

Semiotic Approach on the Media Text: Deconstructing the Narrative of “JOKER” as a Villainous Identity

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Abstract: The problem of social inequality has persisted, especially for excluded minorities. In his most recent psychological suspense, *Joker* (2019), Todd Phillips explores this subject. The movie addresses the convoluted connection between societal inequality and mental illness, emphasizing how systematic discrimination can affect people’s behaviours and produce unfavourable results. Through the lens of semiotic analysis, this essay explores how the “Joker” character evolved into a villain due to social conditions that endorse unfair treatment. The study argues that the Joker’s sinister attitude can be connected to the larger structural issues in society, such as poverty, a lack of access to mental health services, and discrimination. Ultimately, “Joker” makes a profound observation about how social injustice affects people’s mental well-being and mindset and leads them to destruction.

Keywords: Semiotic, Societal inequality, Mental illness, Villain, Systematic discrimination, Joker

INTRODUCTION

The Genesis story of the recognizable DC character is portrayed in an engrossing and sinister manner in the 2019 movie “*Joker*,” which is directed by Todd Phillips and starring Joaquin Phoenix. The protagonist “Arthur Fleck,” a struggling and ostracised clown for hire who is driven insane and tends to transform into the iconic character “*Joker*,” as a villainous identity is the movie’s focus. The work of art goes in-depth about how people who are struggling with mental health issues can suffer grave consequences if they are not given adequate support and a “hand.” Due to a dysfunctional health system and social prejudices associated with mental illness, Arthur, who has severe mental health problems, finds it difficult to get the treatment he requires. He eventually succumbs to violence and craziness due to the lack of empathy and moral support. Additionally, the movie points out how Arthur’s emergence as a villainous character was shaped by society. The protagonist is frustrated and resentful of society because he lives in a place where the wealthy and powerful abuse and exploit the less fortunate, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and despair. “It is possible to consider his metamorphosis into the ‘*Joker*’ as a direct reaction to the systematic [in]justice he has encountered all of his life” (Coteli, 2020). His mental health difficulties are frequently exploited to justify his villainous behavior, which can propagate damaging misconceptions about mental illness in popular culture. At the same time, the movie implies that the societal institutions and power dynamics that contribute to Arthur’s metamorphosis into the “*Joker*” are also to blame for the carnage he perpetrates. In its entirety, “*Joker*” is a thought-provoking and distressing analysis of the intricate relationships between social inequality and mental illness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of signs, symbols, and their significance at the cultural level of society is known as semiotics. As Ferdinand De Saussure defines it, “A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable...I shall call it semiology (it will) ...show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them” (Course in General Linguistics, 1959). He asserts that signs have two properties: Signifiers and Signifieds. The Signifier, which can be a word, sound, or image, is the form that the information takes. The information’s meaning, or the idea that the sign stands for, is known as the Signified. It is a theoretical framework that has frequently been applied to studying media texts. This movie has been chosen as it is a popular taste and can be interpreted in many ways. Through dialogues, facial gestures, and various pictures, the movie “*Joker*” offers varied analysis. It also focuses on various signs and signifiers of society, notably those related to power dynamics, class struggles, mental health stigma, and media influence are all issues vividly depicted in various journal articles.

Arthur Fleck, a man suffering from mental illness in a world plagued with discrimination and social injustice, is shown in the movie “*Joker*.” The movie explores the complicated connection between socio-economic inequity and mental illness, as well as how the latter influences the Joker’s persona as a “villain.” We observe Arthur’s mental state deteriorate over the course of the film as he encounters social rejection, abuse, and loneliness. As a result, Arthur eventually embraces his violent impulses and becomes a recognizable “villainous” character. This essay will discuss how the movie “*Joker*” explores the intricate relationship between mental illness and societal inequality and how that disparity tends to form the “*Joker*” as a violent character using semiotic analysis approaches. The “*Joker*” is not shown as a standard bad guy, but rather as a victim of a failed civilization. His aggressive behaviour is a reaction to the [in]justice and oppression he has experienced all his life.

In analyzing “*Joker*,” semiotics is crucial. The colour scheme, the clown mask, and the other signs and symbols that are employed throughout the movie all add to its overall significance. For instance, the Joker’s makeup serves as a representation of his change from Arthur Fleck to the Joker. The mask of the clown symbolizes the persona Arthur adopts to disguise his suffering and insecurities. The primarily dark and gloomy colour scheme symbolizes how oppressive society is. Therefore, applying semiotics to the analysis of “*Joker*” enables us to better understand the numerous signs and symbols present in the movie and how they affect its overall meaning.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does this media text “*JOKER*” examine the complex connection between mental illness and societal inequality, and does this inequality tend to shape “*JOKER*” as a villainous character?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The movie starts with Arthur Fleck’s (Joaquin Phoenix) “inner journey” as he becomes the “*Joker*,” unquestionably one of the most fascinating and nuanced villains to appear in both comic books and mainstream media. The movie’s original narrative of the anti-hero addresses the idea that the culture in which we live itself generates terrible evilness. The fundamental goal was to make people uncomfortable, terrified, and strange. For the same, the filmmakers used extreme camera motions, high angles, manufactured sets, painted backdrops, and extreme close-up shots. The director of “*Joker*,” Todd Phillips said, “When you make a movie about one person, every other element becomes a character” (Parvathy P, 2020). Similar to this, every mise-en-scene aspect in the film—including the

backdrop, background music, clothing, makeup, lighting, and even the mood “colour” associated with characters—contributes either directly or indirectly to how the audience perceives the primary character.

A. SCENE 1:

1. Denotation: In the scene, Arthur can be seen dancing on the side of a busy road while wearing a yellow “Joker” suit and a wooden sign that says, “EVERYTHING MUST GO!” (Phillips, 2019). A group of students steals his sign at that precise moment, and when he chases after them, they beat him severely before abandoning him curled up in the alley.



2. Connotation: This image strongly suggests hostility, violence, and power struggles. At this point, a group of students attacked Arthur, kicking, and pummeling him. “Come on, this guy is weak, he can’t do anything,” they exclaimed. “Hit it harder!” (Phillips, 2019). The painful conversation only helps to emphasize the type of criminal activity that may be carried out by someone who is both physically and cognitively superior to the victim. In the image, Arthur is seen curled up on the ground, his eyes closed, and a painful look on his face. Arthur was tortured till he was helpless.



3. Myth: In the scene, Arthur is shown as a wounded bird who is helpless against the harsh judgments of society. The “boys” stand in for the oppressive forces who prey on the helpless, and Arthur’s suffering portends his eventual metamorphosis into a furious joker.

B. SCENE 2:


1. Denotation: In the scene where Randal is essentially giving Arthur a tool for either aggressiveness or defense. A weapon is a tool that may be applied to an array of tasks, but in this case, it is intended specifically to assist Arthur in achieving his purposes, whatever they may be. The fact that Randal gave Arthur the weapon shows that their connection seems to be merely one of necessity rather than true friendship.




2. Connotation: The moment Randal delivers Arthur a weapon it has some terrifying overtones. Randal also utters, “You gotta protect yourself out there...” (Phillips, 2019). This act symbolizes how society’s corrupt influences have led Arthur down a destructive path. The handgun is elevated to a symbol of authority and power, emphasizing the perilous attraction of rebellion and the disastrous effects of a society that neglects to care for the “weak.”

3. Myth: According to the myth, Arthur receiving a defense weapon from Randal symbolizes the transfer of authority from society to the individual, unleashing a destructive force that eventually causes chaos and madness in the world.

C. SCENE 3:

1. Denotation: This scene has been depicted as having a denotative significance revealing that Arthur is in the hospital amusing the kids in clown makeup. He seems genuinely happy to sing and dance to the tune “If You Happy and You Know It...” (Phillips, 2019). Arthur had to tap his foot on the ground while he danced, and as he did so, the revolver in his pocket fell to the ground. Then, Arthur’s employer, Hoyt, called and sacked him from his position. In a fit of rage, Arthur slammed his head on the glass until it broke.
A still from the movie 'Joker' showing Arthur in clown makeup in a children's hospital. He is sitting at a table, and there are other children and staff around. The text 'JOKER CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL SCENE' is overlaid on the image.
2. Connotation: There are several ramifications to the scene in the movie where Arthur approaches the children’s hospital brandishing a weapon. It might be seen as an indictment of society’s propensity to overlook those who are afflicted, as well as a condemnation of how the medical system treats people with mental illnesses. The weapon is a metaphor for the fury and hopelessness of a person who has been abandoned by society to the point of madness. Since it highlights the defenseless children who participate in the cycle of abuse and neglect, the children’s hospital highlights the sorrow of the situation even more. The scenario also offers a strong critique of how society treats the weak.
3. Myth: Arthur, a representation of society’s decline, enters the hospital armed in Gotham, inspiring terror, and hopelessness. His insanity feeds on the misery of the city, giving rise to a new bad guy. It stands for his descent into madness and his rejection of societal norms. His actions serve as a cautionary tale about the peril of ignoring the needs of the poor and disenfranchised, as well as the chaos and violence that lurk below the surface of civilization.

D. SCENE 4:

1. Denotation: The phrase “Arthur Shoots Three Men” refers to a specific scene. On the train, there was a woman and three men. The woman is being courted by a group of men sitting nearby. The moment the boys heard Arthur’s laugh they approached him. One of the men dragged Arthur to the ground and yelled, “Hey, hold him!” (Phillips, 2019). Then only Arthur pulled out the handgun he was carrying and fired one round at each of the men who had struck him. One of the men managed to flee, and Arthur found him and killed him.
A still from the movie 'Joker' showing Arthur in clown makeup, holding a handgun. He is looking towards the camera with a menacing expression.
2. Connotation: In the movie, the scene where Arthur shoots three guys suggests a wild uprising revolt against cultural norms as well as a deep-seated rage and disgust against the injustices and societal inequality of the world. As Arthur finally takes charge of his life and exacts retribution on those who have harmed him, it is a cathartic moment for him. The scenario also emphasizes

the movie's primary concepts of socio-economic inequity and the damaging results of untreated mental illness.

3. Myth: In the movie, Arthur's killing of three men serves as a metaphor for his spiral into insanity and marks the start of the "villainous" character as he rejects social conventions and embraces disorder as his true personality.

E. SCENE 5:

1. Denotation: The denotation of "Arthur killing Penny Fleck" his own mother is the real act of him suffocating her with a pillow as she lays in a hospital bed, displaying his troubled and violent character. It is the violent deed he committed against his own mother, signifying his total plunge into madness, his disconnection from reality, and the dissolution of their strained relationship.



2. Connotation: Connotations of violence, confusion, and insanity are conveyed in the scene in the movie where "Arthur kills Penny Fleck." The deed acts as a turning point in Arthur's transformation into a villainous character, encapsulating the study of social neglect and mental illness throughout the work.
3. Myth: The incident in which Arthur kills his mother symbolizes the demise of the fictitious mother figure and the emergence of the "Joker" as a villainous persona, a disorderly force that subverts social conventions.

F. SCENE 6:

1. Denotation: Arthur, dressed in a red outfit and clown makeup, appears to be dancing on the steps. When two officers arrived, they approached Arthur and asked him about the murders that had occurred on the train. Arthur flees and boards a train while being pursued by the authorities to avoid these questions. They had trouble locating the suspects because other passengers were also dressed as clowns. When a passenger refused to accept Arthur's aggressive take off his mask, the guy eventually shoved Arthur and injured several onlookers, sparking a fight among the other passengers. After making several attempts to diffuse the situation, the cops shot the victim. The officers were beaten up by those who were beside the victim after they unintentionally shot him. He smiled in relief as Arthur sped off.



2. Connotation: In the movie, the moment in which Arthur makes a public break has a subtext of societal breakdown. A feeling of dread and instability is heightened by dim lighting, dissonant music, and Arthur's unrestrained laughter. The sequence conveys the idea that the façade of civilization is thin and easily cracked as Arthur's behaviour gets increasingly chaotic.



3. Myth: Arthur's public outburst in the movie symbolizes a legendary change as he rejects his meek facade and embraces his true nature as the "Clown Prince of Crime."

CONCLUSION

The movie "Joker" makes the reader think about several important issues, by presenting the "Joker" as a byproduct of a dysfunctional and unfair society. The objective of the movie is to reveal the dark origin of the evil character "Joker" by "externalizing the internal conflicts" of the protagonist (Parvathy P, 2020). The entire film, from beginning to end, demonstrates how, regardless of how far civilization has advanced, a mentally ill person's existence is still far from acceptable. Because mental illness is stigmatized, many of them are unemployed and living in poverty. The movie is also successful in showing how inadequate medical care is given to mentally ill people like Fleck by the government. It demonstrates how social services struggle to adequately care for patients due to a shortage of funding and staff, and as a result, many people who depend on them for mental health treatment are unable to recover. The movie also highlights the stark contrast between the well-off and the less fortunate in terms of the gap in society. It is exemplified by the fact that persons in positions of authority flatly deny that the group of people calling for an improved welfare program even exists. They refuse to acknowledge the injustice and power dynamics in society. This illustration of the socio-economic gap created by unjust state policies shows how the government deliberately sought to maintain the status quo, keeping the elites in positions of power and the rest of the populace defenseless and destined for a life of perpetual poverty. The transition of the "Joker" into a villainous identity is depicted through the skillful construction of all the signs and symbols used as social objects in this film. It shows how unequal access to opportunities and resources can push people to the breaking point and make their mental health issues worse. Thence, the movie argues that the Joker's upbringing in harsh and horrible conditions shaped his development into a malevolent figure.

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