

Adam G. Liber

Russel Williams

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No Joke

One of the most well known and popularized fictional villains of all time wears make up. His identity: unknown. His origin: unknown. He is only known by what he calls himself “The Joker.” This character first appears as a villain in the first issue of Batman written and illustrated respectively by Bill Finger and Bob Kane in 1940. Batman was created for a series called Detective Comics and branched out into his own series published by DC Comics derived from the original Detective Comic series. The Joker is Batman’s first and most notable villain that has been recurring since the character’s birth over seventy years ago and has only increased in popularity. He is intriguing for his unmatched exhibition of the pleasure of crime. Over the years the character has developed parallel to American society and has exhibited lasting relevance. Gotham, the setting of the comic book has always been a reflection of American civilization and draws many similarities particularly with New York City. By extension of the relationship between Gotham City and New York City, The Joker and his criminal behavior has real implications and meaning to American and world civilization.

The most recent film rendition of The Joker portrayed by Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight* (2008) reinvents the classic character in post modern society. Critical receptions, such as J.M. Tyree say, “The Dark Knight arrived freighted with political and social resonances. One can expect papers on Batman”.¹ This film draws from “established grittier versions of the Batman

¹Tyree, J. M. "American Heroes." *Film Quarterly* 62.3 (2009): 28-34. *JSTOR*. Web. 04 May 2015. 34.

mythos that, for the most part, played out in a 'realistic' Gotham city, set in a familiar, contemporary America."² Aside from the comic genre, it invigorates characteristics of the modern literary detective genre such as Raymond Chandler's outlaw, private detective and Jean-Patrick Manchette's implementation radical sociopolitical ideas. Porter analyzes these detective novel's literary "critical concepts of peripeteia" which "signifies, of course, reversal."³ I intend to use this same detective novel conceptual lens, of a reversal device, to analyze the sociopolitical element of *The Dark Knight*. This film offers new meaning to a detective comic story almost sixty years old. The new meaning is within The Joker's mission which he himself claims "is about sending a message." This raises two questions: what is his message and who is he trying to send it to? His message is a change of perspective. He attempts to implement social reform by spreading the message. He tries to reshape social perspective through forced role reversal, making people behave opposite to their own social identity. However equally important is the answer to the second question. I would argue that the audience or intended recipient of his message is the entire society of Gotham. In his attempt to convince the city of Gotham of his message on screen, the viewers of the film indirectly are subjugated to The Joker's message. Moreover, there are two audiences of *The Dark Knight*: the people of Gotham in the film and us the people viewing the film. In light of this understanding I argue by analyzing The Joker, as a fictional product of real society, through the aforementioned comparative device of reversal his character reveals a broader perception of social and political values.

²Wurtz, James F. "'Out There in the Asylum': Physical, Mental, and Structural Space in Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's 'Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth,'" 555.

³Porter, Dennis. "Backward Construction and the Art of Suspense." *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1981. 24-52. Print., 31

To begin we must understand the meaning of “reversal” and how it can be used to alter the perceived meaning and value of an idea or identity. Reversal is a process of positional exchange and change of relationship between ideas or identity for the purpose of comparison. It considers two different identities, generally of opposite nature, and exchanges their positions in order to draw a fair comparison between the two identities by negating circumstantial factors. This process is based on logical reasoning, that is reflected in the scientific method. For example scientifically to properly analyze the difference of two unknown substances they must be treated with equivalent stimuli, isolating the dependent variable. Because even the same substance behaves differently under different stimuli. Thus, analyzing two substances who behave differently with different stimuli is not sufficient evidence to verify a distinction. By extension of this logical property in the context of social identity it would not be appropriate to classify people based on their behavior when their circumstances are different. Role reversal is a process there by negating these factors in order to fairly determine a distinction or similarity between people. The Joker uses this method, both artistically and scientifically, in order to demonstrate that even people of different perceived social statuses and identities behave in the same way and therefore societies preconceived notions of identity are fallacious. He also uses this device to question social perception of ideological values such as values for truth, order, and moral code. Artistically he employs this technique with parody and satire, and scientifically through “social experiment.” In *The Dark Knight* The Joker both embodies and enacts this process of reversal. As The Joker says to Harvey Dent, “I just did what I do best. I took your little plan and I turned it on itself.” His persona itself is an example reversal of roles, a satire of a social appearances. He dresses and projects and image of a clown, representing comedy, innocence, and happiness,

while he commits crimes and acts of terror. The role of the clown and terrorist are reversed. He dresses in a fancy suit but its so worn that it is no longer fancy. He creates comparisons between: truth versus falsehood, order versus chaos, criminal versus police, perpetrator versus victim, hero versus villain.

The Joker challenges perceptions by introducing uncertainty between fiction and reality. He does this through his creative contradictory narrative about himself and his manipulation of other people. Throughout the film *The Joker* captivates his audience, or rather terror victims, by recounting how he obtained the scars on his face. However each time he tells the story it is completely different. The first time he tells Gambol, the mob boss, that the scars were from an abusive drunk father. "My father, was a drinker...and a fiend. And one night, he goes off crazier than usual. [...] Sticks the blade in my mouth, "Let's put a smile on that face.'" The second time he tells the story to Rachel Dawes, Assistant District Attorney, that the scars were self inflicted as a romantic love gesture that failed. "So I had a wife, beautiful...like you... [...] Who gambles and gets in deep...with the sharks. One day they carve her face. And we have no money for surgeries. She can't take it. [...] I just want her to know that I don't care about the scars. So...I stick a razor in my mouth." The Joker as a character never had an origin story at all or facial scars to begin with, but here he recounts two contradictory backstories. Both stories cannot be true, and I would argue neither are true. He creates these false scenarios to mentally manipulate his victims through intimidation and confusion. This functions to establish himself as a tortured mad man pushed to the edge that is completely unpredictable and capable of improvisation. However the audience off screen contemplates the veracity of the stories and by extension the credibility of *The Joker*. Thus his conflicted statements serve a different role to the real audience.

They are not concerned for real danger, but are concerned with reconciling his conflicting statements to understand their meaning. In this attempt to understand meaning implications of the relevance of truth enter one's mind. With this idea, in the aftermath of a scene filled with confusion between reality and fiction Batman tries to rebalance and restore the populations grasp of order amidst a time of moral ambiguity by lying. This seemingly paradoxical resolution adds to the complexity of the viewers understanding of the truth and reality. The Joker attempts to demonstrate to Gotham how fragile society is, that even Harvey Dent a civil leader renowned for his integrity can be corrupted into a murderous monster. Batman sacrifices his own reputation, in the stead of Harvey Dent so that the people do not lose hope for humanity. "They must never know what he did [...] the Joker cannot win. Gotham needs its true hero. [...] I can do those things, because I'm not a hero, not like Dent. I killed those people, that's what I can be." Batman and Commissioner Gordon cover up the truth about Dent and run with a flattering portrayal of Dent as a martyr, "the hero that Gotham needs."

Aiming to upset the social order, The Joker anarchically reverses order with chaos. He removes the sense of control and stability from society: politicians, police, public servants, corporate leaders, and even organized crime bosses. Governmental and societal structure rely on stability and therefore strategize for the future, to anticipate and prevent disasters. This strategy has drastically and overtly been amplified in America in the recent years. Martin recognizes the view of "Batman films as forthright allegories of post-9/11 anxiety, the "war on terror,"" and that "The Dark Knight is certainly imprinted with the anxieties of a post-9/11 world."⁴

Corroborating this theory, The Joker terrorizes, private establishments, public establishments,

⁴Fradley, Martin. "What Do You Believe In? Film Scholarship and the Cultural Politics of the Dark Knight Franchise." *Film Quarterly* 66.3 (2013): 15-27. *JSTOR*. Web. 03 May 2015. 15.

and criminals who try to control the social order. He demonstrates the extent of all establishments lack of control, with his unpredictable and unusual grand crime spectacles. “Nobody panics when things go “according to plan.” Even if the plan is horrifying! If, tomorrow, I tell the press that, like, a gang banger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it’s all “part of the plan”. But when I say that one little old mayor will die, well then everyone loses their minds!” This reflects on American society and forces the audience to reevaluate how confident they are with their own security in the hands of the leaders we empower and the establishments they represent. The Joker suggest that people should embrace unpredictability and anarchy and not arrogantly trust that the social systems we have in place are sufficient. “I’m not a schemer. I am trying to show the schemers just how pathetic their attempts to control things really are.” He forces the audience to become uncomfortably conscious about the uncertainty of life and reminds them of the necessity of vigilance.

The Joker blurs the boundaries of identity between criminals, victims, and lawmen through his terror methods. It is easier to understand and classify people as either the perpetrator or the victim, criminal or civilian, thus people tend towards such limiting categorization. The Joker rejects this premise and by forcefully exposing people to experience another perspective. As Martin puts it: “Ledger’s Joker makes manifest the cruelty and contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, his actions literalizing the symbolic violence of Gotham’s rigid class system. [H]is unruly behavior exposes class divisions and the cruel fictions of self-sufficient individualism.”⁵ He begins by threatening and successfully stealing millions from corrupt corporates and the mob. He puts out a public incentive to commit muser of another civilian, Mr. Reese, with the threat of

⁵Fradley, 22.

blowing up a hospital. He is successful in convincing some civilians and policemen to consider or attempt committing murder. News journalist, Mike Engel asks, "Commissioner: Do you think an ordinary citizen would try to kill this man?" Evidently the answer to that question is yes, as immediately following shots are fired at Mr. Reese. Even policemen become potential murderers when a conflict of interest is presented. "Im gonna need your weapon." Commissioner Gordon tells, Berg, the officer involved in the police escort of Mr. Reese. "Why? Because my wife is in the hospital?" he says. Furthermore, He manipulates and corrupt cops into doing his bidding. Particularly in arranging the abduction of Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes as well as the murders of police commissioner and a Judge. Through his demonstration of how malleable and multifaceted peoples identities are, he confuses the audiences moral understanding of social status. On some level by changing the social roles, he acts as an equalizer of social status. Moreover he supports this idea with his actions by applying the same attitude and courtesy to all he encounters. He disrespects them all, be it criminal, lawmen, or civilian. The only outlier in Jokers outward attitude is Batman. All except for Batman bend or break their own behavioral codes when circumstantial pressure arises. Batman does not break his moral code despite all of The Joker's physical and physiological terror tactics. Because of this uniqueness the Joker takes particular interest in him.

The Joker, as he does with reversal, both embodies and enacts detective novel aspects of peripeteia and retardation devices as described by Porter. He embraces the idea of delayed gratification through what Porter calls a retardation device. Porter considers it a "paradox that pleasure results to a large degree from the repeated postponement of a desired end."⁶ His

⁶Porter, Dennis. "Backward Construction and the Art of Suspense." *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1981. 24-52. Print. 32.

fondness for knives comes from the same motivation of delayed gratification. To intentionally toy with the prison guard he says, “You want to know why I use a knife? Guns are too quick. You can’t savor all the little emotions.” He describes killing like one would describe “savoring” the pleasurable flavor of a treat, trivializing the act of murder and promoting the pleasure of crime. He also enjoys battling Batman, because he is an exceptional challenge for The Joker. He mockingly says, “Kill you? I don’t want to kill you. What would I do without you? [...] you complete me.” The Joker prolongs his clash with Batman, both by protecting Batman’s identity and not killing him. “You are truly incorruptible, aren’t you? Huh? You won’t kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness. And I won’t kill you because you’re just too much fun.” This exemplifies The Joker’s pleasure from crime, that he prolongs his criminal “game.”

From the beginning of the film, with The Joker’s bank robbery, there is a police chase, aided by a private detective known as Batman, to apprehend this criminal. This chase followed from the point of the detective, Batman, builds anticipation to catch The Joker. However the Joker is captured twice: first midway through the film he is jailed by Commissioner Gordon, second near the end he is disarmed and strung up by Batman, neither time concluding the story. Porter explains, “In a detective story peripeteia implies the sudden and unexpected postponement of the apparent approach to a solution. The gap that seemed to be closing opens up again.”⁷ The detectives, and viewers alike, mistakenly focus exclusively on The Joker, ultimately realizing that he is not the full extent of the criminal problem for Gotham. Thus the story does not end with The Joker, rather the story brings an understanding that his crimes are symptomatic of a

⁷Porter,32.

deeper social, political, and criminal issue. In a way, his actions succeeded in unearthing these deeper issues.

From a certain perspective The Joker himself could be seen as the hero and Batman the villain. The Joker's biggest trick is convincing the audience that the outcome of his mission is a valiant cause worth the extreme measures he takes to send a message and reform society. By reversing the roles of perpetrator and victim he puts shifts the responsibility and therefore blame from himself onto others. The blame for the death of Rachel Dawes he places on corrupt cops. He retorts Gordon's interrogation with his own questions: "Me? I was right here. Who did *you* leave him with? Hmm? Your people? [...] Does it make you feel responsible?" To Dent he says, "When you and Rachel were being abducted, I was sitting in Gordon's cage. I didn't rig the charges." Then with Batman he accuses him saying, "You didn't disappoint you let five people die. Then you let Dent take your place. Even to a guy like me that's cold." The Joker makes a case to reflect the truth about corruption in society. In fact, Batman and Gordon are the ones who lie to the people. Gordon fakes his own death even to his family. Batman is himself hiding his true identity and therefore not being honest with society to begin with. In the end it is Batman who takes the fall for Dent, poetically repaying Dent for protecting Batman's identity, and conspires in a lie to the people. He quotes Dent saying, "'You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.' I can do those things, because I'm not a hero, not like Dent. I killed those people, that's what I can be." In contrast The Joker makes a point of repeatedly emphasizing "I am a man of my word." He goes further to justify his actions and beliefs saying to Batman, "I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve." He suggests society, of Gotham, is behind "the curve," not developed to the proper way of thinking. As a

psychologically disturbed villain his claims can be dismissed as radical. But understanding The Joker as a potential hero allows for a greater understanding of the meaning or “message,” from the creators, in the political and social milieu.

Remember, The Joker is fictional. He is a representational figure born in the comics controlled by the film makers of *The Dark Knight*. He is the mouthpiece of real people with real sociopolitical opinions. Consider the aforementioned two audiences of The Joker in *The Dark Knight*. To the people of Gotham Batman is a menace believed to have killed cops and public servants, not to mention law violation and property damage. However the viewers of the film are led to believe they see the truth, that Batman is the hero that adheres to a strict moral code that in doing so, operates outside the law. This discrepancy of perception between the “two audiences” makes it conceivable to extend our consideration of perspective outside our own to examine the veracity of our own beliefs. Possibly, The Joker’s claims of righteousness are valid and we do not know something about The Joker that justifies his seemingly monstrous actions, because we only view the film from Batman’s perspective. Perhaps his suggestion that he is “ahead of the curve” applies to both the people of Gotham and more so to real American society. Gotham labels The Joker as a “freak,” a “mad dog” projecting how he would be portrayed as insane by today’s social standard if he were to really exist. If Batman is viewed by Gotham as a menace incorrectly than we, the people of America, too might be mistaken about our own conceptions, namely The Joker. Perhaps it is because of this social stigma around The Joker’s methods, just like Batman’s unlawful methods, that force the film makers to present The Joker as insane so that they can send his “message” without being discredited as insane themselves. In essence this

mimics Manchettes method of using the detective novel to enable “fusion of radical politics with taut plotting.”⁸

Through The Joker’s representation of reversal, *The Dark Knight* projects one version American civilization to evoke a self reflection of the real American civilization. This self reflective process aims to change the American collective perception of the social structure. By reversing notions of fact and fiction, order and chaos, criminal and civilian, hero and villain the perceived meaning and value of these terms are altered. Perception of these terms shifts from narrow to broad, rigid to fluid, defined to ambiguous. This returns to Manchettes “recognizably more ambiguous contemporary world, in which bad guys are as likely to be cops, capitalists or the clergy as lurking in the sleazy Pigalle shadows.”⁹ However, “Manchette used the detective story as an assault weapon to draw the reader’s attention to the state of the world or as a channel for “violent social intervention”.¹⁰ where as The Joker literally puts this into practice within *The Dark Knight*.

⁸Williams, Russel. "New Statesman." French Revolutions: The Eerie Prescience of Jean-Patrick Manchette's Detective Fiction. NewStatesman, 19 Mar. 2015. Web. 03 May 2015.

⁹Williams.

¹⁰Williams.

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