Casey, "my body and natural things are not just

coterminous but continuous with each other. …The fibers of culture and nature compose one

continuous fabric" (Alaimo 11). The corrupt city of Gotham helped to breed the character

through their interactions with one another culturally, economically, and socially even before the

chemical transformation of the comedian's material body.

This single fabric of nature and culture in which one affects the other symbiotically, both

negatively and positively, can be found throughout many Joker stories.

> The existence of toxic bodies, both human and nonhuman – however clichéd,
> however repressed or denied – still mixes things up. Since the same chemical
> substance may poison the workers who produce it, the neighborhood in which it
> was produced, and the web of plants and animals who end up consuming it, the
> traffic in toxins reveals the interconnections among various movements, such as
> environmental health, occupational health, labor, [etcetera]. (Alaimo 18)

As a toxic body, the Joker poisons those things around him, humans, animals and the

environment itself. In *The Killing Joke*, for example, the Joker is conducting a deal in order to

purchase an abandoned carnival for a yet unknown caper. When he and the salesman reach an

accord, they shake hands in the old-fashioned manner of business. The third panel of the page

reveals that the Joker has strapped to his hand what appears to be a joy buzzer with a large

needle attached to it. With his ever-present grin, the Joker casually discards the joy buzzer,

comments that he can see the salesman is happy with the deal, and walks away. The final panel

reveals the face of the salesman after this encounter. His eyes are bugged out and yellowed, the

flesh of his face is bleached white, his teeth are clenched tightly together as his lips are drawn

back into a ghastly smile, a trickle of blood runs from his lip mirroring the image found in the flashback of the Joker emerging from his chemical bath.

The chemical transmutation of another to resemble the Joker can initially be found in *The Laughing Fish* and *Sign of The Joker*. In this two-part story, he uses the same chemical cocktail that altered him to taint Gotham City's water supply, this mutates the local fish population, giving them his grotesque red grin. When a cat feeds upon a tainted fish it too develops Joker-esque features. The maddened cat then attacks his owner spreading the poison to the next more biologically complex creature.

The Batman story, *The Man Who Laughs*, depicts the first appearance of the Joker in Gotham City as the Joker after his chemical rebirth. The story takes place a few months after the Red Hood caper. This is the first time Batman has encountered the new threat of the Joker. The tale begins with Detective James Gordon asking the question, "What the hell is happening to my city?" (Brubaker 12). In an abandoned warehouse, bodies of the homeless are found in varying stages of decay, eyes bulging, skin bleached white, and mouths hideously stretched into smiles. When Batman arrives on the scene, he informs Gordon: "Some of these people have been dead for nearly a month. I think whoever did this was practicing on them. And I think this is just the beginning" (Brubaker 12). Batman's prediction proves true and shortly afterwards the Joker makes his criminal debut poisoning a TV reporter live on the air with his Joker venom. He proceeds, in what is now a classic Joker trope, taking over the broadcast to announce his intentions: "Thought I'd take time out of my oh so busy schedule to say hi and make a few not so veiled threats, so, hello-goodbye, you're all going to die" (15). Threatening the entire city marks him as both the supervillain with lofty goals and the threat of the toxic invader poisoning the ecology and the biological web that surrounds it. His motivation is discovered written on the wall

of a cell in Arkham Asylum, "One by one they'll hear my call then this wicked town will follow

my fall" (20). The reader familiar with *The Killing Joke* knows that this message is not only

referencing the Joker's transformative plunge into chemically tainted waters, but also his loss of

everything; his wife, his unborn child, his former life, and his fall from society. His crimes are an

act of vengeance against those in society who have wronged him, including society itself.

The Joker's murderous escapades are his attempt to regain what he has lost. By

committing violence, he is seeking to reclaim his humanity and reestablish his position within

society by transcending his former socio-economic status that marked him as an outsider. He is

attempting to claim the power that contributed to lack in agency that prevented him from making

sacrifices. The act of violent sacrifice in this manner causes those that he was formerly on the

outside of to suffer the results of that sacrifice. Essentially, the Joker is turning the tables and

making his victims into the animalistic creatures that live outside of and before the law.

Yet the more heinous his crimes, the more he is seen as inhuman. The more he is

regarded as less-than-human, the less agency he has within society, "as agency is usually

considered within the province of rational – and thus exclusively human – deliberation" (Alaimo

143). In the circle of contradiction that the Joker creates within himself by attempting to reclaim

his agency as a human, he comes across (and is interpreted by many critics) as irrational and

simply catering to his own whims. Should these whims be seen as little more than animalistic

instinct, he can no longer be viewed as a human with agency, but rather the animalistic creature

continuing the contradictory circle. Attempting to become human again by transcending

humanity's own wickedness places him within Garreau's definition of transhuman through the

continuous "process of becoming posthuman" and warping the proper canon of creation by

chemically altering his victims into his warped progeny. However, this attempt at posthuman

transition marks him as Lupton's "creature." Acting on his own accord, the Joker is creating

situations that disrupt the status quo and invoke a state of emergency "in which forms are no

longer fixed." In these particular sacrificial acts, the Joker is attacking the material body of his

intended victims. These victim's "bodies are not only the sites of the direct application of [this]

power, but permeable sites that are forever transformed by the substances and forces [the Joker

serum] that penetrate them" (Alaimo 30). Focusing on the body, he is creating a central point at

which the power struggle between himself and his victims becomes embedded.

Using the same chemicals that transformed him into the pale-skinned clown as a weapon,

the Joker becomes an acting agent for environmental illness. This "environmental illness" that

the Joker induces is an illustrated instance of what Stacey Alaimo says "offers a particularly

potent example of trans-corporeal space, in which the human body can never be disentangled

from the material world, the world of biological creatures, ecosystems, and xenobiotic, humanly

made substances" (115). Created by the toxic environment of Gotham City (both socially and

chemically), the Joker often seeks to alter that environment and its inhabitants to reflect his own

toxic body so that they in turn becomes toxic to other inhabitants, spreading the Joker's poison

like a plague through the ecosphere.

When the story involves poisoning the city, the fact that the Joker begins his toxic

infection among the lower class and vagabonds should come as no surprise to readers. His

previous incarnation comes from this social stratum and he resents their perceived weakness.

Alaimo states that

> in the United States, exposure to toxins correlates most directly with race, and
> then with class, as toxic waste sites, factories, and other sources are most often
> located near the neighborhoods of African-Americans and other people of color.
> As the term *chemical injury* suggests, many people become ill through toxic work
> places, and those closest to the chemicals, such as factory workers and
> agricultural workers, face the most risk. (117; emphasis in original)

The Joker removes the issues of race and class by making the environment of Gotham City inhospitable to all members of society. Through the induction of a physical change in the citizenry of Gotham City, the Joker creates more creatures that are akin to himself. As the number of Joker-like creatures, living or dead, increases, the abnormality of the Joker becomes more normalized. Decreasing society's humanity brings him closer to reclaiming his humanity's lost agency. Effectively, he is decentering the human into the posthuman through the continuous act of becoming. The notion of trans-corporeality and his being an agent thereof does not transform the character into a sympathetic creature. Rather, the character elicits a more complicated conversation, serving as an environmental metaphor for the dangers of unchecked chemical waste and toxicity.

The Joker has always been a supervillain under the comic industry's own definition. With the enactment of the CCA, the Joker has been allowed to expand beyond the scope of being simply super by strictly adhering to the imposed limitations placed upon villainy by this self-regulating act. As a result, the character has delved into a deeper complexity than most other comic characters of his generation. Not only does he represent the aspects of evil, the antagonist, and the villain as explored in the first chapter, but he has, in many ways, become the face of the faceless masses that rides the line between that of human and inhuman, powerful and powerless, and transhumanism and the post human condition. He is a contradiction to his own contradictions in his illuminations on society and the status quo. By existing outside of society while simultaneously being an aspect of that same society, he acts as both creator and destroyer, warping the canon of creation through his own spreading toxicity to infect all he comes in contact with resulting in his human victims becoming creaturely reflections of himself which in turn reshapes his society. The next chapter of this thesis will continue to explore the post-human

and transhuman aspects of the Joker as they are related to his madness. In order to do this, we must first gain an understanding of the way madness has been conceived and received by society in the past and the ways that these outdated preconceived notions continue to impact the way our modern society envisions mental illness; the results of which can be found throughout the mythos of the Joker.

Chapter 3

Madness of All Sorts

The Joker's transcendent animality based upon his physical deformities and the posthuman decentering of society through his promotion of widespread environmental illness and chemical injury are often neglected by critics in favor of analyzing him from a moral and ethical stance, but his most often addressed trait tends to be his madness. Over the years, various authors have depicted the mental state of the clown prince of crime in a variety of ways. He has been portrayed as a clue-leaving serial killer in the same vein as Jack the Ripper or the Son of Sam. Some have depicted him as the laughing criminal clown whose sole purpose was to entertain his victims with his antics. Other authors have presented him as chillingly sane. Modern versions of the character tend to emphasize his madness, which over the years, has been questioned by comic book versions of police, psychoanalysts, and Batman, but rarely real world critics. Even the Joker himself has stated many times that he is not crazy. Yet despite variations in his portrayal and existing questions of the legitimacy of his insanity, the Joker's madness takes center stage in nearly every written assessment of this clown.

Most critics place madness at the core of the character; some blame his madness on his "evil" nature, while others insist that he lacks morals because of his madness. Some have tried to psychoanalyze the Joker and even diagnoses his mental ailments, but professor of psychology Travis Langley says that the character "defies diagnosis." Langley states, "his behavior doesn't neatly fit any specific mental illness beyond his obvious psychopathy" (152). Langley goes on to assert, "we just don't know what's going on inside his head and for storytelling purposes, it's best that we don't. Knowing he had a specific mental illness may engender our sympathy" (152). Being able to effectively diagnose the Joker would serve the same function as knowing his real name (as discussed in Chapter 1); it would give a face to his perceived evil, humanizing him for

readers. The Joker -- cited as not having a conscience, empathy, or concern as to right and wrong -- could, according to Langley, be diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, but this label is inadequate as it fails to separate the uniqueness of the Joker from "many petty thieves" (152). Fictional character, Dr. Ruth Adams of Arkham Asylum, Gotham City's home for the criminally insane, says that the Joker has no personality and sees himself as both the king of chaos and the absurd. Depending on how the author perceives madness; bipolar disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, megalomania and other psychological maladies can be found among the ailments portrayed in the various Joker stories.

Portraying the Joker as both evil and insane provides a convenient and easy connection between the two. The misconception that evil and madness go hand-in-hand is not an unusual one. In fact, it is quite common based upon our collective conceptions of the mentally ill. Dr. Mary E. Camp claims in her article, *The Joker: A Dark Night for Depictions of Mental Illness*,

> it has been argued that media portrayals of mental illness are grounded in lay understandings of madness and the images of the mad men or women. This hypothesis may be unfamiliar but is consistent with analysis of mass media depictions of persons with mental illness, most of which emphasize crime and violence, unpredictability, and social incompetence. (145)

This lay understanding of madness, much like our preconceived notion of those with physical disabilities and deformities presented by Jack Fennell in the previous chapter, creates an expectation within the mind of the reader that the mentally ill are violent, unpredictable and antisocial. The result of this preconceived notion carries our expectations of fictional characters that we know are mad over into the real world to be placed upon those that we perceive to be mad or mentally ill. Transference in this manner tends to affect the way people react to and treat those with mental deficiencies, causing some to shy away from the mentally ill out of fear that they may be met with unpredictable violence.

Camp's portrayal of a mass-media-influenced view of mental illness is simply a modern incarnation associated with Western Civilization that has changed very little since the 15th century. In other cultures and historical time periods, madness was viewed in a different light. The mad have been regarded in some societies as one possessed by malicious spirits or demons, other societies facing different circumstances viewed those afflicted with mental illness as wise speakers of truth or conduits for the gods to be revered. Both madness and depression were once linked to the continuous cold and humidity of a Northern maritime climate. It was believed that water would seep into everything, including the mind, as "the manifestation in man of an obscure and aquatic element, a dark disorder, a moving chaos, the seed and death of all things, which opposes the mind's luminous and adult stability" (Foucault 13). This water-borne malady was not necessarily evil, but it was a dark force to be feared that could both disable and kill. Societal influence of the mad can be found dating back to early writings of the Greeks, but as prevalent as madness has been throughout the history of Western Civilization, it was not until the 15th century that madness erupted as a theme in iconography and literature.

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To better understand the character of the Joker, we should first have a more thorough grasp on the cultural and literary viewpoint of madness that influences the way the character is presented by writers and interpreted by readers. For a deeper understanding to emerge, it must first be understood that the modern view of the mentally ill can be traced back to events and perceptions of the 15th century. Michel Foucault's work in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* provides an excellent map to the roots of our modern way of thinking in regards to the insane. With a clearer idea of our past perceptions, various aspects of the Joker will begin to make more sense.

As Europe began to emerge from the Middle Ages, madness and the mad were spotlighted in society as a symbol of unrest looming on the future horizon. Michel Foucault suggests that it was the ambiguous nature of the mad that elevated them in cultural status. With little regard as to who was affected, madness mocked and ridiculed both society and the unreason of the world. As we will see later in this chapter, the Joker repeatedly ridicules and mocks modern society as a world gone mad with the only defense against the overwhelming unreason being madness itself.

By the end of the Middle Ages there was a large bulk of literature and moralistic fables that replaced failure to adhere to Christian virtues with madness as the source of vices and delinquency. Madness as a cause became the en vogue method of criticism and the madman gradually gained literary importance. It is within this tradition of madness as social commentator that we find the Joker playing the role of a didactic character. From Alan Moore to Frank Miller, many storytellers have employed the Joker to relate commentary to the reader that both criticizes and explains various aspects of our society through the eyes of a madman. Foucault states that, as the end of the Middle Ages approached, the madman no longer played the ridiculous role of the fool in farces, but rather "he stands center stage as the guardian of truth" (14). In these tales, the madman acts as the incorruptible deceiver of deceivers, criticizing the folly and sins of the story's other participants. Truth and reason are found by flawed characters in the words of the flawless fool by his uttering of unreason.

From the 15th century forward, madness or, as Foucault refers to it, "folly" was attributed to being the root cause of many things. Madness was accredited as that which influenced groups of men to embark on journeys across the sea and it was madness that bound them together ensuring their survival. Madness acted as the catalyst for the rise and fall of kingdoms. It was

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also the sole source that compelled love. Madness became entwined with academic dialectics and discussions, not only causing arguments, but arguing against itself. It was both truth and reason without being either and opposing both. Ultimately, it found itself a seat at the center of humanist texts as well as artistic movements of the time.

As we have stated in the second chapter, the Joker's physical appearance can be associated with that of death and the dying. While the coupling of physical bearing and a person's mental state might not be surprising, the idea that death and madness go together easily may seem like a strange notion to some. This, however, is another feature of the character that harkens back to the roots of our modern views of insanity. Previous to the rise of madness, the theme of death prevailed in the minds of Europeans up until the latter half of the 15th century. The fleshless threat of pestilence and war signaling the end of times was replaced by the mockery of madness in the last years of the 15th century when

> madness replaces death and its solemnity. From the discovery of that necessity which inevitably reduces man to nothing, we have shifted to the scornful contemplation of that nothing which is existence itself. Fear in the face of the absolute limit of death turns inward in a continuous irony; man disarms it in advance, making it an object of derision by giving it an everyday, tamed form, by constantly renewing it in the spectacle of life, by scattering it throughout the vices, the difficulties, and the absurdities of all men. (15-16)

The all-consuming notion of death and its finality that had previously meant everything to the existence of Europeans was reduced to nothing when faced with madness. This was not, however, a break from the theme of death, but rather a twisting and reimagining of it into a new form. The new incarnation still exhibited the anxiety of death's final nothingness, but the form the nothing took was internal and continuous. Death meant an end to the individual's existence, while madness meant that the individual continued to exist in a form of living death. No matter what its form, madness was as indiscriminate as death and just as final. This theme of living

death can be found in the symbolic, if not actual, death of the comedian in *The Killing Joke* who emerges from the chemical pool reborn as the Joker whose continued existence as a death-dealing clown is highlighted through his madness.

With the removal of death as a social anxiety, madness was allowed to replace it by becoming the presence of death while simultaneously representing its absence. The indiscriminate nature of madness condemning one to a life without reason indicated that people were no longer a valuable prize for death to claim. When the Joker first debuts in Gotham City, according to the graphic novel *The Man Who Laughs*, he replaces any social anxiety that the citizens might have by killing both the wealthy and the homeless. With their lives seemingly meaningless to the living-dead clown, who now represents a new fear by coupling madness with murder, the citizens of Gotham are forced to accept the idea that everyone has become potential prey with no singular individual bearing more value than any other.

Like the Joker, death in the 15th century was considered to be unflinchingly indiscriminate and when the metaphorical mask of death was removed, the same smiling face of the skeleton was discovered in every case. However, according to Foucault, "when the madmen laughs, he already laughs with the laugh of death; the lunatic, anticipating the macabre, has disarmed it" (16). No longer was the threat of death to be feared. It was the menace of imminent madness that must be denounced, for the mad were dead already in their own right. In the event that madness be allowed to become a universal truth, it would be virtually one and the same as death.

The Joker is well known for holding the entire city hostage with not-so-veiled threats that he will unleash death, madness, or both upon the citizenry with his Joker Venom and henchmen dressed as clowns. These actions by the Joker create city-wide fear of spreading madness and

death which in turn prompts the need for a hero such as Batman to combat and denounce the ever-present threat of the Joker to abate these anxieties.

Fear of madness was so consuming in the 15th century that the fear of death was internalized to reflect, retrospectively, that humanity had experienced a kind of madness in itself for blindly allowing madness to grow unchecked as a secret and silent indicator that the end of times and the world's final catastrophe was near at hand. Losing one's mind was equated to death because it marked the end of that individual's ability to properly function as a member of society.

The anxiety-inducing association between madness and death is the equivalent of the anxiety invoked by the Joker's grim visage and the ways in which he resembles the dead and dying due to his deformities discussed in the previous chapter. The effect of his appearance is further magnified by the fact that, in addition to the physical traits he shares with the dying, he is the willing avatar of the anxiety-inducing association between death and madness.

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The Joker, like his mad predecessors, is seen as one of the greatest problems of his city. His madness and social deviancy not only threatens society's status quo, but the lives of every citizen. His particular brand of madness encompasses the majority of Foucault's depiction of madness in the 15th through 17th centuries. His madness takes the form of the morally bankrupt sinner, the creator of scandal, the herald of unreason, and the unbridled fury of the bestial predator. As such, he and other members of Batman's rogues gallery often find themselves in Gotham City's Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane.

There are many literary instances in which a concept, institution, or locale is considered to be another character in the story that influences and alters the other characters. While Gotham

City can be described as such a character, Arkham Asylum is in many ways an additional antagonist. This institution of mental health treatment is the kingdom of the Joker, it is his playground, his ancestor, and his offspring. The Gotham City asylum has a sordid history of not only treating, but creating the mentally ill with the asylum's founder being marked among its victims. Many Batman stories, especially those that involve the Joker, either begin or end within the walls of the asylum. Once hailed as the king of Arkham Asylum, the Joker is intimately tied to this institution, it is therefore important that we understand the representation of the asylum as a character if we are to completely understand who or what the Joker is. If madness was a form of death that dislodged individuals from their previous role in society, institutionalizing the mad in the asylum removed them even further.

The 17th century saw the creation of houses of confinement for the mad from the institutions that had previously been used by the state to house and treat leprosy throughout Europe. Lunatics were placed in these former lazar houses that had been repurposed to care for this newly perceived manifestation of death. The mad were given a home alongside other social deviants such as the poor, the unemployed, and criminals. By the middle of the 17th century, society inherently associated madness with the socially unwanted.

Those mad nonhuman human creatures housed in the houses of confinement as detailed by Foucault were not simply the insane; they were the alienated, the extravagant, and the demented. Confinement was not only used as a means of removing potential threats from society, it was also used to control and avoid scandal. Heretics and sodomites could be held indefinitely alongside anyone who displayed deviant behavior that could potentially bring scandal and dishonor to a family's name. When these behaviors are equated as antisocial and coupled with actual madness, the poor, and the slothful; mental illness takes on a new mantle that

encompasses an even greater portion of the population. Foucault says that this is a decisive event in the history of unreason. It is the "moment when madness was perceived on the social horizon of poverty, of incapacity for work, of inability to integrate with the group; the moment when madness began to rank among the problems of the city" (64). As not only a social problem, but a civic one, it was determined that the mad should be removed from the world that encourages their continued moral trespasses due to their weakness. They should be placed within a space of solitude where their only companions are their wardens who will act as their righteous protectors.

In graphic novels, such as *The Killing Joke*, the asylum is portrayed in the same light that Foucault uses when discussing the Lazar houses and houses of confinement. It is supposedly intended to function as a place of incarceration that removes the mentally unstable from society and therefore protecting the city's civil order and liberties of the citizenry. In his analysis of the function of madness in *The Killing Joke*, Deneb Valereto from Leiden University states that "Arkham Asylum would most likely figure as an institution where mental illness and crime have already been fused. As an asylum for the criminally insane, Arkham suggests that the subject's crimes cannot be disassociated from his mental condition" (74). This assessment of the supposedly modern asylum falls in line with the 15th century perception that associated the mad with criminals and other socially undesirables.

The union between criminals and the mad begins in the early 17th century when the existing establishments were required by mandate of the king to take in all the poor who appeared at their doorstep, regardless of sex or age and with no concern as to whether they were able bodied or invalid, mad or otherwise. By royal decree, these establishments were to house and feed those who were sent by either the authority of the court or king and those who freely

presented themselves. From their inception, these institutions were never intended to serve as

medical centers, but rather a pseudo-prison to remove social undesirables from the streets and

contain them until such a time that the facility director, who held nearly absolute power over all

matters that occurred upon the grounds, decided what should be done with the inmate.

In the second half of the 17th century, these houses of confinement transitioned from

being places of care and welfare into houses of correction and workhouses. The inspiration for

this turn comes from the question of the source of the disorders. What causes poverty,

criminality, and madness? The answer, for the time, was idleness. Labor in the workhouses was

intended to combat idleness as a means of rehabilitation for the inmates. Without idleness as a

source, the disorders of the unfortunates could be cured while assisting in the maintenance of the

workhouse facilities. It was believed that

> if it is true that labor is not inscribed among the laws of nature, it is enveloped in
> the order of the fallen world. This is why idleness is rebellion – the worst form of
> all, in a sense: it waits for nature to be generous as in the innocence of Eden, and
> seeks to constrain a goodness to which man cannot lay claim since Adam.
> (Foucault 56)

Labor became the ethical treatment for idle rebellion and houses of confinement took on the

moral obligation of rehabilitating those who through the act of rebellion have not only fallen

from society, but from the grace of God.

The perceived nonproductive nature of the mad immediately allowed them to fall under

the definition of idle, and therefore rebellious. Foucault asserts that during the Renaissance,

> for the first time, madness was perceived through a condemnation of idleness and
> in a social immanence guaranteed by the community of labor. This community
> acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into
> another world, all forms of social uselessness. (58)

Society witnessed the revival of old excommunication rites and associated them with the ethics

and morality that were perceived to be found in production and commerce. The mad became the

most despised of the idle "by their inability to work and to follow the rhythms of collective life" (Foucault 58). By the 19th century, they would completely inherit the workhouses and lands that were previously intended to imprison vagabonds and the jobless. Concerning this outlook, Foucault states,

> if there is, in classical madness, something which refers elsewhere, and to other things, it is no longer because the madman comes from the world of the irrational and bears its stigmata; rather, is because he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic. (58)

The power to segregate the mad from society allowed them to be viewed ethically almost as otherworldly. These individuals were not completely human, but they were also not necessarily transcendent of the species. They were alien to a society that could only perceive them as lesser due to their imposed ethical limitations. The madman's otherworldly alien nature that Foucault addresses can be found to be exhibited by the Joker. Despite their lengthy ongoing relationship, Batman has stated on several occasions that he does not understand the Joker. As a representation of order and rational thought Batman finds it impossible to understand a man who embodies the world of the irrational and who continuously redefines and redesigns himself and his position both inside and out of the social structure.

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In the real world, our modern concept of asylums became a reality in the 18th century when, according to Foucault, "the unreason that had been relegated to the distance of confinement reappeared, fraught with new dangers and as if endowed with a new power of interrogation" (200). Society had taken notice of the disheveled and torn rags that helped to signify madness and began to ask questions. The madman had once again become a social

individual and for the first time was engaged in active dialogue. By the end of the 18th century concern for the welfare of the mad had once again devolved to a state of fear and anxiety.

The fear was not simply an anxiety towards the madness found in the insane, it was a fear of confinement as well. The institutions that were meant to safeguard society against the evil that was madness had evolved into dread-inspiring locations that were considered the birthplaces of evil. As evil's spawning ground, these locales presented the threat that madness' evil may spread by itself as a plague throughout the city. Images of rot and decay became associated with madness and insanity took on the guise of death that was previously reserved for lepers centuries before. It was believed that the evil of these places would ferment in confinement, the air would then become thick with the taint of putrefying madness before seeping out into neighborhoods to infect more people. Similar to the ideas of transcorporality related to the Joker using his serum to infect others and spread the toxicity of his chemical taint among the masses resulting in a physical transformation of his victim's bodies into a deadly reflection of himself that was discussed in the previous chapter. The Joker as infectious agent of insanity, as well as the concept of madness itself being infectious within the walls of the asylum, has been explored several times by various authors over the years. The Joker is credited with driving Harvey Dent insane, which in turn causes the former District Attorney to become the villain Two-Face. In Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, the Joker attempts to drive Commissioner Gordon to the point of madness by simultaneously traumatizing him physically, mentally, and emotionally. While in Arkham Asylum, he seduces Dr. Harleen Quinzel by playing on her insecurities and acting as her therapist, ultimately causing a psychotic break in the interning psychiatrist who then becomes the costumed villain Harley Quinn. Most recently, some of the gangs of Gotham City have adopted

clown costumes to commit crimes and spread chaos in honor of the Joker while being led by

Merrymaker, another victim of the Joker's ability to spread his madness.

The origin of Merrymaker appears in the graphic novel, *The Joker: Death of the Family*

and ties back into the origin of Harley Quinn, who as it turns out is not the only doctor that the

Joker has driven mad. The first chapter has a flashback scene where the Joker is laughing, bound

in a straitjacket and chained to a chair in a padded room while doctors in lab coats surround him.

This panel invokes images of the past when it was considered an acceptable treatment to chain

madmen to the wall (as discussed earlier). The caption states, "ten minutes alone with the Joker

is enough to give most people nightmares for life" (Layman 45). The following panel shows the

doctors fleeing in a panic while the Joker grins menacingly. The caption boxes state that "before

it was over, one member of the evaluation team had wet his pants. Another had fainted, and still

another was throwing up." This implies that not only is the Joker mad, but that he is toxically so.

This example of the Joker's toxicity is how Dr. Byron Meredith begins relating of the tale of how

he became the Merrymaker. After being captured by Batman, Dr. Meredith relates his tale to

another psychiatrist as a part of his evaluation to determine whether he should be sent to Arkham

Asylum or Blackgate Penitentiary. Dr. Meredith claims that his meeting with the Joker marked

the end of his career at Arkham, resigning the next day. He goes on to say that he understood the

influence of the Joker and that he inspires fear in rational humans, but that he "simply inspires"

those who are less mentally stable.

Without directly stating it, Dr. Meredith implies that the Joker has the capacity to both

actively and passively spread his madness. He voices the opinion that "any time Joker would

resurface I'd get more business than I could handle" (Layman 48). Describing his patients as

rejects, losers, and alienated, Dr. Meredith says that "it" always starts in the same manner, his

patients begin obsessing over the Joker by collecting news clippings or "filling notebooks full of Joker-inspired art" before escalating (Layman 48). At the end of their session, the psychiatrist evaluating Dr. Meredith refers to him as a sociopath and stamps the case file with the word "insane" in bold red letters. As Dr. Meredith is being dragged away screaming, the psychiatrist begins scribbling his own Joker-inspired art on his note pad indicating that the madness has taken root once again. This slow-moving viral transmission of madness among those who come in contact with it not only illustrates the 18th century belief that it could spread through the air, but in the case of the Joker, is another example of how "the same chemical substance may poison the workers who produce it, the neighborhood in which it was produced, and the web of plants and animals who end up consuming it" (Alaimo 18). Equating madness and toxic bodies in this manner seems an appropriate analogy in light of the fact that the Joker's madness manifested as a result of the chemical bath that physically transformed him.

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To coincide with the presumed viral transmission of madness was the belief that it was the natural state of certain individuals such as sinners. As a part of their natural condition, the mad were held to be at fault for their own idleness as an act of rebellion against God and society. It was considered that this rebellious behavior by the mad resulted in them being irrational. Their irrationality therefore weakened the moral fiber of society itself. To that end they were seen as a threat to society, which, in turn, marked them as evil. Madness was in some ways considered an invasive force that seemed to grow in numbers daily. However, unlike the Hebrew definition of evil in which the threat presents an opportunity, these mad individuals were not seen as potential to strengthen their native society through the disruption of its status quo, but rather as an

opportunity to prove the strength and superiority of that society's ideals through their attempted rehabilitation.

Foucault states that "in the shadows of the bourgeois city is born this strange republic of the good which is imposed by force on all those suspected of belonging to evil" (61). This right to punish the morally corrupt in order to preserve society's morality validated confinement, forced labor, and even abuse. The idea that the mad would act on their own accord to defy the morals of society helped to demonize them, further removing them from the human condition and placing them in the realm of the creature. While several varying incarnations of the Joker represent the various guests confined within lazar houses, both the mad and the social deviants, he is far from the 17th century concept of the mad being idle.

This reported rebellious behavior against society that was, in the 17th century, linked to the mad being irrational can be found in assessments such as those presented by Ash Cocksworth when he relates his opinion that the Joker is little more than chaos and evil. Assessments such as these discount the Joker as lacking the ability to control his own actions due to his madness. In those cases, he is at fault for actions that he is unable to resist committing. Reducing the Joker in this manner deprives him of power and marks him as morally bankrupt in the 17th century model although with no hope for redemption. This in turn grants the right to punish and abuse to those who would stand in defense of society's status quo, such as Batman, who partially realizes that he can never truly defeat the Joker.

Whereas some may claim that the Joker is beyond redemption as the embodiment of chaos and evil, those of the 17th century believed otherwise. By excommunicating the mad from society and placing them within a workhouse for their rehabilitation, rather than casting them out into the wild, placed these individuals somewhere between human and the inhuman. These mad

men and women remained a burden to their society without holding any sort of placement with in that society. While they were not considered completely human, they were not entirely regarded as animals either. The madman's shift from human ambiguity into the realm of the animal would come later. Prior to the 17th century, it was believed that the best way to deal with evil in all of its forms was to bring it into the light and expose it. After the 17th century began, confinement of the mad became the rule of thumb and their exposure to the populace was considered the best means of combating the spread of madness.

The insane were treated as an attraction to be put on display, the continuation of a custom dating back to the Middle Ages. Windows where installed in asylums to permit passersby to observe the actions of the insane. This tradition of displaying the mad as a public attraction was continued into the early 19th century in the hospital of Bethlehem where the lunatics could be observed as a curiosity every Sunday for a penny. People would enthusiastically pay to see the exhibition of the mad presented in a sideshow like atmosphere. Foucault makes the claim that "certain attendants were well known for their ability to make the mad perform dances and acrobatics, with a few flicks of the whip. The only extenuation to be found at the end of the eighteenth century was that the mad were allowed to exhibit the mad" (68-69). Madness displayed madness in public spectacle for the delight of everyone willing to pay for the pleasure of witnessing the event. For centuries, the mad remained a thing of spectacle, viewed by the populace as monsters, "that is, etymologically, beings or things to be shown" (Foucault 70). Diminished and removed to a safe distance, the mad were placed behind bars under the watchful and reason bearing eyes of the remainder of society. Foucault goes on to state, "madness had become a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself, but an animal with strange mechanisms, a beastiality from which man had long since then suppressed" (70). Once the mad

were transitioned from sinners to beasts in the public eye, it was easy to further justify violence against them in the name of moral correction and control.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault cites an example of the treatment of a mad man reputed to be dangerous in the Bethlehem hospital. He says of the man, "he was attached by a long chain that ran over the wall and thus permitted the attendant to lead him about, to keep him on a leash, so to speak, from the outside; around his neck had been placed an iron ring, which was attached by a short chain to another ring; this latter slid the length of a vertical bar" (72). The report later reveals that another lived in a similar fashion for twelve years. Violent and demeaning procedures such as this, remind us that when the mad are perceived as creatures, they fall outside of the law and the social contract based on their imposed creatureliness in a similar manner to the way physical abnormalities resulted in creaturely treatment as shown in chapter 2.

To illustrate how the myth of humanism relates to speciesism, Neil Badmington quotes Cary Wolfe as saying,

> as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species – or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference. (378)

This was extended to the social othering of the insane. There was no longer a desire to correct, punish, or rehabilitate the mentally ill, rather those in charge of the inmates sought to control them in the fashion of animals. "Madness borrowed its face from the mask of the beast," says Foucault. "[They] were no longer men whose minds had wandered, but beasts preyed upon by natural frenzy" (72). This case in which the insane mind is equated with that of the animal is similar to the ideas of Sherryl Vint concerning the body as the central governing agent and our continuity between animals and humans as it relates to the social contract discussed in the

previous chapter. When violence is enacted upon one in such a state of nature, it remains unquestioned as the use of force serves in the establishment of legitimacy of the sane and rational over those that were mad. Taming the mad in such a fashion not only proved the imagined superiority of the rational mind, but reinforced the concept that the mind of the mad was in a natural bestial state.

When describing the enemies of Batman in relation to madness, Steve Brie states, "his enemies can be seen to be symbiotic, the characters operating within a Saussurean binary axis; without the villains Batman would not exist and vice versa. While in terms of psychological representation the Riddler, Two-Face and the Penguin are interesting characters, the Joker is, and always has been, Batman's *bête noire*" (206). The term essentially means anathema, yet when broken down into its roots it translates as the dark beast. By choosing to use this term, Brie is reinforcing the equation between madness and animality which in turn justifies Batman's violent methods of dealing with his foes during their apprehension in a 17th Century manner.

The animality that accompanied madness did, however, have a positive aspect to it, according to Foucault. The fact that madmen were not treated the same as humans, but rather with nonhuman indifference abolished old fears that attributed the perceived animalistic nature of the insane as a supernatural occurrence, infernal possession, or the presence of the impossibly fantastic. Foucault claims that "the animal in man no longer has any value as the sign of a Beyond; it has become his madness, without relation to anything but itself: his madness in the state of nature." (74). Madness when perceived as a natural state of the human condition serves the post human function of decentering the individual in relation to other nonhuman animals while reifying humanist ideas of the superiority of the non-mad human animal over their insane

counterparts. The result of this is that it both elevates and diminishes the mad by making them simultaneously post human and transhuman.

Equating the mad with animality breached an early rendition of transhumanist thought. During the classical period, it was taken as fact that the mad were not suffering from an ailment. Instead, their base animality served to protect the mad from "whatever might be fragile, precarious, or sickly in man. The animal solidity of madness, and that density it borrows from the blind world of beasts, inured the madman to hunger, heat, cold, pain" (Foucault 74). It was a commonly held belief that the mad bore an almost superhuman ability to withstand the elements, much like their animal counterparts. It was noted that they were observed on multiple occasions enduring extreme conditions while naked as if the madness itself had afforded the mad the same perceived invulnerabilities that nature granted animals as a reward for returning to a more natural state. Due to this perceived link with animality, madness was even further removed from the field of medicine and methods of correction. The perceived animality of madness was no longer regarded as an aspect of the natural world, rather it was seen as evil in the most extreme form. It was the fear of a silent predator waiting to release its bestial violence and rage. The mad human animal when unleashed from their chains, it was believed could only be cowed into submission through discipline and brutalization.

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Mass media depictions of the mad as animalistic, toxic, or infectious "are grounded in lay understandings of madness and images of the mad man or woman," according to psychiatrist Mary E. Camp (145). Denab Valereto addresses this type of reification of madness as it is portrayed in the comics when he says,

> the fact that newspapers register and communicate the events of Gotham City only enhances the channels of codification of the Joker's madness, since they

attest to the Joker's condition as 'maniac' and work to maintain the continuity between institutional knowledge, power over his condition and public opinion. (75)

The continued maintenance of these mass media portrayals of the mad reinforces an emphasis on criminality, violence, and unpredictability. This manner of depicting madness tends to remove human aspects of the mad and results in a form of post-human othering that creates intertextual echoes to previous portrayals of madness, according to Camp. Actor Heath Ledger described the Joker as a "psychopathic, mass murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy," while the former president and publisher of DC comics, Paul Levitz said, "I keep coming back to the way he physically incarnates madness" (Camp 145). The intertextual image and perception of madness is a social convention, according to Sander L. Gilman of Emory University, who says that "these images are interchangeable, each reifying the other. Mental illness is real because it fulfills our expectations of the image of madness" (441). He is not, however, claiming that mental illness does not exist, only that madness and mass media depictions of madness form a hermeneutic circle that continuously reinforces our common perception of what it is to be mad. This creates a vast array of stereotypes that unifies the various psychological differences into a singular category that meets the public's common perception. As a result, characters like the Joker are said to be mad, psychotic, or given a label such as sociopath as if these terms are simultaneously equal and interchangeable.

Like the public's perception of the mad, Batman has been noted on several occasions to not understand the Joker. This lack of understanding allows Batman, and others in his comic book reality, to perpetuate the established stereotype of the madman that is publicly perceived within the Joker. As a result, the Joker is repeatedly placed within the confines of Arkham Asylum despite his claims that he is not insane.

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But is the criminal clown actually mad? Most would say yes. However, it is possible that

with his own admission of sanity, the Joker is either grossly misunderstood by law-enforcement

and criminal psychiatrists in his world or that he is perpetrating a fraud known as malingering.

Psychologist Bradley Daniels states that

> malingering is defined by the American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition text revision* as the 'intentional production of false or greatly exaggerated symptoms for the purpose of attaining some identifiable external reward.' In other words, mental illness or some other deficit is faked for some sort of secondary gain." (206)

In the case of the Joker, and several other criminals who have encountered Batman, the

secondary gain would be confinement to Arkham Asylum rather than Blackgate Penitentiary.

Being sentenced to Arkham Asylum is often beneficial to the individual because many of the

employees are either corrupt or mentally ill themselves (and in some cases both). This fact makes

it easier for the inmates to escape the facility or acquire an early release. Daniels continues his

assessment of the malinger by saying: "detecting their malingering is usually as simple as

showing that these 'fakers' endorse experiencing symptoms of mental illness so bizarre, rare, or

inconsistent that even individuals with the most severe forms of psychopathology do not have

them" (206-7). The bizarre, rare, and inconsistent symptoms of mental illness exhibited by the

malingerer could certainly be applied to the Joker, who seems, on the surface, to display *all* of

the symptoms of mental illnesses despite his contrary assertions.

While the Joker's potential for being a malingerer can be argued due to his seemingly

tailor-made embodiment of the public's perception of madness, the case against him being sane is

quite strong. Enrique Arenas declares that "familiarity with psychology will not help us disclose

the one and only truth about our villains. … But it may help us provide clear formulations of

what we have already discovered and so often felt" (4). In other words, we cannot find "the one

and only truth" because there is no singular truth in any of our villains, especially the Joker. Rather, psychology can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of villainy and the potential grounds from which it stems.

For this reason, several critics and psychologists have attempted to break down and categorize the Joker's insanity using both graphic novel and filmic depictions of the clown. Steve Brie states that "the Joker can be read as an irrational, nihilistic madman, or as a victim of fate and an uncaring society" (213). Previous to this assessment, Brie claims that the Joker "exhibits extreme anti-social attitudes, appearing to inhabit an alternative world in which he is unable to distinguish right from wrong" (212). Brie then illustrates an instance from *The Killing Joke* in which the Joker describes himself as a loony before relating "his madness to what he perceives to be an absurdist world, claiming that he went crazy when he saw what a 'black, awful joke the world was'" (213). Brie's assessment is that the Joker is a delusional sociopath who suffers from antisocial personality disorder. Jamey Heit echoes this sentiment that the Joker is antisocial when he asserts that the Joker "exhibits no interest in our cultural values, be they material or moral" (176). This type of diagnosis tends to fall in line with assessments discussed in previous chapters that make the claim that the Joker is completely evil, lacking any morality.

Mary Camp's analysis of the character focuses on the filmic depiction of the clown from *The Dark Knight* when she says "there are flashes of apparently suicidal behavior…. At times he displays self-talk and perseverates, repeating 'hit me' while Batman races toward him on the Bat-pod. The Joker displays a labile, unpredictable affect often inconsistent with his circumstances (e.g., laughing when threatened with death)" (146). She continues her assessment by saying that the Joker is "unconstrained by social rules and expectations, cavalierly disregarding the consequences of his behavior, absence of fear, and destructive, animalistic

actions" (148). She concludes her analysis of the character's mental illnesses with the assessment that he is also a pyromaniac, having set fires and caused multiple explosions throughout Gotham City.

All of these estimations may be accurate in their dissection of the Joker's mental maladies, but there is much more that goes into the character of the criminally insane clown. When Bruce Wayne initially made his decision to become a vigilante, he is well known to have stated that "criminals are a superstitious, cowardly lot" (*Detective Comics* #33). This was an erroneous assumption on his behalf that all criminals are essentially the same, which his many run-ins with the Joker would ultimately disprove. Facing a brand-new type of threat to the city, Batman comments, "I never prepared for this. I planned for the killers, the muggers, the rapists. Desperate people doing desperate things. But I never imagined something like the Joker" (Brubaker 53). Arenas addresses a common assumption similar to Bruce Wayne's initial assessment of criminals when he makes the statement,

> the moment we assume a villain is acting in a certain way prompted by internal forces he or she barely understands or even is aware of - like a thirst for power or patriarchal dominance - we are practicing some kind of lay, commonsensical, psychoanalytic approach. (9)

By insisting on a singular driving force that the villain "barely understands," Batman and critics who have previously attempted to analyze the Joker are adhering to a one dimensionality of the character and discounting the fact that the Joker seems to be in full command when it comes to understanding and being aware of his actions and their causes.

However, in his examination of the criminal personality, Professor of Psychology Travis Langley makes the claim that Bruce Wayne's classification of criminals as superstitious and cowardly is not necessarily the case. Rather than being a cowardly lot, Langley makes the claim that those individuals who are predisposed to fearlessness such as extraverts and psychopaths are

more likely to take risks and participate in criminal activity. Langley describes extraversion as "the personality dimension that includes outgoing, assertive behavior and social fearlessness" (91). Extraverts experience less fear and have a higher need to stimulate themselves through their external environment in order to get a sense of gratification. He goes on to make the claim that characters such as the Joker are not only extraverts, but social extraverts. He says:

> for the Joker and Penguin, committing a crime with no audience would be pointless. They don't always understand people as well as they think they do, especially not the better part of human nature, nor do they generally care about anybody else's welfare aside from the Penguins devotion to his mother, and yet they love social gatherings and public demonstrations, habitually seeking gratification from others as is typical of extroverts. (92)

For characters such as these, the social extrovert thrives on the social gathering or social exposure. Whether it is an intimate dinner party between himself, Batman, and Batman's five sidekicks as presented in *Death of the Family*, the hijacking of a television network in order to broadcast himself throughout the greater Gotham City area as can be found in *The Man Who Laughs* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, or threatening the lives of the entire U.N. General Assembly, we see the Joker seeking the spotlight in an attempt to commit a crime or convey his message to society in a way that is intended to upset the status quo.

As Langley continues to delve into the criminal personality, he points to the potential roots of criminality by examining the hierarchy of needs illustrated by Abraham Maslow. According to Maslow's work, it is natural for us to progress through the various levels, satisfying our basic needs and working our way to self-actualization. Langley states that those who are "stuck in the lower levels fixate on their deficits even after meeting basic needs, choosing to focus on whatever they still don't have instead of appreciating what they do have so they can flourish as human beings" (93-94). He continues by saying that "criminal behavior can emerge among those who have grown frustrated over unmet needs or among those who choose to stay

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mired in a lower level" (94). When Alan Moore depicts the flashbacks that give us insight into the past of the man who existed before he became the Joker, we are presented indirectly with the various aspects of Maslow's hierarchy of needs that remain unmet or are removed from the life of the comedian. Self-esteem, confidence, family, employment, resources; these are all portions of Maslow's pyramid that are either missing or taken before the fateful encounter with Batman at the chemical plant.

The Joker's fixation on these lower levels include employment and resources and are hinted at in *The Killing Joke* when he declares "money isn't really a problem. Not these days" (6). He exhibits this same fixation when he targets Gotham City's "favorite sons" in *The Man Who Laughs* when he makes the statement, "the rich and powerful have lorded it over us little people for too damn long... Tonight it's their turn to suffer!" (53). This fixation on Maslow's hierarchy of needs can also be observed in *A Death in the Family* when the Joker poses as the Iranian ambassador to the UN. He addresses the assembled audience claiming that no one respects him and after all of the abuse and belittlement that he has suffered at the hands of the world, he is not going to take it anymore; no one will be allowed to kick him or anyone else around ever again. Here, as in *The Man Who Laughs*, the Joker presents himself as the downtrodden victim of society, one of the "little people," who have suffered at the hands of the powerful.

The Joker's obsession with satisfying basic needs in accordance with Maslow's hierarchy can stem from juvenile roots of criminality that Langley refers to as the nonsocialized offender. While there is no evidence that would indicate the Joker was ever a juvenile delinquent prior to his transformation, the origin story found in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* supports the idea that the Joker is a nonsocialized offender. According to Langley, the socialized offender has picked

up his or her criminal behaviors from the environment around them. An example of this might be the child of a gang member who grows up to join the same gang. It is true that prior to his transformation, the Joker did traffic with known criminals, however his exposure to them was less than a few days, not long enough to have been adversely influenced in the ways of the underworld. Conversely, nonsocialized offenders do not learn their criminal behaviors from others, but invent them independently in response to "a long series of frustrations over unmet needs" (Langley 97). He goes on to say that the nonsocialized criminal is more likely to be a much more frightening individual than the socialized criminal. The pre-transformation Joker who constantly struggled with poverty and the security of his family once transformed by his chemical bath begins to experiment on the homeless before making his debut in Gotham city's criminal environment as something that has never been seen before (Brubaker 8-9,12). The Joker's response to his new situation could be an attempt at what is known as "adaptive delinquency" which Langley says is an adjustment to the multitude of disadvantages that stem from living in poverty. This, however, is more of a defense mechanism or survival technique that is developed by inner-city children and is not classified as a mental illness.

Words like extravert, nonsocialized offender, and adaptive delinquency, however accurate they may be in describing portions of the Joker, cannot be used to fully and accurately describe the individual that is often referred to as insane. Labels such a psychopath and sociopath; madman and crazy have often been used by critics to define the Joker. Attempts at psychologizing are sometimes truncated in favor of saying that the Joker is beyond madness or that he is simply insane. The latter assessment of being "simply insane" is a diminishing catch all that allows the Joker's mental state to be dismissed in order to focus on how evil he is perceived to be and his diminished morality. Part of the problem is that words such as these lack clear

understanding among the general populace. The result of this is a generic association between these words that leads to the assumption that they all mean the same thing. However, psychotic is not the same as psychopathic.

Using the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental* Disorders (or DSM), Travis Langley defines the word psychotic as individuals that "have lost touch with the real world as indicated by gross reality distortions, notably hallucinations and delusions" (101). Despite the Joker's documented "self-talk," there are no indications in print or film that he suffers from either visual or auditory hallucinations or any other notable break from reality. Rather, his cold and calculating reasoning often indicates that he has a firm grasp on reality that is simply deviant from the norm established by society. When discussing the psychopath, Langley claims that "the world's most dangerous people tend to be coldly sane. They may think and feel differently from most people, but they know enough of what's really going on to use it against others" (101). Based on this idea that a psychopath is sane with aberrant thought, the Joker may indeed be categorized as a psychopath rather than psychotic, which in turn lends credibility to the previous argument that he may not be crazy after all.

In all likelihood, the Joker is an extroverted psychopath, but previous assessments have made the claim that he is "antisocial" as well. The term antisocial does not mean that the individual is unsociable, instead it means that they are "antithetical to social norms, in opposition to society's rules and expectations for how civilized people act" (Langley 102). Behavior that runs contrary to and potentially threatens the status quo was discussed in the first chapter as an aspect of what it is to be evil. Here we revisit the idea from a psychological point of view. Sorcha Ni Fhlainn supports the assessment of the Joker being an antisocial when she says that, "for the Joker, the system – the social contract, order, law, morals, and plans (personal and

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national) – must be reduced to failure, to reveal the futility that lies at the core of order" (86).

Many of Batman's foes can be categorized as antisocial. An antisocial individual can be introverted or extroverted, sociable or unsociable. These personality traits are wholly separate from the antisocial disorder.

In fact, some with antisocial disorder prove to be very charming and many of them use their charm to manipulate others. The Joker, for example, who repeatedly proves to be antisocial through his attempts to disrupt the social order also tends to be a very outgoing and charming individual. The most often documented instance of the Joker using his charm to manipulate others is the case in which he found his way into the heart of his psychiatrist Harley Quinn before driving her mad and turning her into his villainous sidekick. This, however, is not the only instance in which the clown's charm has swayed others. In his early days the Clown Prince of crime would use buffoonery to convince his victims that the crime committed against them was nothing more than a good old-fashioned prank.

Antisocial personality disorder is often confused with the term sociopath, which tends to be used interchangeably with the word psychopath. However, sociopath is intended as a completely different category of mental illness altogether. The sociopath was originally designated as an entire category of mental illness, according to the DSM, that included people who were "'ill primarily in terms of society and of conformity with the prevailing cultural milieu,' a category that included antisocial reaction, dyssocial reaction, addiction, and sexual deviation" (Langley 102). The modern view of the sociopath, according to Langley (again citing the DSM), presents the individual as the "habitual criminal offender who has not been properly socialized" (102). These individuals differ from psychopaths in that they are considered a product of their environment in the same vein as the socialized criminal or the adaptive

delinquent. The behavior of the sociopath is deeply ingrained, but is not as deeply ingrained as

that of the psychopath. As a result, the sociopath bears the potential to be "cured" through

therapy and socialization. While an argument could be made that the Joker is a sociopathic

product of his environment based on his origin presented in *The Killing Joke*, his repeated

confinement to Arkham Asylum and the many failed attempts at his rehabilitation point to a

more deeply ingrained set of behaviors that are associated with the psychopath.

In psychology, the relationship between the terms antisocial personality disorder,

sociopath, and psychopath becomes a little clearer when it is understood that the former two are

considered official clinical diagnoses in the DSM, while psychopathy is not. Yet the term

psychopath is employed as a construct by both therapists and criminologists attempting to

understand the evil in the nature of the villain. In the words of Langley

> psychopathy places greater emphasis on internal qualities, specific emotional and
> interpersonal qualities like grandiose self-concept, lack of empathy, and rejection
> of responsibility for one's own behavior. Psychopathy's essential quality is lack of
> conscience: they should know the difference between right and wrong, but at
> heart they don't understand it and they don't care. (104)

The psychopath's lack of empathy, inflated ego and rejection of responsibility does not however

automatically imply that they are or ever will be a criminal.

While criminality is not a defining component of the psychopath, Hervey Cleckley,

author of *The Mask of Sanity*, identified numerous traits associated with psychopathy by

interviewing psychopaths in prison. These common traits include:

> superficial charm; absence of nervousness; unreliability; untruthfulness and
> insincerity; lack of insight; lack of remorse or shame; inadequately motivated
> antisocial behavior...; poor judgment and failure to learn from experience;
> pathologic egocentricity and incapacity for love; poverty in major affective
> (emotional) reactions; interpersonal unresponsiveness; impersonal, trivial sex life;
> and failure to follow any life plan. (Langley 104)

Travis Langley states that "Batman's foes broadly demonstrate most of these qualities. Some, like the Joker, show signs of them all" (104). By the Joker demonstrating all of the common traits of the psychopath it is difficult to determine whether he is sane and malingering, sane and psychopathic, or a psychopathic madman.

Should we assume that the Joker is a psychopathic madman and not just an extroverted, antisocial psychopath, then there are several aspects to his character that bear further examination. These traits help to form a deeper understanding of the Joker as a character. They make up his personality, which is defined as "your characteristic pattern of behavior, your set of dispositions and tendencies to act and feel certain ways" (Langley 112). However, these characteristics found in the Joker run contrary to the norm and are classified by psychiatrists as personality disorders or deeply ingrained difficulties centered around who he is as a human being. These disorders tend to define the person who has them in a negative manner. In addition to his antisocial personality disorder, the Joker potentially has at least two caustic personality disorders labeled as "Cluster B" personality disorders by the DSM. Cluster B disorders display psychopathic qualities, according to Langley.

The first Cluster B disorder that can be found in the Joker is narcissistic personality disorder. This super-egotistical disorder is marked by a "lack of empathy, a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, and inflated sense of importance, and a need for admiration" (Langley 113). Examples of all of these narcissistic traits can be found throughout the graphic novels explored in this paper. While the Joker displays a lack of empathy in nearly every modern story that he appears in, the most notable example is perhaps found in *The Killing Joke*, after he shoots Barbara Gordon and attempts to exploit Commissioner Gordon's emotions to drive the man insane. The pervasive pattern of grandiosity is exemplified in everything that the Joker does.

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There is no such thing as a small endeavor for him. Everything must be overly complicated and

large in scale. Whether he is forcing kidnapped guests to celebrate his birthday or simply

attempting to gain the attention of Batman so that they can have a one-on-one conversation, there

is an ingrained need within him to exhibit the excessive pomp and circumstance of the spectacle.

His inflated sense of importance is displayed when he elects himself the mouthpiece for Gotham

City's poor and downtrodden. By appealing to the city's "little people," the Joker is also

showcasing his need for admiration by presenting himself as their hero and savior who is willing

to fight for them against the oppression of the city's elite. Langley quotes Halgin and

Whitbourne's assessment of the narcissist when he says that the narcissist has

> intense resentment for others whom they perceive as more successful, beautiful,
> or brilliant. They are preoccupied with and driven to achieve their own goals and
> think nothing of exploiting others to do so. Despite their show of grand self-
> importance, they are often troubled by self-doubt. Relationships with others,
> whether social, occupational, or romantic, are often distorted by the perception of
> others as tools for self-gratification. (113)

In addition to exploiting the emotions of Commissioner Gordon in *The Killing Joke* in order to

deliver his "one bad day" speech to Batman, these narcissistic traits can be found in the graphic

novel *The Joker: Death of the Family*.

The graphic novel *Death of the Family* explores the personal relationship between the

Joker and Batman. In it, the Joker attacks those who are closest to Batman whom he perceives as

a threat to the relationship between the hero and the villain. He begins by pursuing Catwoman,

whom he assumes is in love with Batman. In their final confrontation, the Joker, now wearing his

own face as a mask, has Catwoman cornered on a rooftop. The Joker suggests that Catwoman

could marry Batman. He follows this with,

> but of course, he'd start lying around too much, eating pizza, watching TV, all that
> snuggling at night. He'd become a soft blob. What if you did it to rip his heart out!

Just think of what a great man he'd be, an intense fighting machine, fueled by having no more heart? (Snyder 91)

Catwoman responds by accusing the Joker of loving Batman, to which he replies, "Of course. Isn't that obvious" (Synder 92). This is the first clue in the graphic novel that the Joker is jealous of the perceived relationship Batman has with other costumed personas and that he is feeling nostalgic for his past relationship with Batman before others became involved. Going after Catwoman in the hope that she can emotionally hurt Batman shows that he is willing to exploit others to return Batman to a former state in which he was a violent vigilante, a state before he became a family man in the Joker's estimation. When Catwoman refuses to be a part of the Joker's game, he moves on to other prey.

One by one, the Joker attacks and captures each of Batman's sidekicks, starting with Batgirl. Before capturing Batgirl, the Joker reveals his narcissistic self-importance when he tells her "if you truly look, Batgirl, you'll see I'm the only man in the world capable of showing love" (Synder 155). This statement illustrates the Joker's self- inflated ego before leading into a declaration of resentment aimed at the sidekick who represent everything that he is not; young, beautiful, and in a successful familial relationship with Batman. The Joker clearly states his distaste for the sidekicks when he says of Batman "he's the king, he's the apex, the top head cheese, as it were. ... And it's people like you who weigh him down. Clutching at his cape, drowning him with your empathy and compassion" (Snyder 157). This resentment is echoed again when the Joker forces Batgirl into a mock wedding, saying that Batgirl "and the bratsss. You're just dragging him down" (Snyder 185). The Joker goes on to claim that it is due to this that he is removing all of the pawns from the chessboard in order to start anew. After capturing Batgirl, the Joker systematically captures each of the other members of the Batman family while chiding them for weakening and ultimately ruining Batman. By eliminating those whom he

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perceives as both a source of weakness for Batman and competition for his attention, the Joker is not only attempting to emotionally injure Batman, but to return him, through anger, to a greatness that might once again rival his own. In the Joker's opinion, he is the one and only Joker, the smartest criminal, and the greatest threat Gotham City has ever faced, but there is no one who can challenge him, not even Batman now that he has grown soft and caring. This is not simply about the relationship between the two or an example of employing others as a tool to achieve one's own goals, but rather the narcissistic need to be acknowledged as the best. To prove this, the Joker needs to have someone who is close to an equal that can challenge him efficiently enough to prove to the world that he is the greatest.

The narcissistic pattern of grandiosity that is found in the spectacularly dramatic schemes of the Joker could also denote a second personality disorder for the clown: histrionic personality disorder. Like narcissism, this disorder is also classified as a "Cluster B" personality disorder according to the DSM. To be histrionic is to constantly seek attention through theatrics and melodrama. "The histrionic person does whatever it takes to be the center of attention at any time" (Langley 114). Persons with this disorder will make grandiose emotional displays such as laughing excessively or inappropriately at a joke or wailing in exaggerated grief during a funeral. The attention seeking emotional reaction is readily switched by the histrionic person if the new outburst will gain them greater attention. These displays are shallow, momentary, and are often tailor-made to fit the situation. Similar to the narcissist, the histrionic person has an all-about-me outlook, but unlike the narcissist, the histrionic person experiences feelings of inadequacy and lack of self-worth.

In *The Man Who Laughs*, we see the Joker in a narcissistic moment where he has taken over a news broadcast and is giving a speech heralding his latest victory. The first two panels of

the page bear the wild eyed, grinning, green-haired Joker that everyone is familiar with, but in the third panel his face suddenly shifts to a mask of concern as he claps his hands on his cheeks, his eyes wide, thoughtfully looking upward, his brow is furrowed in angst, and his mouth is open in a dramatic "oh." This quickly returns to his well-known grin and laughter in the fourth panel (36). The Joker's melodramatic histrionics can be found again in the pages of *Death of the Family*. While he is addressing Batgirl and claiming he is the only man capable of love, in the last panel of the page his face shifts from his well-known grin into an exaggerated expression of pain and anguish before his smile returns on the following page (155). These theatrical displays of emotion, however, do not conceal a lack of confidence in the Joker, who is secure in his self-worth and almost never proves otherwise. Instead, these displays are employed to mock his victims and Batman.

His desire to mock his victims suggests that the Joker receives personal gratification through the pain and injury of others, whether physically or psychologically. He smiles while he beats the second Robin, Jason Todd, with a crowbar in the graphic novel *A Death in the Family* (87-88). He smiles again and raises a glass as a toast after shooting Barbara Gordon aka Batgirl (14) in *The Killing Joke* before laughing his way through the torment of her father. And he laughs when he sprays acid in Batman's face during their final fight in *Death of the Family* (393). Finding enjoyment in the pain of others that he himself has inflicted suggests that in addition to his other potential personality disorders, the Joker is likely to also have sadistic personality disorder. For the Joker, the pain of others is what makes life entertaining.

Sadistic pleasure, however, is not the Joker's sole motivation. Mary Camp's assessment that the Joker displays "apparently suicidal behavior" and an "unpredictable affect often inconsistent with his circumstances," such as laughter in the face of death, align with sensation-

seeking. Langley defines this as "the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences" (116). In particular, the Joker's behavior would denote him as an impulsive unsocialized sensation-seeker, someone who is willing to break laws and endanger not only themselves, but others in pursuit of thrill. The non-impulsive socialized thrill seeker, on the other hand tends to seek out legal adventures for their rush. Some sensation-seekers such as this can be meticulous and patient while formulating their plans. The Joker, for example, is well known for his complicated schemes that require multiple steps before the final thrilling pay off.

One of the most disturbing examples of this meticulous planning appears in *Death of the Family*. In a flashback to one of the many times that the Joker was in Arkham Asylum, it is revealed that he has been keeping a journal of his past endeavors as well as his future plans. As a female doctor leafs through the pages, the Joker describes the page's contents until she opens up what is according to the Joker a "really special" page. The Joker declares that this page contains a description of "what I would do if I ever met a nine-year-old girl name Sasha" (164). The doctor, whose eyes are wide with terror, discloses not only that her daughter is nine, but her name is Sasha as well. At this time the Joker narrows his eyes, leans forward and with a smile through gritted teeth he says "Now Doc, no peeking ahead" (164). He continues to inform the doctor of the journal's contents; including his plans for a future wedding. Several years and pages later, the Joker reveals this same book to Batgirl at their mock wedding that she is being forced to attend and informs her that he wrote of their wedding a long time ago. The predictive claim of the wedding indicates that, not only is the Joker patient, but the great lengths to which he will go when formulating his plans.

Regardless of how complex the Joker's plans are or who he involves in them, there is always one commonality to everything he does; his obsession with Batman. Langley defines obsessions as "persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate and that cause marked anxiety or distress" (118). Most obsessed individuals generally try to fight to suppress or ignore their obsessions when they inappropriately intrude upon their lives, but the Joker revels in his persistent obsession with Batman, it is the single constant that drives him. Langley claims that by not showing an interest in resisting his impulses, characters like the Joker and other Batman foes cannot qualify for being diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder. Adult patients with OCD tend to realize, according to Langley, "that the obsessions or compulsions are excessive or unreasonable" (118). Langley goes on to say that OCD is classified as an anxiety disorder in which the sufferer experiences distress concerning the existence of their obsessions.

While the Joker does not take discomfort in his obsession, nor does he view it as intrusive or inappropriate, he does consciously realize that his sole motivation in everything that he does is indeed Batman. Although not speaking directly to the behavior of the Joker, Arenas proposes a reason why individuals like him do the things they do in relation to a specific fixation. He states that there is a notion that an individual's belief and desire can offer a satisfactory explanation of their behavior. He cites a traditional folk-psychological approach that offers the idea of that a person does something because they believe that by doing that thing they would obtain something that they desire. Cognitive Psychologists, Arenas claims, offer the formula that "Behavior Potential is a function of the Expectancy of reaching a certain reinforcement and the value attributed by the individual to this reinforcement - reinforcement value" (12). In other words, the individual that is sure that they will gain the object that they desire by doing a certain

something is highly likely to commit that act in order to obtain their desire. In the case of the Joker, he is very strongly convinced that if he perpetuates a crime, such as a kidnapping or a mass murder, then he will gain the attention of Batman which he desires for multiple reasons including his own narcissism and the challenge that Batman presents to the Joker's own superiority.

Without a doubt, madness is the most centrally important aspect of the Joker as a character. While he may defy diagnosis (as stated by Langley), exploring the character through a psychological lens helps us gain a greater understanding of who or what he potentially is. The fact that over the past seventy-five years he has appeared in countless stories, written by multiple authors, makes the killer clown nearly impossible to pin down with each author depicting the Joker with his/her own interpretation of what it is to be mad. However, through the exploration of the history of madness in the Western World we are provided with insight into the way our modern perception of madness has come about as well as the ways these views impact our current reception of mad literary characters such as the Joker. Whether the Joker is a genius malingerer flawlessly adept at manipulating the legal system or severely mentally ill suffering from multiple derangements and maladies is an entertaining prospect to explore, but the history of madness grants us an understanding of certain cultural roots that are employed in the modern depiction of this character. By understanding the historical association between death and madness and the once held belief that madness could be spread as an airborne virus, readers gain a greater appreciation for the self-perpetuating tradition of madness as it is presented in literature and mass media. With an understanding of this tradition, readers are able to more greatly appreciate events perpetrated by the Joker such as his creation of Harley Quinn through his infectious insanity and the fear that the character instills in the people of Gotham.

Conclusion

The Joker is many things to many people, both fans and critics alike. To some, he is the epitome of evil, the ultimate villain, the amoral psychopathic clown. Others see him as a monster or a study in madness. Throughout this thesis, the Joker has been examined through these and several other lenses. The character is a richly developed one with years of material that has transformed him from a criminal mastermind clown into a multi-dimensional and frightening opponent for both Batman and Society. As a result, he is now one of pop culture's most recognizable and influential characters. DC Comics editor Mike Gold once claimed that a key aspect of the Joker's continued success over the years is the fact that he is scary, not just because he's a criminal, but because upon his debut he did with other criminals in comic books did not do: he killed. Taking the crime of murder and factoring in the Joker's ghastly appearance coupled with his seemingly unending madness makes the character truly terrifying. With every new Joker story, this unique character defies our expectations in order to subvert our ideas of what a villain is.

As a character, the Joker fulfills the role of antagonist by acting as a foil, performing acts that hinder the story's protagonist that help propel the plot forward. His actions, like those of many modern villains, are often perceived as evil by readers. By examining Greg Garrett's ideas on the nature of evil, this thesis has primarily employed a variation of the ancient Hebrew definition of both moral evil and calamity, in that evil was "anything that is unpleasant, repulsive, or distorted" (Garrett 56). In this view, evil is a natural aspect of the universe and is necessary for the betterment of society. When an "evil" event occurred, it disrupted society and in turn strengthened it. In literature, that which is evil is given the responsibility of disrupting the status quo and the established morality of the society that is being addressed. This disruption

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challenges previously established concepts of good by exposing inconsistencies and forcing a reevaluation of both good and evil, in particular, the societal flaw that allowed the evil to first come into existence. Critics Jamey Heit and Ash Cocksworth both claim that the Joker disrupts the status quo and, similar to a force of nature, he has no regards for his own actions or their consequences. Vilja Johnson theorizes that if readers had a defining motivation for the Joker's chaos, he would be less evil, a villain without an edge.

There can be no doubt that the Joker is both an antagonist and evil, but he is also the story's villain. Under Enrique Cámara Arenas' definition, a villain has to be a character who intentionally opposes the goals of the hero to achieve their own by enforcing their will upon the environment while having the ability to adapt and react to direct confrontation with the hero or other obstacles. Anna Fahraeus and Dikmen Yakah-Çamoglu address the importance of villains in literature when they say, "villainy is integral in narratives that reflect the innermost fears of human psyche" (vii). These innermost fears repeatedly come to the forefront in nearly every Joker story and all of the critical assessments of the character.

The unknown origin of the Joker is, according to Ash Cocksworth, a key aspect to the character. His multiple deceptions in reference to his origin betrays honesty and his namelesness implies that he has no humanity. These veiled aspects of the Joker represents society's fear of the unknown. Knowledge of a definitive origin or even the character's real name would serve to eliminate his perceived lack of humanity, dull his villainous edge, and remove any inspired fear by allowing readers to better understand potential motivations for his actions.

Fahraeus and Yakah-Çamoglu assert that villainy is "often a significant part of the construction of loss" (vii). Through the examination of Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, several instances of a fear of loss can be illustrated. The sepia tone flashbacks provide a possible

window into the past that allowed for the creation of the Joker. One such example is the accidental death of the comedian's wife and child, this fear of losing a loved one is mirrored when the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon and torments her father with pictures of her bleeding to death. This instance not only represents a fear of losing a loved one, but also the fear that your child or family member may be in danger and there is nothing that you can do about it. Fearing a loss of or lack of power and usefulness is another fear that can be found in the pages of *The Killing Joke* and other Joker stories, as when the comedian bemoans his unemployment and inability to provide for his family. This fear of power loss is brought to the forefront of *The Killing Joke*'s flashbacks when, after losing his family and dressed as the Red Hood, the comedian finds himself face-to-face with Batman, who stands as a threat of loss to the comedian's final resources, his health and ability to make his own decisions regarding that health.

When comic book authors employ the Joker to explore and exploit fears such as these, they allow readers an opportunity to find an aspect of the character that they can relate to. Using the Joker to illustrate fears of failure, loss, and alienation -- even fears of societal members that are more powerful, such as police and/or government officials -- provides readers with something that they can sympathize with despite the atrocities committed by the character.

In addition to providing readers with examples of fear that they can sympathize with, the Joker represents fear experienced by other characters, particularly Batman. As a mirror to Batman, he represents the fear Batman experiences towards the idea of the monster that he might potentially become. The Joker acting as Batman's mirror allows for the reader to witness the hero as good while seeing the villain as an example of evil. When the Joker addresses Batman directly, implying a perceived bond the two share and claiming that they are alike, he reminds his

opponent of his own dark potential which in turn causes Batman to strengthen his resolve to fight against the fear of his own potential.

Symbolizing a vast array of fears, the Joker is, however, not fearless. He actually fears Batman as a result of the anxiety created by the threat of further loss that he experienced when he faced Batman at the chemical plant before taking his fateful plunge. This sort of anxiety is commonly replaced by fear aimed at the object that symbolically represents that fear, according to Robbins and Moore. Rather than avoiding his fear, the Joker directly confronts that fear in an attempt to transcend it.

The idea of transcending an aspect of your personal life, whether it is fear, the human condition, or a disability, is a common trope found in superhero comics. As a super villain who gained his abilities through a chemical accident, the Joker surpasses the human condition and is an example of Donna Haraway's cyborg model -- by blurring the lines between his former human self and the chemicals alien to his system, the fusion of which has created a new hybrid entity. Under Haraway's cyborg model, the Joker has no genesis and represents both life and death, making use of the social collective consciousness to inspire the imagination towards fear of oppression and the possibility of it. The Joker negates his own genesis by refusing reality and claiming that both memory and the past produce anxiety. As an example of the super villain cyborg, the Joker becomes transhuman by transcending what it is to be human through his chemically enhanced powers.

While the Joker's powers make him more than human, his physical appearance and deformities make him less than human through a posthuman decentering. His blood red smile and bleached white skin serve to dehumanize the character into the posthuman monster that allows for readers to use the process of personal projection to further create fears contained

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within the Joker's flesh. Arenas asserts that readers combine fear and anxiety with their own subconscious and forbidden desires such as power, freedom, and independence to reproduce these fears in the monstrousness of the villain. As a result, the Joker reminds his readers of the dead and dying through his pasty skin and skeletal frame similar to that of the zombie, a kind of living death.

The inhuman aspects of the Joker are further compounded by the idea that he was created through the folly of humanity. As a creature born from chemical waste, the Joker becomes a toxic pollutant that exemplifies environmental fears. Representing the environmental concept of trans-corporeality, the Joker acts as both environmental and societal pollutant, seeking to further taint his environment through the transmission of his own poisons into, not only the biosphere, but society itself by creating a chain reaction that starts with the infection of the smallest entity and rapidly increasing in scope. The spreading taint of the Joker's toxicity and its indiscriminate nature mark the Joker as an agent of environmental illness through the creation of fears related to unchecked chemical and industrial waste. As these are allowed to seep into our water supply and air, they contribute to the infection of our ecology and biological web that we as humans are intimately tied to.

The posthuman decentering of the Joker into fear-inducing monster is continued when he is examined through the lens of madness. The fears that are created by his madness can be traced to a lay understanding of mental illness based upon the collective conception of the mentally ill that are perpetuated by mass media portrayals of the insane. These depictions of the mentally ill often emphasize a connection to "crime and violence, unpredictability and social incompetence" (Camp 145). Our modern concept of madness can be traced to the 15th century where the fear of death was replaced by the indiscriminately mocking nature of insanity. Madness was an anxiety-

producing affliction noted as being worse than death because while death was final, insanity was continuous. As a form of living death, madness became a universal truth that marked the individual's inability to continue to properly function as a member of society.

Dehumanization of the mad continued with the formation of asylums and houses of confinement where the mad were further removed from society. Internment in asylums alongside the poor and the criminal elements began the association of madness with the socially undesirable as a threat to society. The segregation of the mad allowed the rest of society to view them as alien elements that were perceived as less than human incapable of moral or ethical existence. The asylums in which the mad were housed were feared by the populace as being the birthplace of evil, a location where the disease of madness could grow to toxic levels, infect the air, and spread like a plague through the city as an environmental illness. This plague-like image of madness was associated with rot and decay and ultimately death. This fear of madness as plague is a fear that is often exploited by authors writing Joker stories providing multiple instances in which the Joker has infected others with his particular brand of madness.

The Joker as a character is the embodiment of the legacy and continued tradition of villains representing societal fears manifested through his actions, madness, and physical deformities. He is not simply a character based on fear, nor is he one who employs fear alone, instead he is the avatar of fear not only instilling it within his victims and society, but experiencing fear himself. The Joker is fear incarnate, but the fact that he suffers from some of the same fears as his victims and rivals allows readers to sympathize with him and see the darkest portions of themselves within the complex and storied character. While his appearance and madness are iconic, this sympathetic relatability to a character that should for all of his actions be considered deplorable has instead garnered him legions of fans and propelled him to

the heights of pop culture. He is the madman, the angel of death, the posthuman monster, the transhuman abomination, the toxic pollutant, the morally bankrupt, and the jovial clown. He is all these things and more. It is due to this multifaceted nature of the character that will allow his readership to grow as they continue to find aspects the Joker that they can relate to.

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