



Examining the Personality of Arthur Fleck in *Joker 2019*: The Shift From an Innocent Man Into a Supervillain

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Abstract

Todd Phillips' film *Joker*, a 2019 psychological thriller, has displayed the main character, Arthur Fleck, as a perplexing, eccentric character. Arthur appears to be a poor, marginalized man at first glance. But as the plot progresses and we witness life from Arthur's perspective, we're left questioning whether he's a good man, a bad man, or just schizophrenic. In this research, Arthur's perplexing personality will be examined using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. The study aims to uncover Arthur's true personality and his shift from an innocent man into a supervillain by analyzing his Id, ego, and superego. The method used to study Arthur's character dimensions is the descriptive qualitative method, by watching the movie and reading the script thoroughly. The study revealed that Arthur suffers from mental illnesses that affected how he was treated and that the tough circumstances Arthur has been through have shaped him into becoming the Joker.

Key words: Joker; Arthur Fleck; Freud; Personality; Psychoanalysis; Empathy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine if humans are divided into good and bad, how simple would it be if it was just that easy! Wouldn't it be

great if there were evil people somewhere committing evil acts, and it was just a matter of separating them from the rest of us and destroying them? But humans aren't divided into good guys and bad guys. That is simply a fairy tale, a cliché adopted by Hollywood and tailored to the lowest common denominator element of the cinema audience.

The audience is supposed to identify with the nice, good-looking hero character and look forward to seeing the dastardly (and usually disfigured —ew!) evil villain finally get his comeuppance. In reality, these childish stereotypes are so one-dimensional and unrealistic. Good guys and bad guys are only appropriate for children's stories. Human beings, in reality, are morally complex, uncertain, and ambiguous.

According to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the line separating good and evil runs through the heart of every being. And what kind of person destroys a piece of one's heart to accomplish good? As a heart matures, this line moves from place to place; sometimes it is squeezed by exuberant evil, and other times it shifts to allow good to flourish. At different ages and under different circumstances, a single human being is a completely different entity. Occasionally, he seems like a devil; other times, he's a saint. The name he bears does not change, and it is to that name we attribute all good and bad. (Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, 1973/1975, p.168).

Joker is a 2019 psychological thriller directed by Todd Phillips, a unique film that has presented a complex, unique, eccentric character, by the name of Arthur Fleck. At first glance, Arthur appears to be a poor, marginalized man, but as the story continues and we see life through Arthur's eyes, it becomes difficult to tell whether he's a good or a bad man, or simply schizophrenic. Todd's character has confused the issue. Arthur's behavior is confusing and emotionally ambiguous. Arthur is not just a fitting villain - he's a character who has experienced extreme hardships. He's the villain throughout, yet we never see him as the villain at all.

The film stars Joaquin Phoenix as the Joker and tells the story of the Joker's possible origins. It is based on DC Comics characters. Arthur Fleck, a failed clown, and an aspiring comedian who develops a violent counter-cultural revolution against the wealthy in the decaying city of Gotham in 1981, due to his descent into insanity and nihilism. *Joker* was inspired by Phillips' desire to make a different, more grounded comic book film. He was drawn to the Joker because he didn't believe there was a definitive depiction of the character, which he knew would give him a lot of creative freedom (Joker, 2022).

We will look at Arthur's complex personality through the lens of psychoanalysis, examining his Id, Ego, and superego. The researcher explored the psychological aspects of the main character in Todd Phillips' film "*Joker*" Using the descriptive qualitative method by watching and reading the script repeatedly. Arthur's eccentric character dimensions and the process by which he transformed from an innocent man into a supervillain are subject to analysis in this study.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Psychoanalysis, in general, concentrates on how the id, ego, and superego interact to shape personality (Friedman & Schustack, 2009). Psychoanalysis gets us to understand people in a very deep, intimate way. It gets us to know people's lives, thoughts, feelings, traumas, successes, and failures. It gives us the chance to explore the puzzling maze of human dynamics (Kunst, 2011).

Psychoanalysis divides personality into three parts: Id, Ego, and Superego. The id represents our most fundamental and primal instincts. The id craves satisfaction and has no qualms about pursuing it through violence against others. It consumes, mates, and kills (McLeod, 2019). The superego is the manifestation of morals as assigned by society. The superego is just as demanding as the id, with the exception that it expects the individual to strictly adhere to the rules it has learned, regardless of how unrealistic these rules may be. The ego acts as a buffer between these unrealistic demands from both ends of the spectrum. It directs realistic behavior that satisfies desires and adheres to rules. We refer to the emergent personality as a manifestation of the ego (McLeod, 2019). The ego seeks to balance the demands of the three tyrannical masters: the id, the superego, and the external world. As a result, the ego becomes a battleground for the conscious and unconscious minds (Sibi, 2020).

Arthur Fleck is a special example of what can happen when the normal interaction of these parts of the personality is disrupted. The most significant disruption is the intuition-based ego. The inability to distinguish what's right and what's wrong is caused by Arthur's abnormal ego. The superego is built around a set of rules

and morals unique to working in accordance with the ego. These conditions allow the id to be uninhibited, allowing it to fulfill its unrestricted desires in ways that mirror the unbalanced interaction between the three parts. Each aspect of the personality, ego, superego, and id, as well as the role they play, will be thoroughly examined.

2.1 In-Depth Psychoanalysis of Arthur Fleck's Personality

2.1.1 The Hardly Repressed ID

A lonely, sad, poor man whose biggest dream is to become a respectable, loved comedian, Arthur Fleck aspired to achieve his dream. But unfortunately, he couldn't make a joke on stage, due to his pathological laughing disorder, which makes him laugh uncontrollably at the most inopportune times, especially when he is nervous. When Arthur received a devastating, negative reaction from society, something changed in him. Arthur is no longer the foolish, innocent civilian who abides by the oppressing, depressing society. Arthur has started his descent into madness as he couldn't fit in, pure Arthur couldn't find a welcoming place. He was a victim of being harassed, mocked, and beaten up, all of that negativity changed him. Arthur, after tasting the bitterness of being marginalized and disrespected, saw that living in a cruel society requires a cruel personality.

Thus, he had to become cruel to fit in, and Arthur's Id started taking over him slowly. Arthur was living in a constant state of conflict internally and externally. Internally, Arthur was fighting his Id's desires and bore the humiliation for a certain point but he reached a phase where he couldn't take it anymore, he lived in a constant conflict about whether to stay calm or to explode his Id's ugliness in the face of society. Externally, Arthur was affected by his psychiatrist, family, Sophie, his working environment, and his idol.

Arthur believed that his life was unfair. In the social health services, Arthur always consulted with a psychiatrist regularly. He wanted to get more medicines because he cared about his condition. In their dialog, the psychiatrist always asked him the same question every week. Arthur spoke up and said, "all I have are negative thoughts, but you do not listen anyway" (Phillips, 2019).

All he asked for is some attention, he wanted to get cured, but he was shocked by the cruel response of society, even the psychiatrist didn't care about him. Arthur has stopped taking his medication as a result of budget cuts in the city, and he cannot afford therapy, because Arthur cannot get care and medication, Arthur feels neglected and goes from bad to worse. Arthur's hysterical laughing condition was caused by his mom's boyfriend's harassment, Arthur was hit on his head, which resulted in his uncontrollable laughing condition. Arthur's descent into madness started when he went through unbearable situations and was treated badly because of his mental illness.

Arthur was constantly attempting to appear «normal» in order to gain acceptance from others. In his notebook, he wrote that society expects people with mental illnesses to pretend that they do not have them, and he, therefore, conceals symptoms of his illnesses in order to pursue a career as a comedian. Arthur's attempt to appear normal didn't succeed, throughout the plot, Arthur's mental illness affected the way in which he was treated and sometimes misunderstood by people.

One day, Arthur gets assaulted by a group of teenage boys while doing his job, dressed as a clown and waving with the billboard to attract clients. Arthur was then brutally beaten by those kids, aggravating his precarious mental state. As time passes, Arthur goes through more hard situations.

The incident in the subway was a horrendous act. Three men tormented him without providing any explanations. They didn't give him a chance to explain why he couldn't stop laughing on the train. They have beaten him up brutally, and Arthur as a response bulled his gun and shot them dead, this was the beginning of his slow, downward spiral into insanity and transformation into the Joker.

However, In the family environment, he was disappointed and mad at his mother, Penny Fleck, for keeping a secret for a long time about who his father was. After knowing it, Arthur met Thomas Wayne to ask for clarification. Unfortunately, Thomas said that he was an adopted child and his mother was a crazy woman. In order for Arthur to believe that he went to Arkham hospital to search for the data of his mother, this made Arthur question his own being, whether his family and existence are real or he's just been living with strangers, and the care and love he has for his mother are fake and meaningless. The results indicated that his mother has a mental disorder, and he is adopted. Arthur's childhood was filled with abuse, in addition to Arthur's lack of love from his parents, which left an indelible mark on his personality. In Freud's view, the traumatic events occurred in childhood, but they didn't seem traumatic at the time. Instead, a delayed reaction set in - an event later in life, when the child reached puberty, would spark memories. and this delayed recognition would become a pathogenic or poisonous one later in time, resulting in hysterical symptoms" (Thurschwell, 2000). Despite all this, he maintained a strong bond with his mother. The only person he has a social connection and a strong bond with is her, as he bathes her every night. In Arthur Fleck's case, as described by Freud that 'the unconscious always returns' (Eagleton, 1996), he was under the strong influence of his repressed emotions. Discovering the truth about his mother pushes Arthur over the edge, and he suffocates his schizophrenic mother.

Arthur appears in Sophie's apartment after killing his mother. Startled, she asks him what he's doing there and

if he needs her to call anyone. Following that, the scene cuts away to Arthur leaving the building, and we do not see Sophie or her child again. This whole relationship is entirely inside Arthur's head. In reality, he barely knows Sophie. This entire time, he's been completely alone, which fuels his descent into madness (Phillips, 2019).

Notwithstanding, In the working environment, he believes that he was treated unfairly. One of his co-workers, named Randal, gave him a gun, and later the gun fell from Arthur accidentally in one of his shows, Randal snatched on him and as a result, Arthur got fired. At this moment Arthur became devastated and unconsciously sought revenge. To vent his frustration, Arthur stabbed Randal with a scissor and slammed his head against the wall. The Id works unrealistic and unconsciously. The problem also appeared in his idol behavior, the one who he loved and looked up to, Murray Franklin-the host of the talk show. He invited Arthur to his show, but something happened to Arthur when he was on the stage. his joke was not considered funny, and he realized that Murray invited him to the show just to make fun of him. Arthur lost faith and was disappointed by Murray, the one who he saw as an idol and a father. Devastated Arthur goes to Murray's show, asking him 'Can you introduce me as a Joker'. Arthur shot Murray on live Tv and has fully transformed into the Joker (Phillips, 2019).

Arthur's ID was imprisoned in a cage, repressed and controlled. But once Arthur started revealing the truth little by little and realized that his whole existence is unwanted, either by his family or even by the world. Arthur has set his Id free with no repression or restriction, he decided that he needs to stand for himself, for his rights and dignity, he couldn't keep his Id's desires under control after what he has experienced and his Id took over him. Arthur stated, "For my whole life, I didn't know if I even really existed. But I do, and people are starting to notice" (Phillips, 2019). Arthur's Id gained him attention, respect, and the strength to face the sad reality of his circumstances and the corrupted society that has no care or interest for sick people.

2.1.2 The Intuition Based Ego

Arthur's ego kills people who have mistreated him. Arthur thought that comedy is subjective, while in reality, people decide what's good and bad, in the same way, they decide what's funny or not. According to Aleksandar Isaevich, to commit evil, one must first believe that what they're doing is right, or else that it is a well-considered act in conformity with natural law (Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, 1973/1975, p.173).

Arthur takes action to satisfy what he sees as fair of his Id's desires as dictated by his ego. In the first incident of the three subway men, Arthur's Ego worked through a secondary process thinking in the act of decision making. Secondary process thought is a form of advanced thinking based on logic and operating according to the reality

principle. Secondary process thinking contributes to knowledge acquisition and makes conscious decisions. It's concerned with the environment and its consequences. As a result, one is able to cope with both the demands of the external environment and the demands of the inner self (Nehrig & Wong, 2018). So, Arthur shot the three subway men with his gun as an act of self-defense.

However, Arkham Hospital data have shown that Arthur's mother is mentally ill and suffers from a mental disorder, and he's adopted. For the sake of satisfying his Id, Arthur kills his mother. He remembers that Randal had mistreated him so he stabbed him, and in the talking show Murray told Arthur that he was wrong. Arthur was really mad at him since he presented Arthur as a joke to boost that show. Arthur was shocked that even Murray isn't the ideal idol he thought of, but an exploitative hypocrite. To satisfy his id's want, Arthur shot Murray with a gun. The female psychiatrist in the ending scene disregards Arthur's Id, even though she asked him some questions, but Arthur simply replied "You wouldn't get it" (Phillips, 2019). Therefore, his ego worked by murdering her. Arthur's ego submits to his Id requests which he sees fair and right to do because of his intuition and his sense of righteousness.

2.1.3 The Eccentric Superego

Arthur's superego appears in his smiley face, he wrote on the glass "put on a happy face", and he smiled regardless of his circumstances. Ever since he was young, his mother ordered him to put a smile on his face. According to Freud, a child's superego develops during the first five years of life in response to parental punishment and approval. As the child grows, he absorbs his parents' moral standards, aided greatly by his tendency to identify with them (Britannica, 2019). Arthur had to spread joy and laughter in his life as his mother told him.

Arthur respected people who treated him well and showed respect towards him. Arthur went through a lot of situations where his superego reflected the good Arthur. Arthur's superego significantly appears when he met Wayne's son and his co-worker, Gary. When Arthur went to Wayne's house, he encountered Wayne's son in front of the gate. He had no intention of killing him. Furthermore, he comforted him by performing a little magic trick, which is similar to how a clown would entertain a small child and make his day! even though he didn't have his clown dress nor the mood of joking around. On the other hand, Gary's situation, Gary is one of his coworkers with short stature (midget). When he went to Arthur's house with Randal (the other coworker), Arthur only killed Randal and did not kill the other coworker because he had no problems with Arthur. He was a decent person. As a result, Arthur let him go. Arthur could kill both of them at these moments, but instead, Arthur kept them alive, because they are good people. Arthur's superego works here according to his moral principle. Before Arthur

killed Murray, he said "What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society who abandons him and treats him like trash? I'll tell you what you get. You get what you deserve!" (Phillips, 2019). The sentence illustrates the consequences of inadequate mental health services provided by the state, which supposedly ensures citizens' health. From Arthur's perspective, embracing the Joker character has given him respect and well-treatment because he is able to punish those who have treated him badly and who he sees as evil.

Even in the normal life of Arthur, he spreads joy and his job is to make people happy! Arthur finds joy in playing with kids and performing his work as a clown. Arthur dreams to become a famous comedian, a comedian's job is to change the world into becoming a cheerful place. This shows the pure, innocent Arthur, who aims to make the world a happier place.

2.2 Arthur Fleck, a Psychopath? A Sociopath? Or Neither?!

It fascinates me how quick we are to say that a heinous crime would have resulted from a "crazy" individual when, in fact, the crime is actually more than that. It's a form of coping mechanism for society; a way to set ourselves apart from the extremists, and into a normalized category, because whatever caused that individual to commit such a horrific crime was a result of a one-off, inhuman chemical imbalance. But it isn't true.

Did Arthur Fleck suffer from mental illness? Of course. According to Valentin Skryabin, Arthur appears to have a complex mix of personality traits, specifically narcissism and psychopathy. Arthur appears to have a complex mix of personality traits, namely narcissism (because he craves attention in any form) and psychopathy (since he demonstrates no empathy for his victims). He exhibits some depression symptoms as well, but he also has excellent self-control. Such diagnostic ambiguity precludes the diagnosis of psychotic disorder or schizophrenia (Skryabin, 2021).

Arthur suffers from narcissistic personality disorder, which is characterized by grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), the desire for admiration, and a lack of empathy. Those suffering from narcissistic personality disorder frequently fantasize about limitless success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love (Skryabin, 2021). Arthur craves attention and love, but he's neglected by society. Although he feels no remorse for killing someone, he always escapes his reality through his dance and his fantasies of being a famous comedian. In addition, Arthur is also diagnosed with pseudobulbar affect, also known as emotional incontinence, which is a disorder of expression regulation caused by neurological disease or injury to the brain. In Joker's case, this was most likely caused by severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). TBI raises the chances of developing mood disorders, personality changes, and substance use disorders (Skryabin, 2021).

Imagine if we combine this with a haunted past, a horrible home life, a failed career (his purpose in life), and being publicly ridiculed for pursuing his dream, social rejection, The denial of desperately needed medical treatment, and getting the shit kicked out of him twice in an utter state of helplessness and humiliation, all over the course of a few days, is enough to drive him completely insane: “It’s enough to make anyone crazy.”

It wasn’t psychopathy that drove Arthur to adopt this persona and commit heinous murders. No, it was the state of society that was the root of the problem. And because we are society, we are unable to avoid accountability as usual. There is no way to just chalk it up to an isolated bout of madness this time.

Joker’s role is to hold us accountable. We can’t simply dismiss Arthur Fleck as insane when it’s the state of the world we’ve created that drives him to do the things he does, not a chemical imbalance. As a result, Joker is first and foremost a critique of society— of all of us. It forces us to consider the consequences of our actions; all of the times we laugh at the misfortune of others, or “walkover” someone lying in the street, or define others by their perceived mental illnesses rather than defining them as fellow human beings with feelings and perceptions. The Joker is a very unfortunate victim of the state of our society who had a very, very rough couple of weeks. And sometimes, that’s all it takes.

2.3 What Message Does the Joker Convey?

Many people may not understand what Joker is attempting to convey; however, Joker accomplishes something beautiful by taking a silly concept and turning it into a hard-hitting psychological drama. Joker, to me, is about mental illness more than anything else. It is about the people we forget about, the people we allow to live in filth and squalor, never to be recognized by the greater society. It’s about a man who has battled this demon his entire life but has never received a shred of decency or genuine assistance from anyone. It’s about showing everyone the effects of trauma and lifting the rug to reveal the frailty of what makes everyone human.

This film is here to make you think about the disparity between the rich and the poor, between the feeble-minded and the weak-minded. The ‘Joker’ is discussing topics that many of us would rather avoid discussing. It’s there to remind you of all the people you forget about and walk past in your daily lives.

Josh Brolin stated: Only those who have experienced great trauma, or those of us who have a deep understanding of what compassion is, can understand the ‘Joker.’ As Josh Brolin described Joker, he said: An example of dangerous compassion would be to make a film about the fragility of the human psyche and have it be so raw, brutal, and balletic that when you leave the theater, you not only don’t want to hurt anyone, but you want answers and solutions to both the violence and mental

health problems that have spun out of control around us. It’s all in the irony of trauma - a fine line between resentment of wanting to hurt society for depriving you of a decent life, for not protecting you, and accepting what feels like alienation with softening to those others who seem freakish in our era of judgment (Brolin, 2019).

So, yes, the Joker has valid points, we not only witness his life but we live it, we live an unforgettable experience as a mentally ill loner. It educates us on empathy for such individuals, and that the society needs to do more to support its poor and those in need of psychological and medical care.

2.4 Is It Wrong to Have Sympathy for the Joker?

This is referred to as “the Empathy-Emulation Gap”, it’s related to our inability to accurately identify how our emotions affect our behavior (Empathy Gap, n.d). Characters such as Arthur Fleck from the Joker film are completely deserving of your sympathy. We see how they are marginalized by society, and that their treatment at the hands of others because of their mental health causes their descent into villainy and madness.

Arthur is a tragic figure who, as seen in the movie, desperately wants to bring happiness into people’s lives. He’ll do anything to get there, whether it’s dressing up as a clown for hire or pursuing his dream of becoming a comedian. To be honest, he’s pretty bad at his stand-up routine, but the poor guy is trying his hardest, dammit.

Then Murray Franklin blasts his attempts for all the world to see, with nothing more to gain than a spiteful chuckle at a stranger’s humiliation and a minor boost to his own ratings. People are now laughing at Arthur rather than with him. The comedy he strives to create has now been weaponized as a boot against his neck. It’s a classic case of punching down on a weak guy who can barely hold his own laughter due to a neurological disorder and just wanted to put a smile on his audience’s faces; many of Arthur’s hecklers would never have had the courage to stand up and try. He deserves much, much better from the world, but all he gets are suspicious stares from mothers on a bus who don’t care enough to double-check their facts and cruel dismissals from therapists who don’t want anything to do with him.

Despite his negative thoughts, he does his best to brighten the gloomy world. But society has shown a negative reaction, people have beaten him up, both literally and metaphorically.

Arthur Fleck deserves our sympathy and empathy. We would all be Jokers if we couldn’t sympathize.

In essence, people sympathize with criminals because they have the biological capacity to feel empathy, sympathy, and remorse for other people, heightened by trying to imagine how they would have acted in similar situations (Dimensie, 2021). Now comes the emulation. If you imitate something or someone, it is because you admire them greatly. But we must stop at sympathy and

empathy. Understanding is one thing; imitating is quite another.

Arthur Fleck deserves respect. Sympathize. Empathize. That's exactly what you're supposed to do! But never imitate his ferocity. This chasm cannot be bridged; empathy must be kept separated from emulation. As long as that chasm persists, sympathy for Arthur is both deserved and necessary. So, no, sympathizing with the Joker is not wrong. It's only wrong to act like him.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Arthur Fleck was once an innocent man, he wanted to be cured, Arthur was suffering from mental illness, and he had emotions and needs. But Arthur got kicked down so many times, forgotten, rejected, beat up, spat on, told to go take some pills, and humiliated. Arthur's transformation was not sudden though. It's been building and simmering for a long time. It's just people failed to realize it. In summary, all the people around him played a crucial role in bringing him face to face with his alter-ego Joker. Arthur has set the Id free after the extreme hardships he has experienced, and his Id took over him, eventually transforming him into the Joker. Arthur's ego worked according to his intuition, killing people who mistreated him. It was the reality principle that satisfied all the Id's demands through secondary process thinking. The superego kept people who have treated him well alive. And it was the morality principle that reflected an idealistic standard through the rules of parents and society.

In my perspective, I think that if you were in Arthur's place you're surely going to snap. Killing isn't justifiable, and I don't like that he went to that extreme but it's his story and fiction. In reality, People have harsh experiences that drive them to do irrational things. Behind every person, there's a story, and we shouldn't judge people because we don't know what they are going through. Arthur wouldn't have gone this far if he was treated fairly by society; in terms of medication and in terms of providing proper treatment for his special case. Another major factor of Joker's transformation is religion's absence in society. Having no religion causes destruction, and people become without any morals and heartless, passing by people in need and neglecting them just as what happened with Arthur. Moreover, the film can be looked at through the lens of Marxism and Surrealism.

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