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**Beyond Good and Evil: The Characterization of the
Villain in the Joker Franchise**

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Dedications

To my parents
And my beloved ones

- **Abdel Illah LOUKILI**

I dedicate my work to my cherished family.
To my beloved one, whose unwavering support inspires me daily.

- **Rania MEDJAOUI**

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Abstract

Cinema is considered to be a powerful means in storytelling captivating audiences by depicting complex characters. The villain is one of these characters. Originally known by the embodiment of evil opposing the hero in his journey. However, this research work is an attempt to deal with the development of the villain as a character throughout literature, comic books and movie adaptations. It examines the typical roles of the villain using comparative approach and studies the development of such character psychologically, as well as its changing perception and its influence on audience perspective. This comparative study deals with the character of the Joker in the TV show Batman TV Series (1966–1968) - and film adaptation Joker (2019) in order to further inspect the new role of the villain.

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General Introduction

Throughout history, literature has been a mirror of human experience by providing a reflection of culture, society and even the human psychological side. Literature is not only for entertainment, it plays a crucial role in dealing with social, moral and psychological issues. All of this is reflected in a fictional prose called the novel, by creating characters that reflect society's norms serving each a purpose with the interaction of plot and settings. However, literature witnessed an evolution in its characters' roles. This work is going to focus on the progression of the villain as a character by highlighting its progress from simple villains existing only to shed more light on the hero and serve the necessity of evil in stories to complex ones where the attention is shifted towards them and having their own stories. The chosen works are William Dozier's Joker in *Batman* TV series (1966-1968) and *Joker* (2019) by Todd Phillips, in which it will deal with a comparison between two versions of the same character using different methods to produce new and different characteristics which only made them more outstanding.

The transformation of the villain from being hated to being sympathized with by the audience is a phenomenal process and it is the reason behind the choice of the topic. Analyzing both characters revealed insight about society's views on real life troubled individuals, hence providing Joker of the 2019 version with human traits gave moments of vulnerability making him more relatable and maybe even likable. The film reminded people that these villains are also human beings experiencing emotions like any other person. This shift shows a growing interest in the complex character provoking moral ambiguity.

William Dozier's Joker in the *Batman* 1960's television series was portrayed more as the evil character posing a threat to the society, and being the number one enemy of the hero, Batman. He was simply portrayed by his clownish actions bringing a clear example of a simple antagonist. This version of the Joker was far from being dark, it served as an entertainment whose character had a sense of humor, unlike what is going to be later on shown in the second version. On the other hand, Todd Phillips's 2019 *Joker* provides a dark origin story of the daily life events that influenced the creation of his villainous alter ego, breaking away from traditional representations of

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the character that provided little to no information about his past. Another newer aspect of the 2019 version is the director's efforts in order to show the setting of where the character lived as a world without any kindness in order to trigger as much empathy as possible from the audience. This work is going to deal with the comparison of the two Jokers from 1960s and 2019 by analyzing their characteristics, personalities and actions. Therefore, it attempts to answer the following questions:

- What makes a good villain?
- What are the main factors the director portrays to attract viewers' sympathy towards villains?
- How did the Joker's character change over the years gaining attention and appreciation?

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- A well-written villain may be a complex character with human attributes everyone can relate to.
- The main reasons viewers' feel sympathy towards villains could be the authors' portrayals of humane situations and struggles in the lives of villains.
- It seems that the writer of the 2019 Joker gave the character more attention and appreciation.

This research work falls into two chapters. The first chapter is mainly focused on the literary concepts such as defining the novel and its aspects (from settings, plot to the characters), to defining the hero and villain and focusing on the latter. The development of the villain from one simple character to a more complex one created a blurred line between the hero and the villain. In addition to the relatability of the character with the audience and why they sympathize with it nowadays.

The second chapter is going to use a comparative approach between the chosen characters of Cesar Romero's Joker in the 1960 *Batman* TV series and Joaquin Phoenix's in *Joker* (2019). Plus, it is going to analyze the audience's reaction to both works.

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Chapter One: Evolvment of the Villain in Literature and Cinema

1.1. Introduction

Throughout the long history of literature and cinema, characters served as reflections of societal norms, values, and beliefs during the time of their creation. The process behind creating these characters has always been a straightforward one. A protagonist molded into a well-behaved lovable character and on the opposing side, an antagonist, representing everything evil despised by society. Readers would understand and tend to side with whatever represents good, and oppose evil. This is the classic version of characters, simple with clear motives that align them with what is commonly agreed upon as good, setting them apart from wicked characters, because that is what was accepted to be done while writing or reading a novel.

The line separating good and bad has always been a clear noticeable one by readers and viewers when analyzing old novels. However, as much as literature developed throughout time in forms, themes, topics, and characters evolved as well.

In examining the evolution of characters from classic literature to the present, it is essential to consider the shifts in societal norms, storytelling techniques and, most importantly, the reader's expectations over time. In old literature, characters were often depicted as static and unchanging, embodying a single feature or quality in a novel, as mentioned before, good for protagonists and bad for antagonists. The character's path was determined by external forces such as destiny, God intervention and society's expectations.

From the late 19th century onwards, characters broke out from those stereotyping aspects with authors experimenting on a wider range of identities. Such a process resulted in characters with internal growth and more complex and dynamic moralities, often driven by personal transformation and self-discovery. Villains served as a multidimensional driving force in many narratives. Not only fulfilling the purpose of being an obstacle for the hero but making readers and viewers question the very core of what is right and what is wrong.

1.2 The Novel

Novels have long captivated the reader's mind with their ability to transport them into different realms as it evokes their emotions, inner thoughts and challenges their

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perspectives. Novel, a fictional prose narrative of a considerable length, encompasses a wide range of genres that explores the life and experiences of human beings; it deals with different topics with a purpose of education and entertainment from social, mental, political point of view through the art of storytelling.

According to *Background to the Rise of the Novel* by Dr. Manashi Bora, the word “novel” can be traced back to the medieval romances and spread its branches to European societies in the 14th and 15th century (Manashi, n.d). Women from wealthy households developing reading abilities for religious practices is one of the many factors that helped with the development of the novel during those times, as well as the protestant reformation usage of written forms of propaganda and the emergence of new sources of public news such as broadsheets and newspapers (Manashi, n.d)¹.

The most essential sets in any novel are the setting, its characters and the plot; they are referred to by Wellek and Warren (1985) as ‘constituents’. They claim that each one “is determinant of the others” (p. 216). These three aspects are gathered and harmoniously interrelated with each other by the writer's exceptional writing techniques to create a captivating reading experience.

1.2.1 Characteristics of a Novel

A well-crafted novel is important for engaging readers within the events of the story. As the novel is of a fictional genre that depicts different themes according to what the author wants to convey in his writing, he uses defined elements with his techniques of storytelling, exploring themes throughout a complex structure and realistic characters.

1.2.1.1 Setting

The setting is considered to be one of the crucial aspects in the novel. It is divided into two elements; time and place, which specify the plot of the novel. These elements give more intensity to the character itself as well.

The setting also influences the mood and the atmosphere of the events. For instance, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* written by Ann Radcliffe (1794), the writer expressed the feelings of the character, Emily, throughout her journey to the castle.

¹<https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/engp02/chapter/background-to-the-rise-of-the-novel/>

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From being in a splendid and vivid path that screamed life and joy by reflecting it to the character and her calm feeling, to a very dull narrow path leading to Udolpho that gave nothing but fear in it and this was a reflection of Emily's feelings and her unfortunate destiny. This description can be taken as a proper example of how the setting can change the tone of any story in various atmospheres, making the reader feel what the character felt.

1.2.1.2 Plot

E.M Forster (1927) in his book *Aspects of the Novel*, defines the plot by comparing it to the story demonstrating the differences between them stating that the story is simply a narration of events while the plot goes deeper into why things happen and how it affects the people involved,

Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and then the queen died," is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot (Forster, 1927, p. 130).

Forster argues that the plot is not a matter of technicality and following a set of guidelines, but the process behind creating a good plot requires a great deal of intelligence and creativity. He continues by stating that the plot calls for memory and imagination as well as following a certain train of thoughts by the reader to try and predict the outcomes of the narrative (Forster, 1927, p. 131).

When it comes to the author, Forster proclaims that the plot provides the author with room for mystery and suspense to keep the readers in the dark, by not providing a certain amount of information until later time, which only makes them more engaged within the story. A prime example of this can be found in detective novels where clues and mysteries are slowly and chronologically revealed to set up a final solution. However, Forster shows that the plot overshadows the other aspects that can be found in the novel, stating that a balanced plot shows clear results of character decisions rather than random events, because it provides the story with a sense of complexity rather than having unrealistic characters (Forster, 1927, p. 132). When it comes to the importance of plot, Forster states that

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A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by “and then – and then” – They can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also (Forster, 1927, p. 130-131).

This quote highlights the importance of audience engagement and shows that the most important feature for a good plot is the ability to keep readers waiting and anticipating for the next line. More than that, the curiosity and the intelligence of the reader is what makes any good plot by constant guessing and wondering of upcoming events as well as a good memory to connect previous events with new ones instead of simply retailing events in particular order.

In conclusion, E.M Forster made it noticeable that the plot is a vital element in any novel and that a good plot should showcase cause and effect between events as well as provoking the reader's imagination to create elements of mystery and suspense.

1.2.1.3 Characters

In order for any novel to reflect the writer's thoughts and visions of reality and humanity it must contain relatable characters. Characterization by definition is the process of giving personality to characters in a story through various means such as dialogue, actions and narration to provide the reader with a clear understanding of these characters' motives and conflicts.

Characterization gives life for characters by providing the readers with a clear vision for their actions and the choices they make. Readers would have the ability to view the world and society, and messages through their eyes.

A novel is a totality, made up of all the words in it, and it must be judged as a totality. Of this totality, characterization is only a part; yet it is plainly an essential one and the first in order of importance since, so far as the reader is concerned, without it the most profound apprehensions of man's fate count for nothing. Only through character can the novelist's apprehensions of man's fate be uttered at all (Allen, 1954, p. 14)

Allen argued that characterization and the way writers produce characters in any story is the most essential part of any novel, as it provides room for writers to exhibit their

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innovation and their vision of this world through relatable and complex characters, and without these characters the novel would lose a great deal of its influence and impact on readers.

In literature, characters can be divided into two parts, round or flat. For the round characters, they are considered the main elements that the story revolves around. They are complex and under development according to the events. They generally have a mission, internal conflicts or motivation that keep them undergoing significant development. They can be either protagonist or antagonists according to the author's writing as long as they keep the plot driving ahead. Readers would feel attached with round characters more often as they are provided with an insight of their motives, intentions and feelings. Flat characters on the other hand, are characters that do not undergo the same changes as round characters. They, most of the time, are static and have one role that remains consistent and unchangeable throughout the whole story. They lack complexity and have predictable actions and behaviors, but they still play an important role in shaping the events of the story (Mouro, 2015, p. 6).

The development of characters is a process that holds a great significance in a novel. Characters breathe life into the story, encouraging the readers, indirectly, to connect with their sentiments, experiences and identity. A well-rounded character completely crafted having both strengths and imperfections will force the reader to empathize with them throughout the story. The author paints a radiant picture of mankind's nature or, as well, characters that hold human-like features shedding reflections on the norms of society.

1.2.2 Archetypes in Literatureand Cinema: Heroes and Villains

In literature, heroes and villains play crucial roles in crafting narratives and shaping stories to appeal to the readers. The task of defining heroes and villains in literature or cinema is a challenging one due to the nature of their roles being unstable and flexible as well as due to the interpretation of such labels differing from one person to another. According to Rebecca Ray in *Types of Heroes in Literature*(2024), the first, every man hero can be defined as an everyday normal man facing extraordinary challenges that place him in a situation where the only option is to act heroic. Such characters are often associated with a robust ethical judgment as well as performing selfless acts

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making them relatable and likable (Ray, 2024). A good example of this would be Bilbo Baggins from J.R.R Tolkien's *The Hobbit ThePrequel to the Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

The second common type is the classical hero, a character type that can be easily recognized by possessing a set of skills, talents or powers separating them from everyone else. A trait commonly shared by this character type is the hidden powers or abilities revealed in a plot (Ray, 2024). A prime example of this would be the seemingly normal Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* trilogy, possessing and wielding great powers distinguishing him from everyone else. Another Example of this type of hero is Neo from the film *The Matrix*, initially an ordinary computer programmer, discovers that he is “The One”, a savior who can manipulate the Matrix. Neo begins his journey with his newfound abilities to challenge the system.

The last type of hero contrasts the previous two by possessing character traits or qualities that would be fitting for a villain and not a hero, as well as using unethical ways in order to achieve the greater good. However, the struggle this character goes through in order to overcome these sinister qualities and striving towards changing their ways is what places them under the hero category (Ray, 2024). A proper example of this can be found in the character of Han Solo from the *Star Wars* trilogy portrayed as an arrogant selfish smuggler who changes for a good cause.

Based on the research *Starting Into Darkness: An Analytical Framework for Villains in Literary and Adaptation studies* (2014) by Samantha Schäfer, three of the four categories of villains in literature are considered the most crucial types in literature and cinema and will be tackled. She explained that the function of a villain is completely different from the anti-hero. These three types of villains have been analyzed and formulated according to the “complexity” of the character (Schäfer, 2014, p. 7).

The first category that she started with is “the emerging villain”. One starting a story, the author would find it challenging when establishing or creating a villain when they know that this character will undergo a changing phase. The example that was provided by her was Michael Corleone from *The Godfather* (1969) as he was viewed by many as a villainous character after the changing phase but not the exact antagonist

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in the story. Schäfer (2014) viewed him as a merely villainous character (p. 8). On the other hand, there was Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* (1847), where the character transformed from an anti-heroic character into a clear villain giving a clear view of his development (Schäfer, 2014, p. 8).

According to Schäfer (2014), the emerging villains are characters who had a simple anti-heroic role where, suddenly, they would develop straightforwardly. The reader would keep the same idea about the character when he was first introduced to, until, later on they would see the same character with different characteristics and motives (p. 9). This type of villains were compared to real life people, they change all of a sudden, however they are not easily understood (Schäfer, 2014, p. 10).

Coming to the second type, named “core villains” by providing an example of Hannibal Lecter from *Silence of the Lambs* (1988) by Thomas Harris, this type of villain, based on the study, are characters of a very mysterious and dark spirit, they raise questions and doubts in the reader's mind and make them question every action in the story (Schäfer, 2014, p. 10). They are very complete and accomplished characters; they may have undergone a development but it would not be elaborated that much. For Hannibal Lecter, he was considered as an evil character with no sense of humanity and that can be clearly noticed in his cold stare. It shows how he feels no remorse with his wrongdoings and is absolutely detached from societal norms. The character also has a very calm aura, described by a “chilling” villain, which results in the reader questioning his behaviour of keeping his eyes firm, a straightforward one on the subject (Schäfer, 2014, p. 10). Other characters, such as the Lestat from *Interview with a Vampire* (1976), represents a philosophical exploration of good and evil as he claims, “evil is a point of view” (Rice cited in Schäfer, 2014, p. 10). Lestat's transformation from a mortal young man to a vampire is a complex development that tackles complicated themes like self-identity and morality creating a certain blurred line between good and bad (Schäfer, 2014, p. 10). The core villains according to Schäfer (2014) are not meant to be understood but more likely to raise questions and ambiguity, provoking debates regarding what is good and what is evil (Schäfer, 2014, p. 11)

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The third category is the “philosophical villain”, who serves as a mirror of society as well as a tool to explore human nature. This type of villain’s effectiveness and impact in stories can be viewed by the message that is intended to be transmitted to viewers (Schäfer, 2014, p. 12). This type of villain is demonstrated with the example of the Joker from the *Batman Series* where the character is showcasing his influence on viewers to question the world around them, in addition to being completely unpredictable with no clear motivation to his actions (Schäfer, 2014, p. 13). Another proper example of this chaotic and unpredictable behaviour of villains can be seen in the *Dark Knight* movie directed by Christopher Nolan, where the character of Alfred is providing a description of the Joker, stating: “Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn” (Nolan, 2008). According to Schäfer (2014), the definition that can be given for this type of villain is that “the primary goal of this villain is to tackle philosophical and societal issues raised by the author and the interaction they establish with the reader or viewer” (Schäfer, 2014, p. 14).

In conclusion, literature has long served as a mirror reflecting complexities for humans. These recurring archetypes of both heroes and villains serve as tremendous addition of depth and relatability stories.

1.2.2.1 Hero

A hero is usually defined as a character with great courage, kindness and true selfless acts in a society where he is the perfect example to look up to. *Western's Third New International Dictionary* defines a hero as “a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strengths or ability”. Joss Whedon (2024) argues that

The things about a hero, is even when it doesn't look like there's a light at the end of the tunnel, he is going to keep digging, he is going to keep trying to do right and make up for what's gone before, just because that's who he is (Joss Whedon, n.d)²

²https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/joss_whedon_410344

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In literature, the hero is represented as the main character with noble, divine qualities and the perfect ideal picture of goodness, as he is the center of attention and mostly what the story focuses on. They can be demonstrated as every-man hero, classical hero and the anti-hero.

The authors, in their writings, shows that heroes hold a great responsibility. They have, of course, flaws and would make mistakes whether in their past or in the present of the story, however, they would be easily and naturally forgiven by the society and most importantly the readers themselves. As the readers would put themselves in the hero's place, understanding why s/he took such a road or decision, they would sympathize with them in the end. An example can be taken into consideration in *The Hunger Games* (2008), by Suzanne Collins, where the heroine Katniss Everdeen is pictured to have such a courageous personality and bravery in an oppressive society where she was forced to kill in order to survive. For the reader, killing is a sinful act and a hero would always leave the killing part as the last chance, and she did. However, she was put in a situation where she had to take a bad action, to take a life in order for her to stay alive. Her society and the readers, as well, did sympathize with her, they understood her emotions, perspectives and what she was going through which only made them love her, support her and make her their own hero.

A hero is not just a simple character, s/he can be a perception of how an author would want to be seen and viewed by others, s/he can also reflect the identity of real-life people viewed by the writer himself. The author emphasizes both resilience and struggle to be identified as more than just simple protagonists serving as idols of inspiration for readers.

1.2.2.2 Villain

Villanus, a Medieval Latin term (Merriam Webster, 2024), simply put nowadays as a villain is commonly defined as an immoral character with behaviours that can only be described as bad, serving as an opposition for the hero oftentimes opposing him in order to achieve personal gains or simply becoming an obstacle in their way.

The common shared goal of villains in most novels is to oppose the hero and seek to inflict harm upon people at any given chance. In old literature, villains were

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characterized by their role to create conflict in the story. The authors would mainly emphasize the evil spirit of the human being by reflecting their thoughts shaping them into villains, which provided an insight of the darkest part of human nature.

John Steinbeck, an American writer emphasized in his book *East of Eden* (1952) that somehow without a villain there is no story. In other words, what would be the use of writing a story of only the hero himself? If there is no villain, then there will be no conflict and no purpose of the story itself. Emphasizing the need for an entity representing what is evil that can be embodied by a single person or character to create clash.

For a hero to shine and overcome their struggles and challenges they, automatically, need a villain who will oppose them in every corner of the story creating conflict, drama, and more opportunities for the hero to develop. Thus, the villain plays an essential part in the growth of the hero.

In recent years, and with the development of literature and cinema, the villain role witnessed a shift in its portrayal. Villains have always been, traditionally, viewed as evil chaotic characters driven and motivated by simple ambitions often associated with hatred of the hero or personal gains. However, all of that changed, this shift has opened more complex questions about this character, the present literature has begun to discover the complexity in villains, blurring the line between the hero and the Villain. As much as the hero is developing in the novel, the villain develops as well.

This *new* change has not been noticed nowadays by providing more complexity to the *traditional* hero-villain relationship awakening, not only, the mind of the readers but also their questions and personal perceptions of the villainous character.

1.3 The Development of the Villain

Critics struggled in the eighteenth century, with the contradictions of finding pleasure in villain-heroes despite their emphasis on moral excellence. Marlies K. Danziger's work sheds light on this captivating. Based on the *Heroic Villains in Eighteenth-Century Criticism* (1959) the

“Eighteenth century critics known for their firmness that literature should extol virtue and make vice repellent, might be expected to take a highly unfavorable

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view of characters conspicuous for their villainy. Yet, a number of critics in England and on the continent acknowledged that certain villain-heroes might give an audience considerable pleasure. Indeed, a particular explanation for such pleasure evolved and came to be rather, widely accepted in the course of the century” (Danziger, 1959, p. 35)

The 18th century critics valued morality in literature by acknowledging and recognizing that audiences can still enjoy watching villainous characters as they can be drawn to them. Over time, they developed this explanation with complex anti-heroes.

Aristotle, a famous Greek philosopher, tackled many topics including literature and drama. When it came to tragedies, he did not mind that those characters can be evil as long as that character was not the protagonist, justifying his opinion that “the main character should be a hero” (Danziger, 1959, p. 35), a flawed one down the path of mistakes that eventually leads to their downfall. Furthermore, he thought that making a character too evil and too powerful is a mistake that shapes the story to be unfair and perhaps unrealistic.

During the second part of the 17th century, several different arguments emerged supporting the idea of creating villainous characters. Among those voices, Rapin was a critic who believed the proper way to determine if a character is good or bad in epic poems is based on their moral values. He wrote a book entitled *Réflexions sur La Poétique d’Aristote* (1674), where he mentioned that an epic character born should influence readers into loving good people and despising bad ones, by providing the example of Aeneas and Mizentius from the epic poem of *Aeneid* by Virgil, where the first man is a pious hero and the latter blasphemous character.

On the other hand, Le Bossu Another critic who believed in a different way to judge character which was based on how well they fit the story as mentioned in his book *Traité du Poeme Epique* (1675), where he mentioned that characters shouldn't always be morally good as long as they fit appropriately into the narrative and, of course, their roles.

Furthermore, back to the 18th century, many writers of that time believed that the core of any writing in literature should be to provide ethical lessons showing the people and helping them differentiate between what's good and evil. However, not all

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writers created characters based on that common consumption. Some writers developed characters that performed unethical and immoral acts at the same time possessing admirable qualities.

This new type of villain-hero appealed to the critics and formed an interesting reading material. It leads to the creation of a modern villain based on Michel Martin Del Compo's research: *Sympathy for the Devils: an Analysis of the Villain Archetype since the Nineteenth Century* (2017). In the past century, this new way of writing the villain presented this type of character as an interesting concept that differs from the old traditional villain that served one purpose only which was to oppose the hero. The modern villain acquiring human qualities as well as positive traits resulted in a huge impact on stories and heroes of those stories by challenging their morals and defying the idea that a hero is simply a white knight in shining armor. Not only that, but by transmitting real world struggles and complexities these villains showcased and that the idea of what is good and bad is not always clear.

In addition, the role of the modern villain is to contrast the hero moving away from the old traditional label of an enemy, it can be seen in the way modern villains often mirror the hero reflecting his dark side and flaws and in the path of doing so, it captivates the audience with a compelling and realistic take on the world.

The journey of representing the villain went through different stages reflecting ideologies of societies in different times, and progressed through simple cartoonish presentations to a modern state where most villains are held on the same pedestal or even higher than the hero.

1.3.1 Complexity and Relatability

The first thing a reader would do while reading a novel is to see whether they feel a connection between them and a specific character, which would usually be the hero. They try to imagine and portray themselves in the story as much as they can, "... a readership capable of entering imaginatively into another personality, the fictive character..." (Gelley, 1980, p. 60).

The more a reader is connected with certain characters, the more he finds himself immersed within the story as a result of great character writing. The invisible

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link that keeps the reader connected is based on relatability and complexity of the characters.

Characters grow and change along the story; they would develop either physically, morally or supernaturally. Whereas for the villain characters, the writers in the present literature would create engaging villains by featuring them with great complexity and depth which makes the reader triggered and confused by the personality of the villain, and somehow ending up connected with them rather than the hero himself. Most successful movies introduced simple plots with complex characters.

It has become noticeable that the villain is the character that guides the sequence of events in the story, without a bad guy there would be no use of the plot, the conflict or the hero himself. Now, indirectly, the evil character has become THE story. Writers such as Patricia Highsmith, Thomas Harris, Scott Silver and Todd Philips and others, contributed in writing such good villains, which seems to be a contradiction at first, nevertheless they succeed to grab the attention of the reader throughout the complexity of their villain characters.

“Murderers, psychopaths, prowlers-in-the-night are old hat, unless one writes about them in a new way” (1972), said Patricia Highsmith, she emphasized that villains do not, necessarily, have to be evil looking in their physics as they were portrayed in old literature. The current literature may have pure evil bad guys but they could still be beautifully good looking. They can be educated, physically fit and well looking, having, absolutely, the opposite stereotyping image of a dirty character of the 18th century.

Even with Scott Silver and Todd Philips who featured the *Joker* (2019), the evil and main character of the story, after a comic book using a unique style of writing by narrating the simple life of the character and how he used to be a normal citizen in society, the character developed and transformed into the *villanus* and most hated person in society. The writers made it hard for the reader to dislike the hero of the story or even for him to be labeled as villain since they showed a background of his life, they understood him and his motives, ending up by liking him as an evil character and perhaps taking his side at a certain point of time.

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By providing a background or what can be called as the past of the villain's life; how they used to live among society or their personality before the start of the conflict between them and the hero, made it more relatable since the reader will end up, eventually, understanding the motives and actions of the villain. The writer would be giving relatable and sympathetic features that will shed light to the complexity of the villain. The readers will not only see their dark side as they used to do before, but they will also try to find out the reasons behind why the character is a villain. They will see vulnerability, fears and even affection, which would make it easy for the reader to relate to the villain or even be on their side of the story rooting for them. The villain can be portrayed as any normal person forced to be pushed by their limits and oppose norms that they have felt society has imposed on them. They may have had great losses and pain but the moment where they needed someone they were found alone or judged. They can be good old friends, but were not able to accept the world as it is and rebel against it and it led to the misperceived actions.

Now that the reader is provided with, not only the evil plans and dark side of the villain, but also with their past, emotions and their own perception of the story, they will relate to them, understand their struggles as unaccepted members of society, resonate with their dark side and accepting their imperfections and complexities.

1.3.2 Blurred Lines between Hero and Villain

Moral concepts such as “good and bad”, “right and wrong” or “moral and immoral” do not exist as opposed to ideas by nature (i.e. not inherently) and are not, always, easily distinguished. According to *Moral Relativism*:

The Metaethical position usually concerns the truth or justification of moral judgments, and it has been given somewhat different definitions. Metaethical relativists generally suppose that many fundamental moral disagreements cannot be rationally resolved, and on this basis they argue that moral judgments lack the moral authority or normative force that moral objectivists usually contend these judgments may have (Gowans, 2021)

This passage means that these concepts are dependent on the personal or social perspective as they reflect human nature and complexity. These philosophies and

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concepts can be applied when discussing the lines separating heroes and villains in literature and cinema.

The essence of many movies or novels requires a compelling story and in the modern world of today it has become a tradition for a compelling story to provide a morally complex villain performing a set of actions contributing greatly to blurring the lines of good and bad, hero and villain. However, the actions of these characters are not the only factor that helps blur the line, perception plays a predominant role as well. For example, the motives of certain characters may change the way viewers see them, a villain with a noble motive in mind can gain viewers sympathy on the other hand a hero driven by the greater good or a good cause performing cruel actions that would make the audience question who are the real heroes and villains.

According to *What Makes a Hero? From Past Polarities to Contemporary Ambiguities* (2021) by Mairuna Farheen, the writer explained that morally ambiguous characters are the definition of blurred lines between heroes and villains suggesting that bad choices made by characters cannot be used to label them as villains, that a single act of crime cannot be used to separate good from evil (Farheen, 2021, p. 17).

On the other hand, a tragic hero is defined by Aristotle as another part of the morally ambiguous character who is not completely good or completely evil, but suffered a terrible downfall that shifts his balance and judgment on his surroundings making his actions unpredictable as well as hard to place under good or bad actions. A proper example of this can be the Hamartia of *Macbeth* (1623) by Shakespeare, blinded by ambition for throne acting selfishly for the sake of glory but at the same time possessing noble qualities as well as the feeling of remorse placing him between the lines.

Patrick Kennedy (2019) introduced the Psychological Realism to be an essential aspect in creating and shaping realistic characters. It is a form of literary genre that came in the late 19th century, as it explains the reason behind why characters take such actions. By delving into the motives and inner-self, writers can develop multi-dimensional characters that would eventually resonate with the readers (Kennedy, 2019)

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Another factor that hugely contributes to these blurred lines is the use of perspectivism by writers and movie directors. According to Nietzsche's *Epistemic Perspectivism* (2020), perspectivism is the dependence on the unique human understanding of life in order to explain it and the concept of truth cannot be based on a single unified view on a given subject but rather a variation of different interpretations of different people. Perspectivism in contemporary philosophy of science has to do with human limitations and focused interest, for him, perspectivism is not one precisely defined doctrine, but a cluster of related ideas about the subjectivity of truth, anti-realist metaphysics, a bundle theory of objects, the revaluation of values and the creation of one's own virtues (Hales, 2020, p. 24-25)

Among many works of literature and cinema a prime example of perspectivism being used as a technique would be the movie *Watchmen* (2009) a superhero film directed by Zack Snyder based on the 1986-1987 comic book with the same name dealing with a group of vigilantes questioning their flawed past as an attempt for redemption.

The film provides an alternative timeline to a real-life situation, the Cuban missile crisis with a comic book world approach. In the events of the movie, a character named Ozymandias executes a plan to prevent world annihilation by committing a series of terrorist attacks around the world and framing fellow member of the superhero group to those attacks, killing millions of innocents in an attempt to save billions by uniting nations instead of escalation against each other that would surely end in doomsday for the planet. An act was described by the character as a necessary crime for the greater good for a chance of world peace, dividing viewers whether it is indeed a heroic act to save humanity or simply an attempt to justify a massacre.

Taking in consideration both of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623) and Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (2009), the lines separating heroes from villains start blurring for the audience. It occurs when the writer starts providing certain characters with the choice of the greater good, whether to perform an immoral deed for the sake of the collective well-being or simply understanding that no universal advantage can justify immorality making viewers more inclined to side with such decisions or in most cases

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not being able to categorize them. Another example can be taken into consideration, is when certain characters suffer a great deal of injustice or misfortune leaving them with no other option other than to react, leaving the audience in a state of confusion whether to uphold a character to a certain moral code or simply understand or even relate to their action.

In other terms, relatability to the complexity of life and understanding that life is not lived in a simple white and black world and watching certain characters experience some of life complexity may alter viewers' judgment making it hard to place a character under good or bad.

Such blurred lines did not only make stories more entertaining and thought provoking for the audience, it contributed greatly in the development of the villain as a major character making the heroes of stories less relatable and placing the villain as an indispensable character.

1.4 Audience and Empathy

Most readers grew up listening and watching the same ideas in stories that a powerful hero with great moral values overcomes the bad guy and, being in this systematic relation, most of them would root for the hero and stand against the villain. However, now that the blurred line has been created between these two characters and the hero looks simple and static with nothing new about it except for being a protagonist, the villain on the other hand is starting to look more compelling and attractive. Ken Miyamoto (2023) says that “the most memorable characters are those we empathize with - even villains”. Therefore, whatever role a character would have in a given story, the audience/readers will empathize with him/her according to what the writer provides as background information.

1.4.1 Reception Theory

Empathy towards misunderstood characters or villains has become a more popular trend in today's world of cinema with the development of the villain creating an appealing story to tell. The industry of filmmaking shifted towards the production of stories showcasing a hidden side from typically well-known villainous characters, this trend aligns with the principles of reception theory Reception theory or commonly

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known as Audience theory was first developed by Stuart Hall in 1973. He presents in his essay “Encoding and Decoding Television Discourse”, dealing with how the content is encoded and decoded for audiences across various forms of media, drawing a link and giving insights between the audience and movies or books.

According to *Handbook of Visual Communication Theory, Methods, and Media*, by Anne Marry Barry saying that “Receptiontheory is the application of neurological research and accepted psychological principles to the study of visual communication” that facilitate the process of understanding how the human brain operates in terms of analyzing visual information, “ultimately, in order to be useful, all communication theory and all assumptions about the way we process images and the impact they have on us must be compatible with neurological research” (Barry, 2005, p45).

1.4.2 Empathy with the Villain

Readers naturally tend to side with and relate to characters that represent them. However, a well-written villain with a compelling background story can help readers understand their motives and struggles. One of the examples that can be given is taken from *Wuthering Heights* (1847) written by Emily Brontë, where the novel portrays Heathcliff as an immoral character with bad deeds from tricking Isabella Linton to marry him by his deceiving behaviour and torturing her as well. He can be viewed as a villainous character. Normally, this type of villains is hated and not accepted in society, however, it was mentioned that Heathcliff is a complex character and his actions were driven by his tragic childhood and the difficulties of being accepted in society, it was described in the background of the story that he was first abandoned by his real family and adopted into another that not everyone accepted him in and was never given a kind treatment and was mistreated numerous times. Such events will psychologically affect the character into either growing up with a low confidence or, in the case of Heathcliff, develop into an evil character

Villains have been present in most stories for decades, but the consideration that every bad guy has a story behind his actions and behaviour would reveal the truth behind every deceiving villain. Based on the research of Latoya Abulu (2014) about Lord Voldemort in *Harry Potter* with the pen of J.K Rowling, a character

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that is not so unfamiliar for most readers nowadays is the enemy of hero Harry Potter, the favourite hero for most readers. Many characters within the book were terrified to even pronounce the name of the villain, terrified he would harm them. He was known by many names such as “Lord Voldemort”, “The Dark Lord”, “He Who Must Not Be Named”, but few of them addressed him by his real name, “Tom Riddle”. Before turning into a villain Lord Voldemort was actually just Tom Riddle, an orphaned boy with no parents or relatives alive to take him in a home, abandoned in a children's orphanage where he was abused by other kids before knowing his true self

That foul common smuggler who abandoned me before I was even born. He left her [his mother], before I was born! She died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a muggle orphanage, but I vowed to find him. I got revenge! (Rowling, 2000, p. 561)

It shows Tom Riddle's decisions and the path of revenge he chose. What happened to him as a kid affected his thoughts and personal relation; he can be viewed as a misunderstood character with low trust when it comes to people in general. “How stupid they were and how trusting, thinking that their safety lay in friends; that weapons could be discarded even for moments” (Rowling, 2007, p. 281). It only showed how deeply he was affected by the loneliness to the point that he grew a strong independence towards trust and love.

If we consider Voldemort based on the movie, he would be a villainous character typical like any other villain, but if we take Voldemort of the books, he would be perceived as a tragically misunderstood character.

Such examples of villains who captivated the audience is a clear-cut example of why the reader would sympathize with the villain and maybe root for them rather than the rest of society. They would understand his wrongdoings and maybe even forgive him later on. The reader would see the villain as a victim of society with their relatable actions, it would reflect the roles in the story, i.e. rather than having a despised villain, there would be a misunderstood one and the same thing goes with the hero. Rather than having a perfect hero, there would be a good character who tries to do good, having flaws just like any other person.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter attempted to clarify and demonstrate general concepts that would provide assistance in explaining the process behind the development of the selected work. In order to fully grasp the evolution of certain characters the aspects of the novel must be established, furthermore defining heroes and villains showcasing the process of their development from simple to complex, eventually resulting in blurred lines between the two and the emergence of empathy and relatability towards villains. The following chapter will focus on specific villains using a comparative study in an attempt to provide an insight on what makes a well written villain

Chapter Two:
Analysis between Cesar Romero's
Joker and Joaquin Phoenix's

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2.1 Introduction

The development of the villain as a character went through many different stages to reach the complete villain of nowadays, as established in the first chapter. Among the many memorable villains in the history of literature and cinema, the character of the Joker stands out as one of the most iconic representations of an antagonist in recent years.

Appearing first as the villain in the *Batman* (1939) comic books serving the goal of opposing the Dark Knight, evolving into a fan favorite character and moving into the big screen with many live-action adaptations of the clown prince of crime with each one showcasing a different approach in the presentation of the *Joker*³. Many movie directors, and actors took on the job of bringing the characters of the Joker⁴ into life with by providing certain traits to this role, with each new project brought forward a different Joker appears with different characteristics that reflect the true essence of the clown prince of crime, as well as, providing a thought-provoking stories viewer worldwide. The character of the Joker, mainly the 2019 version, delved into complex themes unlike the first version, such as the neglect of society to its citizens' political issues and it deepened into the psychological aspects of the character.

Among the most notable live-action adaptations of the Joker that can be used in studying the development of such character and the development of villains in general, is the first appearance in *Batman* TV series (1966), aired on the ABC Network from 1966 to 1968. In more recent times, Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) starring Oscar-winning Joaquin Phoenix, provides a deeper dive to the past and a look inside the mind of the character.

The audience's worldwide reception of such a variety of takes on the Joker can be seen as mixed, leaving viewers with different opinions and reactions to such works and questioning the character's actions and their roles in societal disconnect.

³*Joker* (the movie)

⁴Joker (the character)

2.2 Who is the Joker?

The name of the Joker is not an unfamiliar one to the audience, whether they are readers or viewers. The Joker is a character of villainous and evil characteristics and personality that first appeared in DC Comic book series *Batman 1* in 1939, as it was presented as the most chaotic and evil character that everyone fears in society, and number one enemy of Batman, a character that showed one hundred percent evilness and no remorse to the suffering he caused in society. According to what was presented in the comic book and the viewers, Joker is a villain who lacks moral compass. In a city where there are countless crimes and criminals, the “laughing villain” was the most terrifying of them all (DC Comics, 1939).

The first appearance of the Joker in the comic book was portrayed by his white skin, his green hair, and the reddish grin that was spread across his face without forgetting his loud laughter in his acting, the only thing is that there was nothing funny about his actions; however, he found it hilarious and pleasing seeing people suffering, and that is of course the nature of the villain. According to “*The Complete History of the Joker*” site by Sean T. Collins, the creation of the Clown Prince, another name was given to the Joker mainly because of his appearance and behavior, shrouded in controversy involving Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson, each one of them contributing to the character's inception. Robinson designed a joker playing card, and Bill Finger drew inspiration from a clown face logo and actor Conrad Veidt's character in *The Man Who Laughs*, while Kane and Robinson developed the character visually. The Joker was simply an antagonist in this comic, trying to oppose the hero in every step. However, he was Batman's iconic nemesis. (Collins, 2019)

At the end of “*The Killing Joke*” (1988) by Alan Moore, Batman, finally, confronts the Joker, questioning the origins of his madness: “I mean what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob maybe? Brother carved by some mugger? Something like that, I bet. Something like that...” (*The Killing Joke*, 1988).

The response of the Joker was unclear, let alone logic, “You know, I'm not exactly sure... sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another. If I'm going to

have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!” (*The Killing Joke*, 1988). The character reveals his past as an ambiguous and ever-changing view of his own past, preferring it to be a “multiple choice”. This response reflects the Joker’s unstable mind, chaotic and not-so-predictable nature, enjoying the idea of his past being open to interpretation. The character himself was uncertain how to define himself, which only gives us an example how villains can be chaotic and unstable.

2.3 The First Joker

Over the last 80 years of the Joker’s existence, the character has gone through several changes in interpretation, and it has been played and distinguished by many actors, but it is without question that the 1960s version is one of a kind. Cesar Romero was one of the most compelling villains in the 1960s in the *Batman* television series and *Batman* film (1966) as he was well portrayed.

According to “*The Best Joker is Still Cesar Romero in the ‘66 Batman TV Show, Hand Down*” by Noah Berlatsky, saying that this version of the Joker was not introspective, wounded or soulful, but because he was a cheerful, extroverted goofball; an exemplary chaotic maniac villain with an unstable mind. The Joker was a perfect adversary to Batman, every time he thought he was a step forward, Batman would be right after him.

While Batman was a character of strict moral code doing what was right for the whole society, the Joker was a protagonist always seeking destruction and chaos. In addition, the relationship between Batman and the Joker was far from a simple hero-villain relationship. The Joker viewed Batman as a challenge and a symbol of order that must be taken down whereas he viewed himself as the agent of chaos ready to destroy this order, and as chaotic the villain is, he wanted to destroy this order.

2.3.1 Personality and Actions

The Joker of the 1960s was a completely different character, with a different persona. It is true that he used to oppose the hero Batman as he was the antagonist of the film, however he was considered to be far from being a darker character as he was famous for being more comedic than a darker villain.

In *Batman's First Live-Action Is Way Darker Than You Remember* (2024), David Miller believed that even though the Joker in *Batman* television series (1966) was viewed as a prankster, nicknamed by Clown Prince, he was still engaged in outrageous and dishonorable acts, by posing a threat to society (Miller, 2024).

Furthermore, based on *The Best Joker Is Still Cesar Romero In The '66 Batman TV Show, Hands Down* (2019), the Joker was a masterpiece as it blended between nefariousness with his cheerfulness and glee-nature. Unlike the Joker in comic books who often showed episodes of mental-illness and criminality, Romero's Joker held a more carefree demeanor that he seemed to always enjoy himself in the middle of the chaos he created (Berlatsky, 2019).

This version of the Joker was more focused on the humor, the laid-back personality embodying a whimsical and entertaining villain, in which Romero "invented the character's laugh, which would later be taken up by Jack Nicholson, Heath Ledger, and Joaquin Phoenix," rather than the cruel and deeply dark malevolent character (GuessWho, 2020).

In the movie *Batman* (1966), the character of the joker had one static role with no changes or any development, which is to be the antagonist of the hero and oppose him in society as well as causing trouble and chaos in Gotham City, with the intention to be feared by all citizens. The Joker is a clear example of the "old" villain, how it used to be represented by authors and movie directors.

The character remains consistent and unchanged throughout the whole story as he lacks complexity and has predictable actions and behaviours. His main actions were a set of pranks, stealing money and other properties, kidnapping, and holding people hostage. He was a mastermind criminal, committing heinous acts, which made everyone hate him along with unneeded laughs and a makeup face that only showed him as a clown, in which he felt very comfortable with no one knowing his identity.

The movie focused more on the emergence of the hero rather than the villain. The role played by the villain was unchangeable and as it has already been mentioned theoretically, villains in most novels are to oppose the hero and create chaos and

conflict by simply showing their true nature to the audience, and that's what Cesar Romero's Joker did best, creating chaos with a sense of humor, making him more undesirable.

2.3.2 Characteristics

The features of a character are based on their qualities and personality traits. They represent the individual, whether it is about their habits, attitudes, good or bad acts. For the villain Joker, it is quite clear to analyze his characteristics throughout his behavior and looks. The character of the Joker (1966) can be analyzed, more appropriately, through what is called direct characterization⁵. As simple as the character is, the villain had clear motives, and that is to oppose the hero, bring chaos to the city and be the villain that everyone fears.

The name Joker brought terror in the city, however no one explained what the name of the Joker means exactly. His desire for trouble and bringing the hero was basically the same role as any other villains of old literature, the authors and movie directors, whether it was for comics or television series, only described his traits based on his actions and behavior. In addition to that, his appearance was not explained as to why he had green hair with a face full of makeup, in which the audience concluded that he wanted to hide his face. The message that the authors and movie directors wanted to convey is simple when it comes to this character. The Joker was born as a villain in the story and series, having clear motives, with no background story, which results in being despised by the audience.

2.4 Joker (2019)

The Joker (2019) is a psychological thriller directed by Todd Phillips who also co-wrote the script with Scott Silver, starring Joaquin Phoenix who took on the role of Arthur Fleck also known later on in the movie as the Joker.

A movie described by Hoffman Jordan (2019) on The Guardian site entitled "*Joker – the Incels, the Incitement, the Ending: Discuss with Spoilers*" as "A violent

⁵Direct characterization is when the author provides the reader with the character's personality explicitly.

look at “how Batman’s foe got that way”, Joker has been hailed as revolutionary for its depiction of mental illness. The movie is based on the famous DC Comic book characters, set in 1981, and tells the story of a failed stand-up comedian narrating his daily life and his failures that ultimately lead to his madness. The movie provides a different approach by taking a closer look into the mind of the joker as well as telling his life story in order to show a different side of this character, a side rarely shown in live action adaptations.

Most common live adaptations of this characters in the past can be seen focusing on a rivalry with the hero, or simply being a villain in the hero’s story without providing background information on what makes this certain character operate in such manner, providing little to no details about the Joker’s past or what created such a villain.

In this film, the director provides more than a background story for the joker and takes a step forward by attempting to tackle societal issues through the eyes of the main character and when discussing the core message of the film, Todd states

If I had to drill down on one overarching theme for me, it’s about the power of kindness and a lot of people miss that. I think if you don’t see that you either don’t have a soul or you’re being reductive to make up for your own struggles in that area. But, really, to me, that’s where it started from and there are other things in the movie like lack of love, the lack of empathy in society, and childhood trauma, but the power of kindness really runs through this film (Chichizola, 2020)

Based on *What Joker Is Really About, According to Director Todd Phillips*. As it highlights a key theme of the film which is the power of empathy, and how acts of kindness performed by members of a given society hold immense power to change lives and turn situations around. Another issue that the film tries to tackle is childhood trauma and the lack of love that plays a huge role in shaping individuals as it can be seen throughout the movie where the character experiences all of the mentioned themes in an attempt of the director to showcase the consequences of a society devoid of empathy and kindness.

Violence is another huge theme in the movie, where the explosion of the main character can be described as violent, and the movie does not romanticize the idea of these acts committed by Arthur Fleck according to The Guardian(2019)

It's really just a drama about a mentally ill man with no friends who is targeted by bullies, lives with his mother, is ignored by the attractive woman down the hall and only finds purpose in mass murder... but Fleck's anger, for most of the movie, stays rooted in his own circumstances. He isn't really railing against PC culture or how he's owed anything... (Hoffman, 2019).

Straying away from traditional superhero and comic book movie patterns of glorifying violence, the movie explores factors that lead the main character into a life of crime by provoking sympathy and making the case that all humans are one bad day away from a similar fate.

The movie was well received by audiences and critics, achieving huge box office success and claiming two Oscar awards; a true testimony for the shift happening with the taste of viewers towards stories with compelling villains.

2.4.1 Personality and Characteristics

The personality of the protagonist, in this movie, can be divided into two parts. It begins with a deeper insight into the stand-up comedian, who suffers from several mental illnesses, and eventually leads to the second part of his personality, which is his transformation into the Joker who is viewed as the product of the refusal of that same society.

In the first act of the movie, the main character can be seen as a calm collective man minding his business and avoiding conflict. However, a great deal of sadness and stress takes over him due to his medical condition of the Pseudobulbar affect, commonly known as PBA⁶, which according to Pseudobulbar affect: Symptoms and treatment (2023) by Mary West, it involves involuntary brief episodes of crying or

⁶PBA is a neurological symptom that causes sudden, involuntary episodes of crying or laughing (West, 2023)

laughing. A person cannot control them, and throughout the movie his laughter causes him physical pain as he tries to hide it or even control it which brings a feeling of sadness in the audience which is the complete opposite of what laughter is commonly associated with.

The uncontrollable laughter that takes over the main character is usually the result of stress and being placed in uncomfortable situations, so much so that in his journal he wishes for death by writing “I hope my death makes more sense than my life” (*Joker*, 2019, 00:06:25–00:06:29). In addition to that, he expresses a deep desire to hide from the world and the need to be isolated somewhere alone. This feeling can be viewed through his satisfaction of being in the hospital inside a locked room with nowhere to go. In another shot in the movie, he can be seen taking shelter inside his own refrigerator in a clear attempt to escape the harsh reality he faces.

Another aspect of his personality is his clear desire for empathy, a silent cry for help in order to escape the constant harassment he receives from everyone around him from his coworkers to his mother, as well as strangers in his city. Being bullied and on the receiving end of physical and emotional abuse creates this underdog persona where the audience has no choice but to feel sorry for him. In a page of his journal, he writes “The worst part of having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don't” (*Joker* (2019) 00:26:49 – 00:27:00), showing how deeply he seeks empathy from anyone around him, the constant need to be understood and treated as someone who needs help, an attempt by him to be noticed and treated in order to be accepted into society. A different example of this is the conversation he has with the social worker where he says, “you don't listen do you, I don't think you ever really hear me, you just ask the same questions every week” (*Joker*, 2019, 00:40:44–00:44:50) a clear cry for help to be heard (Puder and Walter, 2024)

However, all the abuse he suffered from transformed him to a monster who attempts to fight back and seeks comfort in killing those who wrong him and the clear shift in his personality is portrayed by his feelings of happiness whenever he commits murder. A ritual of dancing in happiness and confidence whenever he kills someone starts to shape his new personality, a more confident man with a better state of mind

and no insecurities who uses murder as a defense mechanism to cope up with the tragedies accruing in his life, reshaping the ideas of right and wrong by using sympathy to justify his murder and influence the audience judgment. “As the movie progresses, we begin to blur our idea of traditional right and wrong, and enter into his mind, and his reasons for murderous rage” (Puder and Walter, 2024).

The final act that accelerates the transformation from Arthur Flick into the Joker is the killing of his mother upon discoveries of childhood abuse by her. A newborn personality is shown in the movie completing a transformation from a poor mistreated man into a dark villain. This was the final drop for the character to become the villain he was not meant to be, but forced to be that way.

2.4.2 Actions

In the movie *Joker*(2019) the actions of the main character can be divided into two, the first set of actions are performed by Arthur Flick as the failed stand-up comedian, the second set of actions are performed by the Joker. With each set representing a different perspective and acts of the film, splitting his personality into two.

Right at the beginning Arthur Flick gains audience support by his selfless acts, showing a human side of him that cares for others around him. It can be seen in his behaviour with his mother, taking care of her while she is sick despite having enough issues on his own, and in another shot of the film, he is seen on a bus sitting behind a mother and her son trying to put a smile on the kid's face by attempting silly faces. As the result of many mental health issues and his PBA condition, Arthur suffers from severe depression that takes over him and provides more hardships in his daily life. However, he attempts to get better; he tries to seek professional help and takes a huge number of medications to stabilize his health, and even goes beyond that by hiding his feelings and putting on a smile for others around him.

As a result of hiding his feelings, Arthur develops resentment for the idea of being forced to fit in the society and how if he does not put up a cheery face he is treated as a freak. The first signs of anger start to show in a scene in an alley after

losing his job where he starts kicking a trash can repeatedly non-stop, until his feet hurt.

All these misfortunes faced by him culminate and transition his anger to be faced towards people who attempt to hurt him. The first example can be seen where he committed his first acts of evilness, shooting three armless men who were abusing him physically for his laughing condition, emptying an entire gun in one of them with no signs of remorse or hesitation. This behavior indicates a major shift in his personality and opening the door for a different man that takes over him.

This transition to a new persona by the main character defines the second act of the film. He goes on into a killing spree, with a changed attitude that can be described as confident. A prime example of this confidence is a bathroom scene after committing yet another murder he begins to dance carelessly in a clear sign that he is not bothered at all with what just happened.

Towards the end of the movie and in the final major acts performed by the protagonist, he is the guest of a live TV show and commits yet another murder live on national television, killing the host after portraying him as a cruel man who ridiculed him often in the past. A single shot to the head taking away the host's life as well as every remaining part of his old self and fully transforming into the Joker by dancing and grabbing the camera and addressing the audience saying “goodnight and remember that’s life” (*Joker*, 2019, 01:45:47 – 01:45:5).

The actions of the main character can be summarized into a kind tormented soul attempting to exist in a cruel city that lacks compassion and transforming the character’s empathy that begins to erode until he turns, finally, into a cold-hearted killer. This series of events only helped in showcasing the character’s emergence as the iconic villain.

2.4.3 Character Development

Upon examining the topic of characterization and the role of villains in literature and cinema, Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) is a prime example of the modern state of villains

and how far the development of such characters has gotten by reaching new levels and reshaping the narrative to place attention on villains in modern times.

The movie breaks away from traditional norms and patterns when dealing with villains. The origin story of the protagonist in the film is completely different from usual comic book stories where the man behind the painted face is oftentimes created by a chemical accident that alters his brain and behavior creating the Joker. “With Todd Phillips’s *Joker* (2019), the super villain’s cinematic origin story took a different turn. There was no falling into the chemicals, no criminal background”, focusing more on a realistic setting to present an ordinary man in order to shed light on the societal issues that end up creating the Joker in the film, based on *Exploring affect, identity, and populism in and around Todd Phillips’ Joker*(Sreepada & Partida, 2022, p177-193)

The film puts extra attention on the development of the main character's personality. Such care for a character identity used to be applied only to heroes; however, the film takes a deeper perception inside the life of a troubled individual, telling his story from the start instead of presenting a villainous character for the sake of the plot. “As a matter of fact, the “Joker” seems to apply more, although still not entirely compatible, to Pizarro and Baumeister’s (2013) analysis that diversifies the imaginary super villains from the real villains that have flesh and bones” (Efthymiadou, Koukouvinou, 2020, p16). The film moves at a slow pace taking extra care to the details that makes and transforms the character into a villain in order to provide a compelling protagonist, one with many human flaws as well as enough positive traits to appeal to the audience.

Another aspect of the modern villain that can be seen in the film is moving away from the constant requirement for a hero to fight or crimes to be committed, such traits that identified villains in the past are not visible in the film and replaced by transmitting real life struggles. By presenting a character in pain before committing a crime, handing them common daily issues that many people around the world face such as sickness; physical and mental ones. As well as, the struggle of trying to be accepted in society and finding a place in the world, making the character face real-life

complexities at every turn in before turning into a life of crime in order to create credibility and reliability within the audience.

Furthermore, the *Joker* (2019) equips yet another aspect of the modern villain by challenging norms as well as the idea of good and evil by giving the villain the underdog statue from the very beginning. It pursues the audience to disregard any acts performed by the main character as evil, sticking by him or even at times cheering for him for finally escaping the underdog statue.

The movie *Joker* (2019) provides a fresh take on an iconic character and elevates the role of villains in cinema, producing what can be seen as a documentary about a troubled individual who suffers and turns into a life of crime as a result. The director gives the audience a chance to live and experience life through the eyes of the main character creating a case for empathy for him. The huge success of the film can only be described as a shift in narrative where viewers no longer demand or show interest in stories about the good guys but seeking reliability with villains.

2.5 Audience and Joker

The *Joker* (2019) had an encoded message created by the filmmakers, using Stuart Hall's theory, based on social, mental and psychological issues faced in real life society and the decoded or the interpretations given by the audience in which linking the events of the movie with their real-life experience as it influences their interests and response about the movie, technically, showing the relationship between the *Joker* (2019) and the viewers (Hall, 1973). As Barry notes, the core of this theory can be based on the huge role emotions play in determining first hand reactions to visuals' (Barry, 2005, p45), especially on what has been shown in *Joker* (2019). The emotions felt by the character from sadness to happiness to the crazy laughing episodes, in other words it is more than just a simple observation; it is about the emotions that come as a result. Furthermore, age groups that can be labeled as emotion driven thinkers are kids and teenagers, basing their reasoning mostly on sentiments. "Developmentally, too, we know that children and teenagers' reason primarily through emotions" (Barry, 2005, p45). Based on Ben Dalton "*Why 'Joker' is performing so well at the UK box office*" the *Joker* (2019) was highly watched by teenagers with a percentage of 70% between

the age of 13 to 34, 18% for 35-44 and 11% for 45-54 and that consequently explains the deep influence visuals have on them by shaping their thoughts and actions due to the strong emotional connection between them and the character because of the background events which made them reasonable for the audience (Dalton, 2019).

The director Todd Phillips stated in an interview with *Indie Wire Films Industry and Review* about the process behind creating this movie; “we sat down to write a movie about empathy and the lack of thereof in the world” (Phillips, 2020, 0:49-0:59). He explains that motives behind the creation was to shed light on the issue of empathy in modern world especially towards troubled individuals taking a closer look at their mind and making them appear as normal everyday people who just happen to experience difficulties that provoke certain reactions from them.

In another interview with *Variety* magazine entitled *Todd Phillips' Risky Vision*, by James Linhardt, Phillips talks about the core of the movie being empathy “Arthur is the guy you see on the street who you walk right past — or over,” Phillips says. “With this movie, we get a peek at what’s below the surface.” He suggests that at its core, “Joker” is a portrait of a society devoid of empathy” (Phillips, n.d)⁷

Throughout the entirety of the first act, the main character is established as inferior to his coworkers and everyone else representing the cruel world he lives in, facing injustice and trouble at every corner which provokes a feeling of sadness and sympathy wishing anything positive would come out of such horrible experiences. After handing the main character hardship after hardship the director successfully culminates everything to a transition to the second act where the viewer gets to see the first acts of evil done by Arthur, murdering a defenseless man on the subway completely unfazed with its cruelty, which results in a feeling of satisfaction within the viewer after experiencing the cruelty the main character suffered from in act one, keeping the murdered victims stories and influence in the plot shallow by giving them a surface level appearance on screen in order to minimize the effect of their death on the audience.

⁷ <https://feature.variety.com/joker/todd-phillips-risky-vision>

After dedicating a large portion of the film towards the cruel world Arthur Fleck lives in, the director successfully sways the audience towards the main character with complete disregard of his actions and goes as far as to provoke a sense of empathy from viewers.

Audience Perspective on Todd Phillips's Joker (2019): A Lacanian Psychoanalysis (2021) by Alifiadita Nindyarini Wirawan, has illuminated previous unexplored facets of the audience perspective or reaction towards the *Joker* (2019) that raised psychological issues, which were the main theme triggering the audience, mainly focusing in the American society, yielding valuable insight about real life people, who suffer from psychological disorder and mental illnesses. Through this research, there are a number of steps taken into consideration in order to study the “decoded” or interpretations of the viewers. It highlights the attraction by the viewers where they relate the film to their own experiences, whereas the writer explores the interpretation of the audience emphasizing the need to why, and the audience form these interpretations. In the essay, there is also the need to understand the viewers’ psychological stages with the use of Lacanian psychoanalysis⁸. The *Joker* (2019) had a great impact on the American society’s audience as the essay examines their diverse interpretations, and according to Jacques Lacan’s framework, the psychoanalytic perspectives sheds light on the psychological development of the individual in three stages: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic (Wirawan, 2021, p51-52).

The tendency of the human nature to prioritize a straightforward approach is characterized by Wirawan as the concept of the Real in Lacanian psychoanalysis which focuses on less developed and direct view of life in order to fulfill basic human needs as clear as possible without any complexity or a deeper dive into the hidden meaning of things.

Such a concept is commonly used in the interpretation of audiences of various forms of media, such as the movie *Joker* (2019) where the concept of “Real” is noticeable among movie viewers. It is the first stage where the ordinary viewer begins

⁸Lacanian psychoanalysis is a theory and practice of therapeutic treatment that then also provides coordinates for thinking.

to follow the events of the film in order to be entertained as a prime example of the Real. Observing shots seeking pleasure and enjoyment without delving deep inside the meaning of it, “Their interpretations often lack nuance or depth, reflecting a basic desire for sensory satisfaction rather than a comprehensive understanding of the film's psychological complexities” (Wirawan, 2021, p53-55) ignoring all psychological aspects of the film as well as any themes or messages transmitted by the director favoring immediate desire for enjoyment.

The second stage, known as the “Imaginary,” shifts from the primal analysis and understanding of the movie by the audience and moves, to a self-reflecting approach while watching. The major characteristic of this stage is defined by a “superficial understanding based solely on what is depicted in the film” (Wirawan, 2021, p53-55) lacking any critical thinking of the themes as well as being easily influenced by false inaccurate ideas. Such influence often leads to the reinforcement of stereotypes as well as developing negative attitude towards certain topics within the society “contributing to negative perceptions and stigma surrounding mental illness” (Wirawan, 2021, p53-55). Another element of the movie that goes unnoticed with this category of audience is the element of chaos. As it has been seen in the film, many parts of it contain elements of violence and chaos, which might be easily misunderstood as a glorification of violence or even justifying it without really understanding the message behind it. A message that imitates real life struggles and issues completely ignored by people claiming the nature of the movie is too dark or encouraging misbehavior, which further proves how this category failed to grasp the real meaning behind the story being told in *Joker* (2019); a “disconnect[ion] between the intended message of the movie and how it is interpreted by viewers” (Wirawan, 2021, p55-58).

The Symbolic stage, the final stage, can be characterized by the individual usage of logic when interpreting scenes, as well as the influence of language, body language and social norms. Such a stage creates a feeling of desire for reality within viewers that tend to establish any connections with the real world and the society where one lives. The main theme of the movie deals with mental illness and tries to debunk the many false theories and stereotypes surrounding it, as well as acting as the

driving force for viewers to see the true message behind the film that revolves around the idea of challenging the misrepresentation of mental illness in American society by evoking empathy. This step of Lacan's psychoanalysis focuses on how an individual navigates their understanding of social norms and structures, which has been applied not only to personal circumstances but also to the interpretations of the audience on *Joker* (2019). A message that can only be seen and understood by taking a closer look behind what the interface of the movie is (Wirawan, 2021, 58-60).

The movie *Joker* (2019) served a better purpose, not only was it used for entertainment, but it also broadened the vision of the viewers. It offered insight into different aspects of the modern real world that some citizens are ignorant about; the struggles of some individuals who may appear to be sane by putting on a smile during daylight, but in reality, they may have more complex issues with society and themselves, and that smile is only a way to mask these complexities.

2.6 Conclusion

In order to demonstrate the progression, the villain went through as a character, a comparative study using two versions of the same character The Joker but from different time periods 1966 Cesar Romero and 2019 Joaquin Phoenix was used as an example. The Identification of each version of the Joker by mentioning personality, actions and characteristics was important to show how far character creation has developed. Furthermore, a psychological approach was used in the last title to provide insights on the modern take viewers have on complex and compelling villains.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

This work attempted to delve into the evolving development of the villain as a character in literature and cinema focusing on the Joker of the 1960's depicted by Cesar Romero in *Batman* television series and Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (2019).

Chapter One explored a detailed understanding of the aspects of the novel from the setting, and plot to the characters. It showed the importance of the latter element in the novel explaining the huge impact characters have in stories. Therefore, the audience is mainly affected by them. It also examined archetypes in literature focusing on the villain and its development, explaining how it led audiences to sympathize with villains over the years after viewing them as flat characters presenting evilness. The development of the villain is shown in the elements of complexity and relatability that created blurred lines between the hero and the villain, leading the audience to appreciate, love, and root for the villain just like they used to do with the hero.

Chapter Two attempts to answer the hypothesis of whether the character of the Joker has developed over the years, and indeed, using a comparative study analyzing the Joker from *Batman* 1960's television series and *Joker* (2019). Cesar Romero's Joker's crazy laughter was viewed more as a maniac demeanor than an illness, resulting in being not liked by people. Not that the actor did not greatly perform the Joker of 1960's, however, the character himself did not have such influence and impact on the audience. They still viewed him as simple and static, holding clear motives.

The director of *Joker* (2019) gave extra attention to the psychological side showcasing the protagonist suffering from mental illness in order to depict him as a troubled individual who needs help from society. Although both jokers share similar harmful and evil actions, the new Joker's villainy is clouded by his morality. His actions are portrayed as reasonable reactions to him being victimized by family and society; his crimes are shown as indicators of his revenge morals which were constructed due to injustice. And the fact that only his abusers were the target makes the audience support him and accept his actions. Furthermore, the attention given to writing the Joker's character is shown by adding the aspect of complexity. Two key points are used to build a complex character; unpredictability and ambiguity. The Joker changed from a flat character employed to only represent a specific idea to an

unexpected person who is capable of surprising the viewers by constantly breaking their expectations and confusing them, which creates the difficulty of defining him as a good or a bad character. This ambiguity continues throughout the whole film as he keeps switching from a criminal to a nice person.

The Joker of 2019 has clearly captivated the audience, This new type of villain has changed the portrayal of usual villains and how they used to be in literature and cinema. This transformation of the villain that was highly noticed in *Joker* 2019 resonated with viewers of modern literature. Viewers, who desperately sought a change in typical stories, got used to the classic predictable versions of villains. However, this shift has changed the viewers' perspectives when villains are being portrayed with human traits, resonating with the audience by tackling themes of mental illness and social issues

Therefore, what makes a good villain is writing a character different from the traditional, stereotypical, and superficial villain. When authors give more depth to a character, they allow the audience to understand one's psychological motives. They grant their character the extremely important quality of humanity, providing human-like traits and narrating familiar experiences that most ordinary people witness or even live. Thus, they provoke feelings of relatability and sympathy as well as self-awareness and personal philosophy which are visible signs of the work's success.

As it is the case with several aspects of literature, the villain character witnessed an evolution throughout the years. For instance, Cesar Romero's Joker in 1960 is significantly distinct from Joaquin Phoenix's Joker in 2019. Even though they share the role, the new Joker is more complex, human-like, and dynamic; leaving a considerably different audience response characterized by relatability and sympathy. However, the question arises of whether this study can be applied to other villains that are not inspired by comic books.

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