

Joker: An Instructive and Realistic Image of Villain Taking the Dark Knight and Joker as Case Studies of the Villain in Films

Ziyan Liu

English and Creative Writing, School of English, Drama and Creative Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2TT, The United Kingdom

**Corresponding author. Email: zxl844@student.bham.ac.uk*

ABSTRACT

“Joker”, as a character experimental movie, brings the iconic villain—Joker of the DC Comics back to the screen. For the first time in DC movie history, Joker becomes the protagonist to narrate his background story as a person Arthur before his criminal identity Joker appears. Another prominent portrayal of Joker can be traced back to Christopher Nolan's “The Dark Knight” from his famous Batman trilogy. “The Dark Knight” constructs Joker's tyrannical and antisocial nature in a realistic perspective. Both of the movies are innovative in their successful establishment of Joker image. However, while “Joker” and “The Dark Knight” turned Joker into an iconic villain with personality and depth, their success of character setting also generated unexpected Joker mania. In particular, “Joker” even aroused psychologists’ concerns about society's prejudice against mental illness. Both films build Joker as an image that has research implications for villain portrayal in the film and television. This article aims to analyze the factors that make villains impressive and the possible approaches that lessen villain’s negative social impact. To achieve these objectives, the article will discuss the reasons for the successful portrayal of Joker and the controversy this character had caused by analyzing the movie “Joker” and “The Dark Knight”. As a result, villains with complex personality and keen sensation to human nature are more realistic and destructive compared to superficial evils with formidable superpower.

Keywords: *Joker, Villain, Violence, Mental illness, Realistic character, Characterization*

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most iconic villains in the DC superhero universe, Joker has undergone various adaptations since his first appearance in Batman comics in 1940. These adaptations keep advancing and making Joker into a profound icon by using this character to represent some of the most concerning social problems. “The Dark Knight” and “Joker” are two representative versions of the character Joker. They both elevated the role to a new level. “The Dark Knight” is the second installment of the Batman trilogy directed by Christopher Nolan in 2008. Nolan's portrayal of Joker has left a deep mark on the movie history of villain characterization. Not only does the movie stay on the surface of the Joker as a lunatic, but also it presents the image of a highly intelligent sociopathic murderer who does not consider money or power as his pursuit. The Joker in this version is an emerging human being who

violates universal human moral perception. This film successfully complicates the character Joker, making him a vehicle to show the evil side of human nature, so that the movie becomes socially meaningful. As for “Joker”, it is an experimental film starring Joaquin Phoenix in 2019. This film did not follow the existing completed criminal Joker setting, but focused more on Joker's origin. This way of villain portrayal has aroused the concern that the emphasis on the Joker's tragic life might mislead the audience to rationalize the character's brutality through empathy. This may cause the film to convey harmful values to society. An article in The Washington Post published that movie theaters around the US banned masks and costumes at “Joker” screenings because of concerns about the movie's violent theme [13]. In addition to this, some academic articles argued that “Joker” had created social prejudice against people with mental illness. Simultaneously, by associating uncontrollable mental illness behavior with

deliberate violence crime, government's support for psychopath patient may be affected [11]. All this discussion proves that Joker is a unique character who has a certain social influence.

Despite the controversies, realistic antagonists are valuable because a villain's connotation and abilities can determine the limitation of the hero's characterization. This article intends to discuss two factors that make villains impressive and the social boundaries of portraying them and takes the characters of Joker in "The Dark Knight" and "Joker" as examples, referring to academic articles and supplementing with specific movie scenes. In terms of the structure of the article, it will start with analyzing the feature of villains that provide social value, then reviewing the indispensable role villain play to superhero in a movie's character composition. Finally, the possible ways to avoid harmful social influences that carried out by villain character will be discussed. Based on the successful characterization in "The Dark Knight" and "Joker", the research on their main character Joker could provide a practical reference value on realistic villain study in superhero movies.

2. THE VILLAIN IMAGE FROM REAL LIFE

Normally, a memorable character is a human comes from real life but transcends the reality. "Character is a text- or media-based figure in a story, usually human or human-like" [1]. Joker raises controversy precisely because of his reality presence. A villain portrayed with convictive realism can extend the depth of a film. Dayong Wang [5] claimed that to create a villain with aesthetic value, the character's inner side needs to be analyzed to reveal common social issues from an individual perspective to avoid formulaic conceptualized, facetious, and simplistic villainous images. Christopher Nolan mentioned he wanted to create an antagonist that still came from a place of reality in his production notes [3]. And this creative intent is what makes Joker transcend many other superhero villains and even his previous versions. Joker appears to be difficult to defeat even though he is a character who does not have strong physical power, superpowers or magic. The danger he creates is from his intelligent and terroristic characterization as a daily life criminal.

2.1 *Three stages in the developing process of Joker*

Compared with most villains, especially villains from the early superhero movies, Joker appears to be a three-dimensional role because he is presented as a vivid individual with a backstory rather than being a tool only to serve the plot. His evilness has its reasonable

developing process. In "Joker", Arthur's transformation can be divided into three stages, corresponding to his three crimes: First is the shooting of three men in suits on the subway. Arthur got beaten by them because he burst into uncontrollable laughter when these three men harassed a girl. He took his gun and killed them. This was his first rebellion to violence. This scene also signified the revenge and hatred from the working class. Afterward, Arthur hid in the toilet, dancing stiffly and slowly. At this point, he was still not used to killing. The second time was in the hospital. He suffocates his mother by pillow after he found his birth mystery. This scene indicates Arthur's desire to be demarcated from his past and his family relationship, also reflects Joker's further control over the personality of Arthur. The third was his stabbing of his colleague Randall, who had betrayed him and made him lose his job. This symbolizes that he would no longer let anyone suppress him. The dance scene down the stairs after this is joyful and full of energy, which presents the complete transformation of his Joker identity. Such a transformation process also reflects the reality of social contradictions and human inferiority on a significant level. The psychological and social causes of Arthur becoming a villain are traceable every step of the way.

2.2 *Exposure of humanity*

Another characteristic of realistic villains is that they have the function to explore human nature. Villains with insightful crime purpose tends to carry the dark side of society or humanity which is the opposite of surficial desire such as money and power. In "The Dark Knight", Joker proclaims his contempt for money by burning a large pile of cash and says, "This city needs better criminals." This indicates Joker's disdain for property and his vision of the destruction of human life. Yet, in the final scene of "Joker", Joker enthusiasts crushes the police car, escorting Joker and lifting him onto the police car's hood. At this point, Joker is no longer just a human, but an icon. The crowd's veneration of Joker is not pointing to Joker's personality but to the political symbol he represents. After they crash the police car that held Joker, instead of providing first-aid to Joker's injured body, they displace him onto the hood of the car. This implied their indifference to Joker's health and their real concern for the 'populist' movements Joker symbolizes. "This latter interpretation underlines the careless instrumentalization of an individual to serve a political purpose." [8] The villain is the embodiment of the evil that threatens society and the symbol of humanity's dark side. People need heroes because they have the power to defeat the depressing reality while ordinary people are unable to achieve. Therefore, if the "reality" is not portrayed realistically and profoundly, hero's victories will lose their inspiration. As Hu (2016) mentioned, the superhero movies are no longer the formalist of saving humans and saving the earth, but the spiritual salvation [14].

3. SUPERHERO AND VILLAIN—TWO SIDES OF A PERSON

The two characters, superhero and villain, are two sides of a coin, confronting each other and achieving each other. The villain is an essential element in a superhero's evolution, while the superhero is the ultimate mission of a villain's appearance and actions. The villain's function is to set obstacles on heroes' success, thereby promoting heroes' growth and contrasting heroes' justice and bravery. Therefore, an intelligent and powerful villain can find and attack a hero's weakest part so that the process of a hero overcoming villains is a sign of overcoming their weakness.

3.1 Villain as a dark version of hero

A villain can detect a hero's weakness because he/she has a degree of similarities with the hero. They understand hero's deepest fear and present the other possible outcome of hero's life. Joker and Batman are like two sides of the same person with similarities but make different life paths. "Joker" even implies them as half-biological brothers. The similarity between them is manifested in two parts. For one thing, both of them suffer from psychological trauma. Bruce Wayne become an orphan because an unknown criminal shoot his parents and this case stays unsolved. As for Joker, different Joker versions have different interpretations, but all implies that Joker has a tragic past. In "The Dark Knight", Joker seems to have a violent father who kills his mother and cuts his mouth open, or for his other version, his wife is raped in front of him. In "Joker", he is brought up by his mother who neglects his sorrow and this has made him grow up in an environment of being ignored. For another, both of them are different from other superhero movies' main characters since they do not have superpowers. Although Batman has seemingly unlimited money and technology, he has no special powers beyond that. "Batman's superior resources seem to be an acceptable part of everyday life", Boscaljon said [3]. This setting has made them more like a cop and a criminal from the real world. They have a balance of power that makes them highly intelligent characters with depth of substance.

3.2 Villain as a catalyst for the growth of hero

A villain who has full knowledge of his enemy can stimulate the protagonist's growth. Instead of leaving the audience an impression that heroes are invincible, "The Dark Knight" creates a situation where Joker teases Batman in most parts of the movie. He induced Gotham citizens to press Batman to reveal his identity with threats. He kidnapped Batman's beloved woman Rachel and deceived him about the location where he kept Rachel and Harvey Dent. Not only did Batman lose the

opportunity to save his beloved woman, but also he was pushed by Joker to decide between his own desire and the city's hope. Joker knows how to attack Batman, Bruce Wayne, an ordinary man with concerns and helplessness, shaping him a more human-like protagonist and not just as the altar of a hero.

To conclude, "The antagonist is the character(s) (or situation) that represents the opposition against which the protagonist must contend. The villain demonstrates to the hero what he might become, preventing him from being a monster himself. Fighting villain, the superhero battles his own monsters and exorcises his dark side [4]." Successful villain settings need to be able to embody the hero's weakness through similarity, conveying an evil preconception.

4. THE POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES IN VILLAINS' PORTRAYAL

4.1 Controversial social impact caused by realistic villains

Villains have been controversial from the beginning of their existence. "The Dark Knight" and "Joker" use an anti-utopian way to endow Joker with a realistic value. However, this realistic portrayal has led to many social concerns. These concerns are mainly from two aspects: Joker mania and the discrimination against mental illness patients. Both movies present a free wish anarchist who dares to rebel against social consciousness. In addition, Joker's tragic original story described in the movie "Joker" may trigger the audience's sympathy, then rationalize Joker's brutal behavior. "He is portrayed as a poor commoner and tragic figure", said by Efthymiadou & Koukouvinou [6]. Furthermore, the movie does imply many social issues: the contradiction between the rich and the poor, the selfishness of humans and the incompetence and corruption of the government. This may inevitably send the misleading message that Joker is a revolutionary character who breaks unequal social structure. Apart from this, portraying Joker as a psychopath may lead to viewers' prejudice against those who suffer from the same illness. Studies have argued that these derogatory terms about madness, directing at an individual who is considered clinically insane, negatively portray what it means to be mentally disturbed. They argue that such descriptions contribute to the stigmatization of mental illness [7]. Characterizations can not avoid exaggerated descriptions. These medically implausible portrayals tend to lead a part of viewers to interpret evil behavior as uncontrollable, innate, or a situation where social circumstances leave no other choices to them.

4.2 Ways to minimize villains' passive social impact

First, the villain can be portrayed as a complex and charismatic character, but it is essential to avoid ambiguous moral values. Audiences may make ethical judgments from different perspectives. When characters deviate from social-moral rules, or when a plot is unconventional, audiences may use cognitive strategies, such as moral disengagement to maintain their enjoyment of their watching experience [12]. Just as a hero may be stigmatized for a mistake, a villain may be righted for a trivial good deed. Sometimes, it does not even need to be a good deed, a painful experience is enough to elicit the empathy and mitigate their crime. When the villain is perceived to behave more morally than expected, the audience's relationship with the villain is strengthened, their relationship with the hero is weakened [2]. Therefore, the destructive purpose of the villain should be clear and stable. At the point a villain is created, their villainous attributes need to be confirmed. If the motivation of the villain is not evil, villains may be easily considered as an anti-hero. When a character does something inappropriate, as long as his purpose benefits society, this character can still be recognized as good [10]. The concept between this two types of character needs to be distinguished. It is reasonable that villains have stage victories, but a bad ending is their fate, which can avoid villain conveying negative values.

Then, in a film, characters do not exist in isolation. The contrast between characters can highlight the center value of a story. Therefore, it is important to build a protagonist with a strong will that makes better choices than the antagonist. The more inspirational heroes are, the more supportive the audience will be for them to defeat the villains. Even if the hero and the villain experience similar pains, the hero will insist on making the moral choice. The characterization should focus on what the villain destroys after his traumas while emphasizing how the hero overcome their traumas.

In addition, a film can introduce good human qualities, such as love, kindness, compassion, etc. For example, In "The Dark Knight" Gotham bay scene, both of the criminals and citizens did not choose to detonate each other's ferries bomb.

Joker's portrayal in "The Dark Knight" is controlled within a reasonable scale when in "Joker", it tends to be more controverted since it uses a villain as the protagonist. However, even the Joker of this version subverts social value and triggers psychiatric discrimination to some extent, he is still a vehicle to expose social problems and plays a role in reminding society's concern for disadvantaged groups. This type of character has its value.

5. CONCLUSION

Characters that reflect reality are often worthy of profound reflections and examination compared to superficial roles that are easily forgotten. "Joker comes to embody different kinds of collective fears and evils in different eras [9]." The threat of terrorism in "The Dark Knight" and the class conflict, discrimination of mental illness in "Joker" are carried out by the villain Joker. The villain is set to reflect the most anxious issues of contemporary society.

This paper illustrates that an admirable hero is not demonstrated by his invincibility but by his powerful opponents. Joker in "The Dark Knight" constantly challenges Batman's moral line and revealing his deepest concern. Joker is essential to promote Batman to grow and become the Dark Knight. The reason superheroes are given the name "super" is not only because of their superpower, but also because the villains can give them the opportunity to stand their justice.

Additionally, moral boundaries need to be cautious when portraying a villain. Even if the villain as a human is multifaceted and complex, an overemphasis on empathy can cause the ambiguity between anti-hero and villain. An empathetic villain may create a situation where viewers have a sense of complicity, then rationalize the villain's cruel behavior. As a cultural medium, movies need to be aware of misleading characters while avoiding extreme goodness and bad characterization.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aprillia, A., Andayani, E.S., Chodidjah, C. and Khoirunnisa, K., 2020. ANTISOCIAL DISORDER OF JOKER CHARACTER IN THE DARK KNIGHT MOVIE DIRECTED BY CHRISTOPHER NOLAN. KREDO: Jurnal Ilmiah Bahasa dan Sastra, 4(1), pp.129-147.
- [2] Bonus, J.A., Matthews, N.L. and Wulf, T., 2021. The impact of moral expectancy violations on audiences' parasocial relationships with movie heroes and villains. Communication Research, 48(4), pp.550-572.
- [3] Boscaljon, D., 2013. The Flip Side of Justice: The Two-Faced Spirit of The Dark Knight. Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies, 14(1), pp.44-64.
- [4] Chacko, C.M., 2021. Villainous Disability: Gazing the Deformed Bodies of Supervillains in Comics.
- [5] Dayong, W., 2010. The artistic value of villainous characters in theatrical performances. CN22-1285(2010) 04-0054-05.

- [6] Efthymiadou, P. and Koukouvinou, P., 2020. The Joker Returns: A new perspective on the violent Clown Prince of Crime.
- [7] Hoffman, L., 2014. The damned, the bad, and the ugly: Our society's bad (and occasionally sinister) habit of using villains to label, deter, and other. Eastern Michigan University.
- [8] Mouleux, G., 2019. The Politics of Circularity in Todd Phillips's Joker (2019). *Transatlantica. Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal*, (2).
- [9] Rodriguez, M., 2014. Physiognomy and Freakery: The Joker on Film. *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present*, 13(2).
- [10] Shafer, D.M. and Raney, A.A., 2012. Exploring how we enjoy antihero narratives. *Journal of Communication*, 62(6), pp.1028-1046.
- [11] Scarf, D., Zimmerman, H., Winter, T., Boden, H., Graham, S., Riordan, B.C. and Hunter, J.A., 2020. Association of viewing the films Joker or Terminator: Dark Fate with prejudice toward individuals with mental illness. *JAMA network open*, 3(4), pp.e203423-e203423.
- [12] Sanders, M.S. and Tsay-Vogel, M., 2016. Beyond heroes and villains: Examining explanatory mechanisms underlying moral disengagement. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19(3), pp.230-252.
- [13] Telford, T., 2021. [online] Available at: <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/09/27/movie-theaters-ban-masks-costumes-joker-screenings-ahead-films-release-next-week/>> [Accessed 12 October 2021].
- [14] Xiaorui, H., 2016, The research on villain shaping in Hollywood series movie-Taking Batman series movies as an example 10736.