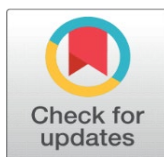


READING JOKER'S PROGRESS THROUGH TWO MOVIES FROM VILLAIN TO NECESSARY EVIL

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ABSTRACT

DC's Joker is perhaps one of the most precious piece of brand for the comic behemoth. Rarely do we see that a villain is so celebrated. A villain who is equal in stature with a superhero. Joker was created as a heartless villain and over time he changed and shall we say matured into an evil ingrained in the society, so deeply embedded, that will remain. The Joker was created upon the philosophy of pure evil, as someone who was beyond reason: crazy, deranged, out of his mind. His ostensibly senseless acts of violence and turmoil only reinforced this assessment.

The Joker historically had sported different shades. But when he appeared for the first time in 1940 in Batman comics, he was destined to be 'the ugly'. The society rejected Joker as it went against everything that was honest and ethical. The comic books till early into this millennium bore the seal of Comics Code Authority (CCA) that among other things ensured that the creators maintained their respect for society, government and parental authority thus sealing Joker's fate as the abdominal and the untouchable.

In 2011, DC dropped the CCA seal and moved on in a major shift from its initial stand on ethics in general. Now, the society, less insecure and more matured, looked for the causes. As the society took a dip into the why's and how's of things, the black and white of evil and good now got the shades of grey.

This paper asks the basic questions what is the parameter of measuring a villain and how do we separate it from victim and how has Joker transformed from just a pure villain to a rebel with a propensity for nihilism. I will try to seek the answers to these questions through a content analysis of two films-- The Dark Knight (2008) and The Joker (2019).

Keywords: Society, Ethics, Batman, Joker, Villain

1. INTRODUCTION

Codes of ethics are as old as time. Like when the nomads knew when to hunt and when to rear. Religious traditions, social cultures, moral values all have their own codes as their foundations. Be it the Eight-fold path of Buddhism or the Mosaic Decalogue, better known as the Ten Commandments, of Judaism, codes form the keystone for every civilization. Similarly, the Assyrian Civilization thrived on the Code of Babylon, more commonly called the Hammurabi Code, just as Pericles made the Athenian code the corner stone of the ancient Greek politics and culture.

In all these commands hid the secret recipe of peaceful coexistence and running the society by a definite set of rules that separated the black from white, the evil from good. But they are just not obligations and admonitions, these codes go far beyond in setting up the society in accepting and rejecting current trends of that civilization based on these norms. Thus, these codes can often be compared with

visions of excellence and statements of aspirations of great men, who wanted the society to flow with a sense of sanity in a world generally suck in the vortex of chaos. ("Ethical codes and standards," 2011, p. xx)

The codes often captured the true essence of what individuals and societies should be striving for and what they could achieve. In this sense codes, which are often mistaken as part of social restrictions, are actually part of a social and cultural expectation from a society at that point of time. ("Ethical codes and standards," 2011, p. xx)

Ethics have often been codified as a reaction and response to current circumstances and after a careful study of history and how mankind behaved to certain conditions. Therefore, it is only imperative that these ethics codes would need revisions with time as society and civilization progressed or went through a dark period so abominable that society itself needed a moral cleansing. In fact, the most influential ethics codes are arduous retorts to major disruptions resulting from wars and scandals, both social, cultural, behavioural and biological.

These events and incidents that we could call interruptions to the chronicling of civilizations reopen questions of responsibility, trust and legitimacy making these codifications new social and political arrangements. Jacob Metcalf in his piece 'Ethics Codes: History, Context, and Challenges' wrote: "In the 1940-50s researchers struggled to respond to the scientific and medical atrocities of the Nazi regime. Defense attorneys in the "Nazi doctor trials" at Nuremberg argued that their clients could not be held accountable for war crimes because there were no widely recognized research ethics standards that would have prohibited their experiments. Although the doctors were still found guilty, the judges found enough merit in that claim that they offered the 10-point Nuremberg Code that set the stage for all subsequent research codes and policies." ("Ethics codes: History, context, and challenges," n.d.)

Society is a volatile malleable ductile pack of emotions build by the most unpredictable creature that have walked this earth – Humans. Yuval Noah Harari contends that human rights are an outdated myth. He calls for replacing them with a new global ethic to meet crises as varied as environmental destruction, disruptive technologies, and extreme gaps between rich and poor. And he calls for beginning at the very basics. (Harari, 2014, p. xx)

There is a very old saying that if someone said "it's not about the money but the principle," chances are that it is about the former mostly. Historically we have seen people are quick to change their moral benchmarks depending on what profits them more either financially or esteem wise.

A study, titled "Equity or equality? Moral judgments follow the money," was conducted by Peter DeScioli, an Assistant Professor in Department of Political Science at Stony Brook University and Associate Director of the Center for Behavioural Political Economy and his colleagues, stated: "Previous research emphasizes people's personalities, genes, and upbringing as the main source of moral values and disagreements about morality. We found that people also adjust their moral values depending on which principle benefits them the most. Our moral principles are more flexible and self-serving than we would like to admit." ("People change their moral values to benefit themselves over others," 2018)

The ethical compass seemed to dwindle when it came to divvy up resources, as personal likes, dislikes, bias and self-benefit often dictated terms. People seek not only to benefit, but also to persuade and convince others that they are morally right in doing so. Thus, the matter of ethics have always stood on very slippery turf further challenged by the shifting sands of time.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researches have mostly been done on this infamous villain created by DC on his mental state. The unpredictability and the remorseless brutality he brings with him. To establish the point let us look at the study 'The Joker: A Dark Night for Depictions of Mental Illness' by Mary E. Camp, M.D., Cecil R. Webster, M. D. Thomas R. Coverdale, John H. Coverdale, M.D., M.Ed., Ray Nairn, Ph.D. published in March 2010 in *Academic Psychiatry* 34(2):145-9.

In the paper the authors state that, "It has been argued that media portrayals of mental illness are grounded in lay understandings of madness and images of the mad man or woman. This hypothesis may be unfamiliar but is consistent with analyses of mass media depictions of persons with a mental illness, most of which emphasize crime and violence, unpredictability, and social incompetence. Film is the great storytelling medium, yet few have studied how mad-ness is depicted in film. Extant studies merely de-scribed aspects of the content. To facilitate effective destigmatization, studies need to show how a portrayal was assembled and placed in its institutional and cultural-historical context. Recent analyses of media show that depicting someone as mad positions the person as "other than human". "Othering" is done using language and images familiar from use in previous depictions of mad men and women, creating intertextual echoes in the present image." (Camp et al., 2010, p. xx)

In this study the authors' analyse the construction of this significant movie character, the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. The primary goal of the authors is to show how the Joker's madness was constructed to create an understanding that could trigger destigmatization efforts. To do that they have highlighted processes, cultural resources, and images that need to be addressed to alter the depictions and related stigma that has remained over the ages. And to bring out the richness of the depictions and the processes of their production, the authors used a discourse analytic method created by the understanding of how the creators aimed to attract and hold viewers' attention through it. (Camp et al., 2010, p. xx)

However, there is a complete lack of social understanding in this study and how society silently yet definitely becomes a character and catalyst in the process of making Joker what he is. The we question the whether the Joker is just a dark deceitful mad villain with all the necessary tropes of villainy or is he a victim too and a voice for the voiceless going insane at the refractoriness of a stubborn and often compassionless society.

I will first do an analysis of the Ethics benchmark for pulp fiction as set by standards bureau and how within that Joker fit in and then do a contextual analysis using social theories to establish the premises of Joker evolving into a necessary evil.

3. COMICS AND ETHICS

Simply put comics are a means of expressing ideas with images, interwoven with a fictional storyline, having a plot and based on a particular genre. Without venturing much into the technicalities, a comic book typically takes the form of a sequence of panels of images with specific texts through mediums like speech balloons, captions, onomatopoeia which are indicative of dialogues, narration and sound effects that build the mood and setting of the story. While almost all the genres starting from funny, historical, slice-of-life, sarcasm to Manga are celebrated, perhaps it's the superhero version that has been ruling the roost.

The world of comics has been a cosmos of a variety of storytelling that are both unreal in setting and bordering on the idea of willing suspension of disbelief. Fans worldwide have taken tours of these imaginative worlds while remaining firmly grounded on the moral and ethical scales. The comic book has always provided an absorbing, fascinating, pleasurable, and sometimes an expository mirror of society. The comic books have brought with it excitement for children and tempering for the adults, be it the early political cartoons or newspaper comic strips. During this time travel from last century to this present day comic books have beyond doubt influenced cultures and have reflected it as well. ("Comics and ethics," 2016, p. xx)

The world of comic is a big part of the growing pop culture that has swept the world and given birth to record-breaking franchise that has mesmerised the world from the latter part of the mid-90s. Over the last 80 odd years it has grown into a burgeoning phenomenon that began with the arrival of the DC universe in 1934 and Marvel just five years later.

The duo have been able to rule the world of imagination with a variety of characters shoring up attention from every nook and cranny of the world. But it has not been all bright and good for the world of comic books. While most vouch for the ethics it ingrained in the young mind with the values of 'friendship', 'loyalty', 'patriotism', many detractors thought otherwise. A stream of progressive psychologists believed that children were more attracted to the Knights in shining armour and the victory of good over evil. This is because of the fables they have grown up hearing where the princess in distress is always rescued by the prince charming. They have their ethical base set even before they began to read and write. But even a full moon has its craters and dark spots. ("Comics and ethics," 2016, p. xx)

And ethical concern has been synonymous with the world of comic books. History is littered with instances of ethical condemnation directed at individual pieces or the genre as a whole. Fredric Wertham's 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* is perhaps the most influential counter voice to the positive world of comics. It did two things—it sent the readers on a tizzy and secondly and most importantly it took the issue to the senate and played a pivotal role in the formation of the Comics Code Authority.

His key worry was clearly the negative influence reading comic books left on the growing impressionable minds of the children and the adolescent, and its capacity to morally corrupt them. The same concern had been echoed by several others who saw a black hole as the after effects of reading these pulp-fictions and could add as a stimulant to take up violence even if in the capacity of a vigilante. They believed that the violence unleashed in these action oriented pages could tilt the young minds towards it and make the world worse than it already was. (Wertham, 1999, p. xx)

Wertham went to say in his seminal work that the world "of the comic book is the world of the strong, the ruthless, the bluffer, the shred deceiver, the torturer and the thief" and while testifying before the Senate he said: "Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry." The ethical divide was sharp and the philosophies poles apart. (Wertham, 1999, p. xx)

In this sharply divided world of opinion the Batman arrived.

4. THE GENESIS

In 1939, DC Comics was looking for a new superhero, who could build on the insane fandom of the kryptonite Superman who had by now become a phenom.

Editor Vin Sullivan took his chances with an underrated creative source in gag cartoonist Bob Kane. Bob Kane collaborated with writer Bill Finger to create one of the most endearing superheroes who at 83 was still the most sought after franchise of the DC. The superhero with no super powers, just a will to do justice, has emerged as the twentieth century's most effective humanist justice monger—the Batman.

The debut Batman story, “The Case of the Chemical Syndicate,” written by Finger and drawn by Kane was an instant hit. Published in Detective Comics #27, which hit newsstands on March 30, 1939 (cover date: May 1939), became an instant cult. But every superhero needed a super villain. And in walked Joker. (Manning, 2011, p. xx)

The Joker made his debut in Batman #1, the spring of 1940 with the launch of the Dark Knight's dedicated comic-book series. But the creation of the Clown Prince of villainy is shrouded in controversy, with the three wise men writer Bill Finger and artists Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson each offering their own version of how Joker came to be. What one can safely conclude that Joker was a hybrid of influences. According to claims, Robinson produced a joker playing-card design. Finger brought to the table a clown-face logo from Coney Island and more importantly a picture of actor Conrad Veidt playing the mutilated, perennially grinning title character in the 1928 horror movie *The Man Who Laughs*. The end result was a villain unlike any of other Batman had ever faced. (Collins, 2019)

In *The Batman Files*, published by DC Comics as a journal handwritten by Bruce Wayne, a note from the elusive billionaire states: “Professor Dennis O’Neil, one of the world’s leading experts in criminal psychiatry, said it best in his rather sensational bestselling book, *Laughing at You: The Joker Story*: “On one particular day the Joker might spare a man’s life, simply because he liked his shoelaces. The next day, he might kill a man, simply because he liked his shoelaces.” (Manning, 2011, p. xx) (Fig: 1.1)

Figure 1

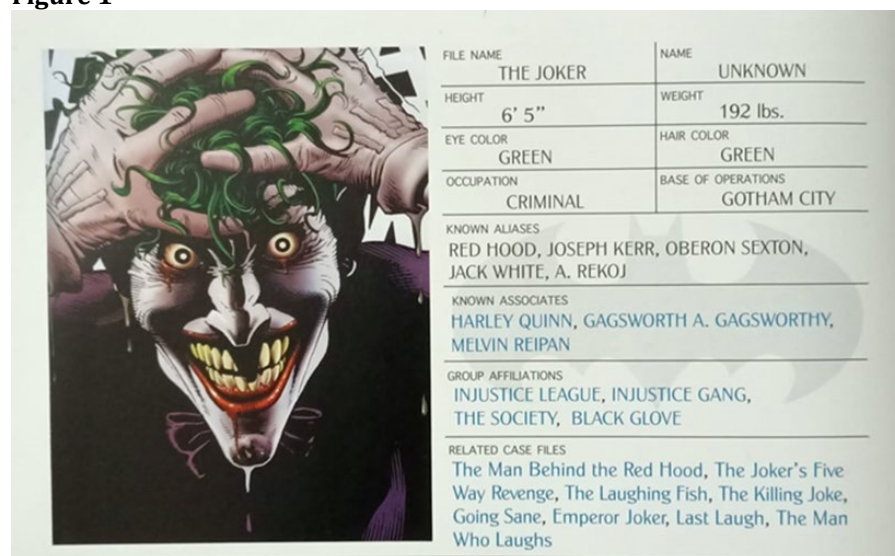


Figure 1 Joker's Vitals as Printed in the Batman Files

So popular was Joker as an unpredictable villain that when the first Batman movie appeared in 1969, he got featured and from then he has never looked back, walking toe to toe with Batman, much like Lex Luthor for Superman or as in literature Professor James Moriarty for Sherlock Holmes.

Despite being such a villain how did he endear up to the society. What does it speak of the ethical values evolving with time? Or does it add up as espoused in this famous line from Joker in the Dark Knight Rises-- "Their morals, their code; it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. You'll see- I'll show you. 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." (Manning, 2011, p. xx)

A telling line on the societal moralities.

5. THE DARK KNIGHT

Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy virtually took off where Burton's finished in terms of the character evolution of Joker. The marker for this movie was laid in Christopher Nolan's first movie Batman Begins of the Dark Knight trilogy, when shortly after the death of Ra's Al Ghul, Lieutenant James Gordon was seen talking about a criminal with "a taste for theatrics" who had recently committed a double homicide and an armed robbery and left behind a playing card with Joker insignia as his calling card. ("dark knight trilogy: The complete story of Christopher Nolan's Batman films," n.d.)

Gordon further warned that just as there was a growing trend of police force against crime, the scale and style of criminality was set to undergo a sea change with the appearance of Joker.

Gotham after a period of relative ease was witnessing a broad daylight bank robbery by a group wearing clowns masks calling themselves as Grumpy, Happy, Dopey, Chuckles, bus driver along with a sad looking clown Bozo. The robbers shaved off their own numbers within minutes in a series of premeditated betrayals. Only Bozo survived, who revealed himself as the Joker to the Manager of Gotham National Bank.

Before dying the bank manager asked: "You think you are smart huh? The guy who hired you will do the same to you. Oh! Criminals in this town used to believe in things – honour, respect. Look at You. What do you believe in, huh?"

"I believe whatever does not kill you simply makes you stranger" the joker said while revealing himself. The benchmark was set for the mindless evil that was going to be let loose on Gotham city. The Joker both terrified and fascinated, so much so that lines like "If you're good at something, never do it for free" thereafter became benchmark used by marketing Gurus.

Actually, Heath Ledger's Joker embodied and deepened the world view of anarchy. In a nomenclature of similarity, Ledger's Joker was homicidal, violent and disturbed as the ones before. But this edition was needle-focused on complete annihilation of the civil society. He was driven by the moniker of disorder and the creed of chaos not worrying about the road taken to reach. When Jack Nicholson's Joker was single-minded about disruption to reinvent authority, Ledger's Joker longed for complete dismantling of the establishment. ("dark knight trilogy: The complete story of Christopher Nolan's Batman films," n.d.)

While the magic trick performed by the Joker to convince the underworld cartel spelled fear not only by the act, rather by the manner of nonchalance with which a life was taken. The Joker in the midst of a twisted arm twisting of the cartel promised a magic trick of making a pencil "disappear". He embedded the pencil in the table and shoved underworld Boss Gambol's henchman head-first into the pencil where it indeed disappeared inside the man's head through one of his eyes killing him

instantly. He then goes about his business as if nothing had happened asking everybody: "Why so serious?"

Nolan had imagined Joker as a villain in the aftermath of 9/11 that shook America and the world at large. The socio-political landscape of world saw a new form of terrorism where people were ready to destroy civilization with utter disregard for their own wellbeing.

Thus, Joker's avatar with a philosophy of no rules was especially scary as it was afflicted with a measure of unpredictability, disregard for reason and dipped in an explosion of a volatile mindset that was unfathomable. Cesaro's Joker was a regular thug with a smart one-liner that no one really cared for, Nicholson's Joker wanted power, recognition and intimacy at all cost; whereas Ledger's Joker was a different beast who only sought bleakness. Though he often referred to himself as "agent of chaos," it didn't matter how he attained it as long as his delusional world of "unjust" hierarchies collapsed and dissolved beyond recognition. He was not after Gotham's power, he was after their soul, to morally corrupt so show that the prophesied ethics and the term 'good honest' people were just skin-deep.

Joker burned a pile of money belonging to an underworld boss and then cut him to pieces and fed him to the boss's dogs just to test the animals' loyalty. He questioned everything till the questions had no meaning. Only cacophony of chaos remained where nothing meant anything.

Upon a closer look at Joker, he is personally disorganized and unsettling. He wore a dull dust laden purple suit with a sloppy and smeared make-up. He walked awkwardly as if to hide a physical deformity further made evident through visible facial scars with jaggedly drawn lipstick in shape of a twisted smile. He continuously and inconsistently mutters talking to himself (maybe his imagined doppelganger, showing a duality hidden in his character) and off the cuff behaviour showing a strong streak of confusion and lunacy. But hidden in this incoherent self, there was an evil --something lucid, attentive and composed-- below the whirlpool of emotions on the surface. (See Fig: 1.2)

Figure 2



Figure 2 Heath Ledger as Joker in The Dark Knight

When Joker made his escape from Gotham General Hospital detonating a series of bombs, he does not leave in a hurry. Rather he shuffled away gawkily

dispassionate as the bombs erupt only looking back momentarily to as if ensure that the giant blast ignited and engulfed his captor and then reflexively turned away from the desolation satisfied and thinking about his next move.

Nicholson's Joker would have made a grand exist and staged a show and captured it on television to give him that giant injection of self-esteem and recognition and soaked up the dark euphoria around it. But Ledger's Joker just walked away believing in his impaired sense of reality.

Malcolm Gladwell, Journalist and author of bestseller *The Tipping Point*, asserted that arousal could leave a person mind-blinded. Arousal had two distinct traits. When over-stimulated with fear, it could lead to 'fight, flight, or freeze', whereas in case of being under-stimulated it could unleash a whole new notoriety. Low Arousal Theory in psychological terms explained individuals dealt with abysmally low arousal as people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Their brain simply searched something more interesting to attend to. More extreme versions seek self-stimulation through complete destruction or high level of creation. In *Joker* this aggravated state of violence was his normal state with a complete, utter and decisive lack of empathy. (Gladwell, 2022, p. xx)

When Joker realised that Batman was 'incorruptible' he went for the white knight of Gotham Harvey Dent. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! We are tonight's entertainment. I've only got one question. Where is Harvey Dent?" he uttered gate crashing Bruce Wayne's fundraiser for Gotham's DA. The method in the madness was evident when he told Batman: "I don't want to kill you! What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No, no... no you complete me."

Joker only wanted to corrupt Batman's Gotham before his eyes and set up the finale with two detonators in two ships carrying people out of the city. One was filled with criminals and the other with ordinary citizens. They were threatened that if one did not blow another out by midnight then Joker would blow both up. But as Batman caught up with Joker and none of the people in either ship blew each other up, Joker was distraught.

However, Joker had the last laugh in the movie when Harvey Dent burnt ugly to the core cried out for vengeance on Batman for letting his love die. As he emerged as the new villain two-face Joker reads out words from his own Bible of thoughts: "Introduce a little anarchy – upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos. And you know the thing about chaos - it's fair."

However, Nolan quietly puts forth two back stories trying to map the origin of Joker. One was about an abusive father who gave him his Glasgow Smile and the other story had it how he ripped off his mouth ear to ear to match his wife's scar given by goons and how she dumped him. In both cases his self-esteem took a severe beating causing him to question all societal norms and ethics and bend each and every one of those to suit his twisted world. The fact that he could not see anything, even his own work, get fruition showed how underwhelmed he was with this world and everything that posed as good in it. Hence, his avarice towards Batman. "I had a vision, of a world without Batman. The Mob tried to ground a little profit and the police tried to shut them down, one block at a time. And it was so... boring. I've had a change of heart... why should I have all the fun? Let's give someone else a chance," he announced in the movie. ("joker (Nolanverse)," n.d.)

In the end he summed himself up as "I'm a man of simple tastes: I enjoy dynamite, gunpowder, and gasoline...and you know the thing they have in common? They're cheap. [...] All you care about is money. This town deserves a better class of criminal, and I'm gonna give it to 'em. This is my city."

It's kind of a societal acceptance of good and evil when Joker said that Batman and Joker were like an 'immovable object' and an 'unstoppable force' each at each other's throat forever. One tried to go by the book and the other trying to burn it down and the world with it.

6. JOKER

Todd Phillips's Joker is the origin story of the criminal mastermind and Batman's biggest adversary ever. Arthur Fleck, played by Joaquin Phoenix, was portrayed as a penurious, scrawny man in his 40s who worked as a party clown in crime-peppered Gotham. He aimed to be a stand-up comedian, but in reality, completely underweight, with a recessed and colourless face he had little hope to be one. He was not repulsive, but his bizarre appearance put-off others. (See Fig: 1.3)

Arthur was an odd withdrawn individual, who at the best was callous by nature. But was not devious. Moreover, he had a condition that made him laugh out oddly. He had to carry a card with him that explained the neurological condition that made him laugh at the oddest moments. In fact, Arthur had been portrayed as somewhat innocent or naive and well-meaning towards others, taking people at face value and loved being in presence of children. (Nast, 2019)

Arthur lived with his mother Penny, who he cared about deeply, but maintained no other strong, meaningful connections. She called him happy yet when he said he wanted to be a stand-up comedian she quietly retorts 'but for that you need to be funny'.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Joaquin Phoenix as Joker in the Movie Joker

His communication skills were under par and facial expressions and body posturing odd to be put politely and in a trade of being a party clown these oddities were amplified. These peculiarities influenced others to ostracize, bully and avoid him, which by domino effect isolated him further helping the weirdness grow within him. This joker does not try to be distressing or bizarre; he does not seek the thrill of being hurtful or imperilling others, it happens naturally. That is the scary bit.

But what has the society to do with this odd man? He could have gone about performing his clown acts quietly had he not been bullied and beaten and robbed by a set of street urchins for no apparent reason or just for the thrill of being able to beat down someone who could not protect himself. He could have lived out his life

like a face in the crowd you would miss forever, had he not been betrayed by his colleague who sold him a gun in the name of protection and then ratted him out to the boss after the gun dropped out of his pocket during a clown act at a children's hospital. Had he not been pointed at, put down, humiliated and left feeling a complete loss of self-esteem even from the Social Service executive who cared little about his wellbeing that forced him to ask "Is it just me or is it getting crazier out there", that he may have survived this world.

He was aware that he was odd, but could not quite grasp what was it that they disliked so much. He longed for only one thing in life-- adoration of others by becoming a successful stand-up comedian. A spotlight where after his show he would doff his hat and take a bow to the standing ovation of his spectators. His one minute of fame. But he may have known it that it was an impossible dream and so he wrote in his scrapbook "I just hope my death makes more sense than my life". But he struggled and clawed to hang on to a dream of his mother telling him with adoration "you were put on this earth to spread joy and laughter".

He quested for the cherished land of Murray Franklin: visible, idolized, and respected. As he pantomimed the scene, Arthur visioned himself as attractive, debonair and dominant. Despite these elevating dreams, Arthur's reality was that of a loner, droning, tedious and thankless, much like the landscape of the Gotham City—despondently bleak. ("Joker (2019 film),")

In 1989, Grant Morrison and Dave McKean created one of the most odd and satirical institutional histories one can imagine. A psychiatrist got admitted is admitted into his own hospital as an insane homicidal inmate. When readers are exposed to his past, they learn the doctor might have euthanised his mother. His wife and daughter had been brutally violated and murdered by an insane whom the doctor then treated and finally electrocuted. Amadeus Arkham, this unfortunate doctor, was the founder and inmate of Arkham Hospital, eventually Arkham Asylum. Arkham stood for the veritable evil that breed within its premises and festered and grew with each passing day. (Beckett, 2023)

Still on seven types of medication, Joker thought his life at Arkham was better than the world outside that was more maddening and brutal. "I think I felt better locked up in the hospital," he mumbled thinking wistfully between his puffs at a burnt out cigarette. A statement against the growing lack of compassion in the society.

Then one night while travelling by the tube, he is attacked violated and humiliated by three citizens who were supposed to be 'educated, well behaved, well-meaning and leading a decent life' and later as actually revealed were working for Thomas Wayne, the richest man and moral clock of Gotham. Unable to take it anymore he shot the first in self-defence, the second in vengeance. By he gained some self-respect seeing the fear in the eyes of the third, the helplessness, the desperation to escape the present situation. The third man was doing everything he had done throughout his life and he was doing what he had faced all his life.

He hunted down the third as he slowly realised that instilling fear in others gave power. He then locked himself up in a toilet and did his slow ominous dance as he internalised the new power potion that he had consumed. As he walked out, he threw his rag-tag bag like the burden of the past and walked up to the apartment of the girl he had been stalking for some time and bedded her. For the first time Arthur had imposed his mind and body on others, for something within him snapped.

In Heath Ledger's version of the Joker, he said: "Madness, as you know, is like gravity. All it takes is a little push." Todd Phillips's Joker completed the puzzle of the push. The slow struggled climb to the top along the stairs to reach his refuge was

gone. What replaced was the freewheeling fall of a newly born Joker dancing down the long cascade of stairs.

While the film had received raving review, but there had been a narrative of discontent hanging about it. In wake of the surge in violence in the society across East and West, some moviegoers called Joker insensitive. People even questioned the timing of the release of the movie.

It all began with the premiere of Joker at the Venice Film festival. The story of Arthur Fleck found a receptive earth with the audience. So much so that the film was awarded a Golden Lion for best film. However, another set had a problem with the fact that at pit of his misery Joker committed murder and realized that he enjoyed it. And his metamorphosis completed when he held court at the studio committing murder in the characteristic grandiose with which Joker is associated.

Critics explained that the Joker's character evoked angry, misogynistic response from people that could result in far-right and xenophobic violence. Indeed, some incidents followed the release of Joker, but such incidents have peppered history of the urban civilization for a very very long time and with no Joker to blame. ("Joker' wins golden lion at Venice film festival,"

2019)

In the film, Fleck's life naturally propped up empathy with misfortune upon misfortune piled up on Fleck till he broke and remoulded as Joker. Bad but not hated, criminally inclined and yet understood, Joker was a box of oxymorons. As Todd Phillips pointed out that the movie was more about a heartless world outside than anything else and hence Joker was accepted as a symbol of a man who represented everything that was wrong with the world. Philips added that art could be complicated, and often it was meant to be like that only. Thus, as a movie Joker had become relevant in the real world like protesters in Beirut started to paint their faces like the Joker, over the country's financial crisis or photos of people in Joker masks and face painted popped up in Chile and Hong Kong against respective government's repressive measures.

The Joker was almost a Marxist with an evil twist. He tried to represent the losers and the defeated, but the course was wrong. Society accepted him as an evil who was made to be what he was. It was as if the Joker had become a symbol of revolution, not a perverse justification for violence. Young people chose to wear t-shirts with Joker on it more than Batman t-shirts, not because they chose the path to violence but because they saw in him a defiance of the injustice. Either way you see, the film proposes an idea—be it terrorism or revolution. (Peaslee & Weiner, 2015, p. xx)

And the fact that society has accepted Joker in the way he was does not make the world a better or lesser place. The society is broken into compartments that have their own value sets and Joker had been successful in evolving from pure mindless evil to an evil that was a societal gift to this world. The question that were raised by Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger's version of Jokers, found a ground reality with this movie.

7. THE JOKER'S WORLD

Batman had undoubtedly been one of the most successful franchises ever created. His fandom was not necessarily only based on his gizmo heavy ass-kicking vigilante super sleuth aura, but as the adage, twisted like his world, goes: by the enemies he kept. For as much as he was known for his dual avatar, he would be incomplete without his long list of villains with Joker topping the list.

While Batman represented justice, laws and order, the maniac, clown-dressing Joker for sure represents the very opposite. The Joker's leitmotif made one question everything on basis of their moral standard. That was his sole quest, to prove that there was no such thing as morality. For him the line between the moral and the immoral was blurred as he talked of life's measure in moral scales as he found it. In one moment, it was good and it could be different the very next moment.

Joker was the propagator of Moral Nihilism or Ethical Nihilism and people endeared to him because somewhere deep inside everyone at some point had been a world beaten and run over disgruntled self, waiting to give up.

It is no coincidence that Joker's character was built on Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs*. This is a novel about how the Lord's heir, Gwynplan, was kidnapped by people who mutilated children and sold them as fools. Despite his terrible appearance, the young man managed to find his love in a blind girl Deya. When his real lineage was revealed, Gwynplan was made a peer of the aristocrats but never earned their respect because of his appearance. Gwynplan's life never really took off and when his girlfriend also died all of a sudden, he took his life throwing himself into the sea. (Hunt, 2023)

The novel related this tragic tale of Gwynplan who lived with a mutilated mouth that gave him a perpetual grin. It was based in 17th century England plagued by class difference and social hatred. Gwynplan's permanent smile was a sarcasm towards this bane of English gentry, social disparity, and injustice. This formed an integral part to the development of the character Joker. The perpetual grin combined with a felonious mind, vicious sense of humour, noxious shenanigans, and a flamboyant outfit perfectly contradicted Batman with his black and grey bat suit, sombre personality, lack of smile and his mission to protect Gotham. (Hunt, 2023)

Evidently such a character would not have much faith in the dominant culture or established ethical backbone of the society. He would always interpret society in his own terms becoming an ethical moralist.

Ethical Nihilism in brief was built on the belief system that all values are unsubstantiated and without foundation. It was often associated with extreme gloom and a radical cynicism that talked of apocalypse. A nihilist believed in nothing, had no loyalty and no purpose in life other than an uncontrollable impulse to destroy. The Nihilistic themes like epistemic failure, valued destruction and cosmic purposelessness. All of that found reflection in Joker's world. ("Nihilism," n.d.)

In Joker's world there was nothing right or wrong. According to Joker, morality was the end product created through social interaction during which an individual created his own senses of what was right or wrong. These senses did not hold any universal or even relative truth. Joker's Moral Nihilism ultimately rejected the very concept of morality and claimed that the conventional moral codes were abstracts calculatingly created by humans. This was the Joker's doctrine. ("Nihilism," n.d.)

In the world we live in or even in the context of Gotham City, Batman and Joker were exact opposites and hence the eternal conflict between these two. It was as if Batman and the Joker existed just to fight each other's concept of righteousness. This philosophy was espoused in *The Dark Knight's* interrogation scene, where the Joker said: "We are opposite, yet we are no different from each other. We are both considered freaks." He concluded that Batman completed and complemented him. In the climax Joker reaffirmed that belief when he called the duo's rivalry like an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. They could never kill each other. Batman would not kill Joker because of his sense of justice, while Batman was the only person that Joker did not want to kill. Joker wanted to corrupt Batman's moral code and with him the city.

However, unlike other conventional villains, his only aim in life was to prove that the world was as insane and corrupt as he was and thus stand on his delusional moral high-ground. This is his concept of 'one bad day'. Joker believed that people needed just one bad day, one really bad day, to become like him. The success of being the Joker was perhaps his capacity to manipulate people to commit acts that are hard to distinguish from being morally right or wrong.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Perfume Brand After Joker

And in a society where the general rules are set from a preacher's pulpit, the world has accepted Joker from being a villain to being a perfume brand. With taglines like 'Time to get Wicked' and 'Strong Unique & Long Lasting' Joker's way of life was now eulogised by a society that ran Joker's nihilism through a cyder-presser of ethics and filtered what they thought inspired the world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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