Development and Understanding of the Character of the Joker

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2024

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:162:066423

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-02-20**

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku
Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti; smjer: nastavnički (dvopredmetni)

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Student/ica: Mentor/ica:

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Zadar,2023.

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Zadar, 12. siječanj 2023.

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1. Introduction

Looking back on the year 1940, the creators of the character of Joker certainly did not expect such long-term success with the character that would be recognized worldwide and would eventually reappear in the comics and movies constantly opposing one of the most famous heroes, Batman. In his first appearance in 1940 in *Batman #1* the writers intended to make a villain of many to come. However, with time, its popularity grew along with the significance of the character and nowadays there are numerous cinematic and comic book representations of the insanely popular villain as a result. Writer Bill Finger and artists Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson were the ones who take credit for the creation of the whole character. Even though there was a moment in the past when Joker was meant to be killed off already after his first appearance, the character was spared by editorial intervention and ultimately resulted in the greatest accomplishments of all time. His looks characterized by green hair, a dead white face, and a wide grin framed by red lips, all tied together with a nice suit accompanied by his mad outbursts towards his famous counterpart Batman was a winning formula for leaving an impact as great as or even greater than Batman. Often referred to as 'The Clown Prince of Crime', Joker affected popular culture which was evident in many cinematic presentations, some of which will undergo various analyses throughout this paper. For the purpose of exploring subjects of evil and madness that are closely related to the character, in this paper there will be two comic book representations included, *Batman: The Killing Joke* and *Batman: Death in the Family*, and three cinematic versions, *The Batman* (1989), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Joker* (2019).

Joker is such an uncommon figure in the world of comic books that readers often succumb to various analyses of the character and what it represented with each incarnation. All the mentioned representations are chosen according to the popularity and success of each of the incarnations of the character and the impact it had on popular culture and the readers in general.

In a way, the mentioned representations could be viewed as milestones in the development of the character, since it is one of the most important aims of the paper. In order to inspect the development of the character, this paper will put the works, both the comic books and the movie interpretations mentioned previously, in social and historical context and it will deal with the subject of madness and villainy. The paper will, first of all, define what a villain is according to different theories and different perspectives on villains in general. One of the most prominent sources is the essay written by Enrique Cámara Arenas entitled "Villains in Our Mind: A Psychological Approach to Literary and Filmic Villainy" which is part of the collection of essays *Villains and Villainy: Embodiments of Evil in Literature, Popular Culture and Media.* This essay will introduce topics like types of villains and the motivational dimension of Joker. Next, the paper will deal with Joker's identity through various lenses. It will first take into consideration Joker's type of character as a transmedia character. After that, there will be a rough display of the timeline of the evolution of the character concerning the Joker's behavior and the era in which he was created. Lastly, the last part of the paper will revolve around the role of the mask and its correlation to the Greek theatre, more precisely, Greek drama. This part of the paper will try to make a connection between the Greek mask and Joker's incarnation and how they fit into his character and overall elements that tie together such modern performances like movies and comic books with elements of Greek theatre and performance.

2. Exploring the villain

The usual mold for successful stories about heroes in general starting from the basics are two opposing sides, one representing the good and the other one representing the evil. Readers and spectators expect to have an explanation or a type of justification for the action happening and therefore, try to understand both heroes and villains and why they behave the way they do. Starting from the Bible itself, one of the first stories in the world found in Genesis depicts opposition between the good and evil at first, God and Satan, clearly displaying characteristics of each side. God first of all created an utterly good world. Still, the evil appears already in the third chapter as an opposition to the good. What can be made as an assumption from those beginnings of the world is that the good is as present as the evil is (Heit 6-7). They are mutually co-existing, without the one, the other would not exist and there would not even exist the same categorization. God created a man and a woman, provided them with everything they would possibly require, and only prohibited the one tree they must not touch nor eat the fruit of. The evil represented by Satan in a shape of a snake was the factor that intervened and encouraged the woman to try it (Genesis 1:31 qtd. in Heit 178). In black-and-white terms, God here is purely good and Satan is pure evil. Nonetheless, looking into it from another perspective, Satan is a fallen angel according to the Bible and was once good, even God's right hand. God in this case was the one who created him, utterly and firstly good. Satan found himself in circumstances that made him become ultimately evil and opposed to God.

A couple of definitions of a villain provided by Oxford's Dictionary are "the main bad character in a story, play, etc.", "a person who is morally bad or responsible for causing trouble or harm" or simply put in an informal discourse "a criminal". The character of the Joker fits into these basic and wide definitions, although a character as complex as the Joker requires more profound analysis and has shifted course over time as well as in different cinematic and comic book presentations.

To give another possible answer in defining what a villain is, Arenas, Enrique Cámara suggests two definitions for a villain, the first being the weak one and the second being the strong one (6). With regards to the weak definition, it is not precise enough and it involves the usage of the term 'villain' in all the metaphorical ways possible. Continuing on the strong definition that describes a villain as a character with a certain level of anthropomorphism with a motivational dimension to them with an ability to exercise their will and to modify the world surrounding them. What is also implied in this definition is that a villain must possess a certain degree of intelligence and that he/she has to be self-aware to a certain point for their behavior to be regarded as intentional. Each part of the strong definition is intentionally and carefully chosen. Firstly, a villain being a character means that this character is a role that must always be played by a character. Even though it seems pretty logical to assume that the villain is just that, there are instances where the villain is a role, i.e. plays a certain role, but is not a character. A role can be filled with a natural catastrophe, or some objects or accidents and circumstances. However, here it is implied that the character should fill that specific role. Furthermore, the motive is what lies behind both villains and heroes, everyone has some type of motive that pushes them to act and influence the plot. To reach their goals and motives, it is only necessary that villains should possess a certain level of intelligence and resourcefulness when it comes to specific situations and specific circumstances. With regards to the strong definition of a villain, it is evident that the incarnations of the character of Joker mostly correspond to it, especially the comic book incarnations. What is also important to highlight is that not all of the incarnations correspond perfectly and that there was a digression from the original character throughout time and that the most recent Joker does not fit the classic definitions of a villain nor does he necessarily fits into the category of a classic villain (Arenas 7).

One thing that is to be discussed is his motivational dimension. Even though it is visible that in general Joker manages to interfere with peace, law, and harmony in Gotham City opposing

Batman in that way, the one that represents those ideas, the ultimate motive is to be discussed throughout different incarnations of the character.

3. Motivational dimension

Having the evident evil actions but lacking obvious clear motives that would naturally occur in each version of the character and that the audience would usually expect such as money, power or fame is what makes the Joker so uncommon and intriguing. It would be logical to claim that his ultimate motive is trying to defeat Batman and in that way drive the plot forwards. Nonetheless, many exemplary scenes point otherwise. For instance, in the comic book *Batman: The Killing Joke (1988)* Joker escapes the asylum in which he was kept, shoots Barbara Gordon (Catwoman) leaving her disabled, kidnaps Commissioner Gordon, and takes him to a setup of an old abandoned circus to torture him and drive him to the edge of sanity.

"You are doing what any sane man in your appalling circumstances would do. You're going mad." (Moore 24).

With this statement, Joker is reinforcing the fact that anybody could find themselves in the same position as Joker found himself years before in the chemical factory where he was left alone after his wife and baby died in an accident and he was forced to rob the chemical factory anyways, even though it was for the sake of his family. He ultimately had the intention to demonstrate that the rest of the world is no better than him, it was just that his circumstances of life shaped him into the person he was. What happens, in the end, is that Batman flies in, as is expected from a superhero, and interrupts Joker's plan entirely. However, he was too late to stop Commissioner Gordon go through that experience.

In the cinematic version from 1989, during the scene in the museum, Joker attempted to kill everyone inside using his knowledge of chemical substances and making a gas that would eventually spread through the vents and leave everyone present dead. In doing so, he explicitly

stated that it was his take on the art itself and that he wanted to participate in the creation of new art. Later throughout the film, Joker claimed that he wanted to win over the people of Gotham City and even gain more popularity than Batman, which would eventually draw the attention of Vicki Vale, a photojournalist who showed love interest for Batman.

Then, in 2008 there came the version of the drastically more profound Joker represented by Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight* who gave this character dimension and importance. That specific cinematic masterpiece offered another possible answer to why Joker is acting the way he is. After causing pure chaos in the City of Gotham, Joker reveals his possible true intention only at the end of the film, stating that he is fighting for the soul of Gotham City and that he and Batman are going to fight for it until one of them finally wins. "It is only by competing for the same goal that the hero and the opponent are forced to come into direct conflict and to do so again and again throughout the story" (Truby 46-47).

In that case, what is making Joker a perfect antagonist and an opponent to Batman are ultimately the same goals over which they are constantly fighting, only from different points of view. What Joker stands for is pure chaos which he wants to obtain by killing people, robbing, and intimidating everyone in Gotham City as opposed to law and order which Batman represents and defends.

Robin S. Rosenberg in his essay about the typology of villains provides a couple of categories of villains and continues to explain that the criterion for this typology is the type of motives that lie behind the villains and their actions (73). In this typology, it is also mentioned the effect that these types of villains have on their opposed superheroes.

The first type of villain mentioned in this typology according to Robin S. Rosenberg is 'the straightforward criminal' who is described as the one that wants to obtain some type of material gain, whether that is money or power, resorting to illegal ways and actions (73-74). As opposed to other types of villains, this one is considered to not be as challenging for the

superhero and provides stories with less interesting storylines. The next one is 'the vengeful villain' which is more interesting than the previous type in the matter of the story and the effect that it has on the superhero and his actions. These villains are driven by revenge, their personal vendetta. Their hostility towards the superhero is personal and they are focused on them and determined to get them. The mix of motives such as greed and revenge makes them want to defeat the villain or try to surpass them in a way that not only does the villain defeat the superhero physically but also outwit or disgrace him/her. This type of villain desires a challenge and recognition by the environment, he wants to attack and defeat the superhero specifically when the superhero is the strongest and is at its highest, otherwise, it is not as intriguing, and if the villain succeeds to defeat the superhero at any other circumstances, it is not considered such a success (Rosenberg 74-75). The third type of villain is called 'the heroic villain' and they are considered to have an 'altruistic' motive in their minds. These types of villains work for some greater good or goal that they consider more important than the welfare of others. In their opinion, they are heroes and everything that they do is justifiable by the greater cause (75-76). Finally, there is a type of villain that has no rival in the terror and horror he causes, the type who enjoys pure chaos and nourishes pleasure as his main motive. Joker is the textbook example of 'the sadistic supervillain' who goes around Gotham City sowing destruction and chaos for his entertainment and pleasure. What these supervillains accomplish is create moral dilemmas for the superheroes and push them into a battle with their own conscience. It is also noticeable that this type of villain is the only one who bears the prefix 'super', marking their supremacy in their world of villains and superheroes (76-77).

Jamey Heit in his essays on popular villains raised questions of villainy and evil in the specific context of the Joker. In this distinct discourse, the Joker is described as dislocated from our normal expected cultural norms of evil and good (176-177). To provide some examples, the Joker does not hesitate when it comes to reaching for a killer weapon and pointing it at

anyone, whether that is Batman or a member of his gangster mob. Another reason why Joker did not undergo the usual categorization is that in almost every version of the character, either cinematic or comic book version, he wants to be killed by Batman. That death wish is the most prominent in the cinematic version, *The Dark Knight* (2008) where he stands in front of the Batmobile, utterly saying that he wants Batman to do it, to finally finish him. In this way, he is practically impossible to categorize within the black-and-white categorization of good and evil since he is capable of pulling the trigger on anyone, regardless of them being a protagonist or an evil gangster fitting into the usual cultural norm of evil. His ultimate goal is not the protagonist but they ultimately share the same goal and purpose, just as two mirror opposites.

"Because he thought it was good sport. Because 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" (*The Dark Knight* 00:54:56-00:55:12).

"Without supervillains, there can be no superheroes. This is an axiom in the world of capes and tights—it's going to be a boring comic book if a hero does not have anyone to fight" states Jones (12).

"The differences from culture to culture and era to era are fascinating and telling, but so are the similarities—so is this impulse we have to seed our world with antagonists. It would seem we do this less to "prove" our own heroics and more because these evil forces are the dynamo at the center of creation, always stirring things up, and in the most generative and necessary fashion." (Jones 12).

Stephen Graham Jones in the foreword of The Supervillain Reader claims that the existence of supervillains is essential for the making of superheroes and their success (XII). The villains are the essence of those heroes, it is what provides them opportunities to demonstrate their heroic behavior. This theory even goes further and it is claimed that to create a successful hero, it is essential that the writer gives the advantage to the antagonist in the process of creation

(XIII). In case the antagonist is not worth a proper fight, the popularity and the success of the hero decrease. The emphasis is rather put on the antagonist and it can be claimed that he plays the role of the main character, although not in an obvious manner. For instance, in the moment of robbing and killing his parents in the movie adaption *Batman* (1989), Jack Napier (later Joker) created Batman by sparking the creation of the masked hero who would eventually fight criminals in Gotham City, driven by the death of his parents.

"It's all the obstacles thrown up by the antagonist, by the supervillain, who is the one actually charting the shape of the story." (Jones XIII).

"The villain's use of power to achieve his or her own ends initiates the plot of a narrative in which good and evil square off. The villain's actions create a problem, and the hero's story is the process of resolving the problem by thwarting the villain's plans" (Forbes, 18). Forbes here touches upon the popularity of the narrative of good and evil and why it still pertains to audience's interests and potentially exhorts their inner desires to use power in their ordinary lives.

4. The question of Joker's identity

In contemplation of what and who Joker is, it is inevitable to get some facts known, such as some characteristics of Joker and how it adds dimension to the omnipresent character of Joker. According to Richardson's (2010) analysis of transmedial characters, since Joker belongs to that category with a rich history of incarnations, there exist two types of transmedial characters, extensions and adaptations (qtd. in Martínez 13).

A character that remains the same throughout every medium where it could be found is called an extension character. Those characters basically hold onto the same characteristics and values and do not change in any remarkable way. One of the examples of an extension character is Luke Skywalker, a character from *Star Wars*. The first movie of the franchise was released

in 1977 and rapidly reached popularity and success. Ever since then, there have been multiple TV shows and movies, as well as other media like comic books, novels, video games, etc. Even after this long period of existence of the franchise it is safe to claim that the character of Luke Skywalker remained the same, they kept the consistency of the character.

Nonetheless, there is an adaptation transmedia character which is quite the opposite of extension transmedia character. This type of character differs from the first type mentioned with regard to the story world. Essentially, the adaptation characters relate to different story worlds independently, regardless of others (qtd. in Martínez 13). This is exactly the category where Joker belongs and that is evident throughout different incarnations of the character putting him in different backgrounds, life circumstances, and goals and motives. From a plot point of view, there are no links between different versions of the character, as will be mentioned and explained in the next part of the paper.

4.1. What lies behind the permanent scary smile?

It is firmly established among all the cinematic and comic book incarnations of the character of Joker that he is characterized by his unique appearance that remains consistent up to this day. Although it may seem that his wide red grin, green hair, and deadly white face would only contribute to his scary and sadistic personality, the presence of these aesthetic elements has a more profound symbolism and draws the attention of the critics as well as readers to investigate them even deeper.

"Even if good and evil could be differences in perspective, we still desire an explanation for why this distinction persists in popular narrative. Heroes and villains usually look different, and this indicates the importance of being able to identify characters as good or evil" (Forbes 18).

Given the unique looks that characterize Joker, various origin stories and events are mentioned throughout the movies and comics trying to give a cause for it. Nonetheless, there are the same reoccurring elements of his looks marked by his distinguished wide smile, green

hair, and pale face. Whether that was falling into a vat of acid during a robbery, doing of his abusive parent, or rather his own doing, according to the recent interpretation of the character in the movie *Joker* (2019), these features are present in all the interpretations and are giving the character some consistency, as opposed to different background stories that lie behind it.

"The function of appearance in villainy begins with identification and then it reaches much further. In puppet theatre, for example, a number of conventionalized features send off the message: 'this is the one you have to hate, be afraid of, warn against, etc.'" (Arenas 11).

"We only need to take a quick look at the external features of a villain in order to categorize them as the baddies, and associate them instantly with several ominous personality traits - this is what social psychologists call a snap judgment" Arenas claims (11).

"Although the jumping from physical appearance to attribution of traits and the generation of expectations has been often noted and studied in psychology, it is important to appreciate the exact value of the external characterization of monstrous villains in fiction" (Arenas 11).

Even though Batman could appear as a part of this category with his dark costume, black cape and always moving under the cover of the night, our minds still don't find him disturbing in the same way as Joker and he does not create the same reaction among the spectators. The concept of ugliness is implied in the aesthetics of villainy, and this does not necessarily signify the normal connotation of the word 'ugly'. In this case, this ugliness attracts the minds of spectators and suggests deviations in the looks of villains opposing to the looks of what spectators find to be normal and agreeable (Arenas 11-12). This thought is exemplified by zombies and the disturbance that they invoke with their appearance, everything that human minds despise, the death of the flesh and body, and limitations followed by this corrupted flesh. However, even when the appearance of villains is disturbing in such a manner and the villains themselves are put in a category of a villain, it is simultaneously attracting the fascination of the human mind. Even after a certain villain is categorized as a villain, there is an occurrence

of an inexplicable dark magnetism toward them. Since this is a matter that is challenging to explain and fully grasp, this matter could be examined from the point of view of a theory of cognition. There is a recalling of a term of a poetic effect where poetry functions by stimulating a big number of feeble assumptions and, with this in mind, the whole appearance of villains draws the exploration of the mind due to the pleasant feeling this exploration creates. The deduction from this explanation of disgust suggests that the subconscious mind has a tendency to psychologically complicate the aesthetics of villainy and to seek those socially unacceptable desires within themselves. Given all the analysis of Joker from different points of view, it is safe to state that he is one of the most analyzed villains of all time (Arenas 11-12).

4.2. From a trickster to a demonic political figure

Regarding different incarnations of the character and adapting the comic book figure to a movie, there is no surprise that fan communities are constantly criticizing and commenting on the quality of each of the incarnations of the character. Even though all of these incarnations are of the same character, they could not differ more than they do and could be regarded as different adaptations of the character. With regards to over 80 years of existence Joker is only becoming more popular as time passes, despite all the criticism and despite digressing from the original character, his personality, and his original purpose, and that will be the center of an attempt to analyze different incarnations of the character, trying to reveal their identity and trying to give them new purpose and motive. Relying on the theory of Michel Foucault and feminist philosopher Judith Butler, which raises a question of one's identity in stating that there is not one intrinsic identity but rather the performance. Everybody performs their own identity which is also susceptible to change, there is an explanation to why Joker's various interpretations seek to change (Garneau 34-35). It is negotiable when it comes to defining

different periods and stages of the character, but what is non-negotiable is the fact that each incarnation of the character was marked by a period of history in which different incarnation was presented and the influence of the dominant genre at the time. Garneau continues to provide a couple of explanations for some of the most important aspects of Joker's villain past with the mention of the techniques that Joker uses (35). Since the first introduction of Joker in *Batman #1* as a character in the comic books, he was a villain who focused mostly on money and material possessions, his threats were aimed at wealthy people. In this era of the character, it is clear that he is presented as a trickster who was driven by greed, described as a murderer who used all the tricks and weapons available to him in order to obtain his goals and to succeed in his robberies. He is even the first character that was 'revived' after killing his character, which served as proof of his potential (Garneau 35-36). From the era of the 'killer clown', Joker undergoes a new era of his theatricality and a big show. Eccentric tales from the 50s show Joker trying his best to surpass Batman in everything. That is also his era of crazy costumes, aiming to outperform Batman regarding his fashion style and when he pulls crazy robberies with no casualties, which is quite unlike his former incarnation in the comic books. Joker's main goal in this era is to cause a big scene and to elicit a reaction from Batman (Garneau 36). Another transformation of the character is to be seen in the year 1973 in a story entitled *The Joker's Five-Way Revenge*. In this story, Joker returns to his killer side with five victims who were his previous associates leaving their bodies with a smile on their faces and Batman's adventures revive the noir edge that was not present for quite some time. His card on the murder scene was a symbol of his return to his old tricks and of him making human casualties along the way (Garneau 38). Then came the period of the 1980s when the main mark of yet another change of the character was Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, a book representing a disturbing, dystopian, and corrupt incarnation of the character. The book could be regarded as an introduction to the era of the hyper-realistic and brutal Joker (Garneau 38). In 1989 there came

the one that shifted the whole character of Joker into another direction that was not present up to that time. It was *The Killing Joke*, the comic book that offered an insight into Joker's past and a possible origin story, even though it is important to emphasize that it is only a possible answer to how Joker was created. It is the version that marked the change in the personality of the character. The famous clown anti-hero breaks out of jail, disabled Barbara Gordon, and attempted to drive Commissioner Gordon insane. This particular story marked the beginning of a dark, psychotic and serious Joker who stops at nothing and taps into philosophy, the meaning of life, and its purpose. *A Death in the Family* was just the continuation of Joker's dark persona where Joker brutally beats and kills Jason Todd who was Batman's new Robin. With Moore's and Bolland's take on the character in *The Killing Joke* and later on in DC's *A Death in the Family,* the readers were left to speculate what the next Joker would do.

Taking into consideration different incarnations of the character, it is also possible to produce various analyses on the character as well as to divide different eras of the character regarding his demeanor in specific social contexts of its creation. Another insight into different eras of the character was provided in chronological order with regard to the social and political developments at the time of the release of the comic books and movies. The evolution of Joker reached the highest point with the latest incarnation in the movie *Joker* (2019) (Lee, "Evolution of Joker"). It commenced with the era of the 'trickster' between the 40s and the 70s. This 'trickster' was driven by greed and has a strong inclination towards theatricality. He is characterized by being smart, cunning, and ruthless and was compared to Loki in Norse mythology (Lee, "Evolution of Joker"). All the characteristics derived from the Carl Jung's division of the archetypes where this trickster uses his intelligence in order to provoke the hero, to play mind games for him to obtain what he desires, constantly succeeding to take actions that are neither completely complete gruesome violence nor evidence of his wicked humor (Lee, "Evolution of Joker"). Just as the so-called 'silver age' of comic books hit in the 50s, Joker's evil

dark side was evidently toned down in order to avoid strict censorship and to extend their public to children as well. One of the hard proofs of this period of Joker is the portrayal of the character in the TV series *Batman* (1966-1968) where Cesar Romero played the role of Joker. Despite the fact that he was still depicted as an intelligent villain who possessed various interesting gadgets, he was no longer a serious threat to Batman and his associates Robin and Catwoman (Lee, "Evolution of Joker"). When Dennis O'Neil undertook writing the comics in the 70s it signaled the start of the "madman" era of Joker, the incarnation of a criminal and a serial killer. That was the period when comic books in general adopted a more serious and darker tone, including both heroes and villains. With the focus on Joker's insanity, there came the creation of Arkham Asylum. The reason for fear of Joker was not anymore his ruthless criminal behavior but rather his insanity and unpredictability. One of the stories that highlighted this insanity is Steve Englehart's arc *The Laughing Fish*. This era marked the beginning of the revolution of the character and was followed by an even darker and more profound era of the 'philosopher' (Lee, "Evolution of Joker").

"Something like that happened to me, you know. I... I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! Ha ha ha!" (Moore 42).

Joker became a representation of philosophical questions debating the meaning of life. Ostensibly the readers are provided a historical background for Joker's path to insanity and his criminal life. However, later in the comic book, Joker states that his past does not have one definitive story and the writers offer multiple different stories. In this way, he surpasses the idea of a human and becomes an idea himself, an embodiment of his own beliefs. What is also prominent in this particular period and this comic book is that Joker and Batman are viewed as mirror opposites deriving from the same circumstances, random and tragic events.

"I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everyone else! All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy. That's how far the world is from where I am. Just one bad day. You had a bad day once, am I right? I know I am. I can tell. You had a bad day and everything changed. Why else would you dress up like a flying rat?" (Moore 42).

Even though every incarnation of the character introduced various backgrounds and characteristics, the evolution was still not over. In 2008 Christopher Nolan and Heath Ledger confirmed that Joker could still keep the backgrounds and some of the characteristics introduced up to that point, but that he could still introduce a new character on the scene, something not seen before. With regards to the previous incarnations, this one could be put in a category of a terrorist who was the agent of chaos in post-9/11 America where there ruled a general fear of political and philosophical extremism (Lee, "Evolution of Joker"). Joker was an anarchist who not only disrupted the law and peace in Gotham City but was the agent who actively sought to destroy that peace and introduce complete chaos. What Nolan added to the spectrum of the character was the philosophy of nihilism, a philosophical belief that rejects generally accepted or fundamental aspects of human existence. Some of the critics compared Joker to Friedrich Nietzsche's Superman (Übermensch) who was an independent creature who decides what is right and wrong and inflicts his own beliefs and his proper justice (Lee, "Evolution of Joker"). What was also intriguing is that there are critics who also found one of Nietzsche's philosophies that could be found in the relationship between Batman and Joker and that is the master and slave morality. In this case, Joker represents the master morality where he has his vision of the world and people and he builds new rules not caring about others and their view on the world whereas Batman represents the slave morality (Litsey 185-186). He is constantly trying to protect the established rules not questioning them. The conflict between the two cannot be resolved physically, Joker is constantly challenging Batman morally and mentally.

The development of the character is a continuous process and the last portrayal of the character is proof of that. Joaquin Phoenix is a political Marxist figure that contemplates the American dream from the perspective of the lower class of society.

"Joker: What do you get...

Murray: I don't think so.

Joker: ... when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash!?

Murray: Call the police, Gene, call the police.

Joker: I'll tell you what you get! You get what you fucking deserve!" (*Joker* 01:44:57-01:45:11).

In this particular scene, Joker shows how society relies on morals to uphold it and how those morals can easily crumble and cause overall fear and anger. It is obvious how the low-class part of society suffers through ideas such as the American dream, they do not belong in the societal forms of successful businessmen that thrive in a world where money is the main motive, goal, and resource.

5. Origins and role of the mask

This part of the paper will use the theories on mask and tragedy and their relation to the modern performance as well as their elements in the character of Joker throughout previously mentioned incarnations, but primarily focusing on the latest incarnation in the movie *Joker* (2019) where those elements are visible. The latest incarnation was embodied by Joaquin Phoenix who later won various awards for that specific role and revolved more around Joker itself and his representation of society, not even including Batman as an opposed side but rather individuals who represent privileged circles of society. In this case, the society that Joker

represents refers to lower-class people and ordinary, everyday people with their struggles, unlike high-class people depicted in The Dark Knight for example.

Throughout the long course of history, masks were generally present and significant in the context of rituals and performances. While some of those rituals were tribal, theatrical performances are worth mentioning, especially early on during the period of the Greeks and the Romans. It later on spread to other civilizations. At first glance, it seems that the mask was a primitive tool of tribal nature used during different rituals and occasions. Jevons examined the origin of the Greek drama and mentioned various tribes and forefathers of the Greeks using the mask to worship a deceased hero called Adrastus, and not in order to worship Dionysus as it was previously thought (174). This serves later on as solid evidence that the tragedy originated from the worship of heroes even before the festivities of Dionysus.

"The simple acts of putting on or removing a mask in front of spectators represent theatrically pivotal moments in the relationships between players and spectators. In those moments of transformation, shared understanding changes. Such changes are those experienced by the performer or spectator within the context of the 'agreed pretence' between player and spectator that are created during performance" (Butterworth 33).

The moment of putting on or removing the mask during a performance on stage is one of the crucial moments for the relationship between the spectators and the players or personages in the play which would affect the conditions during the play. Behind this simple act is a purpose and various motives that Butterworth examined through the evidence provided from the canon of English medieval plays as well as plays from the sixteenth century along with the practices of mumming[1](34). What is offered as a supposed purpose of the mask is to help to abolish facial features of the player or personage entirely and to cover the face with a 'false face'. With that

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[1]"...this curious event enacts a 'hero combat' wherein a champion (often St George) boasts of his battle skill to an enemy (often a Turkish or Egyptian knight). After one opponent has killed the other, a doctor, sometimes at the urging of a young or old woman, raises the dead combatant;" (Hardin 59).

tool players are capable of creating a deep effect of putting, donning the mask or removing it (Butterworth 34). Viewing it from a religious or ritualistic lens, the objective of donning the mask could be to imitate, worship or soothe (Butterworth 35). What is more interesting and relevant to this paper are the theatrical motives. Among creating an identity of personage or creature that contributes to adapting the nature of the production or event, purposefully hiding the former identity of the player or personage in order to not be recognized and other technical motives, what adds valuable contribution to this topic is the shift in a state or condition of the same personage by simply adding a mask. It is then further explained that "donning the mask offers more complex possibilities in promoting allegory, symbolism, metaphor, irony, or mistaken identity" (Butterworth 36). He further states that the signal of a revelation is the removal of the mask, but is uncertain of what or whom and continues to state that the revelation can also be attained by donning or putting the mask. In that way, a new identity is unveiled and exposed to spectators in order for them to create a new understanding (36).

The mentioning of the mask as a performative tool necessarily implies going back to Greek theatre as well including both tragedies and comedies but still putting an emphasis on the tragedy. Meineck states that the theatre actors were never to be seen performing barefaced:

"If facial recognition, reciprocal eye contact, and mental connectivity to the movements of others are some of the most important ways in which humans communicate emotional states among themselves, then what happens when the face is denied by the mask, the eyes hidden, and movement choreographed?" (114).

Stating how actors never performed without their masks implies that masks were an important factor in plays and performances on stage and how masks signified huge differences in different representations of characters. With the often mention of the mask in the Greek theatre, it is necessary to evaluate the mask itself and what value it added to the Greek theatre and the performance on stage. Paul Monaghan examines the role of the mask in his paper

"Mask, Word, Body and Metaphysics in the Performance of Greek Tragedy" with regard to prior various theories, especially the one of David Wiles and Chris Vervain, as they associated masks with the performance of Greek tragedy where masks were split into two categories, the mask painted with character features and the mask of white plaster, neutral mask (1). Another distinction that could be connected with the one of Wiles and Vervain is one of the masks that conceal and the masks that reveal (qtd. in Monaghan 1). However, these theories were not adequate since Monaghan does not differentiate the roles of the Greek masks but claims that masks both conceal and reveal, concealing the physical and revealing the metaphysical (1). The tragic mask is actually found to be an instrument for removing people, both spectators and actors, from their everyday reality and bringing them to another world where the connection between man and god was superior.

To fully grasp the concept of masks, it is crucial to put it in context and, consequently, that is the reason why it is important to understand the central working relationship of theatre, which is an interplay between the three principles arenas of "the 'acting event', the 'mental' space of perception and imagining, and the 'real' world of daily, lived experience" (Monaghan 2).

'Theatrical space' is a term including several various spheres, such as physical, mental, socio-political, cultural, historical, etc. In the course of the 'acting event', the spectator undergoes and observes performers on stage who move, speak, and affect the audience, and communicate with it. They are conditioned by their surroundings, such as the scene, the lights, sound, etc. Generally, the 'acting event' pertains to an 'enacted event', which is actually everything happening in a fictional place. Everything that the audience sees or hears involves every spectator in what is happening on stage and they process all of the information and analyses it in their own subjective and biased method. As it is natural to a human brain, the spectators tend to visualize and conceive ideas or things that do not necessarily have to be present on stage. They connect similar ideas, they have various associations and this is the

'mental' or 'conceptual space'. Every 'mental space' is different and varies from person to person, depending on their prior life experience, their imagination, and basically everything that has ever happened to them. For the 'mental space' to exist, the spectator does not have to be physically present. They could read the piece at home or anywhere else and completely engage their imagination and create that mental space on their own. What it means is that this mental space is specifically dependent on each of the spectators and their minds and thoughts that they bear with them. Depending on the period in history, style, intention, and convention, these three 'spaces' had diverse relationships. Some of the examples mentioned are Symbolist theatre where the three 'spaces' are completely distinct, but still linked. There is also an instance of Realist theatre which equalizes the three 'spaces', the actors and the tangible stage and setting resemble the 'real' world. The spectator's mental world puts focus on the 'real' world's nature (Monaghan 2).

An interesting fact to mention is that Wiles and Calame both noticed how the 'relatively featureless' mask affected the importance of the spectator's mental space in Greek theatre: "The main role [of the mask] is to reverse the way the action is represented by setting it face to face, so to speak, with its enunciated [the audience] …the Greek tragic mask is thus … the instigator of a confrontation with the person who watches the action on stage [the audience] and with the wearer of the mask itself [the actor]" (qtd. in Monaghan 3).

Here Calame claims that the dramatic 'person', face, mask, and actor wearing a mask, all combined in one term *prosopon* are open to interpretation by the spectator's understanding. "When the play begins, we know the basic events of the plot, because they belong to the shared language of myth; we know the names of personae likely to be featured and their familial relationships to other personae. But we do not know how the personae in the play will be portrayed, or how the basic events in the narrative will be connected and given cause." (Monaghan 3).

"We know that the actor who has just arrived in the performance space is, for example, Creon, but we do not know who this Creon is until he makes decisions within the framework of the myth as manifested and used in the plot of that particular play. There is no continuous identity for Creon, only momentary existences in whatever guise the playwright chooses to portray him in that play and performance" claims Monaghan (3).

It is also observed that fifth-century masks are making it :

"possible for the actor to 'change' his identity, to be transformed into 'another person' by submitting to the power of Dionysus. For, on this view, wearing the mask of the god in the accomplishment of the Dionysiac ritual would mean... accessing, through possession and identification with the god, "radical otherness." (qtd. in Vervain 128).

5.1. Joker found in Ancient world

When the spectators or readers get engaged with one of the comic books or movies, they know the basic plot: Batman is the hero of the story fighting against his famous anti-hero, Joker who is an intelligent dangerous criminal and madman messing with Batman and bringing chaos into the city of Gotham. However, with all the regularities that follow the character and the plot, Joker does not have a continuous identity, according to the theory of Monaghan previously mentioned, and that is obvious in the previous analysis of different eras of the character. For instance, in the comic book *Batman: A Death in the Family* Joker is described as a heartless dangerous criminal with high intelligence who plays games and tricks in order to get what he wants, not stopping at anything. He used Robin's soft spot, his mother, to be more precise, his need to find his biological mother, and lured him and Batman into his game and finally won. In the end, Robin ended up being killed by Joker in this sequence. This Joker has no sentiment and no regrets at all, he is a merciless criminal and a killer. What matters the most is the money and power obtained through weapons and missiles. Furthermore, in the comic book *The Killing*

Joke there is again a step back from ruthless criminal and killer and he was described as an unfortunate, low-class, poor man with tragic events happening to him and shaping him into this crazy person who is also unstoppable but aims at a different goal, Batman. With his philosophical nihilist view on life, he makes an attempt to explain how anyone is susceptible to the difficulties and tragedies that life can bring and that the morals that are the ground of society can easily crumble and get destroyed. Again, in the late 80s, Jack Nicholson introduces to the scene another incarnation of the character, another possible understanding of the character that has been long on the scene at this point. He is somewhat of a trickster who transformed from a gangster Jack Napier, killed Batman's parents and started to terrorize Gotham City. Even though he is also a gangster and a killer with his smart gadgets and inventions which help him obtain his goals, there is still some dash of playfulness seen in the trickster era. Then came Heath Ledger with his deeply profound interpretation of the character, the terrorist and anarchist as the product of the post 9/11 American society. The last incarnation that was taken into consideration throughout this paper is *Joker* (2019), a politically and socially extremely intriguing character that can even recall some other iconic movies and books, such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* from 1976. However, there is another iconic and controversial movie made based on a book with the same title, *The American Psycho.* Even though it may seem that the two characters are quite the opposite, they are actually just two sides of one coin, both individuals pushing against society, just coming from different perspectives and backgrounds where Arthur Fleck who incarnated Joker is the social outcast living poorly and lonely, not thriving in the societal norms whereas Patrick Bateman, the protagonist in *The American Psycho,* is the Manhattan businessman who should be thriving, but still struggles in everyday life and succumbs to violence.

Concerning the theories mentioned in the previous chapter which will now be used, it can be claimed that these theories and definitions apply to the character of Joker. Regardless of

which exact incarnation is taken into consideration, the spectators are never fully sure which version of the character they will get, whether it will be a funny trickster or a political figure representing societal problems of that period, and that describes theories on what masks can represent and are the tool with the help of which movie directors and comic book writers bring to life the character they wanted. That fits into the theory of the dramatic "person" by Calame, according to which it is unfamiliar how the personae in the play will be portrayed (qtd. in Monaghan 3). In that same way, the spectators could not predict where would the director of *Joker* take the character in the sense of social position and with relation to previous incarnations.

All of his features insinuate him wearing some type of mask in all the incarnations of the character, especially in the last incarnation where the movie revolved only around Joker. Although in the comic book *The Killing Joke*, in Tim Burton's interpretation of the character in *The Batman*, and also in the latest movie interpretation *Joker* (2019), physical features similar to a consistent mask appear along the storyline while in other interpretations, like *A Death in the Family* comic book and *The Dark Knight* movie, the features are present from the beginning, it is prominent to mention the consistency of the elements of the 'mask' of Joker. He is always characterized by his deadly white face, wide, scarred, red grin with darkened eyes, and green hair. According to the theory of Monaghan explained in the previous chapter, Joker's mask serves him as a device aiding the spectators and the readers in analyzing the character and in the same time, identifying with him. As it was previously explained in the paper, each of the incarnations chosen bears a societal and cultural significance and is described according to the character. In this way, there are different eras of the character, i.e. the era of 'trickster', the era of 'madman', etc. There could be parallels drawn between the era of the character and the societal, political and historical context of the comic books and the movies, as his mask introduces Joker as an idea, as the representation of all the problems and ways of living of ordinary people. That idea is living among all people and can grow and become more and more

prominent, in the same way that Joker becomes less invisible and steps out and makes himself known to the rest of the world.

What is also important to mention in Joker's case is the timing of appearance of these elements. Throughout the comic *Batman: The Killing Joke,* putting on a mask is exactly the moment of physical and mental transformation of crucial importance for the development of the character, the moment where he embraced the mask and the role that went along with it. Since there has been a moment of some sort of transformation within the character, it is possible to compare his behavior of that of theatre actors putting on a mask before a performance. This act of putting on a mask, literally or metaphorically, implicates that it directly affects the environment around them as well.

"To act utterly means to play a part. There is a distinction between three sorts of acting, tragedy, comedy and the satiric drama. One common feature of the three mentioned sorts of acting that ties them all together is the mask, or rather wearing the mask on stage" (Jevons 172).

6. Conclusion

This paper attempted to provide an analysis of Joker, one of the most famous antiheroes ever created in the world of comic books that expanded onto other media such as cinema and television. The analysis revolves around the villainy of the character, his question of identity and in the end, it tackles the subject of the effect of the Greek theatre and the elements of it in modern performances such as movies and comic books. Firstly, the distinction between good and bad was discussed through different lenses, one of which was the Bible and the Genesis book where the distinction between the good and the bad was presented by the event that happened inside the garden of Eden where Satan was depicted as the fallen angel. The reference of the fallen angel could be connected to the downfall of Joker as he went through life and which was the most prominent in the latest movie *Joker* (2019). According to the theory by

Enrique Cámara Arenas, there are two definitions of villains, a weak one and a strong one and Joker was dissected according to the strong theory. Relating to that theory, Joker's motivation dimension was questioned and according to the theory by Robin S. Rosenberg, there are different types of villains according to the motivation hiding behind their actions where Joker is proven to be the sadistic supervillain. Furthermore, Joker is actually proven to be dissociated from the standard distinction of good and evil and does not fit the norm of the two opposite sides in line with Heit's theory in essays on good and evil. Following the storyline of what type of villain Joker is and why is he the way he is, it was necessary to examine Joker's identity. There was a timeline provided in accordance with different depictions of the character, divided into various eras of the character throughout time that describe actions and characteristics of each of the eras confirming that the character went through diverse changes and historical events that happened in real life. In the last part of the paper, there was an insight into Greek tragedies provided with the emphasis on the elements of the mentioned theatre, such as mask. The aim was to make connections of those elements to the chosen incarnations of the character with the stress on the latest movie, *Joker* (2019). Since the elements of the Greek theatre, especially tragedy, could be found in the behavior of Joker, it is possible to draw the parallels between them. Due to its enormous success and constant incarnations of the character in different movies and comic books, it is safe to conclude that the audience is to expect even more versions of the character in the future representing new eras both of the character and the events in the world.

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8. Development and Understanding of the Character of the Joker: Summary and Key Words

The main goal of this paper is to provide an in-depth analysis of Joker as a character throughout different eras and different media up to this point, such as comic books and movies. There were specific incarnations of the character that are chosen in the paper as milestones in the development of the character. The concept of evil and villainy was evaluated from the perspectives of various theories dealing with villains and those theories were connected to the identity of Joker and his madness as a result of everything that the character experienced. Motivational dimension of the character was explored according to the typology of villains and the codependency between Joker and Batman. All the actions that he did were linked to the Ancient world in the way that the tragic mask, the tool without which there were no any spectacles on stage before, is present in the chosen incarnations of the character. Theories that focused on the tragic mask in contemporary performances were used in this paper and put into context of Joker. The paper suggests that there exists a link between those performances in the Greek theatre and the creation of the mask and the character that we see today. In today's society the main focus is on so-called villains and their background stories, and what led to their behavior. In the same way, Joker was given more and more importance throughout the movies and comic books and started many discussions on many topics that could reflect modern society.

Key words: Joker, evil, villainy, types of villains, motivational dimension, madness, identity, mask, Greek tragedy

9. Razvoj i razumijevanje lika Jokera: sažetak i ključne riječi

Cilj ovog rada bio je pružiti temeljitu analizu lika Jokera kroz različite ere lika i kroz različite medije, kao što su stripovi i filmovi. Odabrane su inkarnacije lika koje su predstavljene kao prekretnice u razvoju lika. Koncept zla i podlosti provučen je kroz perspektive različitih teorija koje se bave zlikovcima, a te iste teorije povezalo se s Jokerovim identitetom i njegovim ludilom koje se pojavilo kao rezultat svega što je lik proživio. Motivacijska dimenzija lika istražila se u radu sukladno s tipologijom zlikovaca i međuovisnosti Jokera i Batmana. Sve radnje lika povezane su s antičkim svijetom na način da je tragična maska, sredstvo bez kojeg predstave na pozornici u prošlosti ne bi bile moguće, prisutne su u odabranim inkarnacijama lika. Teorije koje se bave tragičnom maskom u modernim izvedbama iskorištene su u ovom radu i stavljene su u kontekst Jokera. Ukazuje se da postoji poveznica između tih izvedbi i grčkog kazališta i stvaranja maske i lika kojeg vidimo danas. U današnjem društvu glavni fokus stavljen je na takozvane zlikovce i njihove pozadinske priče, što je sve dovelo do njihovog ponašanja. Na isti način, Joker je dobivao sve više i više na važnosti kroz filmove i stripove i potaknuo je mnoge rasprave na razne teme koje su odraz modernog društva.

Ključne riječi: Joker, zlo, podlost, tipovi zlikovaca, motivacijska dimenzija, ludilo, identitet, maska, grčka tragedija