

**“MY LIFE IS NOTHING BUT A COMEDY”:  
MADNESS AND REVENGE TRAGEDY  
IN TODD PHILLIPS’ *JOKER* (2019)**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the employment of madness and the revenge tragedy in the contemporary Hollywood film, *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019). By focussing on the causation that leads to the protagonist's tragic fate, I argue that the protagonist's use of blood revenge is due to the city's indifferent nature towards its marginalised and mentally ill citizens. Though the protagonist's crimes cannot warrant any justification, an empathetic understanding can be bridged to the audience due to the intimate portrayal of his suffering. Madness is most certainly loaded with diverse histories and persists as an anomaly to humans. The current interpretation of madness, within the context of mental illness, greatly differs from its early understanding incorporating societal rejection of those who failed to uphold the standards of societal convention. In *Joker*, it is further attributed to individuality and liberation from the constraints of societal convention. My research maintains that the film deploys madness as a defensive and coping mechanism against the tyranny of societal structures, through which the protagonist emancipates his dangerous and powerful Joker persona. In addition, I analyse the portrayal of mental illness in *Joker*. I impartially explore the film's rally for mental illness awareness and compare it to its damaging depiction of a violent and murderous mentally ill protagonist. The film essentially embodies both redeeming and harmful portrayals of mental illness. I henceforth assess the presence of the revenge tragedy in *Joker* by examining the formula of the genre's leading precedent, *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898). The Kydian formula establishes the structure of a revenge tragedy narrative employing blood revenge as its primary method of retribution, and it is through this formula that I am able to locate and justify the presence of the revenge tragedy in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019). Due to the cold-blooded vengeance the protagonist undertakes, I evaluate the cautionary tale around the mistreatment of the mentally ill which gave rise to the events in the film. As a result of this, my research asserts that the protagonist ultimately occupies the seat of the anti-hero despite the brutal nature of his crimes. The societal system reigns as the true villain of the film, because if it were not for the systematic marginalisation of Gotham's disadvantaged and mentally ill citizens, as well as the callous nature of society, then the protagonist may have not walked down the dark path that he did.

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts**, in the Graduate Programme in **English Studies**, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, **Selma Akoo**, declare that:

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This thesis does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
  - a. Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced.
  - b. Where their exact words have been used, then their writing has been placed inside quotation marks, or it has been indented, and referenced.
5. This thesis does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the thesis and in the References sections.

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02 December 2022

Date

Dr Samiksha Laltha

Name of Supervisor

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Signature

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

This dissertation explores social constructs of madness in the contemporary Hollywood film, *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), with a specific focus on revenge tragedy. I argue that the revenge tragedy is apparent in the film due to its presentation of blood revenge against personal injuries caused by the callous nature of society towards its marginalised and mentally ill citizens as the focal point that catalyses the protagonist's tragic outcome.

## Summary of Chapters

This literary study uses film studies, with a focus on cinematography which is discussed through particular scenes in the film. This study analyses the conceptual and semantic issues of madness in light of its application in literature and social thought. I further analyse the framework of madness provided by Michel Foucault ([1961] 1988), and the appearance and impact of madness in *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014). The chapters within this dissertation explore three main concepts of my research – madness; the film *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019); and revenge tragedy. Chapter One covers the Introduction while Chapter Two establishes the theoretical framework for this dissertation consisting of madness, mental illness and the revenge tragedy.

My dissertation is structured on a primary premise which seeks to address the madness and revenge tragedy of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019). The premise is centered on the cautionary tale of Joker, which is accompanied by four main aspects that investigate how the film represents madness, its source and its consequence through the protagonist's transition from Arthur to Joker. The consequence of madness subsequently results in the controversy behind the outcome of Fleck's madness and tragedy. The first aspect of this premise explores representations of madness by assessing how madness is employed in the film and through its grey protagonist, while also assessing whether Fleck's madness stems from his mental illnesses. The second aspect examines the source of madness by ascertaining the role of madness in Joker and

whether the film highlights or perpetuates discriminatory attitudes towards mental illness to the general audience. These two aspects are addressed in Chapter Three's critical analysis of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) through the lens of madness, where I thoroughly discuss the representations of madness in the film. I further assess the source of madness by analysing the role of madness in the film. I weigh the stigmatising and redeeming aspects of the film's depiction of mental illness to ascertain the intention behind this specific portrayal and its impact on the general audience.

The third aspect determines the consequence of madness by demonstrating how the revenge tragedy features in *Joker*. I then highlight the final aspect regarding the controversy behind the tragedy of Fleck and inquire whether *Joker* is a tragic anti-hero. Ascertaining the primary villain of the story also falls under this aspect. The last two aspects are discussed in Chapter Four, which analyses the thematic concepts of the revenge tragedy inspired by Thomas Kyd's ([1592] 1898) *The Spanish Tragedy* and how it differs from the orthodox form of revenge laid out by the ancient Greek playwright, Sophocles ([c. 400 AD] 2014), and the ancient Roman playwright, Seneca ([62 AD] 1966). This thematic difference consequently permits an application of the genre to *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019). I therefore analyse the Kydian formula for revenge tragedies and apply it to the film to illustrate my argument. The formula adheres to Kyd's interpretation of the genre and recognises specific exemplary characteristics popularised by Kyd. The controversy behind the film's depiction of its protagonist, Arthur Fleck, as a tragic anti-hero and the consequence of his madness, through which the revenge tragedy develops, are also addressed in the last chapter.

All aspects are answered in the Conclusion after sufficient discussion has been made on each topic, so that comprehensive conclusions may be drawn. I end my dissertation with a brief conclusion that infers the impact of the film on popular culture.

## **Research Method**

Literary studies denotes the practice of analysing literary texts in order to gain further insight and comprehension to every facet presupposed. This form of study notably expands our knowledge by incorporating social and political concepts or critiques, and grants insight into various forms of expression or protest that give leeway to social cohesion and accord. In order to employ close reading to my textual and visual sources, I refer to Catherine Belsey (2013, 160), who explains that “textual analysis as a research method involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help”. Jane Gallop (2007, 183) strengthens this approach by observing how literary studies is embodied by the universal approach of close reading, as “it is necessarily the best way to read literature”; and is furthermore “a widely applicable skill”. Approaches such as close reading allows for an astute analysis of the literary text. Literary studies is also often linked to cultural studies due to the various cultural topics present within a text. Gallop ascertains the link between literary and cultural studies having been formed by virtue of close reading because “when literary studies broadened into cultural studies, it was precisely through the power of this move to close-read nonliterary text” (183). It is this ability of close reading which enables one to understand the complexities and variability of culture.

Film Studies form an essential aspect of this study. Film study is regarded as “an accumulation of concepts, or, rather, of ideas and attitudes clustered around concepts” (Andrew, 1984, 3). Film study involves the abstract notions that arise from film making – such as social, cultural and political concepts – more so than the physical aspects and technicalities of film making. It is hence described as “a verbal representation of the film complex” (3). My dissertation therefore analyses a modern film adaptation of the Joker character set in the twentieth century. It draws the links between its interpretations of madness and my research on the revenge tragedy.

Cinematography is described by Blain Brown (2016, 2) as “the process of taking ideas, words, actions, emotional subtext, tone, and all other forms of nonverbal communication and rendering them in visual terms”. Lauren Beachum (2010, 18) further explains that “cinematographers draw from processes of perception and emotion when creating their scenes”. I therefore explore

the cinematography of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) by highlighting influential factors such as the lighting, composition, colour palette and camera movement of a few select scenes. Todd Phillips (Vanity Fair, 2019, Online) describes *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) to be intentionally “unsettling” so as to emphasise the “slow, ramp up into insanity” experienced by Fleck. Phillips further explains that every intentional aspect of the cinematography contributes towards creating this unsettling ambience in the film (Vanity Fair, 2019, Online). The cinematography is masterfully created as it successfully engenders the audience’s empathy towards the film’s protagonist through the intimate scenes that focus on Fleck’s emotions and vulnerability.

Jay Bolter (2004, 17) proposes the purpose of cultural studies as a critique and comprehension of how society operates with regard to the cultural values and dimensions which it either possesses or rejects. Belsey (2004, 11) jointly postulates cultural studies as the primary framework which defines our diversity as humans as “culture [has] the virtue of allowing for difference, acknowledging the diversity of cultural values and practises”. Belsey (2003, 24) further notes the importance of cultural studies as a means to assimilate humans and their multifaceted nature, since “culture does not constitute its subjects as conditioned robots, but as complex, sophisticated, multifarious individuals”. Our culture deeply impacts us as a society; as it changes, so will we change with it – thereby providing the space required for social growth and responsibility.

Cultural studies assists in uniting cultural theory to film studies and it is often approached through the literary technique of close reading which allows for a more thorough comprehension of cultural or social contexts, such as treating a film as a novel and adopting close reading in the same manner for its critical analysis (Brummett, 2019, 7-8). My research hence incorporates a Cultural studies approach that explores how *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) depicts, and possibly aggravates, the stigmatisation of the mentally ill. Films that fail to accurately depict mental illness may worsen the plight of the mentally ill. Such films could further stigmatise marginalised groups of people, or invalidate their struggles and cries. The mass media is, undoubtedly, a highly versatile platform and one of the most striking features of worldly life due to its vast utility and widespread influence. In the same way the media may serve to connect people for humane endeavours, it may also connect people who wish to spread

ignorance, hate, prejudice or discrimination. The mass media thereby acts as a canvas for the human mind to express its contents and beliefs.

## **Literature Review**

My research is centered on an analysis based on societal perceptions of madness as social constructs and then I expand this discussion to *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), where I analyse the themes of madness, mental illness and society; as well as humour which symbolically represents social systems and conventions – along with an analysis of the revenge tragedy genre and the film’s endeavour to portray Fleck as the anti-hero of his tragic story. To substantiate my assertion, I analyse how Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* ([1592] 1898) rekindled the theme so as to re-establish retribution in the form of blood revenge.

The framework for madness is primarily provided by Michel Foucault’s ([1961] 1988) exploration of madness in society. With specific reference to the theme of madness, I employ the analysis of Tomi Gomory, David Cohen and Stuart Kirk’s (2013) inquiry of madness and the space it occupies in both the medical and social spheres, as well its historic relation to mental illness and psychiatry. In Gomory, Cohen and Kirk’s article, *Madness or Mental Illness? Revisiting Historians of Psychiatry* (2013), they explain how mental illness had fallen under the category of madness<sup>1</sup> due to both human error and our failure to comprehend mental illness. Their work is echoed by the analysis provided by Julio Arboleda-Flórez’s (2003) article, *Considerations on the Stigma of Mental Illness*, which focuses on the social stigma of mental illness and its association to the stigma attached to madness. In order to address the conceptual issues of madness and its semantic problem, I utilise Shoshana Felman and Martha Evans’s (2003) work on the link madness shares with literature and philosophy in their book, *Writing and Madness: (Literature / Philosophy / Psychoanalysis)*.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this, humans have nevertheless throughout time understood mental disorders, although not retrospectively recognised as such, to stem from the brain (Gomory, Cohen and Kirk, 2013, 123). Mental illness had nevertheless fallen within the nonconforming dichotomy antithetical to the dichotomy of societal conventionalism, order and acceptance – the dichotomy inclusive of the ‘other’; of societal repudiation of undesirables whose presence would frustrate the societal image and norm of a community. The terms madness and mental illness are not used interchangeably throughout my dissertation but rather in the relevant contexts that refer to either the social construct of madness or the psychiatric understanding of mental illness.

Sophocles' tragedy, *Ajax* ([c. 400 AD] 2014), is also referred to due to its influential representation of madness and the various social outcomes that occurred as a result of this employment of madness. The research on *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014) is provided by Ismene Lada-Richards' ([2006] 2010) article, *Becoming Mad On Stage: Lucian On The Perils Of Acting And Spectating*, which analyses an occurrence of madness during a crucial performance of *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014), through which the pantomime performance can be associated to the cathartic dancing exhibited in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019). My research specifically analyses the effect of madness in the play due to not only its depiction of madness, but the legacy this depiction has left behind.

For my theoretical and academic analysis of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), I briefly analyse the Joker character and his problematic relation to mental illness through the work of John Goodwin and Izzat Tajjudin (2016). My dissertation explores the works of Guillaume Mouleux (2019) and Sean Redmond (2021), which both critically investigate various theoretical aspects of the film. Regarding the dramatic genre of revenge tragedy, I refer to the analysis of Fredson Bowers (1966) who lays out the framework of Kyd's ([1592] 1898) employment of the revenge tragedy in *The Spanish Tragedy*. This framework is strengthened by the works of Ronald Broude (1975), Bradley Irish (2009) and Tanya Pollard (2010) who all provide additional contextual information regarding the genre's rise during the Elizabethan era.

### **Acknowledging Previous Research**

Christopher Crosbie's (2007) PhD thesis on the philosophical aspects of revenge tragedy is worthy of mention as it informs the structure of my research on the revenge tragedy. Crosbie's research asserts "that revenge proved a particularly apt *vehicle* for engaging with the highly contested philosophies of the period" (10). Crosbie notes that even though *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, [1601] 1977) wholly encompasses the revenge tragedy genre and its characteristics, it is not recognised as the primary reference for the genre (11). *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898) is instead recognised as the "progenitor of the early modern revenge drama" (11). Revenge tragedies such as *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898), *Titus Andronicus* (Shakespeare, [1594] 1907), and *The Duchess of Malfi* (Webster, [1623] 1997) reign in their precedence over the genre due to their ability to merge philosophy and

revenge together as components that unite for the act of revenge as opposed to acting independently, as seen in *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, [1601] 1977) where “criticism has resolutely kept philosophy and revenge separate, as almost intrinsically incompatible with each other” (Crosbie, 2007, 7). This notion paints the process of revenge in *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, [1601] 1977), with the act of revenge arising through “impulse, with comparatively little rumination” (Crosbie, 2007, 7), despite the protagonist philosophising at the beginning of the narrative. This differs from the aforementioned plays where revenge is intrinsically tied to philosophy, which further provides a critique of the state of social affairs during the respective periods of the plays.

Crosbie (2007, 11) argues that “early modern revenge drama takes on, with surprising sophistication, such variegated matters as class, perceptions of moderation, the essential composition of the material world, and the generation of political power through fabulist narrative”. He ultimately presents the idea “that revenge on the early modern stage functioned not simply as a dramatic *raison d’être* but as a means to engage with the period’s transformative strains of natural, ethical, and political philosophies” (192). This notion is explicitly exercised in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) as the film tackles various social issues through Fleck’s acts of revenge. It is through these vengeful acts that he is able to challenge and expose societal systems designed by the elite that suppress the working class and further neglect marginalised groups of people. The significance of theatre as a platform that illustrates the social commentary of a play is also emphasised by Crosbie, as “the stage affords the opportunity to make material and immediate the political and cultural possibilities latent, if unexplored overtly, in philosophy’s more prosaic moments” (2007, 15).

Lauren Beachum (2010) is notable for her Honours research on the portrayals of mental illness and psychotherapy in film. Beachum draws on the stark influence of the media as simultaneous source of education and entertainment, and affirms the notion that “fact and fiction media are interactive and mutually reinforcing, and the interaction allows movie images to implicitly influence public perception through news sources under the guise of objectivity” (8). Beachum also argues that “when people have little real-life experience with mental illness, they draw more of their knowledge from films, resulting in more inaccurate and negative perceptions” (9). Gross and inaccurate representations of mental illness by the media, specifically its

Hollywood machinery, thereby exhibit the power the media possesses to establish general attitudes towards mental illness that reflect such erroneous perceptions. Beachum illustrates the similarities between film and psychiatry through the idea that “both psychiatry and film share an interest in human [behaviours] and motivations” (16).

The ability to recreate important perceptions in a film greatly helps a film succeed in eliciting the intended emotional reaction from its audience. Beachum (2010, 18) affirms this point about creating emotional perceptions in film, because when they are “bolstered by dramatic music, carefully written dialogue, and superb acting, these perceptual imitations can be quite effective”. *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) owes its success to these various aspects that masterfully recreate these perceptions for the audience, along with its cinematography that expertly establishes Fleck amongst the uncompassionate society of the dark and gritty Gotham City. Although it may be contentious, *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) also succeeds on portraying the challenges the mentally ill face in society; whereas films, in contrast, had often “[incorporated] mental illness for its cinematic value as a plot device, for its comedic potential, and for the dynamic characters it can construct” (Beachum, 2010, 20). In order to correct such misapprehensions concerning mental illness, Beachum therefore maintains that “it is imperative to understand how these myths and stereotypes influence public attitudes, [behaviours], and policies” (28).

Edward Koslin’s (2021) noteworthy PhD thesis on representations of madness in various works of literature, film and art edifies this dissertation’s framework of madness and its complex history with society. Koslin contends that “the definition of madness rests with the authorities that define madness” (23). He further augments this stance by linking the incongruity of madness to socio-cultural norms and values, because “while definitions of madness have changed through the centuries, its [conceptualisation] has consistently been in opposition to cultural norms” (23). Koslin’s analysis indeed establishes the recurring factor of “two communities: the one in which individual [behaviour] is deemed dystonic, that is, not harmonious with norms, and the one deemed syntonic, harmonious” (81). Madness is hence perceived as a “cultural artefact” (9) by Koslin, who competently explores the various definitions and labels devised for madness by numerous disciplines and authorities.

In contrast to the familiar causes behind madness, Koslin (2021, 9) notably upholds that “underneath madness, whether comic or tragic, is sadness, melancholy. And, most often, under the rubric melancholy dwell grief, loss, and trauma”. This is especially pertinent to *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) since Fleck’s madness emerges as a counter to societal systems and norms that he retaliates against – a counter wrought by his experiences of intense melancholy and grief. The concept behind Fleck’s madness can be sustained by Koslin’s analysis of madness, which maintains that “if madness exists as a condition or way of behaving, it is a response to a specific context and not inherent” (2021, 82). A specific context fuelled by melancholy, grief and trauma is a meaningful observation put forward by Koslin, who asserts that a possible reason “reason madness is not more comprehensively parsed in its history rests with the difficulty of looking directly, feeling directly, listening deeply to the trauma and grief that underlies most manifestations of madness” (72).

### **An Academic Insight towards an Improved Understanding of Mental Health**

Madness is variously regarded in society, and the chief culprit behind the odious attitude towards madness is literature and the mass media, most notably the film industry, which has played a toxic role abetting the stigma and stereotypes held by society towards madness and mental illness<sup>2</sup>. Society’s regard for the mentally ill is of utmost importance and the societal urgency for redress to correct the wrongs suffered by the mentally ill is a dire exigency that is fundamental towards the upliftment of the mentally ill in society. Through the research in this dissertation, I wish to raise awareness towards their plight through my work on *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) while highlighting the uncompassionate nature of society which ultimately leads to marginalisation, social violence, prejudice and division – a situation that greatly reflects our modern societies.

Madness is a phenomenon that is arguably intrinsic to human nature. Throughout the years, this phenomenon has faced a complex history of misconception and misjudgement, thereby

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<sup>2</sup> My research does not intend to generalise the mass media since there are redeeming films that serve to educate and raise awareness towards the struggles and realities of mental illness, with *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) arguably falling into this category as well for its depiction of the marginalisation of mentally ill citizens.

resulting in much discrimination and prejudice that has lingered throughout time. Madness, through its multiple facets and spheres, is most prominently identified in society as a construct that provides justification towards its maltreatment of madness. The understanding of madness operating at the margins of society develops into the primary comprehension of madness as more than a disease of the mind or an explanation for unreason: its true form within the socio-cultural sphere is that of a construct. By analysing the multifaceted nature of madness, my research is then able to locate the key ramifications that arise from the various factors influenced by madness, primarily the societal factors that play a salient role in the formation of madness as a social construct – a construct subjugated to arbitrary socio-political powers that sought to control and categorise madness, and influence social perception by manipulating and regulating what society was exposed to concerning madness.

Madness, as interpreted in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), is hence perceived as a means to survive a world that has lost all sense of humanity. My research intends to highlight not only the cautionary tale expressed in *Joker*, but to more importantly inspire introspection regarding the way in which the system, as well as society itself, marginalises those whom it refuses to recognise or support. A socio-cultural perspective aids my research in not only its expedition to the realm of madness but also in the various ways in which madness operates within our current contexts and domains. Understanding the multi-faceted nature of madness and what it wholly entails enables a more efficient study into the core of madness to be effected.

### **Madness and Mental Illness in Hollywood**

Socio-cultural stigma and discrimination impairs the livelihoods, dignity and rights of those perceived as the “other”, as well as the mentally ill. To illustrate this, I refer to an incident regarding European explorers and their descriptions of mental illness among the Inuit. This encounter reflects how the “lack of cultural knowledge, abuse of power, and observer bias can lead to inappropriate judgments of abnormality” (Connor-Greene, 2006, 8). Julio Arboleda-Flórez (2003, 645) further asserts that “associating mental illness with violence helps to perpetuate [stigmatising] and discriminatory practices against mentally ill persons; it is only one of many negative stereotypes and common prejudicial attitudes about them”. Those who are stigmatised face a myriad of difficulties in society. The stigma against mental illness

culminates in the negative quality of life for the mentally ill, who are “[marginalised], disenfranchised, excluded, and denied the human rights and social entitlements that others take for granted” (Arboleda-Flórez and Stuart, 2012, 459). Society’s disparaging regard of the mentally ill is thereby a concern of utmost importance, especially since antiquated socio-cultural beliefs and conventions are responsible for their predicament due to unjust interpretations and depictions of mental illness that aggravate prejudice and misunderstanding. Societal assumptions and prejudices towards mental illness are generated primarily through the media, which prominently promotes a link between mental illness and violence.

Lauren Beachum (2010, 29) avouches that Hollywood may not cease in its damaging portrayals of mental illness “for the sake of accuracy”, because “the industry’s primary motive is to provide entertaining movies that will draw crowds and succeed at the box-office, not to correct society’s perceptions”. Societies are inherently shaped by their cultures and beliefs. Discriminatory attitudes and beliefs are hence formed when prejudicial preferences and interests are upheld by socio-cultural commentaries that are especially featured on mass media platforms such as the film industry and its Hollywood machinery. Various films therefore perpetuate stigma against the mentally ill. The stereotype of mentally ill persons exhibiting violence is most prominently featured in psychological and horror films, such as the iconic *Psycho* (dir. Hitchcock, 1960), and *The Shinning* (dir. Kubrick, 1980) which both showcase misinformed representations of schizophrenia and other disorders. *The Visit* (dir. Shyamalan, 2015) is also notable for its damaging association of violence to schizophrenia and mental illness. In addition, the stereotype of asylums as oppressive structures encompassed by brutal treatments is exacerbated by films such as the successful yet harmful *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (dir. Forman, 1975).

Though a large portion of films have depicted madness and mental illness in a negative light over the years, not all fall into this category. There are films that endeavour to challenge these stereotypes in order to create content that not only justly represents the mentally ill, but marginalised groups as well; as Beachum (2010, 29) contends that “the mental health sector has a responsibility to seek out collaboration with filmmakers to encourage positive portrayals while commenting on inaccurate ones”. Films such as *Inside Out* (dir. Doctor, 2015) correctly

portray the complexities and importance of mental health, as well as the great influence various emotions have on us. *A Beautiful Mind* (dir. Howard, 2001) accurately portrays the challenges a schizophrenic man could face, which ultimately serves to not only educate its audience about schizophrenia but to counter deep-rooted stereotypes and stigma around this highly misunderstood mental disorder. *Edward Scissorhands* (dir. Burton, 1990) meaningfully depicts deformity and social exclusion by shining a light on social prejudices towards abnormality. *Alice in Wonderland* (dir. Burton, 2010) further depicts madness as a counter to tyranny and conformity while also praising individuality and creativity through the vehicle of madness.

*Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) follows the downward spiral of the mentally ill, failed comedian Arthur Fleck, who slowly concedes his sanity to madness due to the morally-bankrupt society which surrounds him. The film essentially serves as a character study that illustrates Fleck's gradual concession to madness. This concession occurs as a result of the tragedies that burden Fleck and his inability to assimilate to society – but it is also fundamentally influenced by the dark ideals and humour of his alter-ego, Joker. As Joker, Fleck is freed from the restraints of social order and conventional humour, and lives his life according to his own nihilistic ideals. This radical change in character signifies Fleck's resistance and opposition to the “system” (2019) and is further symbolically depicted by not only his psychological transformation, but his physical transformation as well.

*Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) succeeds in portraying the iconic character, who is heavily integrated into popular culture, in a manner that greatly differs from other conventional superhero films. Todd Phillips establishes the concept of *Joker* (2019, dir. Phillips) as an “anti-superhero film, with practically no CGI effects or cartoonish plots, but instead a dark realism drained of heroics” (Hagan, 2019, Online). Though it does not feature heavy computer-generated imagery (CGI) and action, such as the eminently successful *Avengers: Endgame* (dir. Russo and Russo, 2019), and *Avatar* (dir. Cameron, 2009), it still became one of the highest-grossing comic book films of all time (Rose, Cragg and Verdier, 2019, Online). The film encompasses a character analysis that intently studies the causes that lead to Fleck becoming Joker. The socio-political problems within this context form a salient component of the film, which is further juxtaposed to a mental health awareness campaign endeavoured by the film. According to Valentin

Skryabin (2021, 1-2), Phillips utilises the infamous villain in order to create “a neuropsychological study drama that reflects on how society views and treats the mental health problems of certain individuals”.

Todd Phillips is a well-established director better known for his comedic and male-centric works, but the sudden shift of genre in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) portrays a stark deviation from his previous films, such as *The Hangover* trilogy (dir. Phillips, 2009; 2011; 2013), to a gritty character study void of comedy – despite humour being a major theme in the film. Although films such as *The Hangover* trilogy (2009; 2011; 2013) appear to problematically “celebrate the alpha male” (Kavka, 2021, 32), some of Phillips’s films are recognised for “interrogating the question of masculine belonging, particularly in sub/cultures where masculinity is both individually negotiated and collectively consolidated” (32). Despite Phillips’ divergence from humour to controversial and dark comedy films, *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) nonetheless preserves the notion of “masculine self-destruction [...] while nonetheless keeping the white, male body and status intact” (Kavka, 2021, 32). The character design of Fleck is certainly questionable, generating heated controversy and debates regarding its supposed glorification of male rage-induced violence, as discussed below:

Thus, *Joker*’s discomfiting ambivalence lies not only in the question of what constitutes a socially (ir)responsible representation of downtrodden masculinity, but also in the way that it bleeds the good man into the bad, the redeemable into the deplorable, the pitifully damaged into the dangerously damaging (31).

Notwithstanding the film’s endorsement of male-centric tropes, it refreshingly shines an interesting light on the violent and chaotic villain by humanising his character. Fleck’s “cackling laughter, sheepish grin, and slow-blinking eyes channel unexpected heartbreak and humanity [...] erasing any trace of comic books and instead presenting a character study of a fevered vigilante suffering from mental illness, alienation, narcissism, and latent rage” (Hagan, 2019, Online). Joaquin Phoenix (Online), who plays the tormented Fleck, has impartially commented on the broad ambiguity of the film, stating that the character is merely “somebody who, like everybody, [needs] to be heard and understood and to have a voice”. Yet Phoenix is

also open to the interpretation of Fleck being “somebody that disproportionately needs a large quantity of people to be fixated on him. His satisfaction comes as he stands in amongst the madness” (Online).

It should be further clarified that though the film provides an independent interpretation of the Joker, Fleck is ultimately not *the* Joker: he is a version of the character and is thereby referred to as just *Joker*. Fleck retains certain symbolic features of the Joker, such as his green hair, the clown face paint, the suit (although not matching the original colour palette), and the laughter. This version of the Joker, however, detaches from a few iconic characterisations in favour of the film’s modern and grounded take. Ultimately, the film narrates the story of Fleck, not Joker; with a focus on the causes that lead to Fleck’s downfall over the incriminating actions of the character. This thereby links the narrative to socio-political problems and socio-economic inequality since these problems catalyse further setbacks, such as poverty and the moral decay of the city.

The Joker was first introduced in 1940 as a psychopathic criminal, but the Batman villain has greatly evolved since his inception. The modern Joker is much more violent, dark, sly and depraved. The Joker is one of the most iconic comic book characters to have ever been created and is deeply entrenched in popular culture due to the influence and popularity of the character (Freemantle, 2019, Online). The character is further defined as “the ultimate egoist” (Weiner and Peaslee, 2015, xix), and is guided by his own capricious madness since “his actions are never driven solely by reason but also by a twisted aesthetic” (xix). The Joker, however, often illustrates problematic narratives that perpetuate stigma against mental illness. John Goodwin and Izzat Tajjudin (2016, 387) establish that “negative stereotypes are quite common in the comic book/graphic novel medium”. In light of the Joker’s numerous depictions and portrayals, “the terms psychopath and sociopath have been used to describe the cinematic and literary Joker” (394). In order to diffuse problematic portrayals such as this, comic writers are encouraged “to focus on a character experiencing mental ill-health who is not a supervillain, but rather a superhero. Such an approach could provide hope for service users and lessen feelings of isolation they may experience” (397).

The Joker's ability to imprint his image on the world is worthy of consideration and concern. By placing this influential character on the pedestal as the anti-hero, *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) may possibly inspire its audience to rise up against the system in the same manner Fleck tragically does, and to also embody madness as their lens to view society. Fleck, who has been neglected by society, uses madness as a means to not only endure his position in society but to also retaliate through revenge and violence. I hence argue that the true villains of the film are, in fact, these social hegemonies that have manufactured a cutthroat society, and are hence able to apathetically neglect and exploit those without financial influence or power. Furthermore, by ascertaining the real villain of the film, my study is then able to critique these socio-political powers that wreak havoc on those who are marginalised by society.

### **Controversy and Impact of the Film**

The film, though highly successful at the box office grossing over \$1 billion (Nolan, 2019, Online), was fairly controversial upon its release. *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) has ultimately received mixed reviews: some critics have praised it as “one of the true masterpieces of the superhero cinema, and one of 2019's greatest achievements” (Hughes, 2019, Online); while others have labelled it as “the year's biggest disappointment” (Bradshaw, 2019, Online). Negative critics have further considered the film to be “dangerous, deeply troubling and a toxic rallying cry for self-pitying incels<sup>3</sup>” (Gajanan, 2019, Online). Critics, as well as the general audience, have raised various concerns and complaints regarding the manner in which the film portrays a character as iconic as the Joker with regard to his conventional characteristics, but the most notable controversy lies in the timing of the film. A film as violent and provoking as *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) engenders concern regarding the volatile issue of terrorism through gun violence in the United States. This thereby results in the most controversial aspect of the film which questions how acceptable it would be “to do a glorification story about a mentally ill white man who is so damaged by society that he eventually becomes a killer” (Scribner, 2019, Online). The general view regarding this type of criticism asserts that the notion of “[empathising] with and glorifying a character who ultimately [terrorises] society because it

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<sup>3</sup> Incels refer to online communities where “angry, young, virgin men brainwash each other with an ideology that tells them that only extremely good-looking men have any success with women and life, and that if you [do not] fit that criterion, women will not only ignore you, but set out to destroy you” (Zand, 2022, Online). These communities further promote the idea that if men fail to meet the standards set out for men by society, then they should resort to “violence or suicide” (Online) in order to assert dominance over society.

did not accept him might not be the kind of message audiences want or need to hear” (Gajanan, 2019, Online).

The film alludes to numerous socio-political issues that bear significant relevance and intrigue<sup>4</sup>. The socio-political remarks left by the film purportedly rendered *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) as “one of the most contentious cultural discussion points of 2019” (Nolan, 2019, Online). The film also highlights mental illness, social inequality, revenge and violence, which will encapsulate the discussions within this dissertation. Within the context of American politics, Sean Redmond (2021, 2) illustrates the following ways in which right-wing and left-wing supporters perceive the film. He observes,

*Joker* has been adopted by the alt-right who claim Fleck/Joker as the embodiment of the disenfranchised white male, and conversely, utilised by the left as a powerful fiction for how austerity and neoliberalism create an underclass, enabling an anti-hero to emerge through the ‘cracks’ or ‘stains’ of society.

The primary altercation of the film stems from its ability to greatly influence the psyche of the world. *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) has garnered extraordinary attention, but the possibility of the film inspiring violence raised concern to such a degree that the military of the United States had issued a statement warning those who chose to watch the film to be vigilant of any possible violence that may occur (Scribner, 2019, Online). Public violence that spurs from films such as *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) is not an utterly foreign phenomenon, as this was experienced in 2012 with the fatal gun violence that occurred during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* (dir. Nolan, 2012). The influence of the Joker does not only extend to the borders of the United States, since it has dominated international waters as well. In late 2021, a man was reportedly arrested for attempted murder after committing a terror attack in a Tokyo train while dressed as the Joker (Staff report, 2021, Online). The accused (Online) stated that “he wanted to kill people and be given the death penalty” as the reason behind his attack, which injured 17

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<sup>4</sup> These issues, however, occupy a scope that far exceeds the capacity of my research, but are nonetheless worthy of mention. The film explores interesting notions of masculinity, race, and populism – but these fall beyond the scope of this dissertation.

people. The influence of the Joker and his ability to inspire violence, especially after the character's escalation in popularity due to the 2019 film, is therefore a notable concern – with the possibility of more attacks occurring in the future.

In light of the criticism of extreme violence in the film, these scenes are, indeed, fierce and potent as they typify Fleck steadily embracing and unleashing the madness raging inside him. Despite the film harbouring a hazardous influence, others have argued that the film is essentially a comic book adaption and comic books are generally known to involve heavy violence, often on a massive scale (Scribner, 2019, Online). Comic book violence exhibiting unnatural and extreme levels of violence and annihilation, however, has less of an impact on the audience since “they happen on a cosmic scale that [does not] seem as grounded in reality” (Online). *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) is, nevertheless, detached from its comic book counterpart to such an extent that Valentin Skryabin (2021, 2) perceives the film to be “closer to an art-house film than a typical comic book film, since it shows less explosive action but more social commentary”. The context of the film is established in a very real, modern world – a setting that indicates, in light of our socio-economic divides, that “Fleck could be anyone from any time” (Scribner, 2019, Online). Guillaume Mouleux (2019, 19) further presents the following concern regarding the film's cautionary tale:

While the film advocates the urgent necessity to rethink the problem at hand instead of choosing between two equally unsatisfactory if not dangerous solutions, it either fails, or refuses, to state a convincing way-out, which makes of it, by any standard, more of a whistleblower than a prescriptive movie.

What sets *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) apart from the conventional comic book adaptation is purely its subject matter and the manner in which it portrays this content to its audience. Phillips (Scribner, 2019, Online) asserts that the move away from the exuberant superhero genre, while utilising the “superhero iconography” nonetheless, is “a very intentional choice”. Phillips justifies his antithetical use of the superhero genre through the vehicle of realism, opting for a superhero film that is “seemingly [grounded] in a very real, very intimate sense of violence, as opposed to big cosmic violence” (Online). The realism thereby elevates the intensity of the

film as “it clearly changes how that violence is meaningful to us” (Online). Mouleux (2019, 15) therefore contends that the violence in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) is extreme but the extremity of it was orchestrated to create awareness towards the plight of the working class and the mentally ill, as well as the many societal causes that lead to their demise.

Indeed, it is not the graphic violence but the disturbing aspects entailing social violence in the form of marginalisation, inhumanity and indifference that truly encapsulates the violence depicted in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019). There are scenes that disturb the audience due to the raw emotion, humiliation, and injustice that Fleck faces at the hands of society. Joaquin Phoenix (Gajanan, 2019, Online), who plays the tormented Fleck, also argues against the film inspiring violence, contending that “a person who is already emotionally disturbed can find inspiration for violence anywhere”. Phillips (Online) further states that the film more importantly “makes statements about a lack of love, childhood trauma, [and] lack of compassion in the world”. The central notion of compassion is a crucial theme, with the idea that Fleck could have possibly subdued his Joker persona if he was treated better by society. With this being said; however, Fleck’s use of extreme violence as a means to acquire retribution against society is neither an acceptable notion intended for the audience nor a valid justification for unhinged violence.

Even though the film has received substantial criticism, it also received heavy acclamation and praise. The film landed two Academy Awards for Best Actor and Best Original Score, amongst numerous other awards and nominations. Fleck is impeccably played by Phoenix, who “lets the inner derangement manifest in every movement, every glance” (Hughes, 2019, Online). Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) engulfs the film in suspense, which he claims is principally effective due to the adept Phoenix who enhances the suspense through his nuanced performance. Phillips (Online) notes that the suspense helps the film emanate the primary feeling of unease since “everything [...] is meant to be unsettling” – every aspect of the film is made with the intention to cause agitation. The score, written by Hildur Guðnadóttir, adds an inherent dimension to the film through its mournful music that intensifies the tension while also enhancing sympathy for Fleck from the audience.

The responsibility of the film to inspire positive instead of negative messages is a contentious issue. There is division regarding to what extent the media, or rather in this case Hollywood specifically, is responsible for the content that it depicts, as well as the messages that such content extends to the audience. Some critics are of the opinion that “Hollywood should be more mindful about what [they are] creating, especially when they know children embrace comic book characters in droves” (Scribner, 2019, Online). Phoenix (Gajanan, 2019, Online), in light of his comment regarding the ability of a disturbed mind to find inspiration for violence from any source, maintains that it is not “the responsibility of a filmmaker to teach the audience morality or the difference between right or wrong” because people are usually “able to tell the difference between right and wrong”. Other critics believe that the subject matter of this film in particular will always pose some sort of risk since “there is no easy way to tell the story of the Joker and avoid its motivating backstory – a character who has bathed in mass violence and hysteria since his inception” (Scribner, 2019, Online). Ultimately, it has been established that “there is never a good time, nor a bad time, to release a Joker film” (Online).

A film portraying the Joker as the focus of its character study will bear its own complications due to the significance and volatility of the character. Both Phillips and Phoenix reportedly expressed worry for taking on a formidable antagonist so steeped in popular culture with the fear of upsetting fans or failing to do the character justice (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online). Moreover, the Joker is not “a child-friendly villain [...] [He is] a psychopath. He has his own vision of the world that the world is not right” (Scribner, 2019, Online). Even though Fleck’s perspective is disparate to that of society and the elite, the film’s focus on the many wrongs he suffers enables the audience to understand, but not utterly condone, the justifications behind his actions. This outcome nevertheless produces even more controversy around the film. A space is created through the ability to empathise and sympathise with Joker, whereby one could find validation in his crimes and hence truly perceive the world through Joker’s eyes. This turn of events could possibly prove disastrous, because “creating sympathy around the Joker character makes him potentially dangerous” (Online). Contrary to the film’s capacity to influence those who relate to Fleck towards a path of violence and vengeance, Phillips rather (Gajanan, 2019, Online) “[urges] people to watch the [film] ‘with an open mind’ and [cautions] against judging the film on behalf of other people”.

The film succeeds in bringing awareness to the plight of the working class, particularly those who are mentally ill. The problems that Fleck experiences exhibit the age-long hurdles and discrimination that the mentally ill still face despite the numerous, notable endeavours to establish equity in society. My research critically analyses and justifies this film's momentous effort in bringing to light the delicate and faceted nature of society's mentally ill citizens. There is, undoubtedly, a cautionary tale that the film expresses to its audience, urging them to question their stigmatising and negative actions, perceptions and attitudes towards the lower brackets of society. Critics have criticised the negative reviewers who have supposedly failed to comprehend the true message the film attempts to express beyond its depictions of violence, with Sean Redmond (2021, 1) arguing that the negative responses "remove [Fleck's] agency and divert attention from a potentially more stimulating conversation about wealth inequality and its responsibility for societal collapse". Mouleux (2019, 15) agrees that too many critics have condemned the violence of the film but turned a blind eye to "the latent social violence" which serves as the catalyst for crime in general.

The Joker is already well-established as a character who articulates his humour and ideologies through violence and chaos – which is a highly problematic concept that bridges the association of mental illness to violence. Phillips' portrayal of the Joker, although lacking in the comedic aspect, realises his intrinsic and iconic violent nature. Notwithstanding the Joker's idiosyncratic appeal to violence and chaos as a primary element of his character, this aggressive characteristic, which is patently applied to Fleck, heavily collides with the film's rally to mental illness awareness by upholding the notion of mentally ill persons as violent and dangerous individuals. Fleck exhibiting violent tendencies due to his unstable mind should not be regarded as a blanket statement that would automatically generalise anyone with the same or similar mental conditions as dangerous. Any form of media that perpetuates such stigma should hence bear the onus of breaking away from these stereotypes due to the following reason put forward by Julio Arboleda-Flórez (2003, 647). He notes,

Those with mental illness in general bear the brunt of impact from the actions of the few. Unfortunately, the media do not inform the public that only a very small minority of mental health patients commit serious crimes and that the percentage of violence

attributable to mental illness as a portion of the general violence in the community is also very small.

It is well understood that the mass media - notably the film industry - has the power to greatly influence minds. Films representing inaccurate information have the power to do great harm; as seen in the case of films that portray incorrect assumptions regarding mental illness and its treatment, with such films ultimately preserving stigma and stereotypes against mental illness (Driscoll and Husain, 2019, Online). An example of this is found in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (dir. Forman, 1975), but this film is arguably a product of its time as it emerged amidst the anti-psychiatry movement (Rössler, 2016, 1251). The use of mental illness as a prominent theme in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) has been well received, but not entirely. On the one hand, it been posited by Valentin Skryabin (2021, 2) that *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) “[would] increase stigma for those with psychiatric disorders and make people afraid”, and that “it [would] take great efforts to combat this setback in the battle against stigma”. Experts of mental health have discredited the film’s use of mental illness, asserting that the film upholds “the hackneyed association between serious mental illness and extreme violence” (Driscoll and Husain, 2019, Online).

On the other hand, *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) has been praised for its portrayals of mental illness within an indifferent society. This is notably expressed by prominent neurocriminologist, Adrian Raine, who was surprised by “how accurate the film’s depiction of the psychology of a murderer was” (Miller, 2019, Online). Raine (Online) commends the work of Phillips and Scott Silver, who both authored the film’s script which “authentically traces the way a man could be driven to deeply troubling acts of violence by a combination of genetics, childhood trauma, untreated mental illness, and societal provocation”. In this vein, Raine (Online) regards the film as “a great educational tool about the making of the murderer”. In addition, Xavier Merchán-del-Hierro, Julián Fernandez-Boccazzi and Emilia Gatto (2021, 515) note that the film has utility for educational purposes chiefly residing in neuropsychiatric education. This utility stems from how the film portrays Fleck’s mental disorder and psyche alongside external and internal factors, which thereby “provides the possibility to explore aspects involved in the differential diagnosis of pathological laughter, a challenging symptom situated at the crossroads of neurology and psychiatry” (515). The film is therefore largely rendered to

individual perspective: whether a person perceives the film to be a glorification of violence or rather a statement on society, or whether a person perceives the film to be enforcing stigma against mental illness or shining a light upon it, is entirely up to debate.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Theoretical Framework: Madness, Mental Illness and the Revenge Tragedy.**

My dissertation is centred on an analysis of the characterisation of Fleck and the manner through which madness and the revenge tragedy features in his story. Regarding characterisation, Alex Woloch (2009) writes that the “the representation of any character takes place within a shifting field of narrative attention and obscurity”. Woloch further explains that “each individual [...] emerges as a character only through his or her distinct and contingent space within the narrative as a whole” (2009). Through this concept of characterisation, my dissertation assesses *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) through a thematic analysis that explores the primary theme of madness, as well as the themes of the humour, mental illness, and the absence of humanity in society, which bring about a multitude of consequences, such as social marginalisation and systematic neglect of the lower brackets of society. Regarding the representations of madness in the film, I argue that madness is employed as a means of retaliation against an unjust system of cruelty and is hence perceived as a counter to the oppression that finds its roots in society, convention, and reason. *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) portrays the tribulations of Fleck as a mentally ill person in society and how his madness encapsulated by his marginalisation as the ‘other’, operates in response to modern oppressive structures of power that enforce socio-economic division. My research is able to express the historic relation mental illness shares with madness by briefly assessing how the stigma surrounding madness was eventually transferred to mental illness.

Madness has always been subject to intense scrutiny but its identification as a separate and distinct condition or symptom gave leeway towards the acknowledgement of mental illness and the variety of disorders that embody it<sup>5</sup>. However, the scrutiny of madness bore many

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<sup>5</sup> The association of madness and mental illness to the brain is cemented by German psychiatrist, Wilhelm Griesinger, who argued for the correlation between mental illness and a diseased brain during the nineteenth century (Ban, 2007, Online). His influential pronouncement had strengthened the recognition of mental illness and ultimately affirmed a psychiatric approach in the treatment of mental illness, as opposed to methods based on socio-cultural or antiquated perspectives. Griesinger’s ([1857] 1882, 75) recognition of mental illness stems from its detachment from a blanket category owing to madness, due to his insistence that an analysis of madness “can only be drawn from the study of its single forms, owing to the extraordinary diversities which they present”.

challenges that still persist to this day due to its complexity, sensitivity and perplexity. The most notable challenge pertaining to madness is its definition – the issue of aptly defining madness has lingered since its inception, with it retaining its conundrum nature over the years. Providing a working definition of madness<sup>6</sup> that holds no previously stigmatising concepts, assumptions, or prejudices – but pure impartiality – is still widely contentious. There is a comprehensive supply of literary evidence that demonstrates the perplexity of madness and its divided definitions. Medieval scholars, for instance, perceived madness to “connote a social or legal status, a descriptor of bodily function, a behavioural or interactive pattern, a subjective perceptual experience, an ethical judgment, or some combination of these” (Craig, 2014, 731). Tomi Gomory, David Cohen and Stuart Kirk (2013, 120) assert that in virtue of holding significant social, cultural, and political weight – and history for reasons more ill than favourable – madness became regarded universally as “a semantic category referring to all manner of [behaviour] peculiar enough to be [publicly] disturbing at any given time”.

By analysing social beliefs, one may be able to bridge a more structured definition of madness and its history. A thorough semantic comprehension of madness and its influence to the socio-cultural domain can then be established as well. Michel Foucault is reputable for his thorough scrutiny of not just his historic evaluation of madness and its treatments in Europe, but generally of madness itself. In his seminal book, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Foucault ([1961] 1988) semantically and contextually captures early societal beliefs and perceptions through his analysis of the historical trail of madness. Foucault’s insistence on context enables a “return, in history, to that zero point in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself” (ix). Furthermore, a historical analysis of madness permits one to “describe, from the start of its trajectory, that ‘other form’ which relegates Reason and Madness to one side or the other of its action as things henceforth external, deaf to all exchange, and as though dead to one another” (ix).

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<sup>6</sup> The use of ‘madness’ throughout my research is not intended to cause insult or harm, but rather to explore the socio-cultural perceptions of the word and specifically how film and literature play a vital role in the damaging and stigmatising attitudes expressed towards mental illness. ‘Madness’ carries a weight and influence like no other: its meaning and potency cannot be conveyed through any other word purely because “no other term more richly captures representations of mental illness throughout history in literature, film, art, [theatre], and popular culture” (Connor-Greene, 2006, 6).

Foucault's work proposes that a genuine and independent comprehension of madness will only be established by returning to the intrinsic nature of madness. Shoshana Felman and Martha Evans' (2003, 14-38) analysis of Foucault's work denote madness, in this sense, to be "a lack of language, an 'absence of production', the silence of a stifled, repressed language". Therefore, in order to decipher madness in a just manner, Felman and Evans assert that one will need "to give madness a voice, to restore its language: a language *of* madness and not *about* it" (38). Consequently, Foucault argues that madness is thereby characteristic of the 'other' due to the manner in which history has denied it a legitimate and inclusive space to exist alongside society, within its own domain and identity; as well as its subjugation to society, art, anthropology, philosophy, psychology and psychiatry (38). Gomory, Cohen and Kirk (2013, 121) provide further guidance regarding the definition of madness by referring to past societal responses towards madness. When society was confronted by various inexplicabilities, they had often "[manufactured] a word or phrase as an explanation that [could] safely contain all that puzzling and frightening content". Madness, as a category, had thereby "[provided] ontological comfort that [helped] one regain the existential stability that was lost as a result of the encounter" (121).

The marginalising categorisation placed social stigma, inferiority and much miscomprehension upon madness due to its bewildering nature, thus invalidating efforts to solidify respect and empathy towards it. The misconceptions placed on madness by society and these disciplines further led to the diminishment of the mad individual's dignity, which ultimately gave rise to discrimination and prejudice. Gomory, Cohen and Kirk (2013, 121) believe that the repression of madness by these disciplines forms the foundation of Foucault's interpretation of madness as "a disjunctive linguistic category label". The shared subject of madness amongst these disciplines also exhibits the multi-faceted nature of madness and its broad yet intricate influence on life throughout history. The impact of madness on numerous disciplines thereby "illustrates the diverse ways societies interpret, explain, represent, control, and attempt to change [behaviours] judged as abnormal" (Connor-Greene, 2006, 6). The ever-evolving nature of society is constantly shaping and influencing the mentalities and beliefs of its people, and "because psychiatric diagnoses and treatments are constructed through the interaction of social, economic, and philosophical forces, mental health is inherently an interdisciplinary field" (6).

Even though these disciplines provide ample information regarding madness within their respective fields, madness itself still requires a space in which it may exercise its own independent history and purpose – to be detached from the interpretations and subjugation of various disciplines. A strategy is provided by Foucault ([1961] 1988, ix) to guide the reader to objectively assess madness, so as to achieve an informed outlook. He observes,

To explore it we must renounce the convenience of terminal truths, and never let ourselves be guided by what we may know of madness. None of the concepts of psychopathology, even and especially in the implicit process of retrospections, can play an organizing role. What is constitutive is the action that divides madness, and not the science elaborated once this division is made and calm restored.

By analysing madness in this objective manner, prior restraints are consequently removed which thereby grants madness a freedom to be grasped impartially. Madness and reason appear to be completely contradictory, but the two are possibly more alike than one would initially perceive. A statement as oxymoronic as this, when adequately adduced, reveals the paradoxical properties that are, in fact, *shared* between madness and reason. Through this neutrality that recognises neither bias nor authority towards reason, the similarity between the two is thereby strengthened. One could then be able to truly and thoroughly ascertain how “the realm in which the man of madness and the man of reason, moving apart, are not yet disjunct; and in an, incipient and very crude language, antedating that of science, begin the dialogue of their breach, testifying in a fugitive way that they still speak to each other” (Foucault, [1961] 1988, x). This juxtaposition of madness to reason portrays the complex, yet interconnected, nature shared between the two. The philosophical foundation behind the literary paradox of madness and reason lies in the shared dualistic nature, in that both madness and reason portray contrary worlds and voices that are indicative of the two respective realms; but these two realms are not mutually exclusively because they may exist within the other as a means to regulate, counter or balance the other.

From the existence of madness and reason emerges a co-dependency, for reason cannot know or recognise unreason if madness had neither been present nor experienced; and similarly,

madness cannot perceive reason if sense and logic had been neither enforced nor experienced. Madness is often interpreted as a counter to reason and defies reason's endeavours to utterly restrain it. Nevertheless, Felman and Evans (2003, 36) note that the polarity between the two enhances its shared connection and dualism, as "madness is essentially a phenomenon of thought, of thought which claims to denounce, in another's thought, the Other of thought: that which thought is not". Madness is hence a variant of reasoning – it functions as a lens that portrays a distinct understanding of the world to its viewer; one that is epitomised by indecorous behaviours according to reason yet it provides satisfactory comprehension to its viewer. Madness and reason cannot be at variance with each other without the two having been experienced by each other. This notion is hence supported by "the relationship between abstract categories and lived experience, and a resistance to allowing the former to stand for the latter" (Craig, 2014, 731).

The reciprocal relation between madness and reason is made apparent through its symbiotic nature, which is inherently expressed through the vehicle of literature<sup>7</sup>. Foucault ([1961] 1988, x) establishes madness and reason to be "inextricably involved: inseparable at the moment when they do not yet exist, and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them". Felman and Evans (2003, 15) further observe this juxtaposition to be encapsulated by the literary framework that informs the connection between madness and reason, because "throughout our cultural history, the madness that has been socially, politically, and philosophically repressed has nonetheless made itself heard, has survived as a speaking *subject* only in and through literary texts". This notion hence confirms that "literary interpretations of madness both reflect and question medical, cultural, political, religious, and psychological assumptions of their time" (Feder, 1983, 4). Felman and Evans (2003, 16) thereby assert that it is through this medium that one can realise the various manners in which "literature and madness are informed *by* each other, in the process of informing us each *about* the other". Literature, exploring those marginalised by society and those categorised as mad due to their inability to conform to societal standards, ultimately portrays the numerous occurrences of societal exclusion and the direct social rejection it faces due to its unconventional presence. Felman and Evans (36) uphold that this literary theory of madness

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<sup>7</sup> My dissertation is essentially based on a film study, but these concepts around madness and literature are necessary. The result of this discussion propounds the intrinsic notion of madness pertaining to the 'other' and social exclusion that I employ in my analysis of *Joker* (2019, dir. Phillips).

cannot consequently exist without its repression by reason because “madness can only occur within a world in conflict, within a conflict of thoughts”. The necessary conflict that madness must face is hence embodied in the literature that informs it. Madness has therefore been interpreted as an alternative mode of thought that contradicts the conventional modes held by society (13).

As the ultimate manifestation of unreason, madness has often been perceived as the antithesis to rationality and convention – a deadly threat to the hegemonies of reason and order. Madness has stood against reason as an abstruse obstacle threatening the balance and governance of reason in society. Madness, when seen through the ‘other’ and serving as the voice of the ‘other’, amplifies its relation to reason to a greater extent, with both perceived as being in direct opposition to the other yet unable to exist without the other (Felman and Evans, 2003, 36). In this respect, a world without madness is a world of utter propriety and assimilation, while a world that knows madness affirms diverse streams of exclusivity, subjectivity and individuality.

Understanding madness beyond the iatric discipline offers novel ideas and interpretations regarding its perception and cultural influence, including how madness operates within the social domain. Gomory, Cohen and Kirk (2013, 121) therefore define madness, in this sense, as “a word, a human artifact, a sign, stitched together to represent or echo something (abstract or concrete) related to human [behaviour] or one’s perception of this [behaviour]”. Gomory, Cohen and Kirk (121) further note madness to exist dually within the physical and abstract domains because, “as a linguistic sign, madness becomes available for our critical manipulation, but like all linguistic signs it need not be anchored to particular aspects of the material world”. Madness exhibits its stigmatised history most conspicuously within this abstract understanding. This understanding can then be merged with the medical aspects that society commonly ascribes to madness, which further lies within the physical understanding of madness. Notwithstanding the utility of madness as the voice of the ‘other’, the problem regarding the illustration of madness in various social works, and how it is deployed therein, persists. It has portrayed madness in various ways that enforce both redeeming but largely

damaging sentiments to the public, and this negative apprehension of madness principally contributes to stigma.

The correlation between literature and madness propounds more than just the consonance between literature and madness as a means to discern social exclusion. It alludes to an intricate investigation of how madness is employed, or suppressed, within literature since “the question ‘How does a text talk about madness?’ is incomplete without the concomitant question: How, within the text itself, is madness *denied*?” (16). In light of the interdisciplinary aspect of madness, philosophy offers the literature of madness the one thing it has been denied throughout history: its own experience. Ascertaining madness through its experience enables a formulation of its language – the ability to speak, *within* its madness, *of* madness on its own terms that are void of reason. Madness therefore finds a voice through abstract notions of philosophy. Yet, the contention and relation between madness and reason results in an epistemological dilemma regarding what constitutes the authority that judges over madness (de Young, 2010, 9).

The question of reason has long been debated: *what* does reason entail, and *who* is truly reasonable enough to deem another as mad? *How* would one fairly judge what constitutes reason? Philosophy has deduced different variations and perceptions of reason, but these endeavours supposedly raise even more difficulties for madness as a result of its silence. Foucault ([1961] 1988, x–xi) argues that it is only through the opportunities that came as a result of this silence that such literary difficulties were raised, since “the language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence”. Psychiatry, in light of Foucault’s analysis, has misunderstood the crux of madness in its attempt to define and cure it, because “whenever it ‘explains’ literature, particularly when it locates *madness* in literature, psychoanalysis is in danger of revealing nothing more than its own madness: the madness of the interpreter” (Felman and Evans, 2003, 30).

Madness has thereby become a stigmatising banner that collectively categorises the mentally ill as unreasonable and dangerous, thus purporting them as being incapable of integrating and interacting effectively with society. Andrew Scull (2015, 1066) argues that one of the most problematic features of madness beyond the iatric domain is that “it implies stigma, and stigma has been and continues to be, a lamentable aspect of what it means to be mad”. Julio Arboleda-Flórez (2003, 646) writes that beliefs of this nature, as well as other beliefs concerning madness, ultimately led to widespread social ostracisation since “[stigmatising] and discriminatory attitudes against those with mental illness have also been reported and are known to exist in many other cultures”. Scull observes that the social damage done by past societies that created harmful stigmas towards mental illness remain, considering how madness “challenges our sense of the limits of what it is to be human, and, perhaps as a consequence, the mad have all-too-often been treated as less than fully human” (2015, 1066).

In addition, linking madness to the spiritual realm misconstrues its human anchor as a mystical one, thus detaching the human factor in mental illness to instead attach a supernatural origin. Unjust spiritual interpretations of madness are significantly responsible for its vicissitude of fate. This is apparent throughout history, as “attempts to explain abnormal [behaviour] have included religious interpretations of the mentally ill as witches and demons” (Connor-Greene, 2006, 7). Arboleda-Flórez and Heather Stuart (2012, 459) further note that dehumanising notions attributed to madness in the passage of time still linger within our societies, as “the explicitly pejorative application of the term stigma to mental illness most likely appeared when mental illnesses became linked with sin”. The peculiarity of madness was regarded as either a curse or an inauspicious sickness by those startled by its inexplicability, for the reason being that “two thousand years ago, most people, when confronted with someone foaming at the mouth and then descending into unconsciousness, believed that the person had been possessed by some spirit or God<sup>8</sup>” (Frith, [2015] 2016, 635).

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<sup>8</sup> A further example of this lies in Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger’s *Malleus Maleficarum* ([1486] 1928). This medieval manual instructs its readers on how to identify and dispose of those who practise witchcraft, with women constituting the primary target. The misogynistic, yet highly successful, manual is a notable example that inadvertently highlights how those with mental illness were often negatively misperceived as practisers of witchcraft and were thereby stigmatised by societies who did not condone sorcery (Arboleda-Flórez and Stuart, 2012, 459).

According to Simon Cross (2010, 2), the stigma attached to madness, and consequently mental illness, is largely responsible for the damaging attitudes and misinformation engulfing mental illness, because “the meaning of madness is mediated in and through cultural forms that construct its appearance such that we know this is what madness ‘looks like’”. It is the language of madness that informs the imagery of madness. Diction plays a salient role in the stigma against mental illness, with historically influenced connotations negatively impacting the quality of life for many with a mental disorder. The diction of madness has, over time, served to disorient madness and, consequently, mental illness as well. Mental illness has therefore always, throughout history, been an issue relating to the human condition. Retrospectively, madness was a category to which mental illness was not only classified under but further generalised as a mere lack of social reason and morals. Historically, Arboleda-Flórez and Stuart (2012, 459) explain how fiction has largely played a negative role in further stigmatising those affected by mental illness by attaching connotations of tragedy, shame, contagion, and violence to the mentally ill, thus resulting in them becoming the ‘other’ in society. They note that “labelling someone as mentally ill has been central to the process of [stigmatisation] as it immediately brands someone as being of lesser social value” (459). The ‘others’ distinguish themselves in society by possessing an ‘illness’ which disrupts the norms, conventions and behaviours of society. It was hence recognised as a defining characteristic of the ‘other’, considering how “we have inherited from the last century a ‘deep disposition to see madness as essentially ‘other’” (Barham and Hayward, 1991, 2).

The shared attitude towards mental illness highlights a human propensity to fear what we cannot understand and, in doing so, to potentially severely distort it. Gomory, Cohen and Kirk (2013, 120) argue that mental illness was assigned to the category of madness, under which it was distorted during the formation of a collective destructive label that “conceptually [captures] within an apparently comprehensive category all those ‘abnormal’ people who significantly disturb society and sometimes themselves”. Prejudice towards mental illness put forward on the basis of cultural beliefs and, often misconstrued, from religion exposes the perennial influence of these beliefs on the general attitudes held by societies towards abnormality. For instance, the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth-century bring to attention the “similarities in attitudes toward witches and the mentally ill” (Connor-Greene, 2006, 7). The social category which houses madness, and the language that enforces, builds

and supplies it, exposes the authoritative hegemonies that maintain the hierarchies and entrenched divisions of society.

The use of madness as an *overall* explanation for mental illness, unscrupulous criminal behaviours, and immoral corruption starkly signifies the exploitative nature of hegemonies typified by the sciolism which enables the conjectures against mental illness. Foucault ([1961] 1988, 66) demonstrates the variety of persons who carried the dishonourable label of ‘mad’ through the example of Gilles de Rais, who was “accused, in the fifteenth century, of having been and of being a heretic, an apostate, a sorcerer, a sodomite, an invoker of evil spirits, a soothsayer, a slayer of innocents, an idolater, working evil by deviation from the faith”. Concerning the contended link between madness and most criminal or immoral acts, the sciolism governing madness systematically categorised all those who committed social, moral, religious or political offenses (65). In light of the mass individual categorisation classified under the banner of unreason, Foucault postulates this benighted authority over madness as a contributing factor towards the term ‘madness’ (65). Madness was hence categorised as the ‘other’, which encompassed unconventional behaviours, vocations, and interests that past societies deemed inappropriate or repugnant.

Madness hence became a metaphor of social exclusion and rejection, with the language that talks *about* madness obscuring the veracity of mental illness. The disorder that culminates from this confusion results in alarming misapprehensions of mental illness. These misapprehensions fatally misrepresent the aforementioned language, resulting in social misconceptions of mental illness and stigma. Mental illness did not initially receive a lot of recognition as a valid medical disorder due to the vast misunderstandings and misconceptions around what constitutes mental illness. Most justifications from the past notably expose a common factor shared amongst these types of reasoning, which is the severe societal confusion and misapprehension regarding the causes, symptoms and nature of mental illness.

Madness has been perceived as either punishment for one’s wrongdoings or as an indication of flaws in one’s character before its complete recognition as an ailment of the mind. Antiquated

beliefs associate madness to bad omens or a divine infliction, such as the ancient Greeks who referred to it as the “sacred disease” (Frith, [2015] 2016, 635). But apart from being correlated to divine punishment in the form of illness, another alternative concept was made apparent by Hippocrates who was the first to associate madness to physical and mental illnesses. *On the Sacred Disease* (c. 400 AD) is a renowned medical book written by Hippocrates that links mental illness, specifically epilepsy, to a disorder of the brain (Peterson, 1982, 3). Though many writers, such as the tragedian playwright Sophocles, were influenced by Hippocrates’ analysis of madness, it was still explored conjunctively alongside divine punishment (Israelowich, 2017, 6).

Sophocles portrays madness through his iteration of the titular mythological warrior in *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014). *Ajax* ([c. 400 AD] 2014) illustrates the adverse downfall of the titular protagonist, whose bouts of unruly violence and behaviours were associated to a sickness that resulted in his madness. The play hence denotes illness as the cause of Ajax’s madness – an illness that was derived from his damaged hubris which ultimately corrupted his senses. The link between madness and illness is discernible here because “the vocabulary Sophocles [uses] portrays Ajax’s madness as a symptom of illness” (Israelowich, 2017, 6), and it further establishes “the Hippocratic explanations of madness, which they perceived to be a result of an illness and a symptom of a disease” (6). Mental illness was often misperceived by the ancient Greeks since their literature often portrayed “[stigmatising] attitudes linking madness with dangerousness” (Arboleda-Flórez and Stuart, 2012, 459). The madness of Ajax is also associated with divine punishment as it ultimately became his undoing, and it is utilised as “an edifying example of the punishment of arrogance” (Cudjoe, Grant and Otchere, 2011, 25). Despite his madness having a divine source, it is emphasised that his madness is still an illness through the following idea:

In turn, the process of Ajax’s regaining his consciousness and coming to terms with what he had done is described by Sophocles as one of healing. This process of recuperation means the disappearance of the illness’ symptoms – madness – and paves the path for Ajax’s coming to terms with what he has done and the inevitable consequences of his actions (Israelowich, 2017, 1).

Madness, as witnessed in *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014), is often associated with volatile behaviour and raw fury, which thereby exacerbated the stigma of mental illness as dangerous. Lucian of Samosata ([c. 164 AD] 1663) had also deduced this effect of madness during his attendance of a live performance of *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014). His narrative, *The Dance* (Lucian, [c. 164 AD] 1663), primarily explores and defends the pantomime dance practise in ancient Greek and Roman plays; but it is here where Lucian unites the two understandings of madness: the manifestation of uncontrollable rage, as depicted by the protagonist; to the embodiment of sheer insensibility, as seen by the actor portraying Ajax. The unreasonable madness exhibited by the actor produced an infectious effect, with the audience channelling the emotional and imprudent rage experienced by the actor (377). By highlighting the contagion effect of madness due to the actor's overly excessive performance of Ajax's madness, enabled possible discourse on the imbricative nature of madness as a space for those incongruous to society – a vehicle that incorporates the self to the 'other' through spaces of social exclusion (Lada-Richards, [2006] 2010, 150).

The display of madness in this performance establishes a space upon the stage for an anomaly to occur. Lucian's personal experience discussed in *The Dance* (Lucian, [c. 164 AD] 1663) regarding the portion of the audience infected by the madness of the actor reveals how the "viewer's 'self' 'does not merely empathize with the plight of the performing 'other' but is entirely subsumed and submerged into that 'other'" (Lada-Richards, [2006] 2010, 150). This variant of insanity results, through the insistence of convention and order by society, in the mad individual adopting the identity of those disparate from socially accepted norms and behaviours. The pantomime actor subject to Lucian's criticism heralds a novel perception regarding the manifold complications surrounding even the mere portrayal of the 'other', "where the distinction between reality and the pretence of reality is blurred, and where 'playing' the other and 'being' the other are disturbingly braided" (150). The madness emanating from the actor himself ushered a new concept for the reality of madness, with "the pantomime enactment of Ajax's madness [foregrounding] the stage as an aberrant site of self-negation and self-loss" (150). Lucian's work is hence substantially constructive in the discourse of madness, particularly its associations of madness to social exclusion and the 'other', while *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014) provides critical correlations of madness as a result of illness.

The sheer inscrutability of mental disorders highlights how poorly chartered mental illness was, with only a few correlating mental disorders to a medical diagnosis. Due to this lack of understanding, the mentally ill were deemed to lack social reason and assimilation, and were therefore ostracised, stigmatised and regarded as mad. This issue of stigma is hence “[recognised] as a major public health problem” (Putman, 2008, 685). Gomory, Cohen and Kirk (2013, 124) note that “the habit of comingling words that are prone to ambiguous interpretations, such as *insane*, *crazy*, or *illness*, with others that also have more formal medical definitions in contemporary medicine, such as *disease* or *psychosis*, has consequences”. This is, undoubtedly, a severe social problem as “public attitudes toward people with mental illness are relevant to the social, psychological, physical, and economic well-being of those affected by mental illness” (Day, Edgren and Eshleman, 2007, 2193). Therefore, it can be guaranteed that “social construction is an ongoing process; the ways people understand and portray mental illness have profound real-world implications” (Connor-Greene, 2006, 12).

This study further analyses whether *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) continues to perpetuate the stigmatisation of madness and mental illness, with reference to the second aspect concerning the source of madness. The role madness plays in the narrative is further juxtaposed to Fleck’s mental disorders. My research argues that Hollywood is, to an extent, guilty for its erroneous depictions of madness and mental illness which, in turn, influence society towards the path of discrimination and stigmatisation. I analyse how madness has been portrayed in my texts, and how these portrayals have evolved over time in either a positive or negative manner. Sophocles’ tragedy, *Ajax* ([c. 400 AD] 2014), has been referred to due to its influential representation of madness and the various social outcomes that occurred as a result of this employment of madness.

The film succeeds in bringing awareness to the plight of the mentally ill and the age long discrimination that they still face despite the notable endeavours to establish equity for them in society. Though the film does succeed in fostering awareness for mental health, this awareness does not only contain elements of positive reinforcement but also negative elements of stigma as well. The salient counter to the film’s representation of mental illness is expressed through the most prominent stigma attached to mental illness – its attachment and tendency to violence.

My research critically assesses the film's take on mental illness and the controversy that envelops it. My research acknowledges the film's effort in bringing to light the delicate and faceted nature of society's mentally ill citizens and the struggles that they face, but also accepts the negative implications of stigma depicted in the film. This dissertation seeks to therefore analyse whether *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) continues to perpetuate the stigmatisation of the mentally ill by critically assessing how the film presents mental illness to its audience.

Social stigma against madness can be effectively portrayed through an analysis detailing the complexity of general cultural thoughts, as well as popular culture and values. This is integral to my analysis of madness as it is primarily through these vehicles that I am able to assess the societal values expressed in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), and how the viewer thereby perceives these depictions of madness and mental illness according to the manner information<sup>9</sup> is presented to them. Through reviews and commentary based on the film, I ascertain the general social reception to the film so as to judge whether mental illness is depicted in a positive or stigmatising light in *Joker*. The film covers a number of relevant issues and themes, but Phillips aimed for the notion of social decay as the primary theme above all else. Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) focuses on the causes of Fleck's devolution, explaining that the film is "not this gigantic statement on the world today" but is rather centred on the question of "what makes somebody that way?" This thereby places society as the dominant cause behind the many ills featured throughout the film. From this trajectory, my dissertation argues towards the stance of Fleck as the tragic anti-hero, since the real depravity of the film lies not in Fleck's crimes, but rather in the socio-political hegemonies that entrench and enforce socio-economic divides. By analysing the setting of the film, the city and its people, I am able to gain a deeper insight into the complexities that influence the dark but authentic path Fleck's emotional journey takes.

Ultimately, the notion of portraying Fleck as a hero in any sense is controversial. It is evident that the complexity of his character and his descent into sheer, unhinged madness will be far too great to hold within the dichotomies of good and evil; hero and villain. Fundamentally, he

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<sup>9</sup> In addition, this information is notably informed by either accurate or erroneous representations of madness or mental illness. My research addresses this concern in more detail.

is merely a tragic grey character who is wronged by society, bearing a daunting message to the audience. Fleck essentially bears the traits of an anti-hero since the traditional roles of hero and villain, good and bad, are subverted and greyed. Daniel Shafer and Arthur Raney (2013, 1030) illustrate anti-heroes as “protagonists who generally act in questionable ways; [modelling] (some) bad [behaviour] even if for justifiable reasons”. They further explain that “despite clearly doing improper things for (at times) corrupt reasons, [anti-heroes] still function as ‘forces of good’ in many narratives” (1030).

Due to the bias perspective of the film, the viewer will eventually empathise with Fleck to a great extent and reject “the system” (Phillips, 2019) for their crimes against the working class. The reason behind the audience taking a possible liking to Fleck despite his crimes lies in his placement as the anti-hero in the film, as Raney and Shafer (2013, 1029) argue that “character liking cannot be capricious; it must be justified and defensible”. The moral justification in this context is perceived through the fact that barely any shred of goodness is seen in Gotham, with Gary arguably being the only character who truly shows kindness to Fleck. Gary is a colleague with dwarfism who Fleck often interacts with; as well as Randall, another close colleague of Fleck who often mocks Gary for his dwarfism and further plays an integral role in Fleck’s transformation into Joker. Raney and Shafer (1029) explain that “as protagonists, [anti-heroes] display qualities of both heroes and villains; acting in morally ambiguous, and at times unjustifiable ways, if even to reach noble goals”. Favouring the determination of Fleck to stand up against society and disrupt their order therefore equates to the favouring of goodness in Fleck and his desire to make the world smile and laugh as a comedian.

In light of this dissertation’s examination of madness, I argue that the madness exhibited in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) most conspicuously occurs as a result of external factors stemming from socio-political problems that exacerbate socio-economic divisions. The madness expressed in the film highlights a madness that is not only psychologically induced but is principally caused by the ills of society. Fleck’s madness thus develops as a coping mechanism against the tyranny of societal structures. There is a contentious issue regarding the perspective the narrative of the film appeals to, with some scholars questioning “whether the film turns an archetype of a violent man into a heroic figure” (Skryabin, 2021, 2). Phillips (Howard, 2019,

Online) has commented on the misapprehension of violence in the film, arguing that “everybody wants to talk about the spark, not the powder”. The film reflects and highlights our current state of humanity, with Phillips “[hoping] that *Joker* would prompt real-life conversations about the implications of violence and the painful treatment mentally ill people receive from others” (Gajanan, 2019, Online).

Madness has utility as a force that often stands as a pillar of unconventionality. Madness, through this lens, is perceived as a means to survive life in Gotham because conforming to society and accepting it for what it truly is destabilises Fleck and rather encourages him towards madness. The reality of life in the city serves as an incentive for Fleck’s vengeful behaviour. Fleck uses violence to achieve retribution against society; and though madness is often employed as a non-conformist lens characterised by individuality and creativity, it is used in the film as a mechanism that enables Fleck to impassively commit his various crimes and fight against the system. Madness is hence the key which finally opens the gates that barred Fleck’s alter ego from wholly emerging, alongside a possible medically-induced barrier powered by his psychotropic medication. The consequence of Fleck’s madness hence materialises through violence and vengeful retribution. Fleck’s use of violence as a means to achieve retribution encapsulates my argument of the revenge tragedy in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019).

I maintain that the film is embodied by the revenge tragedy due to the personal injuries Fleck suffers from that ultimately provoke him towards vengeance. Revenge is truly an extraordinarily broad genre, with the reasoning behind the revenge varying from moralistic intents to heinous purposes. Revenge tragedies feature the revenge against a personal injury as the focal point of the tragedy; as opposed to prior renditions of revenge that portrayed it varyingly. Ronald Broude (1975, 38-39) defines revenge tragedy as the tragic downfall of the revenger, “who conceives himself to have been seriously wronged, and who, overcoming obstacles both within and outside himself, contrives eventually to exact retribution, becoming in the process as depraved as those by whom he has been wronged”. The ways in which this is portrayed or interpreted differ amongst the revenge tragedy playwrights and writers; but the appalling and barbaric violence of Seneca’s ([62 AD] 1966) *Thyestes*, as well as Thomas Kyd’s

iconic revenger, Hieronimo, in *The Spanish Tragedy* ([1592] 1898) are referred to, amongst others, as precedents for revenge tragedy playwrights.

A tragic, yet moralistic, approach was the primary motivator for revenge-based plays where a character's downfall would stem from his or her own flaws. Greek playwrights generally utilised moralistic approaches in order to extend a moral lesson to their audience, but other tragic playwrights experimented with different motives and lessons to portray to their audiences. Fredson Bowers (1966, 21) ascertains other inducements behind vengeful acts besides the hubris principal, with motives deriving from hatred and anger, to jealousy and ambition. Bowers suggests that "envy was perhaps the greatest Elizabethan vice, and it may be considered one of the most powerful of the passions inducing revenge" (22). However, some playwrights employed a different take on these flaws and epitomised the flaw of envy especially to be the driving factor which brings about the downfall of a character, as well as the desire of revenge for rather nefarious purposes than righting a personal injury because "malice is so madde that it will not spare friend, to wreake vengeance on foes" (22).

Revenge proved to be a potent component to tragedy by encapsulating the fundamental elements of tragic works while simultaneously intensifying them. Tanya Pollard (2010, 58) states that the dynamics between tragedy and revenge highlight the complimentary nature shared between the two by equally combining them in order to create a powerful story, because even though "revenge came to play a role in many literary forms, it found its primary vehicle in tragedy, and especially in the particular genre we now refer to as revenge tragedy". Pollard proclaims that the success and impact of revenge tragedy was incredibly widespread, so much so that it "was for a time the most popular form of English Renaissance tragedy, and arguably of the period's drama altogether" (58). Its popularity is thought to lie with its ability to connect to the audiences through its politically and socially influenced stories. Despite the fact that early playwrights did not establish revenge tragedy as an official genre but as two distinctive and individual genres, Bradley Irish (2009, 118) proclaims that work featuring the two as mutually associated genres or elements were still familiar to the people, with "revenge [enjoying] a surprisingly vibrant career on the English stage, well before the [popularisation] of what is now called revenge tragedy".

There appears to be no categorical structure for the implementation of revenge – specifically the independent use of revenge as a genre or element – into plays, for each playwright constructs acts of revenge based on its utility and impact to the story. Irish (2009, 119) notes that for “some plays, revenge is essential to an overall thematic and atmospheric agenda, while in others, it is a casual anomaly, deployed only to punctuate a particular dramatic moment or episode”. Furthermore, its utility was regularly employed because “before revenge came to inhabit its own generic space, it functioned as a widely versatile thematic and dramaturgical element in countless plays, ranging from raucous comedies to stately classical histories” (118). Notwithstanding earlier performances of revenge, Kyd is nevertheless celebrated for having “[systematised], intensified, and refined the dramatic use of revenge – and in doing so, gave birth to the genre now recognized as ‘revenge tragedy’” (129). Bowers (1966, 65) reinforces the influence of *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898) as a greater precedent for revenge tragedies during the Elizabethan era. He observes:

The immediate and long-lasting popularity of the play stamped it as a type, a form to be imitated. Thus it is of the highest significance that *The Spanish Tragedy* first popularized revenge as a tragic motive on the Elizabethan popular stage by using blood-vengeance as the core of its dramatic action.

Regarding blood revenge, the revenger’s injury is believed to cause extensive turmoil to such an extent that the injured victim will fail to find peace until his or her revenge has been fulfilled, thus emancipating the victim from his or her sufferings. Carrying out the revenge is hence tied to their mental and emotional well-being as the disturbed character can only gain some semblance of stability from fulfilling their revenge. Pollard (2010, 60) observes that the catharsis of revenge is exhibited as the sole option available for a character to regain their peace, since “revenge is the only thing capable of restoring them to psychic health and equilibrium”. Blood revenge specifically garnered the respect of many people all over the world. Moreover, revenge tragedies from Elizabethan England were generally set in foreign lands despite conveying the same politics and opinions which would apply to their home country (Pollard, 2010, 64). This was due to socio-political reasons specifically and to avoid accusations of treason; but it nevertheless highlights the idea that revenge tragedies existed in many domains within their own contexts and conventions since (64).

Bowers (1966, 3) refers to Francis Bacon's opinion of this type of reciprocal revenge where "an act of violence was not a crime but merely a personal injury" and that private revenge was "the only possible form in which a wrong could be righted". Bacon hence referred to this type of revenge as "a kind of wild justice" (3). The novelty of 'wild justice', of taking matters into one's own hands, intrigued those who suffered wrongs that went unpunished. One who suffers a wrong yearns for justice. Early revenge tragedy playwrights intricately projected this sentiment of vengeful vigilantism in their stories, with Pollard (2010, 60) affirming that "although ancient revenge tragedies are far from homogenous, they repeatedly dramatise the anguish of those who suffer without recourse to justice – especially those with less power, such as women, and foreigners – and show them punishing their powerful wrongdoers".

Notwithstanding the blood revenge promoted by Kyd, the artists who followed in Kyd's footsteps more specifically intended for their work to primarily critique society by illustrating "the conventions by which [they] perceive and portray their society, and what the conventions signify" (Justice, 1985, 275). The social commentary raised in *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898) as well sought to highlight "a society in which forgiveness and common understanding are impossible" (Justice, 1985, 276). The suffering Hieronimo endures due to the tragic vicissitudes of fate, along with the hostile environments within Spain, drives him to impatiently and viciously take matters into his own. This inability to wait for justice to be delivered by divine intervention ties in with the holy damnation of the revenger as his "desire for justice eventually makes him the enemy of the heavens and of heavenly justice. The danger involved in seeking justice from an inaccessible heaven is that one begins to dictate terms" (282).

An aspect of revenge which boils down to interpretation and opinion is the justification behind a character's tragedy since some are burdened by misfortune despite it being unprovoked or called for. As noted earlier, tragedy works often followed a principle of morality where sinful or wrongful behaviour is presented as the cause behind a character's downfall (Cudjoe, Grant and Otchere, 2011, 1). However, some playwrights seem to deviate from this structure of tragedy plays by implying that misfortune is, at times, inexplicable (1). In such cases "where the fall of the hero is not his making" (1), a problem hence arises regarding how one should

justify or analyse an untoward misfortune in tragedy plays. Undeserving fates has been explored in past tragedies where playwrights are unable to offer a genuine purpose behind the sufferings of certain characters, especially early Greek tragedies where the tragedy is seemingly unprovoked and cannot be traced towards any possible vice (28). I link this notion primarily to *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) by contending that Fleck's situation cannot be completely warranted. In response to such misfortune, Aristotle has notably associated the tragedy of a play to the pity the audience may feel towards the debacles a character faces (Cudjoe, Grant and Otchere, 2011, 29). The elicitation of pity from the audience thereby denotes a successful tragedy, as "proper tragedy demands the rousing of pity and fear, and pity is not incited by the punishment of the guilty person [...] but rather the undeserved misfortune that befalls one, caused, of course, by irrationality" (29).

*Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) resonates with the revenge tragedy in that the tragic protagonist succumbs to his madness due to his inability to sanely exist within an unjust and maddening society. He is driven to ultimately take revenge on those who have injured him as no ally appears to come to his aid, thus highlighting the urgency for him to take matters into his own hands – with his actions eventually starting a social movement which erupts into a civil protest. This turn of events in the film portrays the concept of blood revenge which Kyd had popularised through his revenge tragedy. Blood revenge, in its earliest renditions, allowed for one to correct a wrong by exacting their own personal justice against the offender who caused their fatal injury. Blood revenge is also tied to familial duty and honour, with the private vendetta restoring balance and peace to a wronged family who had lost one of their own due to the offender.

Revenge is hence understood to be an open book in which many societies around the world may be able to comprehend its language, and contribute their stories to. For "the foreignness of revengers could extend beyond geography. Revengers were often outsiders even within the world of the play" (Pollard, 2010, 65). The setting thereby merely acted as canvas for playwrights to paint their commentaries and concerns, although some settings carried deeper implications and symbolisms, accompanied by portrayals of stereotypical behaviours from foreign countries (64-65). The fictional city of Gotham in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) similarly

serves as a canvas through which Phillips could document a character study embodied by a degenerate society that resembles the one we currently reside in.

Understanding why a character is placed in a predicament to begin with is also essential. The environment also plays a significant role by either contributing or relieving the distress a character experiences. *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) succeeds in depicting the insensitive attitude held towards mentally afflicted people, and the cautionary claim that it sends forth is strengthened by the provoking backdrop of a Gotham. It is this ability to visually and audibly portray ideas, creativity, or lessons for humanity, which gives the media the power to influence the masses on a larger scale. By analysing the influence of the film via the possible cinematic and sociological impact on its audience, it can then be deduced how effectively the film succeeds in garnering pity for Fleck from its audience.

The revenge tragedy therefore develops as a consequence of Fleck's downward spiral into madness, since he seeks retribution against the wrongs that he has suffered by murdering his wrongdoers. Tragic works are notable for its utility of madness as an element that serves to intensify the tragic aspect. A descent into madness is often regarded as a consequential state that usually leads to a character's doom. Violence and retribution as a consequence of madness is evident in *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898), which I use as a basis<sup>10</sup> for the revenge tragedy. My research applies the Kydian formula for revenge tragedies, as laid out by Bowers (1966), to *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) in order to depict the presence of the genre in the film. The film fulfils majority of the conditions dictated by the Kydian formula that are characteristic of this genre. Fleck seeks revenge against not just the individuals who cause him some form of pain and suffering but also against society – particularly the social hegemonies consisting of the elite and powerful – that effected the moral and physical decay of the city. The revenge tragedy is further epitomised in the film by the intense violence through which Fleck carries out his retribution and the lack of legal or social support structures to recognise and compensate Fleck for the wrongs he has suffered by the hands of society.

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<sup>10</sup> My research does not engage in an analysis of *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898) as I rather choose to analyse the thematic changes the play had brought about to the revenge tragedy genre. The play hence serves as the vantage point for the application of the genre to *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019).

There is a cautionary, yet controversial, tale that the film expresses to its audience, urging the viewer to question stigmatising and negative actions, perceptions and attitudes towards the neglected lower brackets of society, with particular emphasis on the mentally ill. Affirming Fleck as a tragic anti-hero<sup>11</sup> enhances the dark side of revenge – the tragic and twisted nature of personal retribution and vengeance. My research distinguishes the real villain in order to address the concept of Fleck as the anti-hero and to further highlight the film’s cautionary tale regarding “the system” (dir. Phillips, 2019) which actively pushes marginalised groups to the fringes of society and neglects them, thus entrenching the divide between the rich and poor. The portrayal of a villainous society throughout the film and the blurred dichotomy between justice and crime implies a final consideration: who are the audience meant to side with? The ambiguous morality of this controversial film, as well as its open-ended nature, allows the audience to express empathy towards Fleck’s tribulations while simultaneously condemning his vengeful actions. This gives leeway for meaningful contemplation towards the functioning of our society and its structures of power enabling social divides and prejudices – a notion that coincides all too well with the past and present human condition. There have been concerns around the film advertently inspiring the audience in the same manner as the working class Gothamites were by Fleck’s acts of revenge. Establishing the heroes and villains of the film is therefore paramount in comprehending the cautionary tale it seeks to impart to its audience, which is relevant to the socio-political climate and socio-economic disparities of our time, and what such disparities could possibly lead to.

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<sup>11</sup> My dissertation in no way condones the actions of Fleck, but due to the moral ambiguity of the film, my research discerns socio-political hegemonies as a more potent and lethal villain than Fleck – despite his actions catalysing a violent social insurrection.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Gotham’s Lost Its Way”: An Analysis of *Joker* through the Lens of Madness.

“So when you find yourself locked onto an unpleasant train of thought, heading for the places in your past where the screaming is unbearable, remember there's always madness. Madness is the emergency exit. You can just step outside, and close the door on all those dreadful things that happened. You can lock them away...forever”.

– Alan Moore (1988, 27).

*Joker* (2019, dir. Phillips) resonates well with the current socio-political climate of our times, emphasising mental health awareness and systematic social inequality; which thereby proves itself worthy of academic consideration. The film may be centred on an infamous fictional character but scholars, such as Guillaume Mouleux (2019, 9), contend that the film is nevertheless “not devoid of social criticisms that evoke a number of current issues in the metropolises of our [globalised] world”. It is no ordinary film due to its representations of madness and mental illness, the subject matter it explores, and the influence it extends to the masses. The film independently portrays the origins of the Joker, but through a modern social context that explores the schisms between the elites and the working-class of Gotham, highlighting the socio-economic disparities and the dangers such disparities could bring about. The film’s primary focus lies in the lack of humanity infecting the city while painting a perturbing picture of what could happen if the working class were to revolt against the system<sup>12</sup>. In this chapter, I analyse how madness is represented in the film as well as the source of this madness, through which I further ascertain the role madness plays in the narrative. This analysis, alongside my discussion regarding the impact of the film in light of its positive and negative receptions, thus permits me to arrive at a conclusive stance regarding whether the film depicts mental illness in a beneficial or stigmatising light.

The disparity between the elite and the lower brackets of society culminates in a social insurrection sparked by Fleck’s actions, depicting an aggressive stance adopted by the oppressed and neglected working class towards the elite of Gotham. The insurrection may have

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<sup>12</sup> As witnessed in 2021 during the July riots in South Africa (Erasmus, 2022).

been unintended on Fleck's part, but his acts of retribution nevertheless cause a furore in Gotham City. While the elite, such as Thomas Wayne, denounces his inimical act, it inspires those who suffer from social inequality to take a stand; the citizens who share similar predicaments of poverty to Fleck. Fleck's actions inadvertently induce a prominent uprising by the working class against the elite for their disregard towards the struggles they face in the city. But ultimately the film focuses on depicting the moral degeneracy of society with the hope of bringing to light the circumstances that encouraged Fleck down the dark road that he will tread. The film portrays a sequence of events that all contribute towards Fleck's growing anger and dissatisfaction with society, with each event serving as destabilising nudges towards his inevitable devolution<sup>13</sup> whereby he relinquishes complete control to his alter ego, Joker.

### **Characterisation of Gotham City**

The city forms an integral part of the film as it portrays the context and environment where Fleck trudges through life. The city was designed to feel dreary, gloomy and grungy. Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) had also designed the city in a personified manner and regards it as a character rather than a setting. It essentially depicts the environment Fleck has been placed in [see Figure One]. The first shot of the city occurs at Gotham Square which is depicted by the sea of tall, orderly buildings, as Phillips (Vanity Fair, 2019, Online) intends for the city "to feel really oppressive" in a way that fuels the idea that "Gotham is always over [Fleck]". Fleck is, indeed, perceived as a small, upbeat, vibrant, yet unnoticed clown in a constrictive and oppressive city, which ultimately helps establish the context and setting of the film. Sean Redmond (2021, 75) explains that Fleck's social isolation in Gotham illustrates the idea that "the loneliness and slow violence that permeates its buildings, sidewalks, networks, and human relations is multi-focal and co-synesthetic".

The setting embodies the ambience of New York City during 1981 specifically, which was, according to Phillips' (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) personal recollections, a

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<sup>13</sup> Fleck's transition to Joker enables him to become the most powerful version of himself – a version that commands attention, respect, and dominance. This transition, however, jointly enables the degeneration of his morality due to his immoral enactments of murder and disorder. As Joker, Fleck's power is assumed at the cost of his humanity. Fleck's downward spiral therefore devolves him due to these reasons.

“run-down” and “broken down city on every level”. The physical deterioration of the city is visible throughout the film: whether it be the lack of general maintenance, or the dirty exteriors and interiors of buildings. The city is hence presented as a filthy and unkempt place brimming with unrest. Mirroring Gotham to New York City during 1981 bears great significance and importance as it conceptualises the political context of the film, which plays a major role regarding the deterioration of the city. The film further alludes to filmic references stemming from Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King of Comedy* (1982). Guillaume Mouleux (2019, 12) reveals that both films not only heavily influence the narrative of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), but also “[make] the association between the fictional Gotham and real-life New York City all the more explicit”. Redmond (2021, 66) further notes the socio-political aspect to have been typified by “a period when New York was felt to be on the verge of coming apart, with numerous city agencies on strike and the ‘social contract’ between people and society fraying, as social inequalities increased and support services were cut”. The significance of New York City during 1981 as the political framework of the film entails the following notion expressed by Redmond (3):

What *Joker* also reminds us is that we have been here before and that perhaps we have never left the wasted 1980s period it references. Through its dark or dystopian nostalgia, *Joker* obliquely reveals that the bitter fruit of today was first harvested under the rancid politics of the 1980s: the decade when Reaganism was born and with it the forces of neoliberalism.

The schism between the elite and working class of Gotham is realised through a societal system which favours the interests of the elite while neglecting the rest of the citizens. The government and elite upper class appear to be impervious to the rest of the city’s inhabitants, with the suffering of the poor made apparent through the grimy conditions in which they live. The film implies that social inequality persists due to the ramifications of former American president Ronald Reagan’s implementation of neoliberal governance which “set in train the social and economic conditions that run on through today” (Redmond, 2021, 3). The primary political aspect of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) is thereby centred on the consequences of neoliberalism, “which results in poverty and crime” (Mouleux, 2019, 19). This type of governance depicted in the film proposes that “the failure that leads to anarchy is not that of the socially liberal

institutions but that of the economically neoliberal and socially conservative policies that have driven the people to take the streets” (19).

Severe socio-economic inequality is evident when the film juxtaposes the pristine areas where the elite reside, such as the spacious and ornate Wayne manor and the lavish Wayne Hall, to the rest of the ill-maintained Gotham embodied by graffiti and filth. The luxury, comfort and prosperity of elite areas are exhibited through a few instances in the film since it primarily focuses on Fleck and therefore his living conditions and its surroundings specifically. Another example of the elite areas juxtaposed to the lower-class areas is seen through the clean and orderly subway Fleck takes when he goes to visit Wayne Manor, which takes a route sandwiched between a large body of water and a neatly aligned forest, displaying the more scenic areas of Gotham. This subway is packed with white men in suits, with majority of them reading newspapers covering the Wall Street employees’ murders. Additionally, the newspapers portray the social division in Gotham through contrasting headlines: the newspapers may capture the condemning nature of the murders but they also include the subversive influence of the crime on the city, with incriminating headlines such as “Killer clown on the loose” and “Kill the rich” juxtaposed to the slightly redeeming headline of “Vigilante clown still at large” (Phillips, 2019). The dim and dull subway that Fleck takes as his primary mode of transportation around the city is enveloped in graffiti and posters, which portrays the indisputably stark contrast from the bright subway for the elite.

The trenches of social division ultimately extend to the socio-economic discrepancies, as well as the mentalities of Gotham citizens. In Gotham, the elite are oblivious, ignorant and indifferent to the plight of the working class and their trials. The elite are granted the platform to express their voice, such as Wayne who ignorantly comments on the deterioration of the city and the murder of his employees. It appears that this privilege is not granted to the rest of Gotham society, who are only able to truly express their concerns through protest. The elite’s inability to grasp the severity of the segmented city is most prominently portrayed when Wayne launches his campaign for mayor while articulating an air of ignorance regarding the inherent causes of the city’s deterioration. For example, instead of addressing the problem of socio-economic inequality with regard to rampant crime in the city, Wayne rather establishes himself

as “their only hope” and reduces the motive behind Fleck’s crime to have stemmed from jealousy and spite against those “more fortunate than themselves” (Phillips, 2019).

The elite praise Wayne’s endeavour, as witnessed through a newspaper article titled “Gotham City Looks to Future as Wayne Begins Campaign” (Phillips, 2019). The remainder of Gotham’s society do not share the same hope as the elite due to the manner in which the elite underestimate their struggles. For instance, an extravagant charity gala screening Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) is held for the rich by the Waynes and is consequently met by an organised protest encompassing the working class. The elite who attend and enjoy the luxurious gala “[construct] the notion of one homogenous corrupt group that works against the ‘general will’ of the people and furthermore, situates that group as a ‘cultural elite’” (Quinn, 2021, 195). Moreover, when juxtaposed to the hardships of the working class, the elite are ultimately portrayed as privileged citizens “who have the time and resources to enjoy an evening at the theatre while the city descends into chaos around them” (195-196).

For the working class, this situation serves as a window of opportunity for them to voice out their frustration and anger towards the way society functions in Gotham and its socio-economic divide. The hostile crowds of protestors are angered by the behaviour of Wayne and the elite, with the gala only exacerbating the problem at hand, which thus leads to the eventual social uprising. Additionally, the screening of *Modern Times* (dir. Chaplin, 1936) by the elite highlights the irony of their ignorance since the film is perceived as social commentary against the capitalistic employment of machinery in place of humans. Ștefan Bolea (2020, 47) describes this scene to have “[disclosed] the sadistic sense of superiority of the ruling class, who observe the drama of the disadvantaged from the heights of their contempt”. This scene also notably “makes [Fleck’s] wholehearted laugh while watching the scene with Chaplin all the more significant since it ironically points to his lack of awareness of his own trajectory at that point in the film” (Mouleux, 2019, 12).

In addition, the working class appear to be fairly dissatisfied with their jobs. This is exemplified by a garbage strike that occurs in Gotham, which implies unsatisfactory wages or working

conditions for the employees. This only worsens the dirty state of the city, with garbage accumulating on the streets to such an extent that even the elite areas are burdened by this predicament. This is further exacerbated by the announcement on the news that “the city is under siege by scores of rats” (Phillips, 2019), with numerous reports of ‘super rats’ plaguing the city. The living conditions of the working class is thereby depicted primarily through the characters the audience see in the street which are further indicative of poverty, as well as Fleck’s lifestyle and his apartment.

The various travels Fleck undertakes in Gotham reveal abundant information regarding the state of the city. As mentioned earlier, the streets of Gotham are dirty with piles of garbage heaped on the pavement. Redmond (2021, 68) notes that this could also politically “[point] to the way late capitalism endlessly creates, recycles, and expulses ‘waste’”. Prostitutes and the homeless are present in the streets, and the roads are often active but clustered with cars. Notwithstanding Gotham’s lively appearance, it has been theorised by Redmond (65-66) that “loneliness permeates everything and everyone in *Joker*, so that it registers as a collective condition pervading all of society”. The city is also characterised by its incessant noise pollution: whether it is sirens blaring in the streets or shouting in the neighbourhoods, some form of dissatisfying noise is sure to be heard.

The film displays numerous scenes with the colour palette complimenting each other in a way that enhances the mood and atmosphere of the scene [see Figure Two]. The film’s cinematographer, Lawrence Sher (Vanity Fair, 2019, Online), employs this technique with the lighting and colour contrasts in order to illustrate the internal conflict occurring inside Fleck. This technique emphasises the contrast of Fleck’s Arthur persona against his Joker persona through the notion of portraying “opposite ends of the spectrum, two sides of yourself, a shadow in the light” (Online). An example of this is captured in a scene depicting Fleck walking through the streets of Gotham on his way home, with the “ambient blue light” of dusk casting a dark blue shadow over the city which is lit up by warm street lamps and various instances of fluorescent lighting (Online). The shot portrays the internal conflict of Fleck who is associated with dark shadows that are contrasted by the light – a dark shadow on the verge of unleashing all its rage once the light has shined a sufficient amount of the truth to him about his life. The

light further operates as an interesting mechanism characterised by truth, growth and freedom. Fleck undergoes his transition more effectively after having basked in the sunlight's beams of revelation; as seen when he murders his mother and practises his live suicide on the 'Live! With Murray Franklin' show shortly afterwards, and most prominently when he completes his transition and physically engages in his downward spiral by freely dancing down the stairs as Joker. The long shot effectively displays the environment of the city and its ill-maintained state. The heavy movement of a forlorn Fleck trudging through the streets in a lifeless manner further illustrates the hardships he faces in his life.

The city is thereby a microcosm of its people and it represents the environments, conventions and beliefs of its residing societies. As Fleck spirals beyond restoration, so does the city alongside him; which is symbolised through a bond of declension shared between the two. *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) portrays an utterly bleak Gotham, where life perpetually disintegrates into a ruthless cycle of survival. The violence depicted in the film is contained in the physical aggressions of the people and the state of the city itself, with the violence of disenfranchisement, marginalisation and neglect of the working class all contributing towards the deterioration of the city. Fleck eventually but climatically numbs himself to the tragedies, inequalities and brutalities of life within Gotham and by doing so, he nihilistically adopts his Joker persona – which subsequently enables the inevitable birth of his nemesis, Batman, towards the end of the film (Phillips, 2019). This symbolic and fateful outcome, however, presents a glimmer of hope for Gotham – a hope that the city will not stay in this eroding yet stagnant position festering with crime, inequality and decay due to the birth of its Dark Knight. Notwithstanding Batman's eventual emergence, the film dangerously concludes with Fleck having “nothing left to lose” (2019). The discovery of his apparent adoption breaks Fleck, which results in him fully embracing his Joker persona. As Joker, Fleck has utterly detached himself from anything that could possibly hurt him.

### **Characterisation of Arthur Fleck**

*Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) serves as an open-ended interpretation of the Joker and should not be perceived as the only credible origin of the character. Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) notes that “this is just a version of a Joker origin, [it is] the version this [guy is]

telling in this room at a mental institution”. Phillips (Online) further clarifies that by removing iconic yet impractical aspects from the Joker canon, such as the character falling into a vat of acid that permanently bleaches his skin white, he was then able to create a character study that truly “felt grounded in a reality”. The film rather chooses to reinforce the Joker’s general unreliability accordingly, especially as a narrator. Alan Moore’s (1988) prominent graphic novel, *The Killing Joke*, charts the origin of the Joker and features some of the Joker’s most heinous crimes which he commits in the endeavour to prove just how easily susceptible a sane person can be to lunacy. *The Killing Joke* (Moore, 1988) not only inspired the narrative of Fleck as a failed comedian driven mad by the world, but also the idea of him treating his origin as manifold. The Joker (45), when recalling his maddening past to Batman in the graphic novel, ostensibly expresses this aspect through the following: “[I am] not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If [I am] going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!”

It should be further clarified that though the film provides an independent interpretation of the Joker, Fleck is ultimately not *the* Joker: he is a version of the character and is thereby referred to as just *Joker*. Fleck retains certain symbolic features of the Joker, such as his green hair, the clown face paint, the suit (although not matching the original colour palette) and the laughter. This version of the Joker, however, detaches from a few iconic characterisations in favour of the film’s modern and grounded take. Ultimately, the film narrates the story of Fleck, not Joker; with a focus on the causes that led to Fleck’s downfall over the incriminating actions of the character. This thereby links the narrative to socio-political problems and inequality since these problems catalyse further setbacks, such as poverty and the moral decay of the city.

The film begins on a dreary note, invoking empathy for Fleck from the very start. Fleck is already in a depressive state which only worsens throughout the film [see Figure Three]. He is employed as a clown-for-hire at Ha-Ha’s Talent Booking but his true aspirations lie in stand-up comedy, with his version of comedy forming an integral aspect of his life. *Joker* (dir. Phillips. 2019) opens with Fleck, while getting dressed up as clown, attempting to physically hold a forced smile on his face with his hands but he fails to maintain the smile due to his grief, which is evident by his tears. The juxtaposition of a forced smile to tears emphasises the battle

Fleck fights to maintain a semblance of happiness despite the crushing sorrow permeating his life. He lives with his ailing mother, Penny Fleck, and takes pride in caring for her. She had nicknamed him 'Happy' as a child and "always [told him] to smile and put on a happy face" because "[he] was put here to spread joy and laughter" (Phillips, 2019). However, it appears that Fleck fails to provide joy and laughter due to his personal taste in comedy, which is epitomised by dark and black humour.

This shortcoming acts as a barrier that divides Fleck from society, especially since it appeals to conventional and clean humour. Fleck perceives his comedy to be engaging and hilarious, asserting that "[everybody is] telling [him] that [his] stand-up is ready for the big clubs" (Phillips, 2019); but the film does not depict anyone saying this to him other than the occasional inquiry regarding his progress in stand-up comedy thus far. His own mother recognises his lack of conventional humour and does not actively support him in his aspiration. When Fleck reassures his mother to not worry about their financial difficulties because of his stand-up comedy venture, she insensitively expresses further doubt by asking him, "[do you not] have to be funny to be a comedian?" (2019). Fleck's mother therefore "undermines [his] ability to be her masculine provider" (Quinn, 2021, 192). She further serves as "an essential element of [his] sense of identity" (192).

Humour is an integral theme of the film as it relates to the canon of the original character. The Joker characteristically laughs at most jokes; he even finds mockery towards him hilarious – not because he is laughing at the attempt to humiliate him but rather that he truly finds the mockery funny. The Joker laughs at everything as well, including his own demises and failures, which is further attributed to character's madness. His crimes are usually based off dark humour and are driven by chaos, as seen through his use of the deadly toxin, Joker venom, which physically forces his victims to continuously laugh and smile towards their demise. His crimes are also, at times, completely harmless, such as his signature handgun which bears a small flag with the word 'Bang!' on it when fired, instead of real bullets. The Joker may be a chaotic mass murderer, but his crimes are not wholly impulsive since he is known to kill people only when it is deemed "funny" (Gaiman, Kubert and Williams, 2009, 15).

Fleck's humour is similarly epitomised by dark and violent comedy, while his comic behaviour often emerges when he's assuming a clown persona. A reason for this could be that he is severely miserable despite his attempts to live up to his nickname; with the opening shot of Fleck failing to withhold the frown on his face in favour of a smile illustrating his endeavour to "[fight] the comedy, tragedy that is his life" (Vanity Fair, 2019, Online). Phillips (Vanity Fair, 2019, Online) explains that the notion of smiling and "[putting] on a happy face" is an essential theme in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), since Fleck "wrestles" to commit to the notion of bringing happiness and always being happy. This theme is emphasised by Jimmy Durante's cover of 'Smile' (Chaplin, Parsons and Turner, 1965), which is prominently featured in the film. The song enhances the notion of smiling by encouraging Fleck to "hide every trace of sadness" (1965).

Fleck is a victim of childhood abuse which results in a number of tribulations that he faces as an adult. Fleck was abused by his mother's boyfriend, of which she turned a blind eye to (Phillips, 2019). Fleck was reportedly "found tied to a radiator in a filthy apartment; malnourished, with multiple bruises across his body and severe trauma to his head" (2019). Valentin Skryabin (2021, 2-3) infers that this consequentially resulted in traumatic brain injury, with the revelation of his past together promoting empathy for Fleck from the audience. According to one version of canon, the Joker assumes his visage after he suffers from both mental and physical trauma (Moore and Bolland, 1988, 28-38). Phillips' *Joker*, however, indicates that his trauma is not purely physical because it stems directly from his mental state instead, as Guillaume Mouleux (2019, 3) explains below:

His smile is due to the uncontrollable laughter caused by his mental illness, and, as a clown, his face is deliberately painted white and his hair dyed green, consecrating the primacy of the mind over the body: in a way or another, be it willingly or unwillingly, his physical appearance entirely derives from his brain instead of dramatically shaping his state of mind.

According to Xavier Merchán-del-Hierro, Julián Fernandez-Bocazzi and Emilia Gatto (2021, 513), Fleck develops mental disorders purportedly as a result of the traumatic brain injury –

through which he faces significant misunderstanding and discrimination from society. Fleck is most notably characterised by his pathological laughter, which is defined as “unmotivated, exaggerated, uncontrollable, and involuntary outbursts of laughter that are incongruent with the experienced emotion” (512). He allegedly suffers from pseudobulbar affect which is described as “a disorder of regulation of emotional expression, caused by neurological disease or injury affecting the brain” (Skryabin, 2021, 2). The disorder is hence “characterised by sudden, uncontrollable episodes of crying, laughing or both” (2). Pseudobulbar affect does not necessarily reflect the true emotional state of the patient during the episode, because it has been established that “the emotional expression should be excessive or incongruent with the emotional experience and independent or in excess of the evoking stimulus” (Merchán-del-Hierro, Fernandez-Boccazzi and Gatto, 2021, 513). Fleck’s symptoms match the description of pseudobulbar affect because “there is a clear division between the protagonist’s expressed emotion and his feelings, which is evident when the character is distressed, ashamed, or sad while laughing uncontrollably” (512). The effect of this disorder therefore plays a negative role in Fleck’s life, because “in all the episodes, laughter significantly interferes with his daily activities and deteriorates his quality of life” (513). The negative effect that this has on Fleck’s life contributes to the disturbing nature of the film, as the audience are made to feel disconcerted by Fleck’s tribulations.

When observed through a medical lens, Merchán-del-Hierro, Fernandez-Boccazzi and Gatto (2021, 513) further note that “patients with pseudobulbar affect of any etiology have an increased prevalence of anxiety, psychiatric disorders, and inferior social performance in comparison with patients without this condition”. Skryabin (2021, 2) infers Fleck to be suffering from other mental disorders that were possibly developed as a result of his traumatic brain injury and pseudobulbar affect, thus resulting in “a complex mix of features of certain personality traits, namely narcissism (since he craves attention by any means), and psychopathy (since he demonstrates no empathy for his victims)”. Fleck also appears to suffer from depression due to the constant “negative thoughts” (Phillips, 2019) that envelop him. Though this may be the case, Skryabin (2021, 2) argues that in spite of Fleck’s depression, he still “demonstrates excellent self-control”. Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) outlines Fleck as “an egoist narcissist” and explains that “the ego is Arthur, the ego is the thing [that is] trying to control this wild horse that is Joker”. Skryabin (2021, 3) describes Narcissism

as a Personality Disorder encapsulated by “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or [behaviour]), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts’ characterised by at least five of nine criteria”.

It can be established that Fleck’s narcissism is the driving force behind his desire for social recognition and validation. The film later reveals that Fleck’s mother also suffered from a history of psychiatric conditions, with her first psychiatric admission to Arkham State Hospital occurring when she was only fifteen years old. When Fleck goes to the hospital to investigate a claim that is introduced to him by Wayne regarding Fleck being adopted, he ends up stealing his mother’s files from the administration clerk after his sudden unwillingness to allow Fleck to view the files when he realised that he is Penny’s son. It is disclosed in these files that his mother “has had multiple psychiatric admissions for drug abuse, delusional psychosis and Narcissistic Personality disorder” (Phillips, 2019). Here it is also legally affirmed that Fleck was not only abandoned by his biological parents, but was indeed adopted. Penny’s narcissistic and delusional nature fundamentally illustrates why she is insistent on Fleck maintaining a happy attitude. When Penny was involuntarily admitted to the hospital for child abuse, she claimed that “[she had] done nothing wrong” (Phillips, 2019). However, when confronted about the terrible state Fleck was discovered in by authorities, she (2019) professed that “[she] never heard him crying” and that “[he has] always been such a happy little boy”. The notion of naming Fleck ‘Happy’ thereby originates from her recollection of Fleck passively and silently enduring abuse whilst maintaining an aura of happiness.

Fleck attends therapy sessions due to the troubled state of his mind, but his listless social worker fails to truly help him heal. Fleck (Phillips, 2019) complains that “[she does not] listen” to what he has to say and that “[she] just [asks] the same questions every week”. With regard to stigmatisation against mental illness, Putman (2008, 689) writes how research has shown that “the most ‘intolerant’ group of employers were within health and social care. The worst cases of overt displays of negative attitudes reportedly came from the nursing and social work professions”. Fleck’s struggles with an unhelpful social worker consequently depict the challenges the mentally ill community face due to ineffectual healthcare programs riddled with

stigmatising attitudes. Despite this, Fleck's social worker still nonetheless helps him in acquiring his medication – medication that subdues his Joker persona.

Fleck also keeps a journal at the behest of his social worker, which also serves as his joke diary. The journal provides important insight into Fleck's troubled mind: a place where he freely pens "funny jokes and conversations" (Phillips, 2019); a place scattered with disturbing thoughts, sexual images of women, and dark humour. When Fleck notes his success at a shoplifting incident, he describes a scene which ultimately portrays an important aspect of Fleck's mentality in relation to his narcissism and desire for social attention. The excerpt is as follows:

When I noticed that there was an ambulance, and the paramedics were standing over the homeless man. I went over because I was interested in what happened to him as I got near them I heard them say "what a way to go. On the sidewalk. What? Can you imagine that??? dead on the sidewalk with people stepping over you. maybe hes happier but I don't want to die with people just stepping over me. I want people to see me (2019).

This excerpt encapsulates Fleck's condition by illustrating the fact that the illegible parts of his journal is perhaps due to a lack of proper education, which further highlights his social status and poverty; but also his psyche. Fleck (Phillips, 2019) appears to be disturbed by how society offers little sympathy and care towards the homeless man, since he expresses the following sentiment: "imagine your [whole] life ends on a sidewalk. I [wonder] how old he was and for how long no one cared about him". In response to the homeless man's situation, Fleck jokes, "I just hope my death makes more cents than my life" (2019) – this is a comment embodied by both his dark humour and his depression which developed due to his misery and isolation from society and stability. When his social worker sees this joke, Fleck responds with quiet laughter due to the humour he finds in it. Despite his earlier remarks about the homeless man's situation, Fleck subsequently judges the homeless man's state to have possibly arisen due to him being a jobless drunkard. He then proceeds to ridicule the idea of "[taking] care of every drunk that [cannot] hold a job" (2019). This highlights Fleck's uncompassionate nature which has possibly developed as a result of his psychopathy – this notion further accentuated through the

dark humour present in his journal. Lastly, this excerpt also accentuates Fleck's desire to be seen by society.

The film is essentially shrouded in ambiguity. Penny contends that she had an affair with Wayne while working for his family and insists that Fleck is Wayne's son. This is implied in the film through an old picture Fleck later finds of his mother with a love note from Wayne written behind it, who admires her smile. This theory, however, is contradicted by official documents indicating that Fleck was legally adopted. Though this could be the case, it is also possible that the adoption documents could have been flawlessly forged since Wayne is a "powerful man" (Phillips, 2019). Moreover, the motif of the unreliable narrator also highlights the delusive nature of the protagonist, with numerous events in the film occurring in his mind as delusions.

The film, in accordance with the theme of Fleck as an unreliable narrator, depicts a narrative that is neither established in reality nor credible. Fleck forges a number of delusions throughout the film that indicate the possibility that certain aspects of the story only occurred in Fleck's head. With reference to Fleck's delusions, Michel Foucault ([1961] 1988, 26) upholds that "there is no madness but that which is in every man, since it is man who constitutes madness in the attachment he bears for himself and by the illusions he entertains". In line with Foucault's reasoning, I argue that Fleck's delusions are therefore indicative of the madness within him. Additionally, these delusions of self-attachment are effectually illustrated through Pete Walker's (2013, Online) model of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Walker argues that the 'inner critic', derived from childhood trauma, "weds shame and self-hate about imperfection to fear of abandonment, and mercilessly drive the psyche with the entwined serpents of perfectionism and endangerment" (Online). Fleck's traumatic childhood accounts for his depression and feelings of abandonment by both society and his parental figures.

Fleck's most prominent delusion features an imaginary relationship with his neighbour, Sophie Dumond, who, in reality, barely knows him beyond the neighbourly acquaintance. Fleck stalks Dumond after his brief interaction with her in an ill-maintained lift at their apartment after she

jokingly mimics firing a gun to her head. Fleck is intrigued by Dumond and stalks her the next day on her way to work after dropping off her child at school: in his fantasy, Dumond takes his stalking behaviour lightly and, in jest, tells him that “[she] was hoping [he would] come in and rob the place” (Phillips, 2019). Fleck responds that “[he has] a gun” and that “[he] could come by tomorrow” (2019), to which Dumond acknowledges Fleck’s exceptional humour. Fleck then invites her to attend his first public performance of stand-up comedy, which she gladly accepts. Dumond thereby serves as Fleck’s imaginary romantic interest in the film but also as a means through which Fleck can project his ideal life.

Another salient delusion occurs when Fleck and his mother, as part of their nightly routine, watch the ‘Live! With Murray Franklin’ show. Fleck fantasises a well-groomed version of himself attending the show where he receives substantial social validation and recognition, especially from Murray Franklin who Fleck greatly admires as a role model. The moment Franklin meets Fleck in his fantasy, he immediately asserts that “[there is] something special about you Arthur, I can tell” (Phillips, 2019). When Fleck informs Franklin that he lives with his mother, the audience respond with derisive laughter – but it is Franklin who stands up for Fleck since he can personally relate to Fleck’s situation. Franklin then mentions that his father had left his family when he was young, to which Fleck confidently responds that he, too, is able to relate to Franklin’s situation, noting that “[he has] been the man of the house for as long as [he] can remember” (2019). Fleck further comments with solemnity that “[he takes] good care of [his] mother” (2019), to which the audience respond in applause. Through this interaction, Fleck is able to inform the show’s audience of his morality, responsibility and excellent social nature.

Fleck informs Franklin of his natural purpose of bringing happiness to others through humour, which he delusionally perceives as social validation towards his aspiration in stand-up comedy. Franklin, who is touched by Fleck’s dedication and character, cordially invites him to the stage. Franklin (Phillips, 2019) privately informs Fleck how sincerely he appreciates his words and that he would give up his superficial career “in a heartbeat to have a kid like [Fleck]”. Fleck is immensely moved by this; he smiles and reverently hugs Franklin. The film then indicates that this occurrence was a wistful fantasy of Fleck’s which is intensified by a solemn and emotional

musical piece that only strengthens the development of the audience's sympathy towards Fleck, who wishes to be seen and acknowledged by society as not only a comedian, but a worthy member of society as well.

Fleck's fantasy of being on air with Franklin forms an integral aspect of his characterisation as it establishes his good character and genuine aspirations, while emphasising how dearly he regards his mother and Franklin. Fleck, having lacked a male father figure in his life, turns to Franklin as a father figure who inspires him and with whom he shares a passion for comedy. Also, we witness that Fleck imagines a version of himself that differs from who he really is – a person that is confident, inspiring and socially acknowledged. The audience are hence able to witness the drastic change in Fleck's character throughout the film, with each event aggressively pushing him towards the path of vengeance and rage. In his fantasy, Fleck perceives himself as a distinguished citizen embodying righteous and honourable virtues, yet his authentic self harbours an underlying evil that conflicts with his passive and righteous self.

The last supposed delusion occurs when Fleck perceives his first attempt at stand-up comedy at Pogo's Comedy Club as a successful hit. Fleck initially attempts to understand conventional humour by attending Pogo's Comedy Club, and eventually decides to launch his career in stand-up comedy there. He perceives his experience to have been a flourishing success, and regards himself as a confident comedian; but the opposite occurs with Fleck's vulnerability and nervousness on stage triggering a laughing episode, and his jokes engendering nothing but the silence and internal derision of the club's audience towards him. Fleck "appears out of touch" and due to his psychotic nature, "he is unable to connect with the audience on an emotional level" (Quinn, 2021, 192). In order to erase this unpleasant experience from his distressed mind, Fleck therefore "attempts to resolve the conflict by once more escaping into delusion" (192). This nevertheless creates a bad public impression of Fleck, who becomes a spectacle to such an extent that, eventually, Franklin himself publicly ridicules Fleck by airing a recording of Fleck's performance on his own show. Moreover, Franklin (Phillips, 2019) mocks Fleck's pseudobulbar affect by introducing him as "a guy who thinks if you just keep laughing, [it will] somehow make you funny".

The moment Fleck's delusion begins, he perceives the opposite outcome by imagining himself to have been confident and coherent, delivering hilarious jokes to a lively and cheerful audience. 'Smile' (Chaplin, Parsons and Turner, 1965) is subsequently played during this crucial scene where Fleck seems to be content with life, but this is only due to his delusional perception of events through which he is finally acquiring everything that he ever wanted. His delusional relationship with Dumond is thriving and his first attempt at stand-up comedy was a success; but the most important aspect, which is supposedly the only authentic part of the fantasy, is that the city is starting to notice Fleck through Carnival, his clown-for-hire character, after he commits the subway murders – with headlines announcing the effect of his crime on the city and citizens adorning clown masks increasing throughout Gotham. On the one hand, these delusions thereby provide the audience with comfort and relief; but on the other hand, they also make the scenes where Fleck is violent even more disturbing to witness and endure due to the stark change in Fleck's character.

Fleck's character is fragmented, and this is most prominently portrayed through the conflict between the two personas of Arthur and Joker. With reference to the inner critic that develops from Complex PTSD, Walker (2013, 36) notes that "over time the critic becomes more and more synonymous with the survivor's identity". This is pertinent to the fragmentation of Fleck's ego, with the strongest persona belonging to his Joker persona since "the superego morphs into a totalitarian critic that trumps the development of a healthy ego" (36). His Joker persona is assumed to encompass his real, troubled self, and is often contrasted with his Arthur persona which encompasses the ego and human desires. According to Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online), Fleck's Arthur ego also adds "elegance" and "romance" to his character, which is further epitomised by a certain degree of zeal since "[there is] music in him". Phillips (Online) describes Fleck as going through life "wearing a mask and pretending to be a certain way", especially when he is working as Carnival. Fleck wears a physical mask of make-up, but it is his psychological mask which dictates his actions driven by his ego and desires.

When Fleck finally takes off the mask, it is ironically the mask of make-up that helps him to realise his true self epitomised by his Joker ego. Once Fleck fully assumes the persona of Joker,

he defies his once passive state in order to retaliate against his mistreatment at the hands of society – directing a significant portion of his anger towards “men like Thomas Wayne” (Phillips, 2019), who overlook the struggles of the working class in favour of their own peace and comfort and who, according to Joker, “think that [they will] just sit there and take it like good little boys. That [they will not] werewolf and go wild<sup>14</sup>” (2019). Fleck’s mental health is hence juxtaposed to the state of the city, with both steadily deteriorating. The plight of the working class is a salient theme in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), which is chiefly placed in context through Fleck’s struggles which emphasise not only his poverty but his disconnection from society as a result of broad marginalisation. By grasping the context of the city and society, a thorough analysis of Fleck’s transformation to Joker may therefore be achieved.

### **Society and Precarity: The Devolution of Arthur**

*Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) depicts Gotham to be decaying physically and morally. Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) outlines the city as a place “on edge”, resembling “a powder keg” that will eventually explode. As a result of social inequality, the lower brackets of society are encompassed by an austere lifestyle. People are reportedly “upset” and “struggling” (Phillips, 2019) over the lack of opportunities and employment, which is aggravated by poor living conditions in Gotham. The dire living conditions in turn produces desperate and hardened people who can only afford to care for their own livelihoods, which thereby establishes a general ruthless and cutthroat attitude amongst the citizens. Guillaume Mouleux (2019, 14) explains that the socio-economic segregation is further aggravated by a social disunity that sustains the lack of human interactions amongst the classes in Gotham.

Fleck is portrayed as a solitary figure within Gotham. He is often alone in almost every situation, lacking meaningful support structures or company. The misery that he experiences is juxtaposed to his life in the city, which enhances the general mood of bleakness along with

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<sup>14</sup> An association to the animalisation of madness is made here. Treatments towards the mentally ill in asylums were inhumane partly due to the perception of madness being borne animalistically (Foucault, [1961] 1988, 70). In light of this, *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) depicts how those regarded as the ‘other’ – those categorised as mad in society – retaliate from being pushed to the fringes of society. The elite, on the opposite end of the spectrum, depreciatively perceive their madness in an animalistic light while hoping that the working class will repress these tendencies and remain tame behind the cages of division and marginalisation.

the film's sepulchral score. It is revealed at the beginning of the film that Fleck was admitted to hospital due to his mental illness (Phillips, 2019). We further learn that he is "on seven different medications" after he asks for more, because "[he] just [does not] want to feel so bad anymore" (2019). His alienation from society and the city itself further presents the absence of engagement and social interaction. Sean Redmond (2021, 68) takes note of how the city "appears to be teeming with people and yet simultaneously empty". This intensifies Fleck's isolation since "relations or interactions are discouraged or rejected" in Gotham (68). Redmond affirms that the solitary nature of Gotham is clarified "through its representation of city spaces, social deprivation, political corruption, family breakdown, and mental illness" (65). Notwithstanding Fleck's status as a working-class citizen of Gotham, his mental health in particular aggravates his vulnerability to societal marginalisation.

The dire and merciless nature of Gotham and its inhabitants is illustrated through various instances throughout the film, such as the street children who assault Fleck after he chases them for stealing his sign while on the job, which gets destroyed during the assault. The loss of the sign is attributed to Fleck at work by his boss, Hoyt Vaughn, with Fleck held responsible for its misplacement regardless of the ordeal he had faced. Randall, a colleague who Fleck perceives as a friend, lends Fleck his gun for self-defence after hearing about his assault. Fleck eventually gets caught with it while on the job at a children's hospital and the gun is believed to be Fleck's at work, since Randall tells Vaughn that Fleck recently tried to acquire a gun from him. Randall does this to secure his own job and income, thereby choosing to avoid responsibility and implication by shifting culpability to Fleck. This absence of vindication ultimately results in the loss of his job, which distresses Fleck even more.

The callous nature of the city is portrayed through the city's financial neglect of social services. The city "[cuts] funding across the board" (Phillips, 2019), which ultimately affects social services. It also fails to implement solutions to address the social requirements for these services and those affected by these changes. Due to this outcome, Fleck loses access to a vital social service through which he attended therapy and acquired psychotropic medication. The city's disregard for those affected by the loss of social services and those who were also employed through them, highlights the ignorance and apathy of the city towards those who do

not belong to the upper classes – those who do not form the elite, who wield power through wealth and status. Fleck’s social worker (2019) laments to Fleck that “they [do not] give a shit about people like you [...] and they really [do not] give a shit about people like me either”. This statement notably confirms the city’s stance towards the lower brackets of society.

The loss of Fleck’s therapy sessions and medication proves instrumental in his transition to Joker. The medication that Fleck takes controlled his emotions and desires, thus acting as a restraint that holds him back. The denial of these mechanisms results in the removal of the mental barriers in place, or the medicalised control suppressing Fleck’s mind. The removal of these two safeguards enables Fleck to completely utilise madness as a lens, which complies with his twisted outlook, against the conventions of authority and hierarchy that are maintained by higher society. Though this may be one way to interpret the scenario, others have criticised the film for utilising mental illness in a way that depicts the use of medication and therapy as a means to restrain the stereotypical violence that is associated with mental disorders, since “the notion that mental deterioration necessarily leads to violence against others [...] is not only misinformed but further amplifies stigma and fear” (Driscoll and Husain, 2019, Online). There are times where Fleck’s Joker persona appears beneath the cracks, his emergence fuelled by Fleck’s frustration and anger. Fleck endeavours to subdue his Joker persona due to his passive nature and yearning for social acceptance. Despite his efforts, there are moments in the film where his Joker persona surfaces.

We first get a glimpse of Joker when Vaughn accuses Fleck of stealing the sign – he is quick to dismiss Fleck’s explanation and pressurises him to return the sign. Vaughn’s accusations and lack of trust are further indicative of the systematic stigma against mentally ill employees at the workplace, since it highlights the discrimination Fleck faces due to his ornery boss’ refusal to empathise with or believe his account. Vaughn may have “liked” (Phillips, 2019) Fleck as an employee, despite receiving a handful of complaints against Fleck from customers, but he is still nevertheless quick to dismiss Fleck’s versions of events. He exhibits distrust towards Fleck due to his lack of competence – an attitude which possibly implies a stereotypical prejudice against Fleck on the basis of his mental illness. Fleck has no words for this and chooses to passively accept the admonishment with a smile, but his silent stare betrays the

anger and malevolence bleeding through his being. He then unleashes the pent up fury and frustration on a pile of garbage – a scene which depicts his Joker persona, characterised by violent chaos, slowly coming through with the restraints holding him back starting to weaken. Arthur, however, soon takes over when he is then shown sitting alone in a protective position, defeated by injustice.

Vaughn's hard-boiled attitude is further associated with the city's ruthless nature, which is epitomised by citizens encapsulated by an adherence to the 'survival of the fittest' notion. He also informs Fleck that his colleagues "think [he is] a freak" (Phillips, 2019), with the only colleagues that he often interacts with being Gary and Randall. This perception nevertheless accentuates Fleck's appearance of untrustworthiness to a greater degree. Fleck is perceived and referred to by disparaging terms throughout the film which thereby displays his ostracisation by society on the basis of his mental illness, since "pejorative language [...] is often used by other characters in reference to the character in question" (Pirkis et al, 2006, 528).

Another instance of his Joker persona appearing occurs when Fleck loses his job over the phone with Vaughn. Fleck's job as a clown-for-hire served as a means through which he could exercise his purpose of bringing happiness to others and making them laugh. Fleck pleads for his job to Vaughn after he is held accountable for the gun, saying that he "loves his job" (Phillips, 2019). The loss of this job distresses Fleck who not only has to find another source of income, but also another vehicle through which he can express his purpose of bringing laughter and happiness. Despite his endeavours to fulfil this purpose, "Fleck's pursuit of comedy-related careers – first as a clown, then as a stand-up comedian – can be viewed as failed attempts to appropriate the nickname 'Happy' given to him by his mother" (Mouleux, 2019, 15). It is here where Fleck also learns that Randall has betrayed his trust.

His Joker persona surfaces once more as he bashes his head on the glass wall of the phone booth, his reflection fragmenting as the glass fractures [see Figure Four]. The close-up shot of Fleck's realisation that he has lost his job and been betrayed by a person he once trusted exhibits his internal turmoil. This is further enhanced by the image of Fleck's fragmented identity which

is characterised by his attempts to assimilate to society through pretence; his false persona typified by delusions that build the constructs of his Arthur persona; his ego constituting both his narcissistic and human desire for social acknowledgement and warmth; and his Joker persona, which is a culmination of the anger and pain building up inside him. Though Fleck ultimately opts for a more passive stance in response to the trauma he has been faced with, the gradual release of his Joker persona essentially increases the violence and volatility of his acts and decreases the degree of passivity that he adopts in response to the various injustices that he encounters. The cracks in the glass could also present the idea that Fleck's control over his Joker persona is beginning to break, and his personality has now shattered into fragments. Randall's betrayal, coupled with the loss of his job, generates an anguish potent enough for his Joker persona to briefly seize control and disturbingly smash his head into the glass wall in frustration, symbolising his life cracking to pieces due to the repercussions of his actions.

Discrimination and ignorance towards mental illness forms a salient aspect of the film as it depicts a number of instances that portray the hardships Fleck faces due to his mental disorder. Fleck is devastated by poverty, which is evident by his malnourished, bony appearance and physique that could possibly "signal [stigmatising] attitudes" (Corrigan, [2000] 2006, 50). The film implies that Fleck can only afford enough food for one person at times, as it depicts him preparing food for his mother while having none for himself. Fleck's malnourished appearance contributes towards the stigma and discrimination that he receives from society, as mentally ill characters on-screen "often are given distinctive and unattractive features, like rotting teeth or unruly hair" (Pirkis et al, 2006, 528). In addition, Fleck is considered to be a victim of society due to the difficulties of maintaining his job and surviving a life devoid of opportunity due to the poverty he faces, since "several studies have shown that people with mental illness are more likely than other characters to be portrayed as victims [...], as having few skills, as being unemployed, or as having a poor quality of life" (529-530).

Fleck is once again reminded of the ruthlessness of the city through his encounters with the Waynes. Fleck's mother purports that Wayne is his father after he decided to read one of her letters to Wayne. Fleck does not initially respond well to this and is violently furious at his mother for having hidden this from him, with her justification being that she wanted to avoid

social condemnation, afraid of “what people would say about [Wayne] and [her], and what they would say about [Fleck]” (Phillips, 2019). Fleck therefore attempts to eagerly meet with Wayne as he genuinely believes him to be his father. During his trip to Wayne manor, Fleck encounters Alfred Pennyworth who belligerently discourages Fleck from meeting with Wayne.

He later manages to confront Wayne during the screening of *Modern Times* (dir. Chaplin, 1936) at Wayne Hall, who aggrieves Fleck by insulting his mother and dismissing the claim of being his father by informing him of his adoption. Fleck’s confrontation with Wayne ends with a laughing episode after Wayne reveals the truth regarding his mother, bluntly informing him that “[she is] crazy” (Phillips, 2019). Fleck is deeply offended by the allegations made against his mother, as well as the manner Wayne condescendingly behaves towards him. Wayne misperceives Fleck’s laughter to be as a result of mockery – to which Wayne responds by punching Fleck in the face. The manner in which society treats Fleck weighs heavily upon him, who is troubled by the heavy lack of human decency. Encounters such as this “[reinforce Fleck’s] construction of the people and the elite as a potentially warped interpretation of reality” (Quinn, 2021, 196). This is strikingly portrayed in Fleck’s emotional rant to an indifferent Wayne. Fleck says,

Why are you saying this? I don’t need you to tell me lies. I know it seems strange, I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I don’t know why everyone is so rude; I don’t know why you are. I don’t want anything from you. Maybe a little bit of warmth, maybe a hug, dad? How much is a little bit of fucking decency! What is it with you people! You say that stuff about my mother! (Phillips, 2019).

The inhumanity of the city is conspicuously witnessed through the social struggles Fleck experiences as a result of his pathological laughter. The laughter caused by pseudobulbar affect is depicted as an experience that is uncontrollable, uncomfortable and painful to Fleck, occurring mostly when Fleck is distressed in certain social situations. His laughing episodes are largely misunderstood by society, who perceive his laughter with contempt or offence; this therefore affects the quality of his life significantly. The effect of the disorder on others is prominently witnessed during a scene on a bus where a mother chastises Fleck for trying to

playfully make her son laugh, telling him to “please stop bothering [her] kid” (Phillips, 2019). Fleck immediately breaks out into laughter after disputing this, during which he hands the mother a card that apologises for his laughter and concisely explains the disorder – after which she gives Fleck a look mingled with pity and uneasiness before protectively drawing her child closer to her, as she has now discovered that he has a mental disorder. The mother’s reaction to Fleck’s mental disorder exhibits signs of stigma, as Patrick Corrigan ([2000] 2006, 50) explains,

Many of the symptoms of severe mental illness – inappropriate affect, bizarre behavior, language irregularities, and talking to self aloud – are manifest indicators of psychiatric illness that frighten the public. Research has shown that symptoms like these tend to produce more stigmatizing reactions than those associated with labels alone.

Fleck’s pathological laughter hypothetically fits into a category of Fleck’s variety of laughter, with there being at least three other types of laughter. Fleck has a genuine laugh which he lets out in moments of excitement and humour, such as the excited and triumphant laughter when he first sees his video on the ‘Live! With Murray Franklin’ show; or the genuine laughter he shares with the elite in response to *Modern Times*’ (dir. Chaplin, 1936) slapstick humour. Fleck also possesses a shrill laughter typified by a cackle similar to that of a hyena. This laughter is used for the sake of social pretence as Fleck attempts to fit in with society and join in on their version of humour. It is awkward and disjointed from society’s laughter, which ultimately mirrors Fleck’s position in society as well. This laughter is exhibited when Fleck laughs in response to humour that conventionally appeals to society, with his distinct laughter drowning out all other laughter and ending just as abruptly as it starts. This laughter is used on many occasions in the film: for example, Fleck laughs in this manner to Franklin’s joke about using super cats to tackle the problem of super rats; and to Randall’s unrelenting jest regarding Gary’s height. The last laughter occurs only once in the film, and is encapsulated by a modified version of his pathological laughter merged with an authentic laugh. Fleck has already adopted his Joker persona by this point as this occurs at the end of the film while he is detained at Arkham State Hospital, where he reminiscences the murder of the Waynes on the night of Joker’s unleashing which ultimately orphaned the Wayne’s son, Bruce. This is a laugh void of pain,

discomfort, pretence or force; it is purely personal, voluntary and subjective. Fleck laughs at this dark joke of murder and is notably unwilling to share it with the psychiatrist.

Fleck eventually snaps from the barrage of mistreatment from society, with the elite Wall Street employees catalysing his acts of retribution – through which they ultimately meet a grim end. This is a pivotal moment that pushes Fleck towards the path of violence and retribution against society. On the subway, after having lost his job, Fleck witnesses the employees harassing a woman and nervously watches as she looks to him for aid, but when he is suddenly seized by a laughing episode he gains their attention. The employees are, at first, curious about what Fleck is laughing at and begin to harass him but when Fleck is still unable to communicate they start to take offence and assault him. Fleck does attempt to show them his card that explains his disorder but the employees dismiss it before he is given the chance to bring forth the card. The scene further portrays the lack of patience and compassion that people possess towards the mentally ill. It appears that the employees do not even recognise Fleck's disorder and misperceive his laughing as mockery. Even if they did suspect it to be a mental issue, it is evident that they would probably not tolerate it since "persons who believe that a mental illness is under an individual's control [...] are likely to angrily respond to that individual and act toward him or her in a punishing manner" (Corrigan, [2000] 2006, 53).

It should be clarified that Flecks' retaliation occurs not in response to his mental disorder or his mental illnesses but rather on the basis of his mental health reaching a breaking point, with his motives epitomised by a sane desire for vengeance. Julio Arboleda-Flórez (2003, 648) observes that "not every act of violence committed by a mental health patient should be catalogued as resulting from the mental condition, in that the context, such as taunting or victimization of the affected person, could be the main determinant for the violent reaction". Fleck, who has been yearning for society's validation, as well as the ability to exert power over others in light of his inferiority in society, eventually uses his gun<sup>15</sup> against the employees and mercilessly and excessively murders them – a crime which essentially catalyses the inception of Joker. It is therefore anger that fuels his desire for revenge, not his mental disorder or

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<sup>15</sup> The gun serves as an object of power and superiority. Fleck finds confidence when this is in his possession and is hence able to exert a certain degree of authority over others.

illnesses. The incident serves as catharsis, which is exemplified through the dance he performs after he flees from the subway.

After Fleck commits the subway murders, he seeks refuge in a public restroom where he slowly and gracefully begins to dance. Dancing is characteristic of Fleck's gradual emergence of his Joker persona, with the dancing developing in finesse as it becomes wilder and faster in accordance to Joker's level of control over Arthur. Music plays a role in releasing the madness locked away: Fleck moves in a rhythmic manner unleashing a dance as he slowly accepts the madness within him through the music that is also in him. Furthermore, the dancing is a form of escapism from the harsh realities of his life – a safe haven residing in the depths of madness. Fleck begins a slow and delicate dance involving odd movements in the restroom, and it is “through his extravagant bodily movements, which are, however, more expressive than epileptic, he processes, or exorcizes, his first killing spree and tells us a pantomimic story of oppressive pain and looming eccentric liberation” (Jürgens, 2020, 330). This thereby enables a sense of harmony and solidarity between Arthur and Joker. There are liminal spaces in the film that help Fleck transition to Joker, such as the mirror in this restroom and the stairs he uses daily. With regard to the liminality of the mirror and its effect, the following has been theorised,

The dance scene in the public bathroom ends in a crucifixion pose, with Fleck offering himself up not to an audience [...] but to himself in a mirror. This is the first glimpse we get of the protagonist's split(ing) personality, for this dance, in front of a huge mirror, is a pas de deux involving his double personality: the mentally ill loner who is abused by a society that does not care about him, and the emerging psychopathic and killer clown who does not care about society, whose trademarks are garish makeup, green hair – and ecstatic dancing (331).

The act of murdering the three Wall Street employees in the subway engenders a reaction Fleck has been yearning for throughout his life: recognition. Fleck (Phillips, 2019) expounds while in therapy that “at work, until a little while ago, it was like nobody ever saw [him]” which led him to doubt whether “[he] really existed”. But after he hears a song on the radio involving the name Carnival, which is the same name as his clown name, he realises that he does exist “and people are starting to notice” (2019). Fleck's subway murders cause a furore in the city, with

the elite decrying the murders through the voice of Wayne who describe the employees as “good”, “decent” and “educated” people. This description is perceived as a collective banner that encompasses a superficial characterisation of the elite. Wayne (2019) continues that “although [he did not] know them personally, like all Wayne employees, past and present, [they are] family”. This problematic description raises the following issue as well:

Here, the narrative again draws directly on the incongruity between the actuality of the Wall Street Three as experienced by the audience, and Wayne’s interpretation of their character, situating his viewpoint as one that has been corrupted by his position, allowing him to privilege his own special interests and [the] inauthentic morals of the elite over those of the people (Quinn, 2021, 194).

This opinion is hence countered by the remainder of Gotham society who perceive Fleck’s revenge against the Wall Street employees as an act of sedition that inadvertently ignites an insurrection in the city. The act induces a prominent uprising by the working class against the elite for their disregard towards their struggles in the city, with Fleck setting off the spark which ignites the fury held by a society at breaking point. Fleck nevertheless gains acknowledgement and validation as the whole city is finally “noticing [him]” (Phillips, 2019). Fleck therefore becomes a symbol to the people, bearing more promise to beget change in societal division than Wayne’s endeavour. Fleck inadvertently sparks a movement, becomes its face and is thus perceived as its leader and hero – more so when he wholly assumes his Joker persona. As Joker, he is able to challenge the societal system that governs Gotham’s society more directly and effectively.

Fleck’s ascendancy in Gotham prompts the citizens to establish him as an anarchic visionary, despite his actions having stemmed from a mental breakdown as opposed to a supposed political agenda. His counterattack on the Wall Street employees, although excessive and relentless, inspired the working class to rise up against the rich elite. The murder of the Wall Street employees eventually generates an inundation of insurgent protesters utilising the face of the crime - Fleck’s appearance as Carnival - as the image of the movement. These clowns are malcontent with the disparity amongst Gotham’s social classes, harbouring great animosity

for the elite. The use of clown masks was also conceptualised by Wayne (Phillips, 2019), who referred to the murderer of his employees as “someone who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves”.

Wayne may have genuine intentions to improve the city by endeavouring to run for mayor, but his privilege and stark ignorance regarding the complexities, challenges and realities of socio-economic inequality amongst the people distorts and warps his perception of the working class and their struggles. Wayne enunciates the rhetoric of national reform, restructure and upliftment in Gotham, yet the veracity of his words and intentions remains dubious since the interests of the elite are prioritised above the rest of the citizens. The working class’ resentment for Wayne therefore grows, with protestors establishing a correlation between him and fascism. Regarding the rise of the anti-elite movement in Gotham after Fleck’s crime, Wayne shallowly asserts that “until those kinds of people change for the better, those of us who made something of our lives will always look at those who [have not] as nothing but clowns” (Phillips, 2019). This statement thereby fuels the conceptualisation of protestors masked as clowns.

Despite his recognition, Fleck nevertheless begins to crack from the successive ill-fortunes raining down on him which hampers his defences holding back his Joker persona; thereby resulting in Fleck steadily rejecting the notion of smiling for the reasons insisted upon him by Penny. For instance, when Fleck loses his job and gathers his belongings at work, he alters a sign at the entrance saying ‘Don’t forget to smile!’ to ‘Don’t smile!’ (Phillips, 2019). This move illustrates the starting point of Fleck’s renunciation of the notion due to his unyielding pain and anger at society. Also, when Fleck goes to inquire about his mother’s files at Arkham State Hospital, he confesses to the administration clerk that “[it is] so hard to just try and be happy all the time” (2019). Fleck consequently reclaims the notion of smiling on the basis of his own grounds, choosing to smile in response to situations that bring him joy and to cause laughter through his own sense of humour, such as the murder of the Waynes.

### **Fleck's Descent into Madness**

Madness is represented in the film as a mechanism against social violence and indifference. Fleck harbours bitter hatred towards society for the manner in which they ignore him; he is heavily disturbed by their uncivil and uncompassionate attitude towards him. Fleck submits to madness when the reality of life becomes too distressful to bear. There are a number of ills that Fleck endures that ultimately push him towards adopting madness. Fleck's delusionary nature is indicative of madness, as well as his grandeur perception of the world. Guillaume Mouleux (2019, 7) puts forward the possibility that the entire film could have occurred in Fleck's head while he was at the hospital – with the entire film amounting to a delusion as a result.

Delusions of this nature are characterised by a certain degree of madness and cannot be categorised as mere fantasies or imaginations of the world. Michel Foucault ([1961] 1988, 93) analyses delusions to be a more potent form of imagination whereby one completely blurs the dichotomy of reality and fantasy, since “imagination is not madness”. Foucault argues that it is only through this form of extreme imagination that such delusions enter the realm of madness, because “even if in the arbitrariness of hallucination, alienation finds the first access to its vain liberty, madness begins only beyond this point, when the mind binds itself to this arbitrariness and becomes a prisoner of this apparent liberty” (93). Foucault asserts madness to therefore be “more than imagination, forming an act of undetermined content” (94). Fleck's obsession with falling into delusions as a coping mechanism against the cruelties of reality is thereby indicative of madness, as articulated by Foucault who notes,

Madness is thus beyond imagination, and yet it is profoundly rooted in it; for it consists merely in allowing the image a spontaneous value, total and absolute truth. The act of the reasonable man who, rightly or wrongly, judges an image to be true or false, is beyond this image, transcends and measures it by what is not itself; the act of the madman never oversteps the image presented, but surrenders to its immediacy, and affirms it only insofar as it is enveloped by it: ‘Many persons, not to say all, succumb to madness only from being too concerned about an object’ (94).

The act of forming obscure delusions is characteristic of madness, but the contents of Fleck's delusions are void of madness since they do not, according to Foucault ([1961] 1988, 95), contain any element of mad reasoning typified by the language of madness. These delusions are ultimately vehicles through which Fleck projects his personal ideals and desires. Foucault further maintains that "madness begins where the relation of man to truth is disturbed and darkened" (104), which is typified by Fleck's delusionary nature. Foucault describes delusions to have stemmed from madness, since madness rejects the realities of the world in favour of adopting a lens that speaks to the principles formed against reality and convention (27). It is also employed in order to project ideal desires, as witnessed through Fleck's desires for success, recognition, confidence, romance and acknowledgement. Foucault expresses this notion by observing,

In this delusive attachment to himself, man generates his madness like a mirage. The symbol of madness will henceforth be that mirror which, without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumption. Madness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive (27).

Madness, when perceived through the spaces of marginalisation and discrimination, becomes indicative of the 'other'. The 'other' hence serves as a barrier that counters conventional social thought and practise. Fleck therefore occupies the space of the 'other', with madness becoming the lens through which he sees and comprehends the world. Fleck has always been the 'other' since he is isolated and separated from society due to his inability to assimilate, but it is his mental illness that segregates him even further from the citizens of Gotham. Fleck is marginalised by society due to both his social status and his mental state: on the one hand, he is overlooked by society because he lacks affluence and reputation which thereby lessens him in the eyes of the people; and on the other hand, his disorder agitates people. Valentin Skryabin (2021, 2) demonstrates how Fleck's social skills also agitate people to an extent, since "his communication skills are generally poor; he stares at people for too long, uses abnormal facial expressions and misses important interpersonal cues, making others feel discomfort".

Fleck relinquishes Arthur in order to wholly capitulate to his darkest, innermost desires; and this is done through his own volition where he submits to his alter ego, Joker. His Joker ego affords him a freedom that sets him down a path of homicide, psychopathy and pure madness. Fleck's despondency is hence embodied in his dark humour. This is primarily illustrated through Fleck's jokes; for instance, when Fleck tells a parent that her child was killed in a car accident, and hoping that his own "death will make more cents<sup>16</sup> than [his] life" (Phillips, 2019). Once Fleck realises that the darkness of his mind and the tragedies that envelop his life are akin to his dark humour, he concludes that his life was a comedy all along. This enables him to accept and adopt his Joker persona, and to fully embrace this genre of comedy. Fleck, after having stopped his medication and after discovering his mother's past, coldly exacts retribution against Penny by murdering her via asphyxiation. In light of Penny's previous assertions about "[his] laugh [being] a condition" and "that there was something wrong with [him]" (2019), Fleck visits her at the hospital and remarks that nothing was wrong with him after all. Fleck affirms that his mental disorder "is the real me" (2019) and that 'Happy' is not, since the concept behind 'Happy' was built upon a lie enforced by Penny. In furtherance, Mouleux (2019, 18) questions that "if we consider his mother as an embodiment of the norm, killing her becomes a rejection of the supposed mission she had assigned him". His mother's death presents the following interpretation as well:

It also represents a symbolic challenge directed at society as a whole; not only does it foreshadow the spectacular televised murder of Franklin, but it also increases the irony that a public yet solitary act of rejection of the outside world should be seen as political and gather followers (18).

The act of murdering his mother severs whatever sanity Fleck had left, but it also serves as a symbolic moment of enlightenment. When Fleck completes the deed, he proceeds to silently stand by a window and basks in the bright sunlight shining down on him. Such sunlight is often symbolic of regrowth, life and hope. The sunlight here is therefore symbolic of the dawn of a new Fleck – the dawn of Joker – who has witnessed the truth of society, and he will no longer passively endure any injustice done to him. As a child would open its eyes for the first time

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<sup>16</sup> This ambiguous joke expresses the hopes Fleck has around his death. He wishes for his death to carry more meaning than his life did, as well as more value or wealth since he lives a life of poverty.

outside the womb so, too, does Fleck experience the sunlight anew as Joker. The dawn of his shadowed self<sup>17</sup> is accompanied by his now established vendetta of vengeance, where he seeks retribution against any mistreatment he has suffered from. Fleck returns home and practises for his appearance on the ‘Live! With Murray Franklin’ show since “[it has] been a life-long dream of [his]” (Phillips, 2019) to appear in the show with his comedic role-model.

Fleck plots to end his own life on the show through a ‘knock-knock’ joke and enacts how he will carry this out on the show. He lays on the couch after having ‘killed’ himself with the sun once again shining brightly upon his face, which is further adorned with a smile. This could possibly imply that the joke of ending his life is something that Fleck truly finds humorous. In light of his realisation that the tragedy in his life was a comedy all along, he can no longer find solace in the veracity and comfort of what he knew to be true in his life. He subsequently accepts aspects of his identity that are shamed or discriminated against, such as his mental disorder and his ideals which are no longer suppressed by medication.

When Randall and Gary visit Fleck to offer their condolences regarding his mother’s passing, Fleck assures them that he is not grieving over his mother’s death and that instead “[he feels] good” (Phillips, 2019). The clarity through which he perceives the world is epitomised by his employment of madness as a lens embodying rebellion and resistance, through which he counters conventional thought and societal principles in favour of his own perspective. The clarity which improved his general composure is also due to the fact that “[he] stopped taking [his] medication” which enables him to “feel a lot better now”<sup>18</sup> (2019). Fleck also proceeds to enact revenge against Randall and brutally kills him. Randall’s primary motive for visiting Fleck was to gather information regarding the subway murders to clear his own back and perhaps endanger Fleck. He amiably spares Gary’s life because “[he was] the only one that was

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<sup>17</sup> With reference to Phillips’ comment about subverting the norm through Fleck contemplating living life as the shadow in the light, instead of the traditional concept of light in the shadow (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online). As Joker, Fleck lives life wholly as the shadow in the light [see Figure Two].

<sup>18</sup> This speaks to the notion of medicine serving as a means to subjugate society through authority and order. Thomas Szasz (Gomory, Cohen and Kirk, 2013, 124) argues that psychiatry is utilised to exert control and authority over mentally ill patients. Though this could possibly be the case in the film, it has been made clear in our current times that modern “developments in clinical psychology and psychotherapy over the last [one hundred] years have provided an important counterbalance to what many would see as an excessively [medicalised] approach to human suffering” (Power, 2015, 25).

ever nice to [Fleck]” (2019) and he is arguably the only person who behaved in a civil manner towards Fleck. Gary also shares a similar fate of the ‘other’ with Fleck, since Fleck is stigmatised for his mental disorder and Gary for his physical deformity. Once Fleck achieves his revenge against Randall, he then completes his physical transformation into Joker and enters the world adopting this persona. Juxtaposed to this is a precarious protest planned at City Hall coinciding with his appearance on the ‘Live! With Murray Franklin’ show, which forms an integral aspect of Fleck’s rise amongst the citizens of the lower brackets of society. He is now unhinged and bears an air of danger and volatility to his character. Fleck dons a new appearance which completes his transformation and proceeds to dance down the stairs in a wild yet liberated manner.

The stairs play a liminal role in Fleck’s transformation into Joker, symbolically documenting and illustrating both his endeavours to assimilate into society and his descent into madness. When Fleck is depicted trudging up the stairs every day, he is, in a sense, attempting to climb up the social ladder and assimilate to society through the mask that he wears and the social pretence in his performative laughter. The upward journey portrays Fleck exhaustingly and begrudgingly scaling the system and its societal expectations and norms. The use of stairs as a representation of sanity and madness is exceptionally effective in the film, especially in its physical illustration of Fleck’s downward spiral into madness. Ștefan Bolea (2020, 46) explains that “madness is notoriously difficult to perform, because, on one hand, the actor must keep his emotions in check while acting as if they are out of balance, and, on the other, his exaggerations must be credible, otherwise the movie becomes a melodrama or caricature”<sup>19</sup>. In light of this difficulty, Joker dancing down the stairs, coupled with a controversial rock song from the 1970s, successfully exhibits his unfettered, unhinged and spirited character where he no longer fears consequence and no longer tolerates injustice towards him – he is liberated from both society and his troubles, which is evident through the ethereal feel of his dancing.

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<sup>19</sup> This is witnessed in Lucian’s review of the actor portraying Ajax’s mad fury, where the dichotomy between reality and dramatisation is severed. However, instead of the actor’s exaggerations reducing him into a caricature, it produces an infectious madness that influences a portion of the audience. Joker’s madness, as witnessed when he addresses the crowd of insurgent clowns with a confident dance and then proceeds to “put on a happy face” (Phillips, 2019) through a bloody smile, draws similarities to this incident. Though the type of madness being portrayed by the actor and Joker are distinct, it still nevertheless presents madness in an infectious manner without falling into caricature. Gotham’s insurgent clowns may not have mimicked Joker’s smile, but they did mimic his violence and rebellion against the system in their own way – all fuelled by a madness epitomised by resistance.

When Fleck submits to madness and completes his transformation into Joker, he realises that he does not require society's approval and validation in order to exist. Fleck is partially freed from the constraints of society, as well as his own constraints that restrained the darkness within him. Even so, a nagging need for social validation still persists within him, which drive violent acts committed out of spite. The film's employment of stairs as a liminal space subverts the notion of ascension and descension: climbing upwards normally carries positive connotations associated with improvement and accomplishment; but in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) it carries negative connotations associated with conformity and societal submission. Fleck has, in a way, improved his confidence and maturity by adopting his Joker persona but for reasons more detrimental than redemptive. Climbing downwards is often negatively associated with the loss of control, morality and guidance; but Joker's descent is guided by nothing but himself as he "[does not] believe in anything" anymore (2019). The downward spiral therefore portrays both his descent into madness and his stance against society. According to Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online), interpreting Joker's stairs dance as either an ascension or descension is rendered to subjective opinion.

Fleck's rejection of social validation is most evident in the film's ambiguous ending when a psychiatrist asks Fleck to share a joke that had brought genuine laughter to him. Fleck (Phillips, 2019) merely responds that "you [would not] get it" instead, and possibly murders her. He acknowledges that his version of comedy, as well as his perspective of the world, does not require social approval in order to confirm its authenticity or validity and therefore accepts this part of himself – albeit his yearning to still be seen and heard by society. This yearning forms an intrinsic aspect of his character regardless of whether he is Arthur or Joker. Sean Redmond (2021, 75) confirms that this desire ultimately stems from an inherent ego that is shared between the two personas because Fleck "feels invisible in the world and wants to be noticed". Redmond further states that Fleck "craves renown [and] hungers for fame or infamy, since he imagines this will give him the prestige and the social connections he lacks" (75). This desire hence serves as "a way for [Fleck] to be not lonely" (75). As Joker, he is heard, seen and celebrated; which thereby fulfils the deep seated desires that he has but at the cost of taking lives.

The darkness of Joker is arguably something that has always been present in Fleck, manifesting and escalating through his appeal to dark humour. The city is, to an extent, responsible for Fleck's descent into madness due to callous manner through which society behaved towards him. Phillips (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online) presents Fleck to be "controlled, but there are these glimpses of who he is underneath". It is hence argued that Fleck's transition to becoming Joker was inevitable, since it is "not a transformation but rather a revelation of what was always barely contained beneath the surface" (Hughes, 2019, Online). As discussed earlier, his Joker persona attempted to emerge during numerous instances in the film, with his most violent thoughts and actions indicative of Joker taking control. Fleck vies with his alter ego for the sake of social assimilation but once he abandons his desire for social acceptance, he then accepts his fate and seeks social attention not for the reason he once had but rather to prove a chastising point to society.

Fleck, after failing to conform to the comedy that society is drawn towards, accepts that "comedy is subjective" (Phillips, 2019) and what he might find humorous, while society does not, is not deserving of social dismissal according to his standards. By accepting his authentic self underneath the mask which was worn to blend in with society<sup>20</sup>, Fleck thereby accepts that he no longer requires social validation for his self and his comedy. Though this may be the case, his need for attention remains intact, with his explosive appearance on the 'Live! With Murray Franklin' show indicative of this. When Joker attempts to express himself on the show, he is met with resistance by a calm and collected Franklin; it distresses him when his power and voice, even more so as Joker, is still shut down and stripped away from him.

Franklin, a figure whom Fleck regarded as a role model and father figure, acts as the voice of reason in the film. Franklin contends Fleck's justification for the subway murders and denounces Fleck for his "self-pity" (Phillips, 2019). Franklin is nevertheless undeserving of complete exoneration because though he may serve as the voice of reason, his voice is infused with a societal prejudice through which he mocks and ridicules others who appear weak and

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<sup>20</sup> Ironically, it is the physical mask that most accurately depicts Fleck's character and not the mask that Fleck psychologically wears for the sake of assimilation (Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020, Online). He assumes the persona of Joker not only because Franklin had mockingly called him a "Joker", but because the clown persona resonates with his desire to bring humour through dark comedy.

vulnerable in society. When Fleck asks Franklin to introduce him on the show as “Joker” because “[that is] what [he] called [him] on the show” (2019), Franklin genuinely cannot seem to recall his actions. This highlights the obliviousness of his actions towards others, which is reinforced by Joker accusing him to be “just like the rest of them” (2019).

Despite Franklin’s initial ridicule, Fleck could not help his genuine admiration for him when he first met him backstage. Fleck is in awe when he meets Franklin, claiming that “it feels like [he knows] him” and that “[he has] been watching [him] forever” (Phillips, 2019). Franklin is civil to Fleck behind the scenes, but on stage his mockery takes precedence for the sake of “a good laugh” (2019). Franklin ignorantly mocks Fleck’s mental health again before introducing him, joking that “[he is] pretty sure this guy could use a doctor” (2019). Franklin exacerbates his mockery of Fleck by insinuating that “he has a lot of problems” (2019) with regard to Fleck’s behaviour during his stand-up performance and his choice to controversially dress as a clown, despite doing so for personal reasons that are devoid of politics. These remarks exhibit Franklin’s ignorance of Fleck’s mental disorder since he mocks behaviour that appears bizarre according to his own understanding of the situation. Franklin’s actions fundamentally aggravate Fleck’s public humiliation and derision at the hands of society.

Fleck is depicted backstage, shrouded in a deep blue lighting, watching Franklin ridicule him before his debut [see Figure Five]. When Franklin replays Fleck’s failed attempt at stand-up comedy in jest and jokes about his mental state, Fleck woefully watches from the shadows – as the shadow – behind the scenes but maintains a stoic demeanour. The camera slowly pans into Fleck’s expression, moving in a manner that focuses on the growing resentment and animosity Fleck harbours towards Franklin and society for their mockery of him. This, coupled with the mournful score, can possibly invoke significant empathy for Fleck from the audience. The close-up of Fleck’s face also forces the audience to focus on the multitude of emotions racing on his stone face; such as his anguish and vindictiveness from being reduced to a laughing stock by his role-model. Fleck has already transitioned into Joker by this point, and thereby has “nothing left to lose” because “nothing can hurt him anymore” (Phillips, 2019); yet this moment depicting the various emotions brewing in him emphasises his ever-present pain at the hands of society despite his apathy towards the consequences of his crimes.

Moments before his debut, Fleck begins to slowly, gracefully yet contortedly dance in a similar manner to his initial dance in the public bathroom. This dance portrays his attempt to alleviate his mistreatment, with the dancing encompassing a final catharsis as he is now moments away from his public unveiling as Joker. I further juxtapose the cathartic dancing of Fleck to the pantomimic portrayal of madness in *Ajax* (Sophocles, [c. 400 AD] 2014): both dances portray different types of madness but the utility of dancing as a vehicle to express madness proves to be highly effective in capturing madness. Actions, not words, are employed to express internal madness, with Ajax releasing his madness through rage and chaos while Fleck chooses to process his madness through graceful contortions<sup>21</sup>. Fleck's dance changes to an upbeat, energetic and lively performance when Joker finally makes his debut, highlighting a confidence that Fleck, at one point, could have only achieved through his fantasies.

The scene portraying the argument between Joker and Franklin showcases masterful cinematography that captures the live audience's perspective of Joker's appearance on the show, as well as Joker's own subjective perspective; and it exhibits powerful performances from the actors<sup>22</sup>. This impactful cinematography is achieved through the use of long shots to portray the live audience watching the show, medium shots that depict the heightened energy behind the dialogue between Joker and Franklin, and close up shots that illustrate the emotion and intensity of this scene – as well as Joker's subjective perspective which is heavily focused on especially towards the end of the scene. Over the shoulder shots are also notably employed for Franklin during his conversation with Joker, so that the audience's focus will be fixed on Joker's perspective more so than Franklin's perspective. This climatic scene not only illustrates Fleck's descent into madness as well, but also portrays the essence of the film's narrative and purpose. Joker is aware that he was invited to the show purely to be mocked, but he seizes this opportunity to be unapologetically acknowledged and recognised by society. He utilises this opportunity to also carry out his suicide to evince his dark humour and, more saliently, the injustices and struggles citizens like him face in Gotham. Joker exhibits an exceptionally confident demeanour while asserting his opinions and complaints – a confidence that Arthur

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<sup>21</sup> Attributing the pantomime to *Joker* (dir. Phillips. 2019) is in need of further academic consideration due to his dancing serving as a means through which meaning is conveyed. This would bear exceptional scholarly research.

<sup>22</sup> This is especially significant for Joaquin Phoenix who is exceptionally nuanced and adept in capturing and expressing the storm of emotions raging inside Joker.

does not possess – and eventually realises the control he assumes while on stage, until his spiralling emotions begin to wreak havoc.

Joker and Franklin's conversation takes a turn when Joker avows the subway murders, with an uneasy tension that subsequently follows when he acrimoniously deplores the audience for their ignorance and mistreatment of his dignity and existence as a fellow human being. Joker postulates a lack of common decency as his justification for the subway murders: the deed was done purely because "they were awful" and not because he wanted to "start a movement" or "become a symbol" (Phillips, 2019). Joker complains that "everybody is awful these days" and further justifies his actions by stating that "[it is] enough to make anyone crazy" (2019). He is met with contempt by the live audience, which only serves to incense Joker who questions why society is "so upset about these guys" (2019). He emotionally releases his pent-up anguish stemming from Arthur's sorrow by proclaiming that "if it was [him] dying on the sidewalk, [they would] walk right over [him]" (2019). In relation to this outburst is the notion of "dying on the sidewalk" (2019) unnoticed by society, which is something that has troubled Fleck since he had mentioned witnessing a similar scenario in his journal with the homeless man.

Joker proceeds to scrutinise the moral decay of society during his argument with Franklin. He proclaims how "everybody just yells and screams at each other" because "[nobody is] civil anymore" and, in furtherance, that "nobody thinks what [it is] like to be the other guy" (Phillips, 2019). Joker then repines about society's prepossessions towards "mentally ill [loners]", to which Franklin expostulates his justifications and "self-pity"; asserting that Joker "[sounds] like [he is] making excuses for killing those young men" (2019). Franklin attempts to reassure Fleck that "not everyone is awful" (2019) but Joker vehemently counteracts Franklin by exposing him as being no better than the contemptuous and indifferent citizens of Gotham, growling at the fact that his role-model "just wanted to make fun of [him]"<sup>23</sup> (2019). Joker foreshadows Franklin's untimely death by alleging that "[he is] awful" as well, and it is this turn of events that ultimately portrays the unpredictability of Joker.

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<sup>23</sup> The suspense of this scene is masterfully heightened by a piece composed by Guðnadóttir that grows in turbulence as the scene reaches its climax. The suspense in this scene is palpable.

Joker (Phillips, 2019) asserts that “comedy is subjective” during his polemic against society with his former comedic icon. Comedy can be dually interpreted: the first explanation denotes comedy as Fleck’s version of humour; the second version embodies social ideologies. Comedy, in this regard, is perceived through societal perspectives and attitudes that dictate conventions and principles. Comedy is hence juxtaposed to societal conventions and hegemonic dictations since both comedy and society are judged in the same manner. This reinforces Fleck’s exclusion from society due to his inability to homogenise. Joker fundamentally rebels against society and “the system that knows so much” by rejecting the societal principles that allows society, through the system, to “decide [what is] right or wrong the same way [they] decide [what is] funny or not” (2019). Fleck further rebels through the realisation that his version of comedy should be acceptable and tolerated. For instance, when he is questioned by Franklin about whether the subway murders are a laughing matter, Fleck agrees that it is and that he is “tired of pretending that [it is] not” (2019). Franklin’s murder is symbolic of Joker conquering society and the system by overthrowing the standardised version of comedy in favour of his own comedy, thereby enforcing his own existence in society and the existence of unconventionality and nonconformity. Fleck delivering Franklin’s sudden death by means of a ‘joke’ reinforces not only this stance, but also Fleck’s own dark humour.

Fleck did not initially conspire to murder Franklin as it is implied that he wanted to commit suicide to portray the comedy of his own life in the form of a dark joke. When Fleck is sharing his dark humour with the irked audience, he comes across a joke depicted at the beginning of the film about “[his] death [making] more cents than [his] life” (Phillips, 2019): this is arguably where Fleck starts experiencing second thoughts regarding his suicide as he now wants to create purpose and value to his life rather than sending a message through his death about the apathy of society. It was through the abovementioned conversation alone regarding Joker’s actions that he decides to kill Franklin instead. The heated contention between Joker and Franklin regarding Joker’s vindication leads to one of the most traumatic apogees of the film: Joker’s ebullition of unhinged vengeance on Franklin by tearfully murdering him in front of the live audience, as well as live television. The murder is conducted through a joke that encapsulates society’s attitude towards him, with Franklin symbolically representing society and hence the answer to the joke, which poses the question of “what do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash” (2019). Joker

lets out a sorrowful yet genuine laugh after killing Franklin, with the anger and adrenaline still physically racing through him. He mournfully comprehends the severity of his actions but he still nevertheless finds Franklin's death humorous, smugly convinced that Franklin "[got] what [he] [deserved]" (2019). Joker thereby manages to regain control of the show through this act: his control is symbolically depicted when he grabs the camera at the end of his appearance to personally deliver the show's concluding slogan of "that's life!" (2019), and he is cut off half way through this invasive focus on himself. Joker therefore attains his acme through this public act of vengeance on Franklin, with the act igniting violent social riots in the streets of Gotham.

Notably, Joker appears to be apolitical despite his actions inciting an insurrection. Joker (Phillips, 2019) quips "do I look like the kind of clown that could start a movement" in response to Franklin's interrogation regarding the motivation behind his crime. Fleck, and Joker, retaliate according to personal motives, not political ones – but he nevertheless acknowledges the socio-political chaos that resulted from his actions which revolutionised the unsatisfied working class of Gotham. When Fleck first encounters the protests occurring at Wayne Hall, he expresses enthusiasm at the turmoil occurring. When Joker, while trying to evade pursuing detectives, encounters protestors on their way to the City Hall, he is able to evade the detectives and causes the protestors to severely attack them after they shoot a protestor. Joker watches the brutal assault with jubilation and thereafter proceeds to his destination in a cold yet triumphant manner while police officers run past him to curb the assault. When Joker is arrested after having enacted his revenge against Franklin, he watches the same protestors ravage Gotham with elation. The protest erupts into social riots as protestors engulf the city in fire and chaos, to which Joker laughs at. When a police officer reprimands him for laughing, derogatorily calling him a "freak" in the process, Joker proudly admits to the role he has played to enable the insurrection and remarks that the chaos is simply "beautiful" (2019).

Madness is thus utilised as a means of retaliation against an unjust system of cruelty and fascism. In line of the notion encapsulated by the 'other', by marginalisation, madness is hence perceived as the counter to the oppression that finds its roots in society, convention and reason. Jeffrey Callen (2012, 122) argues for madness as a form of defiance against oppression, and maintains that "reason has no pull when cruelty rules the land, leaving madness as the means

of resistance”. Joker’s crimes against society are interpreted as acts of resistance by the clown protestors, who soon establish him as the symbol of both resistance and their movement. Joker is violently rescued from the police by the protestors, who encourage him to rise as the leader of their movement. Joker assents to the will of the protestors and thereby gains a following without even trying to. Joker is therefore presented as a both a symbol of chaos and an agent of change, with the insurgent clowns noticing, acknowledging and praising him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **“All I Have Are Negative Thoughts”: Uncovering the Revenge Tragedy in *Joker*.**

“When I was a little boy and told people I was going to be a comedian, everyone laughed at me. Well, no one's laughing now”.

– Todd Phillips and Scott Silver (2019).

#### **Inception of the Revenge Tragedy**

Tragic characters are often associated with the tragedy genre, as the character who faces a tragic downfall is often consumed by his or her own flaws; succumbing to corruption, vengeance, evil or misfortune. Aristotle ([c. 335 AD] 1907, 2) defines tragedy as the “change of good fortune” (2) which causes someone to become unsettled and distressed. Aristotle further notes that tragic characters should occupy “two extremes – that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty” (45). Lilly Bess Campbell (1952, 3) confirms that tragedy can only exist in the presence of evil as “the problem of tragedy has always been the problem of evil in the world”. It is the evil of the word that turns one towards a path of tragedy and despair, but the onus lies on a person to either give in to the evil or to strive against it. In Shakespearean tragedies, it is often a battle between passion and reason: a complete surrender to passion leads the character down a tragic path; but exercising restraint through reason yields control and the necessary willpower to fight against the corrupting evil (101). Moreover, the willpower to hold onto reason denotes the heroism of the character in a Shakespearean sense and this sets the character apart from the antagonist, as illustrated by Campbell who observes,

This distinction it is absolutely necessary to make if we are to see the difference between the villain and the tragic hero in Shakespeare. The tragic hero sins under the influence of passion, his reason failing to check his passion. His passion may lead him to madness, but as long as his passion is in conflict with reason, he has not committed mortal sin. When, however, passion has taken possession of his will, has perverted his will, when in perfect accord with passion his reason directs evil through the will, then we have a villain, one who is dyed in sin, and one whose sin is mortal (101).

According to early concepts of tragedy works, the fall of a tragic character stems from his or her own actions and experiences. The tragic character is burdened by tragic events and faces grave decisions, thus enabling him or her to wholly comprehend the full nature and morality of his or her actions and the consequences thereof. This is notably portrayed in Greek tragedy where one of the main elements which causes the tragedy is a fault in one's character. For example, this concept of tragic flaws is depicted in the early Greek tragedy play, *The Persians* (Aeschylus, [472 AD] 1902). Richard Cudjoe, Peter Grant and Jonathan Otchere (2011, 2) analyse hubris as an example of this element. They perceive hubris as an excessive and passionate pride which extends to numerous aspects of life (2). Hubris is spiritually associated with sin and is utilised as a major character flaw in early tragedy works, thereby proving to be a sufficient reason behind a character's moral downfall. This is demonstrated by Cudjoe, Grant and Otchere, who note,

This account, locating hubris within a framework of ideas concerned with the honour and shame of the individual, which took a central place in the value-systems of the ancient Greeks, fits very well the vast majority of texts exploiting the notion, from Homer till well after Aristotle's own time (3).

Greek tragedy playwrights employed the tragic element to act as a consequence to hubris or immorality. Retrospectively, Cudjoe, Grant and Otchere (2011, 27) explain how this motive appealed to the social conventions and beliefs of Ancient Greece, with "the epic writers, the historians and the three Attic tragedians in particular [Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides], [requesting] of their heroes a moral responsibility for their actions". This served to further educate society and promote lawfulness and morality as it "was always imprinted on the minds of their audience the principle that sin never goes unpunished" (27). Early tragedy works often followed this structure but it was Thomas Kyd's ([1592] 1898) *The Spanish Tragedy* which notably broke this convention. Following the success of this unorthodox tale of revenge, Tanya Pollard (2010, 58) refers to Fredson Bowers who documents how "stories of vengeance began to take over the English stage" and that "dramatists soon learned from Kyd 'that there was no simpler method of motivating a conflict than by the revenge of a personal injury'". Pollard further states that Kyd's tragedy was influenced by the early Roman tragedy playwright, Lucius

Annaeus Seneca, who propagates revenge as a salient recourse against injustice and misfortune (60).

Revenge is Seneca's speciality, with his plays encapsulating the classic struggles between good and evil. Bowers (1966, 43) notes Seneca to be most notable for his usage of raw, unchecked revenge as "Senecan tragedy strongly [emphasises] blood-revenge for murder or flagrant injury, or else a serious revenge from motives of jealousy". Cudjoe, Grant and Otchere (2011, 4) argue that Seneca's take on revenge allowed for the advocacy of morals and righteousness by kindling the notion that "a person shows hubris (arrogance) by deliberately indulging in conduct which is bad, immoral, or at best useless, because it is what he wants to do, having no regard for the lives or rights of other people". Immoral activity prompted by one's own vice served as the consequence and reason for a character's tragic downfall, hence the moral impartment by early tragedy works for righteous behaviour. This moral impartment further implies that tragedy would soon beset one who sins, and the tragic downfall will be accompanied by the character's inevitable reprisal in his or her pursuance of atonement. Bowers confirms that Seneca's extensive influence to the genre is well documented as his plays have influenced the archetypal elements that are utilised within notable tragic works (1966, 74). Be that as it may, it was the sweeping, historic impact of *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd, [1592] 1898) which ultimately gave rise to revenge tragedy: the compelling and forceful union of revenge and tragedy.

Seneca's implementation of pity into his plays further serve to vivify and sharpen our ability to empathise with both the revenger and injurer, thus enabling the audience to grasp all aspects of the tragedy and comprehend its full nature. Bowers (1966, 43) writes that "pity is felt, however, not only for the innocent but even for the guilty in the midst of the torments of their retribution or of their remorse". Pivotal incidents within a play hence act as a double-edged sword. The appalling violence simultaneously highlights the plight and inevitable doom of a character since "the physical is often used to enforce this pity, just as it had been originally employed to raise the horror" (43). Additionally, it is this attachment to the audience which enables them to root for the protagonist or at least show empathy towards his or her plight.

Due to the controversial perspectives concerning the concept of revenge as a whole, there will always be a rift between the two viewpoints: one group in favour of revenge; and another against it. By analysing public thought regarding revenge tragedies, and the polemics which inform them, one can thus gain valuable insight into the cultural ideologies and practises of that time. Revenge is thus largely a matter of opinion and personal belief. It has received heavy condemnation for its senseless shedding of blood, belonging to both the guilty and innocent, all in the name of vengeance. A modern act of blood revenge is criminal, falling into the brackets of murder and homicide. Revenge is rather encouraged to be exacted through any legal recourse for justice and compensation. Retrospectively however, despite the implementation of revenge into the law in order to make amends and control the process of justice in a fair manner, personal revenge often found a way to be exacted without recourse to the law.

Before I continue, I feel that it is imperative to mention that applying modern thought will not prove effective in the attempt to understand the societal thoughts and conventions of past periods. If we are to comprehend past cultures and societies, it would be crucial to analyse the conventional thoughts, teachings and practises belonging to *that* time and context instead of referring to our *own*. Therefore, it would be unproductive to apply modern forms of reasoning to early concepts of revenge. Revenge is essentially ubiquitous; therefore, modern reasoning may be juxtaposed to early reasoning to establish insight into the evolution of certain concepts originating from past societies regarding revenge. But in order to understand the reasoning and thoughts of past societies, one will need to fully grasp the frameworks, inspirations and justifications which led to these thoughts, as modern reasoning will only aid us in our attempt to perceive past societies according to our own modern context. With this in mind, the intent behind vengeful acts has been laid out by Ronald Broude (1975, 39), who observes,

Several recent studies of individual revenge plays have stressed the concern of these works with the operation of divine retribution and the ways in which various forms of human retribution are turned by Providence to the purposes of God's justice. Taken all together, such studies suggest that the central interest of revenge tragedy is not, after all, revenge – at least not revenge in the modern sense of the word. We seem to have forgotten, however, that the Renaissance word revenge had a more extended meaning than the modern one, a meaning more nearly equivalent to today's *retribution*.

As depicted in revenge tragedies, personal retribution is key in returning order to the injured. The characteristics and features of the revenge tragedy were developed to critique and promote conventional thought regarding the philosophy, morality, culture and politics of that era in relation to revenge, justice and injustice. Even so, revenge tragedies still adhere to specific criteria of certain distinguishable characteristics which encapsulates the pure tragedy behind the revenger's consequential actions. The early concept of revenge hence shares certain characteristics with the modern concept of retribution. Even though these plays were able to reach out to society while showcasing vengeful retribution, the brutality of revenge tragedy was often frowned upon. Yet, Steven Justice (1985, 271) argues that despite the fact that "Campbell has documented the official disapproval of revenge during the English Renaissance", the sense of duty and honour achieved through revenge succeeds to pique the audience's interest and attention. Justice remarks how this notion is portrayed through *The Spanish Tragedy's* (Kyd, [1592] 1898) protagonist, Hieronimo, who recruits the audience as potential allies to his cause in spite of his moral demise, because "sympathy with Hieronimo and his duty of revenge dies hard" (271). This is precisely what revenge tragedies are so adept in achieving – the sympathy which is evoked by the audience towards its wronged and grieving protagonist.

The revenge tragedies were not very well received by many but were still quite proficient in amassing piety and sympathy – as well as empathy – from the audience. However, Pollard (2010, 65) notes that this possibly works as a disadvantage since "too close a link between spectator and spectacle [threatens] to overwhelm the productive emotional engagement that genre theorists identified as tragedy's primary purpose". The emotional engagement is emphasised over the allure of strength and overpowering those who caused injury. Granted that this was the possible intention of playwrights, it could not be helped that the display of personal revenge seemed to have proven that personal engagement with the audience of the plays triumphed over the intended emotional engagement in numerous cases. Indeed, for it is the personal link and the degree of relatability to the tragedy of revenge which serve as primary roots to the accomplishments of the genre – the pain of having a person or prized possession viciously snatched away from one; the bitterness of having to endure an injustice without redress; the powerlessness one feels unless they take matters into their own hands; and the marvel of duty and justice over the injurer. Although revenge tragedy playwrights intended for

the strength and power of revenge to be secondary to the societal or political issues it raises, Pollard agrees that the personal engagement to the audience is still quite advantageous nonetheless, since the revenge tragedy intrinsically examines human responses to grief and adversity (61). *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) palpably illustrates this aspect of the genre due to the intense empathy that the audience extends to Fleck throughout the various predicaments he finds himself in, which is ultimately enabled as a result of the film's sole and personal focus on Fleck's tribulations. Despite the audience expressing empathy towards the justifications behind Fleck's crimes, the film – in accordance with the revenge tragedy – emphasises and explores the human condition and the lack of humanity that is rampant in our world.

### **Joker as a Modern Revenge Tragedy**

The versatility and utility of revenge has been explored by numerous artists and writers, with some concepts of revenge exhibiting rather bitter truths about the human psyche and nature through its examination. Moreover, Tanya Pollard (2010, 61) argues that it is the notion tied to the suffering of the injured – which only ceases once his or her revenge has been exacted – that effectively connects an audience to a play at a personal level because “the logic that attributes a remedial power to revenge within plays echoes a broader contemporary idea that plays themselves could have a therapeutic effect on the audiences”. Furthermore, the audience may relate to a play which highlights a possible lack of formal and lawful retribution. Revenge tragedies that signify a lack of authoritative aid or futile legal aid often result in characters being driven to take matters into their own hands because without the protection and reassurance of the authoritative systems in place, their suffering will therefore persist. The act of revenge itself is variegated, with different purposes ranging from haughty desires to redressive vengeance; but Pollard affirms that “the moral is seldom straightforward: the revenge invariably exceeds the original crime, creating new victims, and the revenger is always eventually punished for taking the law into his or her own hands” (59). It is this exercise of power which attracts an audience to the revenge tragedy because “the thrill of the plays [...] depends on the audience identifying with the aggrieved revenger and rooting to punish the original wrongdoing” (59). Pollard hence acknowledges how these notions appealed to the audiences since “the genre offered the gratifying spectacle of power for those who lacked it, and reassured the injured that somehow justice could and would be done” (60).

Early playwrights often displayed ghastly acts of violence to intensify their tragedy. According to Pollard (2010, 66), revenge often results in death as it is “a staple of the genre, but the plays’ extravagant violence goes far beyond it”. The use of violence in these plays eventually became characteristic of revenge tragedies, with the act of revenge usually entailing physical murders or injuries. Bradley Irish (2009, 121) maintains that Seneca’s excessive violence consequently gave rise to uneasy concerns regarding the characteristic of violence in future revenge plays, because “though such horrors were unstaged, [it is] not difficult to see how the gruesome imagery, combined with the emergent revenge theme, anticipates the concerns of later revenge tragedy”. Nevertheless, the use of shocking violence indicates a greater symbolism – an intent expressing a profound reminder, as mentioned by Pollard,

The genre’s fascination with savaged bodies speaks to its preoccupation with mortality and human frailty; the onstage skull or corpse, in particular, became a theatrical version of the *memento mori*, reminding the audience of the pervasiveness of death and the futility of human endeavours (2010, 66).

*Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) exhibits the most intrinsic characteristic of the revenge tragedy – a personal injury is dealt to a character and this injury serves as a catalyst which sets the character down the path of revenge. The protagonist of a revenge tragedy is thrown into tragedy by facing harsh and dismal situations caused by structures of power, the ills of society, or by his or her own flaws. Fleck falls into this category as he faces the social ills of discrimination, prejudice and marginalisation; which are all indicative of the general lack of empathy and humanity in Gotham. However, it is salient to note that the protagonist is made aware that his or her own downfall has been subject to his or her own actions, and it is not solely due to external forces alone. Fleck reaches this understanding through his murderous acts but he lacks an emotional attachment to his actions due to his developing psychopathy, as well as the black humour through which he perceives and judges the world. For instance, Fleck (Phillips, 2019) confesses to the administration clerk at Arkham State Hospital that the built-up frustration resulting from his powerlessness and the cruelty of society made him “[take] it out on some people”. He expected the act of murdering the Wall Street employees “to bother [him], but it really [has not]” (2019). Fleck does, however, express a certain degree of sorrow regarding the vengeful path that he has, albeit voluntarily, undertaken. This is conspicuously depicted after he murders

Franklin as Joker; where he gives the lifeless Franklin a look inundated by grief, amusement, anger and contentment.

Fleck's madness plays a ruminative role in the trajectory of his story and actions, which are influenced and engendered by societal mistreatment. However, Fredson Bowers (1966, 46) informs us that "insanity is never used for purposes of deception" in the revenge tragedy. Fleck's acts of retribution are largely achieved through direct means, with his controlled madness exhibiting a cogency void of deceit. Furthermore, Fleck's disorders – specifically Pseudobulbar affect – are not employed in a deceptive manner, as he was once derisively asked by a detective who thought his laughter was part of his "act" (Phillips, 2019). The element of deception is rather achieved through Fleck's role as an unreliable narrator and his delusions.

On another note, politicised religion plays an influential role in early revenge tragedies. Thomas Kyd's ([1592] 1898) *The Spanish Tragedy* offers a critique on the religious dialogues and beliefs of sixteenth century Spain. Steven Justice (1985, 272) mentions how "the political polemics of the 1580s, and the religious vocabulary that informs them, show that the judgment of the play falls less on Hieronimo than on a kind of society, that the tragedy results from a way of life". Kyd criticises the involvement of the church in legal disputes within his work, with his take on revenge tragedy "[giving] form to popular images of Catholic Spain" (272). Kyd denotes the tragedy through which his protagonist suffers ascribable to the legal system because "Hieronimo's tragedy is that the Spanish court [...] allows him no acceptable choice. What it does allow him, something that is very much like justice, becomes perforce something very unlike it" (272). Like Hieronimo, Fleck cannot achieve justice through a moral route due to the corrupt nature of Gotham; his revenge is committed willingly. Kyd's depiction of revenge portrays the concept in a pristine light, as observed by Justice,

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and blood for blood: Hieronimo gives the unbending principle of exchange and revenge its proper name, "the law." This is not Hieronimo the revenger, but Hieronimo the knight marshal, the "judge," that is speaking, and he defines the rigid justice available in his society (274).

How one goes about exacting their revenge is featured as the most striking characteristic of a revenge tragedy to a somewhat impressionable audience. Bowers (1966, 3) writes that the excessive violence and vengeance behind the revenge is influenced by the early concept of blood revenge, where “there [is] no question of right or duty but merely one of strength”. This original type of vengeance through blood revenge is the very type which Kyd popularised during his lifetime where such practises were condemned due to the introduction of morals and laws to the concept at a later stage. It was encouraged for the ideal revenge to be dealt with in terms of the laws and state, instead of through personal action. Even so, the portrayal of power over another in order to correct a wrong or ill which was suffered captivated the audience towards the appealing concept of blood revenge (3-4).

*Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) staunchly employs the notion of blood revenge as Fleck murders those who caused him a certain degree of suffering. Regarding blood revenge, Pollard (2010, 61) notes that the victim’s revenge “offers the possibility of an emotional cure, allowing them to reclaim the pleasure and peace of mind that was violently and unjustly taken from them”. This seems to be the case in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) as the protagonist’s actions are directly influenced by his mistreatment by society. As Joker, Fleck takes it upon himself to deliver justice due to not only his lack of faith in societal structures of power and order, but primarily because his victims were “awful” people (2019). Fleck’s affinity towards strength, primarily through the utility of his gun and his unpredictability, enhances the blood revenge he commits as it establishes the once passive character as a pillar of influence and chaos, commanding powerful dominance in his path of violence. His revenge is characterised by not only impromptu decisions, such as the Wall Street employees and Franklin’s deaths, but are preconceived as well, as seen with the deaths of Randall and his mother. His mother’s death specifically symbolises the rejection of his once passive self, and Franklin’s death symbolises his attack on societal systems of conventionalism, socio-economic division and marginalisation.

The path that the vengeful character chooses to walk is therefore sustained by his or her consequential actions and choices that will influence the trajectory of the tragedy. Pollard (2010, 66) notes that this is usually a path drenched in blood since numerous characters will

eventually meet a grim end; oftentimes involving significant gore due to Seneca's influence to the genre. Fleck embarks on a personal vendetta against those who have wronged him, seeing their death as the only means available to acquire compensation. Blood revenge is thereby employed as a conciliatory method and is fuelled by an intense anger raging inside him. Yet the manner through which Fleck carries out his revenge is not completely influenced by Seneca's element of gore, because "his chaotic *modus operandi* illustrates a [democratisation] of high-profile violence" (Mouleux, 2019, 5).

As mentioned earlier, the move away from heavy and unrealistic physical violence strengthens the film's disassociation with comic book characteristics in favour of a more grounded story. Guillaume Mouleux (2019, 5) explores how Fleck's crimes utilised common, everyday objects that "are within reach of just about anyone, and seem to require no extraordinary ability or qualification". His mother's death was achieved through the use of a pillow which she was suffocated with; and though the murder was simple, it was delivered in a brutally cold manner. His colleague, Randall, was injured with a pair of scissors and died from head trauma against a wall. The gun, which grants him an authority of power and control, is employed for his revenge against the Wall Street employees and Franklin – but he utilises this weapon excessively in spite of the characters' apparent deaths from the first bullet shot. In accordance with the element of bloody violence in revenge tragedies, Randall's death ultimately contributes to the heavy violence required for the revenge tragedy, since this scene is encompassed by gore and shocking violence.

In addition to the utility of violence in revenge tragedies, humour is often employed to enhance dramatic ironies or to intensify the morbid atmosphere. Pollard (2010, 68) upholds that this combination is realised by the symbiotic nature shared between revenge and humour because, "as with stage violence, the convention of including comic elements escalates as the revenge tragedy tradition develops; later plays imitate and parody comic elements more frequently and self-consciously". Comedy gradually became a complimentary element to the genre, with its rise in usage promoting the dynamic combination of humour and vengeance to an even greater extent. Bradley Irish (2009, 122) further writes that the integration of humour into revenge significantly rose during the Renaissance, where "the playwrights of the 1580s found revenge

to be a remarkably versatile comic theme, and a remarkable number of the era's comedies invoke revenge for either narrative or dramatic effect". However, Pollard asserts that the humour expressed in these plays slowly turned dark, befitting the ambience of revenge (2010, 68). Revenge tragedies henceforth "[ranged] from playful to darkly ironic, comic scenes [entertaining] audiences with wit and escapist pleasure, and [pointing] to growing tastes for black humour" (68).

Comedy is an intrinsic theme in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) due to the nature of the protagonist, and this theme permits the film to be classified under the revenge tragedy nonetheless. *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) is centred on Fleck as an aspiring comedian but the film is, ironically, far from humorous – what little comedy that is present in the film is often encompassed by dark humour. The film is, indeed, embodied by dark humour, with majority of Fleck's jokes involving black humour. Fleck's jokes epitomise not only his character, but his circumstances as well, since the jokes often relay an underlying statement regarding the state of affairs in his own life. Fleck's dark joke regarding the stigmatisation of mental illness<sup>24</sup>, for example, is humorous to Fleck who disturbingly writes it with a smile accompanied by a small chuckle; but this joke is derived from a place of sorrow and ill experiences with a prejudiced society, which greatly disturbs him beneath the humour. His ambiguous joke about "[hoping his] death [would make] more cents than [his] life" (2019) also bears the dark humour trademark of the revenge tragedy.

Moreover, in the case of Kyd's revenge tragedy, Pollard (2010, 67) explains that "love was typically a theme of comedy, and the playfulness, innocence and reciprocity of this love identify it especially with comic pleasure". Pollard further notes how "these scenes encourage audience members to relax and enjoy [the character's] good fortune" (67). This technique is witnessed in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) during Fleck's delusional date with Dumond after his 'successful' stand-up comedy performance, where everything appears to be falling into place and he experiences genuine contentment with the state of affairs in his life. The audience hence focus on Fleck's happiness and success before tragedy resumes its course in his life.

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<sup>24</sup> "The worst part about having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you [do not]" (Phillips, 2019).

Another characteristic that primarily incites the violence and revenge is the use of ghosts within revenge tragedies. Supernatural elements are often showcased in tragic works, occurring through illusions, visions or appearances of the actual dead. Bowers (1966, 44) explains that “though the supernatural element of a ghost is not present the revengers are occasionally spurred on by the hallucination that they see the ghosts of the dead”. In *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), this characteristic does not seem to be apply to the story; but Fleck nevertheless engages in hallucinatory behaviour that deceptively blurs the dichotomy between reality and his imaginary world; between sanity and insanity. Fleck’s delusions do not involve ghosts of vengeful dead relatives or friends, but rather serves as a form of escapism through which he projects his ideal life. His delusions hence contribute towards the overall despair he experiences in a reality that encompasses the stark opposite of his fantasies, which indirectly prompts him towards madness and revenge.

Revenge would oftentimes morph into twisted endeavours to agonise injurers for the injury caused. Bowers (1966, 44) affirms this, describing how the revenge would, at times, drag innocents into the fray since “the revenger may be satisfied to take vengeance not on the injurer himself but on his sons, as affording the greater torment”. Senecan tragedies highlight this notion of exacting revenge on those close to the injurer due to the belief that “the guiltless must fall with the guilty, for they cannot avoid profiting by the sin, and so have committed the sin too” (45). The demise of the innocent, especially those who are close to the revenger, oftentimes leads the revenger to take his or her own life as well – generally with the aid of poison – because living with his or her deed prove far too unbearable (57). Different connotations tie in with acts of suicide due to the deeds committed for the sake of revenge, with “Seneca [sympathising] with suicide when it saves [honour] or gives an escape from a life too full of pain; yet he feels it more courageous to combat misfortune than to succumb without a struggle” (42). Bowers further provides an explanation as to why revengers ultimately meet their end in revenge tragedies by noting that,

That the majority of stage-revengers – Hieronimo, Titus, Hoffman, Sciarrha, and Rosaura, to name only a few – met their death, may be attributed either to the fact that they turned from sympathetic, wronged heroes to bloody maniacs whose revenge might better have been left to God; or else that the strain of the horrible situation in which

they found themselves so warped their characters that further existence in a normal world became impossible and death was the only solution (40).

This notion resonates well with *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) as a plot involving suicide is prudently abandoned in favour of Joker pursuing meaning and purpose to his existence. This swift act prominently distinguishes Fleck from classic revenge tragedy protagonists who eventually meet grim ends. However, I attest that the film nevertheless fulfils this classic characteristic concerning the death of the protagonist in revenge tragedies through the fundamental death of Arthur. As discussed earlier, Fleck's act of matricide serves as a cathartic murder of not only his mother but of his own attachments to his previous passive nature and life. His last link to Arthur is therefore killed through the murder of his mother. The murder empowers Fleck to wholly adopt a new life which embraces his dark humour and repressed sentiments, and to bury the person he once was as Arthur. The renewal in Fleck's character ultimately symbolises the necessary death of Arthur, which serves as the last step required for Fleck to transition to Joker.

### **The Anti-Heroism of Arthur Fleck**

Fleck's past and current traumas, as well as the constant ridicule he faces, serve as the mechanism that bridges the viewer's support to Fleck and establishes a favourable disposition towards him. Fleck cannot be perceived as a hero due to his detachment from traditional norms and values assigned to heroic characters; but also because he is a flawed, grey character. Daniel Shafer and Arthur Raney (2013, 1030) assert that "traditional heroes do not have moral flaws. [Anti-heroes] do, and these flaws play a role in the unfolding drama". This is evident in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) since Fleck is portrayed as an unreliable and flawed character – not because of his mental illness, but due to his character instead. Fleck makes numerous bad and impulsive decisions indeed, such as taking his gun to a children's hospital while working as Carnival, his clown-for-fire character.

Fleck may have elements of goodness within him but he ultimately submits to malicious and hateful desires, and embraces his madness as a coping mechanism against a maddening society

that chaotically envelopes him. The tragedy lies not only in the fact that Fleck's descent to Joker could have possibly been avoided if Gotham society treated him better, but that the revenge tragedy develops as a consequence of Fleck's madness. This notion occurs from the idea that "when he becomes Joker, [Fleck] becomes the worst possible version of himself" (Bolea, 2020, 47). Despite this outcome, as Joker, "he gains the world, or at least the acceptance of some part of it, turning into a symbol of the revolution" (47). However, at the expense of the recognition and acknowledgement that Fleck so deeply yearned for, he loses whatever righteousness and humanity he had left and commences his nefarious but powerful criminal career as Joker.

Fleck's status as neither hero nor villain may prove fruitful in this endeavour: as the anti-hero, Fleck's mental health struggles produce a connection through empathy to the audience. Shafer and Raney (2013, 1034) explain that "viewers view and interpret [anti-hero] films in a manner different from the traditional hero narrative, especially with regard to protagonist morality". The film's intimate display of Fleck and his struggles, humiliation and vulnerability subsequently generates empathy from the audience towards the character, despite his crimes. Raney and Shafer refer to outcomes such as this that lead to audience admiration, as "these differences seem to lead viewers to a similar destination: a positive disposition toward the protagonist" (1034). In furtherance, Valentin Skryabin (2021, 3) argues that "the psychopathology that [Fleck] exhibits is foggy and the combination of his symptoms is unusual". Despite other symptoms being clearer than others, these "diagnostic vagueness helps to create a more relatable character who reflects the burden of any mental disorder" (3).

## CONCLUSION

The film has received fascinating attention, stimulating copious debates both virtually and in person. As mentioned earlier, the characteristics and features of the revenge tragedy serve to critique and promote conventional thoughts regarding the philosophy, morality, cultures and politics of a particular era. This is evident in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) in light of the cautionary tale and social commentary embedded in its narrative. This dissertation grounds itself on the opinion that the open-ended nature of the film renders both positive and negative receptions to be, in the most part, contentious perspectives worthy of debate. The open-ended nature of the film consigns ample opportunity for the audience and fans alike to contemplate and discuss. The potentially perilous repercussions of *Joker* and its savage violence is certainly concerning, but the controversies should not downplay or overshadow the primary message of the film which is indicated through the causes that led Fleck to ultimately assume his alter ego of Joker. This message demonstrates the moral bankruptcy of society that occurred as a result of the socio-political sequela of socio-economic inequality, highlighting a cautionary tale beseeching the audience to take note of the ‘others’ in society – the marginalised and disenfranchised – and to take care of our humanity.

Throughout *Joker*, Fleck transitions from questioning his existence and purpose in society to accepting that he cannot, after all, assimilate to society due to the difference in his outlook. This transition occurs both psychologically and physically as Fleck transitions from the personas of Arthur to Joker. His Joker persona, in accordance with Pete Walker’s model of Complex PTSD, is thus developed by his inner critic that formed as a result of psychological effect of his childhood trauma. The ego that drove lonely Arthur’s desire for public recognition and praise, as well as the many hurts suffered by Arthur, transforms him into the synthesis of his experiences: his Joker persona, which was born out of the inhumanity of Gotham and fuelled by a new desire for vengeance. The film does shine a light on mental health by placing into perspective their hardships and struggles in society. Characters, such as Fleck and his mother specifically, exhibit a broad spectrum of emotions and mental states. In light of its association of violence to mental illness, the film stereotypically portrays certain aspects of mental illness – but a positive educational utility is still nevertheless present as well.

There is a stark scarcity of humanity in Gotham and Fleck is bitterly disturbed by the shortfall of goodwill and common decency from the people around him, as well as the lack of compassion from his government towards the working class of Gotham. Fleck's unceasing denunciation of society's disregard throughout the film highlights Gotham society's uncompassionate nature, with Joker ultimately revolting against the system that enforces his marginalisation and placement in society. The indifference of society and the lack of inclusivity and acceptance forms the foundation of his suffering – it is only when he takes revenge on those who mistreat him that he eventually, and inadvertently, gains a following who follow in his footsteps. It is here where he finally feels acknowledged and appreciated.

Madness is hence represented in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) as defiance against the status quo of Gotham, through which Fleck is neglected, abused and marginalised. The source of this madness stems from the ruthlessness of society which engenders Fleck's transformation in Joker. Madness further plays a ruminative role that argues the viewer to reflect over the many ills that drive a person to madness in society. The consequence of Fleck's madness lies in his rejection of Arthur's passive nature after the numerous misfortunes that befall him alters his character into a cold, broken man seeking blood revenge; which ultimately begets the revenge tragedy as a result of his intolerance for society and its values. This thereby gives leeway for the controversy of Fleck's madness which places him on the pedestal of the anti-hero not only because of the grey morality of this character and the empathy that is bridged to the audience, but also as a result of Fleck's placement as a victim in the narrative.

With reference to the first aspect about representations of madness in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), I conclusively argue that madness is represented through Fleck as a means to survive life in Gotham and emerges as a result of external factors stemming from society and not his mental disorder and mental illnesses. His madness is employed as a defensive mechanism encapsulated by resistance that not only protects Fleck from continuous suffering from the various predicaments he faces in society, but as a counter to society's adherence to convention and norms, which thereby enables him to wholly express himself. His actions occur as a result of his mistreatment and growing resentment against society, with the violence of his crimes stemming from *this* aspect and *not* his mental illnesses and disorder directly – the darkness

within him is derived from his Joker ego which heavily influences his actions. His actions do, however, originate from his disturbed mental state but it is his madness that ultimately dictates the trajectory of his actions.

Regarding the second aspect that explores the source of madness in *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), it can be concluded that Fleck's madness originates from external factors, as well as the ramifications resulting from the social inequalities and the moral bankruptcy in Gotham society. Madness plays a ruminative role that encourages the viewer to contemplate over these ramifications in their own society and to what extent they reflect our current state of affairs in the world. The role of madness is detached from the role of mental illness in that madness operates in response to Fleck's hardships and occurs in a tragic manner. The involvement of mental illness serves to shine a light on the struggles and prejudices faced by this community of people through Fleck's personal experiences. This dissertation provides debates that argue for and against the portrayal of mental illness in the film, with some critics wary of its portrayal and deeming it problematic; while others see veracity in its portrayal and perceive a great possibility for education in it.

The film's portrayal of violence and its association to a mentally ill person does, indeed, perpetuate a damaging, long-standing stigma. The film's accentuation of the internal and external struggles of mental illness nevertheless reinforces a portrayal that sheds a light into their marginalisation and neglect. The use of the Joker, who possesses his own problematic characterisation, as a protagonist in a film about a mentally ill person mistreated by society is bound to involve violence due to the nature of the character. This dissertation concludes that the positive representations and accurate statements about mental illness outweigh the negative, with the film highlighting their struggles more than it perpetuates stigma.

Regarding the third aspect concerning the consequence of madness, I hence conclusively argue that the film can be perceived under the lens of the revenge tragedy as it quintessentially epitomises the characteristics and structure of the genre in that an unfortunate character is burdened by a tragedy intertwined with socio-cultural and socio-political oppression and

discrimination. Besides the unprincipled state of the city, he is also afflicted by mental illness and a neurological disorder which undeservedly causes him hardship. Yet it is his unhinging vengeance which sets off a series of events that ultimately leads him down a dark road to his inevitable psychopathy and insanity. The film is a modern take on the classic, yet Kydian-infused revenge tragedy since “according to the genre’s conventions, revengers are typically frustrated victims who want retribution for a crime that goes unpunished, a crime either committed or protected by the highest power in the land” (Pollard, 2010, 59). This burning desire for revenge is clearly exhibited in the protagonist of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019), with Fleck as both Arthur and Joker resorting to blood revenge in order to carry out their retribution.

As with Hieronimo, Fleck eventually refuses to wait for any divine intervention that would rectify the wrongs he faces at the hands of society, and is thus inclined to enact retribution through his own terms. With reference to the hopeless environment he finds himself in and the war he has now waged against societal conventions and systems upheld by the elite ruling class, it appears that retribution will not be afforded to Fleck by society in any case. By resigning himself to his Joker persona, Fleck essentially abandons his attempts to connect with society. Fleck’s madness hence sets him apart from the conventional mentalities of Gotham society and provides him with the ability to counter the injustice he faces by retaliating against an oppressive system. This retaliation thereby results in the revenge tragedy.

The final aspect is centered on the controversy behind the tragedy of Fleck and inquires whether Joker is a tragic anti-hero or not. The culmination of Arthur’s tragic pain and grief morph him into a vengeful, psychotic villain who seeks retribution in the form of blood revenge against those who hurt him, with his anger primarily directed against society and “the system that knows so much” (Phillips, 2019). My discussion on the film concludes with the fact that Fleck’s life is consumed by a tragedy that occurs by both fate and his own hand. The empathy and grey nature of the character render him as the anti-hero of the film as he occupies neither a stark hero nor villain role. Establishing Joker as the hero of the film would be dangerous due to the controversial nature of not only the film but the character itself; and establishing Joker as the villain due to his crimes alone is an insufficient claim due to Fleck’s tragic and traumatic circumstances. Fleck’s circumstances cannot justify his criminal acts but they rather serve to

ground the character and his struggles, which establishes an empathetic connection from the audience. Ultimately, it is society through “the system” (2019) that forms the primary villain of *Joker* (dir. Phillips, 2019) due the consequences that erupt over socio-economic division, neoliberalism and marginalisation – which all contribute to the scarcity of compassion and morality in Gotham society.

## APPENDIX



**Figure One:** Extreme long shot of Fleck, as Carnival, using a yellow sign to advertise for a business closing down.

Phillips, T. (2019). *Joker*. [Film]. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.



**Figure Two:** Long shot of Fleck trudging back home through the streets of Gotham.

Phillips, T. (2019). *Joker*. [Film]. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.



**Figure Three:** Close-up shot of Fleck attempting to “put on a happy face” despite his sorrow.  
Phillips, T. (2019). *Joker*. [Film]. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.



**Figure Four:** Close-up shot of Fleck's frustration after having lost his job.  
Phillips, T. (2019). *Joker*. [Film]. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.



**Figure Five:** Medium close-up shot of Joker watching Franklin mock him before his debut. Phillips, T. (2019). *Joker*. [Film]. USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.

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