



# The Joker Unmasked: A Literary Psychoanalytic Study

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Received: 28 Jun 2024; Received in revised form: 27 Jul 2024; Accepted: 01 Aug 2024; Available online: 09 Aug 2024

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**Abstract**—Psychoanalysis primarily concerns itself with literature through the representation of the conscious and unconscious minds of characters within storylines. Sigmund Freud's theories are often reflected in literary works, using concepts such as the pleasure principle associated with the id, the reality principle linked to the ego, castration anxiety, and defense mechanisms. Other literary theories, like reader-response theory, focus on how texts are read and interpreted by readers. Norman N. Holland suggests that understanding a literary work involves not only reading the text but also considering the author's biography, if known, to grasp how they create their masterpieces. Literary psychoanalysis explores the psychological and emotional aspects the author embeds in their works. Even though many authors are remarkably discreet about their past, their experiences may surface through recurring themes or phrases in their writings. *Joker* is a film released in 2019, directed by Todd Phillips and starring Joaquin Phoenix, who won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his role. This paper conducts a psychoanalytic study of the character *Joker*, whose real name is Arthur Fleck. Arthur is a stand-up comedian aspiring to be the world's most famous comedian, despite suffering from a medical condition that causes sudden and uncontrollable laughter, compounded by traumatic events in his childhood.



**Keywords**— Freudian Concepts, Physical Abuse, Brain Damage, Defense Mechanism, Society

## Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a combination of two disciplines, psychology and psychotherapy, that studies the unconscious mind and makes it conscious. It aims to understand abstract and unconscious aspects of the mind, such as feelings, memories, and thoughts, some of which may negatively impact individuals' lives. This field was developed in the 19th century by the Austrian father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, who was born in 1856 and died in 1939. By merging these two fields, psychoanalysis seeks to cure patients and help relieve their psychological distress. Freud's process of analyzing and interpreting a person's life involves delving deeply into their childhood memories and dreams to gain a better understanding of their issues and subsequently treat them (Lipner et al.).

## Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

Psychoanalysis in literary criticism aims to study the author's personal background and experiences and how they are applied in literary works through the characters

using Freudian methods. Freud often refers to literary texts as evidence supporting his theories. For example, we may consider Hamlet's inner conflict or Brontë's discussion on the role of the mother. As psychoanalytic literary criticism involves the personal and historical background of the author reflected in their work, the author will use their prior knowledge in writing, which encourages readers to investigate these authors' backgrounds. Some authors, nevertheless, are stigmatized and afraid of revealing their pasts, so they remain conservative about their lives and ensure they are not revealed. This compels readers to investigate an author's history through their works using analytical methods such as structuralism and deconstruction (Schmitz, 2007).

## Pleasure Principle and Reality Principle

Sigmund Freud sheds light on three major concepts: the pleasure principle, the reality principle, and castration anxiety. The pleasure principle refers to responding to human instincts and gratifications. The

purpose of the pleasure principle is to detach from the harsh realities that might cause significant suffering. The reality principle, on the other hand, is the return to the real world by confronting the current situations an individual faces. Finally, castration anxiety arises from experiences of oppression, prohibition, authority, and rules (Schmitz, 2007).

### **Id, ego, and Superego**

Additionally, the three components that intersect with the basic Freudian principles are the id, ego, and superego. The id generally correlates with our instinctual behaviors and desires. For example, we feel pleased with the food we chew or the beverages we drink because it is purely instinctual to eat and drink. Another example is sexual desires, which play a role in the id, evolving with the pleasure principle. In fact, our id is linked with the pleasure principle to increase pleasure and decrease pain.

The reality principle is directly linked to the ego. The ego tells us that we must be mature and learn to endure the pain we go through. It is preferable not to use distractions to avoid pain. It is more like giving instructions to the id on what to do or not to do. Sigmund Freud, in fact, likened the id to a horse and the ego to a horse rider. The horse roams aimlessly, and the role, or rather the responsibility, of the horse rider is to guide the horse where it should or should not go. To clarify further, the ego works as a mediator between the id and the superego, standing in the middle and tending toward reality.

Finally, the superego largely deals with judging others, morals, concepts, and societal norms. It is about being upstanding, which means one aspires not to acquire realistic standards but idealistic standards. The superego works to suppress all unwanted desires from the id while perfecting our conduct. This might begin by the age of five and is socially acquired through imitating the actions of parents, adults, and grown-ups around us.

We must realize that each of these three components does not stand on its own. They are practical and dynamic, acting as necessary, as proclaimed by Sigmund Freud. He introduced the concept of "ego strength," which suggests that the ego can mediate between the id and the superego and prevent either the id or the superego from exceeding its limits (Ostow 1119).

### **Defense Mechanism**

A defense mechanism was first mentioned by Sigmund Freud in his paper "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defense" (1894). It is a collection of mental processes that lean towards battling all the conflicts in a human being's unconscious. Freud explains the concepts that oppose one another in the unconscious, which may cause someone to

feel unconfident and provoke fear and anxiety. A common and major defense mechanism is sublimation, which involves channeling unpleasant events into various activities such as physical exercises, work projects, or home tasks. For instance, when family members experience the death of a parent, some may occupy themselves with tasks to avoid being overwhelmed by grief. Psychoanalysts believe that defense mechanisms are highly essential in one's mind and do not indicate that an individual is suffering from any psychological disorder (Britannica, 2020).

Repression, as a kind of defense mechanism, is an indispensable concept in Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Repression involves the accumulation of memories, feelings, and thoughts that are stored in the unconscious and may distress individuals. These memories may include childhood experiences of sexual harassment, physical abuse, and verbal abuse. The impact is significant when these repressed memories attempt to surface into the conscious mind, affecting individuals' ability to live fully and engage in new experiences like marriage, work, or other relationships. Individuals unconsciously avoid these experiences due to repressed fears (Britannica, 2020).

Repression differs slightly from suppression. Repression involves unpleasant memories stored in the unconscious, which individuals, especially as young children, cannot recall or recognize. Suppression, on the other hand, is the conscious effort to push unwanted memories away from one's thoughts. The common aspect of both repression and suppression is their noticeable effect on behavior.

### **Reader-Response Theory**

A theory related to psychoanalytic literary criticism is the reader-response theory. Reader-response theory focuses on the reader's response to a particular text or literary work. The essence of this theory is that everyone has their own unique experience with a literary work. Person A's reaction to a text can be completely different from Person B's. An experiment by the American critic Norman N. Holland, described in his book *Readers Reading* (1975), involved giving the same literary work to five of his students. Each of the five students had a reaction or response that differed from the others. Holland states: "A reader responds to a literary work by assimilating it to his own psychological processes, that is, to his search for successful solutions within his identity theme to the multiple demands, both inner and outer, on his ego."

Reader-response theory helps us understand ourselves better through the texts we read. For instance, when a minor character in a story is bullied, a reader who has experienced bullying might have their memory

triggered and start sympathizing with this character, despite the character's minor role in the storyline. This demonstrates that reader-response theory is subjective. Its foundation lies in the idea that a particular literary work has many aesthetic values depending on the different readers' perspectives. Holland emphasizes not only how we see life from our psychological, emotional, and personal experiences but also how we interpret literary works through the experiences that shape our lives and become reflected in the texts.

Norman N. Holland defines the interpretation of a text as a process with three phases. The first phase is the defense mode, where we become psychologically aware of the threat posed by a character that reminds us of our painful personal experiences. The second phase is the fantasy mode, where we find explanations and justifications that help us calm our interpretation of characters similar to ourselves. Finally, the transformation mode combines the first two steps and abstracts them, so our reading of a particular text does not become distorted by our personal lives. However, we cannot completely hide our personal influences. The goal is to avoid an emotional response to a text, which could lead others to believe that our criticisms are biased.

Holland also believes that studying authors is essential, but with a slight difference: analyzing authors as readers, not just as writers. This involves studying their biographies, letters, and childhood events. For example, when someone reads Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, they might not just think about Antoine Roquentin as a purposeless character but also contemplate Sartre's own experiences. Events such as Sartre being held captive by the Nazi forces, his experience as an orphan, and his reflections on life's painful experiences provide context for the themes in *Nausea*. Hence, Holland aims for an empathic merger with the author, seeking to fulfill our psychological desires when interpreting a text (Mambrol 2018).

### Plot Summary and Characters of *Joker*

Arthur Fleck is a clown who works in the fictional city of Gotham. He aspires to become the world's most famous stand-up comedian. Arthur suffers from a mental condition that causes sudden, frequent, and uncontrollable laughter, which may be offensive to people around him. The first time this happens in the movie is when Arthur tries to make an African-American kid laugh by making amusing facial expressions, but the kid's mother thinks Arthur is bothering her child. Arthur then gives her a card that explains his medical condition in an attempt to inform her that he does not mean to be rude or impudent toward her or her child.

The movie starts with Arthur putting on makeup to advertise for a shop in the city by holding a sign. A group of impolite kids approaches him and bullies him. Suddenly,

one of them steals the sign and runs away, forcing Arthur to chase them. They turn into an alley and stop. Arthur runs faster when he sees them not moving. He suddenly gets hit by one of them using the sign. After he falls down, the kids beat and kick him viciously and mercilessly.

Arthur later returns to his workplace. He struggles to widen his boots while bruises are marked on his back and the rest of his body. His colleague Randall appears, expressing his sadness about what happened earlier to Arthur. Randall suggests that Arthur should carry a gun to protect himself from the savages on the street so he will not be beaten again and can protect himself. Arthur politely refuses to accept the gun, but Randall insists, convincing Arthur that his safety is a priority. As a friend, Randall will stand by his side. Then, Gary, a dwarf who is verbally abused at work by being made fun of for his height, tells Arthur that Hoyt wants to see him. Hoyt is Arthur's boss and the one who runs the shop. He asks Arthur to get the sign back from Kenny's music store. Arthur explains that the sign was stolen from him and taken by force. Hoyt does not believe him and says it does not make sense to get beaten for a sign. As Hoyt tells Arthur off and threatens him, saying his employees do not feel comfortable around him, Arthur hopelessly smiles because he cannot believe how people tend to be rude and merciless.

When Arthur goes back to his apartment, his neighbor Sophie, along with her daughter, runs in a hurry to catch the elevator. Arthur puts his foot in to keep the door open for his neighbor. Inside the elevator, they start talking. Arthur becomes infatuated with her, which makes him follow her wherever she goes. Sophie notices this. She later knocks on Arthur's door to ask if he is the one who keeps following her. Arthur admits it. He indirectly asks her out by telling her that he performs stand-up comedy shows. Sophie agrees to come.

Arthur goes to a children's hospital to entertain kids. As he moves, dances, and hits the floor, his gun, the one Randall gave him earlier, falls onto the ground. Everyone is shocked. Hoyt immediately calls Arthur and asks why he brought a gun into a children's hospital. Arthur is forced to lie to keep his job, saying it is a prop for his act. Hoyt tells Arthur that Randall said it was Arthur who asked him to buy the gun. Arthur is shocked because he was the one who was offered the gun by Randall. Why would Randall tell on Arthur then? Eventually, Arthur is fired.

On his way back home, on the train, a group of white-collar Wayne Enterprise businessmen harass a girl. It starts with them asking her if she wants some fries. The bullying begins when one of them throws fries piece by piece at her. Arthur's condition is triggered, and he starts laughing. The men begin harassing Arthur verbally and later

physically. The scenario of beating Arthur is replayed on the train. He is kicked mercilessly by these high-social-class individuals. This is the limit for Arthur's endurance. He goes wild and explodes. He shoots one of them in the head, killing him. Another is shot in the heart and chest. The third man runs away, but Arthur shoots him in the leg. As the man limps and tries to escape the subway, Arthur shoots him in the back, causing him to fall. Arthur then follows him as the man crawls to escape. Arthur shoots him three more times in the back, putting him out of his misery. Arthur flees, devastated yet relieved, marking the starting point of his transformation into the Joker.

Arthur returns to his normal life, seemingly undisturbed by the murders. Instead, he views them as a victory over the upper-class society in general and against Thomas Wayne in particular. This becomes evident when Thomas Wayne appears on TV to comment on the murders. Penny Fleck eagerly waits to see Thomas Wayne, agreeing with every word that comes out of his mouth. When the wealthiest man in Gotham announces his candidacy for mayor, he describes hiding behind a mask as a cowardly action and criticizes the lower-class residents of Gotham as "nothing but clowns." This makes Arthur laugh.

When Arthur returns home from an unsuccessful comedy show, he comes across a letter his mother wrote to Thomas Wayne, claiming that Arthur is his illegitimate child and should be taken care of in case anything happens to her. Arthur and Penny start a quarrel. Penny hides in the bathroom, complaining that she is fed up with Arthur and cannot endure it anymore. Arthur calms her down and says he is not mad at her; he just needs to know the truth. She tells him they were in love while she was working for Thomas Wayne, but he was afraid of people knowing the truth, which would disrupt his public image. Arthur decides to visit Wayne Manor to learn the truth from Thomas Wayne himself.

When Arthur reaches Wayne's gigantic mansion, he finds the young Bruce, who will later become Batman, and starts performing magic tricks to please him. Alfred, the butler at Thomas Wayne's house, appears and asks Arthur to leave and get away from Bruce. Arthur politely asks to see Thomas Wayne, introducing himself and acknowledging that Penny Fleck is his mother. Alfred is shocked. Arthur continues, saying he knows what happened between them. Alfred states that his mother is delusional and sick. Arthur becomes enraged and chokes Alfred. After seeing the terrified reaction on Bruce's face, he releases Alfred and runs away.

Arthur returns home to find an ambulance next to the building, taking his mother to the hospital. He gets into the ambulance to escort his mother along with the

paramedics to the hospital. They do not have the slightest idea about what happened to her. Later, as Arthur waits outside the hospital, two detectives approach him to interrogate him about the murders that happened in the subway. He avoids them without arousing suspicion and goes to see his mother. Sophie waits with Arthur and calms him. On the TV, the Murray Franklin show starts. Arthur is inspired by Murray Franklin. However, Franklin begins the show with a clip of Arthur and starts making fun of him in front of the public. Arthur becomes angrily disappointed with Franklin, who he once looked up to.

Arthur goes to a cinema where a riot and protest occur outside the building where Thomas Wayne is watching a Charlie Chaplin film with the bourgeoisie. All of the proletarians scream against Thomas Wayne, chanting "Down with Wayne" repeatedly. Arthur infiltrates the building, disguises himself as a worker, and intentionally comes across Thomas Wayne to learn the truth, be sympathized with, and accepted by his father. Arthur meets Wayne eventually, but does not know how to begin the conversation. Arthur introduces himself. Thomas Wayne instantly recognizes him, saying he is the one who visited earlier. Wayne proclaims that he is not Arthur's father and that Arthur is adopted. Arthur does not believe it, but Thomas Wayne continues, saying Penny Fleck adopted him while working for them and was later committed to Arkham State Hospital, a mental institution, and asylum. Arthur goes mad, and his condition flares up. He asks why people behave so rudely, questioning, "What is the matter with you people?" As his uncontrollable laughter continues, Thomas Wayne punches Arthur in the face and threatens to kill him if he touches his son again.

As Arthur goes back home, he acts hopelessly and hides inside his refrigerator after emptying it. The next day, Arthur receives a call from a staff member of the Murray Franklin Show, inviting him to the show after the huge response to the clip that was played earlier. Arthur, calmly surprised, accepts the invitation.

Arthur decides to go to Arkham State Hospital to verify the rumors about his mother. He visits the receptionist in the records office, who brings out an old box with files kept for over thirty years. As the worker reads the file aloud, the diagnoses mentioned include delusional psychosis and narcissistic personality disorder. The worker stops reading further once he notices the innocent reaction on Arthur's face, asking him to bring proper forms or his mother's signature to release the file. Arthur forcibly takes the file and runs away. Hiding in the hospital stairwell, he reads about his mother's past. The documents reveal that Arthur was adopted and that Ms. Fleck allowed physical abuse on Arthur, causing the brain damage responsible for



his condition. In the film, Penny Fleck denies these accusations, claiming Thomas Wayne fabricated them to protect his public image. Arthur laughs and sobs simultaneously, marking a turning point in his personality.

Arthur goes to Sophie's apartment in a disoriented state. Sophie is shocked to see him in her living room and asks him to leave, worried about her daughter. Arthur leaves instantly and goes to his apartment, where he laughs uncontrollably.

The next day, Arthur visits the hospital to see his mother for the last time. He tells her about his past mistreatment. When Penny expresses happiness, Arthur responds, "Happy. Hmm. I haven't been happy one minute of my entire life. You know what's funny? You know what makes me laugh. I used to think my life was a tragedy. But now, I realize it is a comedy" (Joker, 2019). He then smothers her to death with a pillow, making her his first victim of revenge.

Arthur begins preparations for The Murray Franklin Show, obsessing over the idea of becoming a guest. He imagines receiving a warm welcome from Franklin and exchanging fame and fortune. However, this changes after Franklin mocks Arthur by playing a video of his failed stand-up routine. The show invites Arthur to lampoon him further.

While preparing, Randall and Gary, former colleagues, visit Arthur to offer condolences and bring a drink. Randall mentions the police investigation into the subway murders and asks if Arthur has been interrogated, seeking to align their stories. Arthur stabs Randall in the throat and eye, then repeatedly hits his head against the wall, killing him for betraying him about the gun. He spares Gary, who has always been kind to him.

Arthur heads to The Murray Franklin Show. On his way, he is chased by police but escapes into a train filled with clown-masked protesters. This camouflage helps him evade capture after the police are murdered on the train. At the studio, Murray Franklin and his manager Gene are shocked by Arthur's clown makeup, a symbol of the revolt. Arthur claims ignorance of the city's riots. On the show, Franklin mocks Arthur, who tells a dark joke about death and confesses to murdering Thomas Wayne's employees. Arthur criticizes the daily bullying, societal neglect, and Franklin's cruelty. As Franklin instructs Gene to call the police, Arthur shoots him in the head, sparking citywide riots.

Arthur gains many followers among the mistreated lower class. Amid the chaos, one follower kills Thomas Wayne and his wife in front of Bruce Wayne. Arthur, locked in a police car, enjoys the sight of the city in chaos. An ambulance, driven by a follower, crashes into the police car,

freeing Arthur. His followers gather around and embrace him. Arthur is eventually incarcerated in Arkham State Hospital, where he kills the social worker responsible for his case.

### Application and Analysis

The character of the Joker is inspired by Alan Moore's life. He wrote the graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) along with Brian Bolland. Alan Moore's life shares similarities with Arthur Fleck's in *Joker*. Moore attended a grammar school coming from a poor neighborhood to study alongside richer classmates, where he experienced incidents that made him detest school and academic life due to attempts to enforce punctuality and obedience (Wikipedia contributors).

Freudian concepts like the pleasure principle (id), reality principle (ego), and defense mechanisms are applied in *Joker* in various scenes. Regarding the pleasure principle, Arthur seeks to please himself with unreal events to make his life more joyful and less painful. For example, he imagines a romantic relationship with his neighbor Sophie, who supports him in his stand-up comedy shows and stands by his side when his mother is in the hospital. However, after confronting his past at Arkham State Hospital, he realizes that his relationship with Sophie was a delusion, activating the reality principle and forcing him to face his real, lonely existence. Another example of the pleasure principle is his repeated dancing, which aims to relieve his suffering.

Arthur employs defense mechanisms when bullied physically. He occupies himself with his work and writing material, demonstrating sublimation. This defense mechanism recurs throughout the story, such as when Hoyt threatens to deduct Arthur's salary for not returning a sign, despite Arthur having been physically abused. Arthur's reaction, hitting bags of garbage, relieves his anger. Another defense mechanism is rationalization. When Randall asks Arthur about his bruises, Arthur dismisses it, saying, "It was just a bunch of kids. I should have left it alone." Randall insists, "No. They'll take everything from you if you do that," prompting Arthur to reluctantly accept a gun from Randall.

Repression occurs when Arthur reads his mother's file at the asylum. He learns he was physically abused by his mother's partners and witnessed his mother being battered. These memories had been repressed in Arthur's mind, and learning these facts contributes to his transformation into the Joker.

The extreme class divide in the story provokes grudge and hatred, especially for a character like Arthur, who should be treated for his medical condition. Arthur comments on the upper class's behavior and attitude in

various scenes. When he confronts Thomas Wayne, who tells him he is adopted, Arthur is shocked and tries to defend himself, denying the adoption:

“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. And 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 about just a little bit of decency? What is it with you people? You say that stuff about my mother.” (*Joker*, 2019)

Another scene foreplays the unbalanced society is when Arthur is hosted by Murray Franklin and tells him how societies can drive someone mad by saying: “Comedy is subjective, Murray. Isn't that what they say? All of you, the system that knows so much, you decide what's right or wrong. What's real or what's made up. The same way you decide what's funny or not.”

Reader-response theory is applied in *Joker* in the interpretation of the film. Some people suggest that all the actions of the Joker are not justified. Others believe that everything and everyone the Joker takes his revenge from on what he has gone through by the society is totally understandable and rightful. No one, in the film, has brought justice to Arthur, which makes him seek it by himself.

The character of the Joker is inspired by Alan Moore’s life. He wrote the graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) along with Brian Bolland. The life of Alan Moore, to a certain extent, is similar to the life of Arthur Fleck in *Joker*. Alan Moore attended a Grammar School coming from a poor neighborhood to study with richer colleagues. He experienced some incidents in the school. For instance, he explained that there were attempts for punctuality and obedience, which made him detest school and the academic life (*Alan Moore Fan Site*).

## CONCLUSION

This paper examines Freudian concepts applied in *Joker* throughout different scenes. In fact, the Joker can resemble a number of individuals in different societies whose conditions are not respected. Humanity is essential in so many societies. One would experience some Freudian concepts like id to unwind the pressure on himself or herself. They might develop the habit of superego on

himself including the others. Defense mechanism with its many kinds might not last for a long time. This is why people should be aware of treating others properly like Arthur says in the show: “Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody's civil anymore. Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy.” (*Joker*, 2019) When people from different societies behave properly towards people with special conditions, love will be provided by these people and will make us thrive.

A Marxist analysis of *Joker* reveals the stark class struggles and systemic inequalities that drive Arthur Fleck to madness. The film vividly illustrates the consequences of an exploitative capitalist society where the rich get richer and the poor are left to fend for themselves. Thomas Wayne’s dismissive attitude towards the lower classes and the harsh realities of Gotham’s neglected neighborhoods highlight the alienation and resentment that fuel Arthur’s transformation. Moreover, a deeper psychoanalytic exploration could further unravel Arthur's descent into madness, examining how societal neglect exacerbates his fragile psyche. His hallucinations and delusions can be seen as manifestations of a deeply fractured mind, grappling with a world that offers no solace. Finally, from the perspective of absurdism, Arthur's journey reflects the search for meaning in an indifferent universe. His declaration that his life is a comedy, not a tragedy, echoes the absurdist belief that life’s inherent meaninglessness can lead to either despair or liberation. The Joker’s laughter, in this context, becomes a symbol of defiance against a world that refuses to acknowledge his existence.

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