The Joker: A Psychoanalytic Review

Bennett Roth Ph.D.

By focusing on the "villain" the controversial film of the Joker is a radical departure from the usual super-hero genre. Its reception was mixed winning an Oscar for its leading actor and receiving a mixed or negative press. Unlike many other films derived from comic books this film maintains its comic book style and logic. Comic book style and characters have influenced other entertainment media from "The Hulk" to Road Runner. Comic books have a unique history. The Glasgow Looking Glass, first published in 1825, is believed to be the first mass-produced "comic strip" focusing on current news and affairs in Glasgow, Scotland. A century later the term "superhero" was first used in 1917 in the "Golden Age of Comic Books" during the 1930s. It is acknowledged that the current Modern Age of comics occurred following the lifting of censorship, allowing comparatively darker and more complex characters to emerge with an increase in the popularity of comics and the commercialization of the industry. Along with the new popularity there has been a rush into moviemaking following the success of these simple action movies with moral lessons within them.

It is possible that larger than life male superheroes are integral to American society and the development of boys. Change in many superhero comics since 1938 reflect contemporary crises also assisting in the popularity and renown of comics, superheroes and their translation into

movies. World War II prompted Marvel's to include Hitler and Japanese soldiers, atomic energy, and with the coming of The War on Terror following September 11, Captain America faced current issues of government surveillance or US foreign policy. DC's Superman educated children about unaccounted landmines in former Yugoslavia, and technological changes in the 21st century in the current development of Marvel movies and TV series. However, where there are super heroes dramatic fiction requires there also be rival super villains. Almost every hero has his or her rival; a super villain with whom the personification of good and evil is played out for identifactory pleasure and to appease child like guilt. Like Fairy Tales the comic book stories have cautionary messages and crucial turning points or conversion experiences that seem to rely on a facsimile of Freudian theory of trauma. Markovitz (2012) suggested heroes need origin stories because they "show the exact conversion moment when a normal guy goes from being 'Just Like Us' to being somehow, faster, stronger and a guardian figure." I believe they show magical transformation, the stuff of dream work of escaping danger. Finally the supper heroes' archenemy must also have its narrative of origin, as great characters need great enemies in fictive duels that move the narrative to resolution (Robin Rosenberg, 2013)

The first conversion is by violent trauma, which does not lie at the heart of the Jokers origin story, in which Bruce Wayne dedicates himself to fighting crime as Batman after seeing his parents murdered. In real life, many people experience "stress-induced growth" after a parental loss and resolve to help others, even reversing the trauma and becoming social activists. Accidental trauma, as in the Hulk's origin, introduced

the danger of exposure to radiation and sudden rage type conversion in comics.

The second life-altering force is a fictive "destiny." Consider *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a normal female teenager who discovers she's the "Chosen One"—endowed with supernatural powers to fight demons. A similar theme appeared in the film *Pan's Labyrinth* and often male writers grant fictive girls super powers by using this trope. Buffy is "appropriately" humbly reluctant to accept her destiny, yet accepts the new task. This brings us to the Joker. Originally conceived as a character in the 1940's

The comic strip Joker was initially a psychopathic criminal with a variety of different origin stories. This current cinematic Joker is presented with vulnerability as a bungling man narcissistically unaware of his lack of talent either as a clown or a comedian. What saves this "comic book" style film from absurdity is the brilliant acting of River Phoenix as Arthur Fleck; the failed stand up comedian, who dreams of being on late night TV talk shows. Awkward and manneristic, he intervenes in a subway harassment of a young woman and again becomes the target of abuse. Suddenly he becomes a resolute vigilante and shoots his offenders. This is his violent conversion. The conversion is followed by a discovery that he is adopted and that his mother is delusional in her belief that millionaire Thomas Wayne is his father. After she has a stroke he kills her. His rampage continues and ignites a violent movement in which he describes his sense of alienation before confessing his earlier murders on camera and killing the TV host.

It is not possible to offer a diagnostic impression of a comic book characterization in a movie. The movie is not a case study but may rely on psychoanalytic tropes to arouse emotion in the

audience. Simply put Fleck is portrayed as a vulnerable man without normal self-esteem who converts into a random killer of people turning the table on those who insult or bully him. He morphs into an agent of violent deformation and indicates. Joker is at the same time a masterpiece of physical theatre and facial responses. His type of negative nihilism can destroy any hope of meaningful questing and indicates its absence in him. And here we have the appeal of such moral tales as the archetypal conflict between disorder (The Joker) and order (Batman) likely appearing in adolescent fiction. Before concluding the piece a few thought concerning the possible meaning of clowns.

Jesters and clowns are usually for public entertainment, satire and burlesque, they hide their hostility to social norms expressed by ridiculous actions otherwise prohibited. Circus clowns are perhaps the most widely know genre. The evil clown is associated with J.W. Gacy, the serial killer. However the image of a clown borders on the grotesque through exaggeration of body and face and fixed emotion while hiding the "real person" under the exaggerated disguise. Whether clowns relate to their audience is a difficult question to answer though the masks hide identity and facilitate performance. So perhaps Flecks performance was not for comedy but for shocking murder. As Erikson pointed out such vindictive and violent choices can serve a restitutive function in that destroying restores urgently required feelings of inner stability and control.