

Madness Unveiled: Exploring Queer Aesthetics and Insanity in Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke*

Ramprasad Dutta & Vipin Kumar Singh

Abstract

This paper explores Alan Moore's comic, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), and its profound exploration of insanity within the character of the Joker. It delves into the significance of colour within the text, particularly focusing on the enigmatic and queer portrayal of the Joker, which adds an element of mystery and peculiarity to the narrative. The paper also unravels the traumatic experience of James Gordon as the Joker attempts to drive him to the brink of madness. Additionally, it investigates the relationship between Batman and the Joker from the perspective of queer, seeking to understand the underlying fluid dynamics and elasticity of their connection. By examining the hyper-masculine figure of Batman and the queer traits exhibited by the Joker, this paper sheds light on the contrasting identities portrayed within the text, ultimately unraveling the intricate layers of this comic.

Keywords: Comics; Hyper-masculinity; Madness; Queer; Trauma.

Introduction

The word 'bizarre' carries a range of connotations including distinctiveness, peculiarity, and strangeness, often associated with a sense of disorder when applied to the context of madness. Consequently, it raises significant inquiries regarding the nature of madness: is it a mental disorder, a disease, a mental or physical affliction, or does it result in disability? These questions strategically draw attention to the concept of ableism and its implications within this discourse. The term 'ableism' refers to the system of discrimination and prejudice that devalues the potential of people with disabilities, based on the assumption that people with disabilities are infe-

rior to those without disabilities. In addition to perpetuating discrimination and oppression, the dominant 'normal' group reinforces stereotypes by highlighting perceived deficiencies within the marginalised 'other' group, thereby asserting their own superiority and effectively silencing the voices of the marginalised and less empowered group.

Michael Foucault, in his magnum opus *Madness and Civilization* (1961), uses the weapon of silence in order to write about the ontology and the history of madness. His archeology of silence works as a tool to trace the genesis of insanity (28). He claims that madness, as a form, has always been opposed to reason and excluded from the serious practical discourses. While discussing the genesis of madness he refers to the birth of history, as he states:

History is only possible against the backdrop of the absence of history, in the midst of a great space of murmurings, that silence watches like its vocation and its truth: 'I will call desert this castle that you were, night this voice, absence your face.' An obscure, equivocal region: pure origin as it is from there that the language of history would be born, slowly conquering so much confusion with the forms of its syntax and the consistency of its vocabulary. (31)

Foucault's argument establishes the fact that before there is history there is a collection of unrecognised events and occurrences that have taken place. It signifies the chaos that the history connects with the thread of madness. It relates to the historical events firstly through the echo of murmurs and secondly through the rhetoric of unrelated events used as a weapon to refuse "a discourse [...] as not being language, a gesture as not being an *oeuvre*, a figure as having no rightful place in history" (Foucault 32, emphasis in original). Madness, according to Foucault, is a rhetoric of refusal, which is used as a means to build and/or establish order out of chaos. The Joker is an embodiment of that chaos.

This paper conducts a thorough examination of the character of the Joker through the dual lenses of queer aesthetics and the critical dichotomy of sanity versus insanity. Employing Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's comic *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) as the primary text, it delves into the uncanny elements that are intricately woven into the Joker's portrayal and his queer presentation. The analysis aims to address essential questions about the Joker's mental state, questioning whether he is truly mad, and explores his sexual orientation, especially in the context of his encounters

with Batman. Moreover, this study highlights the significant role of colour in illustrating the Joker's enigmatic and queer traits, which adds layers of mystery and complexity to the narrative. Through this multifaceted approach, this paper seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the Joker's character and the broader thematic elements at play in the comic.

Madness and the Joker

There's a popular misconception regarding the characteristics of madness. It is often linked with mental and/or psychological deformities of an individual. Dr. Mary E. Camp writes:

It has been argued that media portrayals of mental illness are grounded in lay understandings of madness and the images of the mad men or women. This hypothesis may be unfamiliar but is consistent with analysis of mass media depictions of persons with mental illness, most of which emphasi[s]e crime and violence, unpredictability, and social incompetence. (145)

The prevailing perception of madness frequently equates mental illness with violence and antisocial activities, assuming these as typical responses of individuals experiencing mental health challenges. Beyond the societal and cultural discrimination they face, the mentally challenged people often endure harsh and virulent criticism from those deemed 'normal' by societal standards. This paper aims to challenge and destabilise the politics of discrimination rooted in heteronormative societal norms through the character of the Joker.

The 1988 cover of *The Killing Joke* is an iconic image that captures the essence of madness and chaos that permeates the story. In the cover the Joker is seen pointing a camera to the viewers/readers and asking them to smile. It intends to manifest the fact that in order to make a successful joke, the inclusion of the audience/readers is important. In *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1916) Freud says wit "often requires three persons, and the psychic process which it incites always requires the participation of at least one other person. It must therefore band itself to the condition of intelligibility ..." (286). Interestingly, it shatters the age-old definition of madness; for, according to the popular belief, mad people lack intellectual faculty, they lack the reason that the superior group holds responsible for considering somebody 'normal'. The question that occurs here is, can the Joker, who is closely linked with wit, be insane if wit demands intelligibility?

The cover is also notable for its use of colour and composition. The image is dominated by a sickly green color, which is associated with the Joker's hair. The composition of the image is also important in creating a sense of chaos that the Joker considers as his origin/past as he says: "Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another ... If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice" (Moore 1988, unpaginated). The multiplicity of history and/or past of the Joker makes him unconventional and different from the 'normal' group. The undetermined origin of the Joker reverberates Foucault's vision of unfixed identity. His concept of breaking the very epistemological belief of fixed identity suggests that one "compels [oneself] to face the task of producing himself" ("Enlightenment" 312). The plurality of the past also suggests that the history of existence has multiple dimensions, and the search for the origin is futile. The Joker's inclination towards the chaos testifies his attachment with insanity, as he profoundly claims: "madness ... is like gravity, all it takes is a little push" (Nolan 2008).

The book tells us that things are falling apart. The centre is not holding. Mere anarchy – for good or bad – is being loosed upon the world (Redmond 3). Here, the Joker behaves like an eccentric maniac. He ruthlessly tries to kill Barbara Gordon, makes her father watch her naked body, and further he tries to drive Jim Gordon mad. To him, "madness is the emergency exit" (Moore 2008, unpaginated), through which he often escapes from the so-called organised world of reality strengthened by the codes of morality and reason. Actually, the Joker is everybody and nobody; since he is portrayed as a nameless person. Cokesworth claims that since the Joker is nameless therefore he has no humanity as he states "a name would humanise and naturalise the evil we see in the Joker" (3).

The Joker's journey from a (failed) comedian to a person who is not considered normal according to the traditional belief of the society marks his (new) destabilised identity determined by the so-called order of the normative logos. The reading of the Joker's newly formed identity provides an alternative epistemological perspective on madness. The joke that he wants the readers to understand has a critical perspective. The joke kills others with laughter as well as it separates order from chaos. If the Joker (and his joke) is an embodiment of chaos then Gotham is the opposite. Critically speaking, the Joker's existence is marked by his ability to laugh. When he comes out of the chemical plant's waste pound lock he discovers that his skin has been bleached permanently chalk-white, his lips have been stained red, and his hair has been dyed green. Though this disfigurement initially makes him awestruck, he reacts to it with a smile on his face.

His new identity is formed because of having a 'bad day' (Moore 1988, unpaginated). He laughs after going through a series of tragic experiences, he laughs after his 'fall', he laughs after experiencing the utter void in his career as a comedian, but his continuous joke on the tragic events of his life does not make him mad. Rather, it reveals his realisation that reason does not suffice to "reflect upon life, and all its random injustice" (Moore 1988, unpaginated).

Interestingly, the Joker comes to realise the fact that madness emits from an 'uncanny' sensation that the heat oppressed brain experiences in the course of transformation from the older self to the newer self. The uncanny, as explained by Nicholas Royle, "[...] is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced" (1). Sigmund Freud remarks that "[t]he uncanny element is nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (145). Botting considers that the uncanny is ". . . a disruptive return of archaic desires and fears [that] disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality" (11). Precisely, it is the uncanny that makes the Joker believe in the fact that "it just takes one bad day to drive someone mad" (Moore 1988, unpaginated). Interestingly, he does not stop in believing in the fact only, rather, he goes on to prove it to the world by inflicting pain and causing trauma to Jim Gordon in the hope of making him insane. Valereto opines that "the possibility of reasoning through a non-normative and non-logocentric-oriented thought is precisely what he wants Commissioner Gordon to reali[s]e" (76).

The Joker's weapon for driving Commissioner Gordon mad is primarily based on his erasure of memory. He says "[b]ut can we live without them [memories]? Memories are what our reason is based upon, if we can't face them, we deny reason itself! Although, why not? We aren't contractually tied down to rationality!" (Moore 1988, unpaginated). He strategically discards the importance of memories and reasons in one's life. According to him, one can live without memories and without reason and/or rationality. For him, "there's no sanity clause" (Moore 1988, unpaginated). The Joker's view on madness frees reason from logocentric codification of reason (Derrida 35). Derrida's concept further reverberates Foucault's idea of the archeology of silence (that has been discussed in the introduction). Derrida considers logos as the root of all 'organised languages' that define and regulate madness. Derrida claims:

If the Order of which we are speaking is so powerful, if its power is unique of its kind, this is precisely by virtue of the universal, structural and infinite complicity in which it compromises those who understand it in its own language, even when this language provides them with the form of their own denunciation (35).

Derrida's idea establishes the fact that it is the logos that determines and regulates one's past actions; it is the logos that constitutes the reason. The slogan "logos is reason" (Derrida 54) therefore refers to the imposition of logocentric order that the non-normative 'other' group does not follow religiously. Moore's comic strategically depicts the subverted version of logos and demonstrates the premise of disruption, chaos, anarchy and the Joker's sadistic vision which evolves into schadenfreude.

Queering the Joker

The Joker is undoubtedly one of the most complex characters in the DC universe. His sexual orientation has always been a question of debate. Since his inception in 1940, he has been assigned to some significant roles in the Bat universe. Sometimes he is a mere trickster, sometimes he is a villain, sometimes he is a cold blooded psychopath, sometimes he is seen engaged in a romantic relationship with Harley Quinn, and sometimes he implicitly expresses his affection for Batman. But after Wertham's scathing criticism in 1954 regarding the violence and presumed homosexuality in the DC comics the writers decided to make the Joker a mere trickster than a criminal mastermind. Primarily it was Frank Miller who added the queer elements in the character of the Joker. Miller's *The Dark Knight* (1986) offered a (homo)-sexually charged Joker. Miller comments:

It seemed like a good idea at the time I was working on the character. I knew we live in very rough times in terms of persecution of gays and gay stereotyping, but I wasn't trying to address this as much as portray this villain in a way I felt to be sensible and interesting. (Sharrett 37)

In the recent issue of the series *The Joker: The Man Who Stopped Laughing* (2022 - 2024) titled "It's Not Funny Anymore #4", the Joker is shown giving birth to his own child by throwing up at a hospital. After being pushed into a puddle of mud by Zatanna, the Joker mysteriously becomes pregnant overnight. Doctor Phosphorus tries to assist with the Joker's delivery, but instead, the Joker vomits up a pile of sentient mud that transforms into a smaller version of himself. However, it's important to note that this

story is non-canonical and does not have an impact on the main continuity of the series or the character. But, whatever the case is, the comic consolidates the issue of queer orientation of the Joker.

The queer iterations in the character of the Joker emit from his unconventional attitude. He puts makeup on his face, applies dark red lipstick on his lips, and wears bright coloured clothes. Obviously, these traits do not confirm the sexual orientation of the Joker but certainly point at the Camp aesthetics. Susan Sontag writes, "...the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (1). The idea of 'unnatural' opens up a completely new realm of possibilities, a dynamic horizon of expectations, and an aesthetic space of a non-serious nonsensical world which has not been explored before. Sontag states, "[t]he whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (8). Unanimously, the anti-serious attitude of the Camp aesthetics magnifies the oft-quoted question of the Joker: "why so serious?" (Nolan 2008).

Batman and the Joker: The Queer Connection

The connection between Batman and the Joker is a queer one. Regarding this Grant Morrison once said: "If Batman was cool, the Joker was cooler. The pair shared the perfect symmetry of Jesus and the Devil, Holmes and Moriarty, Tom and Jerry" (24). Here, the term 'queer' gives manifold connotations. While on the one hand it intends to read the relationship between Batman and the Joker from the perspective of homosexuality, and on the other hand it seeks to understand the metaphors of difference as a strategic continuum buttressed by the heteronormative apparatuses of the society. José Esteban Muñoz claims:

Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. (1)

For Muñoz, queerness is an abstract idea that points to the horizon of multiple possibilities. It is a complex construction of pluralistic sexes and/

or genders and/or desires. The systematic absence of a definite (sexual) identity in the free-floating dynamics of queer expands the horizon for LGBTQIA+ communities. Sedgwick suggests that stereotypical binaries like homosexual/heterosexual, queer/straight, private/public, utopia/dystopia offer far more symbolic connotations than they appear (8).

The Joker and Batman are two most iconic characters in the history of (DC) comics. Apparently they might appear as a hero and a villain. But a deeper study of their relationship reveals the disturbing and uncomfortable connotations. Undoubtedly they are enemies, but there's also a sense of codependency. Batman, driven by a desire for justice and order, seeks to protect Gotham from criminals like the Joker. On the other hand, the Joker embraces chaos and seeks to disrupt the established order, constantly challenging Batman's moral code and pushing him to his limits.

The comic begins with a joke that the Joker tries to crack in the beginning by saying: "There were these two guys in a lunatic asylum" (Moore 1988, unpaginated). At first, it refers to Batman and a false Joker but at the end of the book it is revealed that it denotes the camaraderie between Batman and the real Joker. Batman is seen concerned about their relationship. He says, "I've been thinking lately about you [the Joker] and me ... about what is going to happen to us in the end. We're going to kill each other. Aren't we?" (Moore 1988, unpaginated). Apparently, this speech shows Batman's general concerns for the Joker, but a deeper perusal would reveal his (romantic) interest in him. Batman repeats the same lines when he catches hold of the Joker at the amusement park. The love-hate relationship between Batman and the Joker has been emphasised again in one of the panels when Batman is engaged in a conversation with Alfred. He says, "I've been trying to figure out what he [the Joker] intends to do...All these years and I don't know who he is anymore than he knows who I am" (Moore 15). Critically speaking, Batman and the Joker are the two extreme forces, flawed in different ways, and two opposing ideologies where one tries to triumph over the other. Miller's version of Batman and the Joker represents more than the duality of hero/villain, good/bad. When they are seen engaged in a fight, the Joker whispers tender words in the ears of Batman as : "I'm really...very *disappointed* with you, my sweet...the moment was...perfect... ..and you didn't have the *nerve*..." (Miller 15, emphasis in original). The Joker's speech clearly demonstrates his overwhelming deep desire to be with Batman and to continue this love-hate relationship with him. Interestingly, the speech also reveals his desire to make Batman feel the (homoerotic) urge that the Joker inevitably carries within himself. Again, there's a level of psychological manipulation as the

Joker attempts to goad Batman into killing him so that he can derive pleasure from that fight. The Joker also derives pleasure from causing chaos and destruction in Gotham, knowing that it will draw Batman out of hiding. At the same time, Batman is shown to be similarly obsessed with the Joker, constantly trying to stop him and bring him to justice.

It is also important to note that the Caped Crusader and the Clown Prince of Crime are actually in fragments, their identities cannot be perceived individually (i.e. one without the other). They, as the Joker remarks, complete each other. Both of them are parts of the whole system, where both the threads of 'order' and 'chaos' constitute the ecosystem of the society.

The entire story of *The Killing Joke* revolves around the rhetorical iterations of the joke. The book opens with a joke that the (fake) Joker begins to tell (but never delivers the punchline) and it ends with a joke that the (real) Joker cracks at the very end giving an ambiguous connotation. Even when Batman enters Arkham Asylum at the beginning of the story to warn the Joker about his rough behaviour he is made a fool of by the Joker as the former finds out that the real Joker has already escaped by putting a dummy inside the asylum. This episode makes Batman realise that the joke is on him. The text begins with the image of rain and it ends with the same scenario where after an intense fight both Batman and the Joker are seen engaged in a deep conversation about their relationship. At that crucial moment the Joker cracks the (unfinished) joke and makes Batman laugh. The laughter can be interpreted in different ways. It can be seen as a moment of shared understanding between the two characters, recognizing the tragic futility of their conflict and the irony of their roles. It also symbolises the Joker's victory over Batman, as he has succeeded in pushing Batman to the brink of his own moral code and breaking his resolve.

Conclusion

The deliberate ambiguity in the final scene of the story serves as a tool to explore the intricate dynamics between Batman and the Joker, highlighting the nuanced and blurred boundary between heroism and villainy. The story challenges the readers/viewers to consider the moral implications of the characters' actions and the nature of justice, madness, and the human psyche. The ambiguous ending of the narrative alludes to the perpetual oscillation between order and chaos that every individual carries within while searching for the genesis of history/existence.

Works Cited:

- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Camp, Mary E. "The Joker: A Dark Night for Depictions of Mental Illness." *Academic Psychiatry*, 34.2, (2010): 145-49. Web. 20 February 2022.
- Cocksworth, Ash. "Batman and (the Evilness of) Evil." *The Expository Times*, 120.11, (2009): 1-4. Web. 14 June 2022.
- Derrida, J. "Cogito and the History of Madness", in *Writing and Difference*, Trans. A. Bass, Chicago University Press, 1978, pp. 36-76. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is Enlightenment?" In: *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, volume 1*. Trans. Catherine Porter and others. Edited by. Paul Rabinow. Penguin, 2000, pp. 303-21. Print.
- . *History of Madness*. Trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa. Ed. Jean Khalfa. Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton, Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- . *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. A. A. Brill. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1920. Print.
- Miller, Frank. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics. 1986. Print.
- Mithaiwala, Mansoor. "The Complete History of the Joker." *Screen Rant*, 11 July, 2016. <https://screenrant.com/complete-history-of-the-joker/>. Web. 15 September 2022.
- Moore, Alan. "Alan Moore Interview." Interview by Brad Stone. Comic Book Resources.
- ComicBookResources.- com, 22 Oct. 2001, <<http://www.comic-bookresources.com/?page=article&id=511>>. Web. 15 May. 2023.
- . (writer) Brian Bolland (artist). *Batman: The Killing Joke*. DC Comics. 1988. Print.
- Morrison, Grant. *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants,*

and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human.
Spiegeleisen & Grau. 2011. Print.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.*
New York UP. 2009. Print.

Redmond, Sean. "That joke isn't funny anymore: a critical exploration
of Joker: Introduction". *New Review of Film and Television Studies.*
19.1, (2021):1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2020.1864197>.
Web. 17 September 2022.

Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny.* Manchester UP. 2003. Print.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet.* University of Califor-
nia Press. 1990. Print.

Sharrett, Christopher. "Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Inter-
view with Frank Miller". *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Ap-
proaches to a Superhero and his Media.* Ed. Pearson and Uricchio.
Routledge, 1991. pp. 33 - 46. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *Notes on Camp.* Penguin Classics. 2018. Print.

The Dark Knight. (2008). Directed by Christopher Nolan, Warner Brothers
Entertainment.

Valereto, Deneb Kozikoski. "Philosophy in the fairground: Thoughts on
madness and madness in thought in *The Killing Joke*". *Studies in
Comics.* 2.1, (2011):69-80. Web. 22 October 2022. doi: 10.1386/
stic.2.1.69_1.