THE JOKER. THE PROFILE AND PHILOSOPHY OF A CHARACTER THROUGH LITERATURE, COMICS, AND FILM[1]

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Abstract

The Joker has risen from a mere episodic appearance as a negative character in the early 1940s to the fans' centre of interest either as Batman's utter foil or the vigilante's faithful self-reflection. At the same time, the character's appeal also lies in its permanent transformation and transgression from Victor Hugo's novel in the second half of the 19th century, to the comic books in the mid and late 20th century, and the films at the beginning of the new millennium. This article aims to offer an overview of the Joker's features as they appear in three forms of artistic expression – literature, comic books, and film – examining them as embodiments of the Jungian trickster archetype, found in other literary

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works as well. For this purpose, in addition to the comic books and films where the Joker appears as the insidious antagonist, we have selected three writers who have created Joker-like characters or worlds in their literary productions, namely Victor Hugo with his *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) and *The Man Who Laughs* (1869), le Marquis de Sade with *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), and F.M. Dostoevsky with the novel *The Possessed* (1872). The rationale behind extending our analysis to several works is that, in order to ascertain the character's function as an archetype, it must appear as an explicit figure in as many works as possible, or at least emerge as a mental projection. Such an approach would qualify, in our opinion, for an assessment of Carl G. Jung's theory of the archetypes rooted in the collective unconscious (Jung 1959/1969), since the term "collective" implies a large number. The criteria considered in opting for these particular writers and novels took into account defining themes in the profile of the Joker that were identified in the above-mentioned works, in addition to the portrayal of the character in comic books and films. These overarching ideas included: the masks of insanity, the appearance of monstrosity, perspectives on the essence of human nature, evil and psychopathy, chaos and nihilism, the relation between madness and power, the radicalization of the philosophy of protest and subversion, the fabrication of morality, good versus evil, dominance and control, psychopathology and deviance, the providential leader, freedom and choice. At the same time, the order for introducing these writers' works into our analytical interpretation will be based on preference for the chronology of their respective contents, and not the succession of the writers' lives. In other words, we will start with Victor Hugo because not only did he inspire the creation of the Joker, but he also introduced the image of the disfigured fool as alterity and alienation in the medieval world, as represented by the characters of Quasimodo and Gwynplaine. Then, we will delve into the 18th-century libertinage and *moeurs* with Sade's amoralists from the citadel of *The 120 Days of Sodom*. And, lastly, we will probe into the analogy between the Joker and Verhovensky from Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed*, as elements of evil and radicalization of nihilism in the 19th century. Together with the comic and cinematographic adaptations of the *Batman* stories (featuring the Joker) set in the 20th and 21st centuries, the profile of the Joker as an archetypal character will demonstrate its validity. With the exception of Victor Hugo's character, Gwynplaine, from the novel *The Man Who Laughs*, whose serving as the original source of inspiration for the Joker in *Batman* was attested by the creator of Batman, Bob Kane himself (Kane, 1989), the interpretation of the characters, themes, and other particularities from the literary works approached in this article as

part of the Trickster archetype manifested by the Joker, is entirely original. To our knowledge, there is no previous academic study that has examined these works through a Joker-focused perspective.

Keywords: Joker; Batman; literature; comics; film.

1. The Joker and His Origins

The Joker has been part of the Batman mythos since the beginning. In 1940, just one year after Batman was introduced to the public by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger in *Detective Comics* #27 (May 1939), the Caped Crusader's popularity had already grown so much that the editorial team decided to give him a comic book of his own. This is how *Batman* #1 appeared in the spring of 1940. This issue is important not only because it includes Batman's origin story (actually a reprint from *Detective Comics* #33, Nov. 1939), but it also contains four other stories that feature three of the most popular villains in Batman's famous rogues gallery: Dr. Hugo Strange, the Catwoman, and the Joker (the last two making their debut).

In his autobiography, *Batman and Me*, published in 1989, artist Bob Kane writes how he, writer Bill Finger, and fellow artist Jerry Robinson came up with the Joker character. They were contemplating the idea of a new villain who would be an impactful, powerful nemesis to the Dark Knight, and they drew inspiration from the Joker playing card and the practical jokes they used to play as kids. They wanted "a maniacal killer," Kane writes, "who would play life-and-death jokes on Batman, and that would test his mettle and ability to outwit his foe" (Kane, 1989, p. 105). 18-year-old assistant Jerry Robinson sketched the Joker card that was later used in the story[2], while Bill Finger put forward the photo of Gwynplaine, a character with the face carved into a grotesque, wide grin, played by actor Conrad Veidt in the film *The Man Who Laughs* (1928). Additionally, the Steeplechase Face, the logo of the Steeplechase amusement Park in Coney Island, Brooklyn, showing a man with an abnormally large smile on his

[2] And that was also used by the Joker (played by Jared Leto) in the film *Zack Snyder's Justice League* (2021) as a tribute to Jerry Robinson.

face, was another major source of inspiration. Finger presented his ideas to Bob Kane, who thus drew the first portrait of the Joker, with green hair, a white face, and a large red laughing rictus, which became iconic to this day (Kane, 1989, p. 105).

It is worth mentioning that *Detective Comics* issued a one-shot comic book in February 2005 titled *Batman: The Man Who Laughs*, in Victor Hugo's honour. Narratively speaking, it is a modernised version of the 1940 story from *Batman* #1 where the Joker makes his first appearance. Both the plot (the Joker killing notable citizens of Gotham with his laughing gas) and the characters are faithfully preserved in an homage to the French novelist who inspired, as well as to the American editorial team who created, the Joker. Furthermore, in 2019, DC launched the comic book series *The Batman Who Laughs*, which presents a 'jokerized' Batman, a version of the hero who has given in to all the primal instincts and vengeful impulses that he has too long suppressed and has thus become a literal reflection of the Joker.

Ever since 1940, the Joker has been constantly reinvented. As opposed to Batman, who is a constant character, the Joker's constancy is change. Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's graphic novel, *The Killing Joke* (1988), stands in the centre of the Batman universe and is one of the most important texts in the Batman canon, not only because of the whole new set of philosophical ideas that it introduces but also for perhaps the most iconic take on the Joker's origin. A timorous, unnamed lab assistant turned comedian with no humour and no gigs gets involved in a plan to rob his former chemical plant to support his family. Not only does the heist take a bad turn when the security and Batman intervene, but his pregnant wife, Jeannie, is also killed in an out-of-nowhere and absurd explosion of the boiler in their house ("It was a million to one accident!"). The former lab assistant, now dressed as Red Hood for the robbery, escapes Batman by throwing himself into the toxic waste drainage system, at the end of which he is physically and mentally transformed into the Clown Prince of Crime we know. In the story titled *Pushback*, the lab assistant-turned-comedian is given a name — Jack — and nuanced details are added to his backstory and trauma, which help shed light on his transformation. A corrupt cop carries the

pregnant Jeannie into an apartment, leaving her unconscious, and turns on the gas stove to pressure Jack into following through with the hit on Ace Chemicals. Both plots spiral into tragedy, giving rise to the Joker (Lieberman et al., April-Sept. 2004).

2. The Joker and the Hugoesque Craze

Psychiatrist Carl Jung, in his theory of archetypes, supports the idea that art, along with dreams and neurotic states, is an outlet for the mental frameworks ingrained in the collective unconscious since the creation of mankind (Jung, 1959/1969). He described archetypes – such as the Self, the Persona, the Shadow, the Animus and the Anima – as determining recurrent human behaviour and influencing patterns of thinking. A subtype of the Shadow archetype, the Trickster is mentioned by Jung as a representation of man's proclivity for humour, chaos, rebellion, and reform (Jung, 1959/1969, pp. 255-274). Therefore, even though Bob Kane, Jerry Robinson, and Bill Finger were originally inspired just by Gwynplaine's disfigured face for their new villain, time showed that the Joker took much more from the film *The Man Who Laughs*. This motion picture, directed by Paul Leni, is actually based on Victor Hugo's homonymous novel published in 1869. However, except for the ending, the movie changed little from the book, keeping to it very faithfully.

Gwynplaine's story is a tragic one: although noble by birth, he was kidnapped from his parents by a band of vagabonds when he was only two years old. They also mutilated his face at the orders of King James II, who wanted to retaliate against the boy's father, his political adversary. Gwynplaine was found and raised by a mountebank, Ursus, who, together with Dea, the little blind girl whom Gwynplaine saves from her mother's frozen body, and the wolfdog Homo, become the boy's family. They earn their living by performing in street freak shows where the main attraction is Gwynplaine with his bizarre smile carved onto his face. His noble origin surfaces eventually, and he is invested as Lord of England. He is also drawn into an engagement to Duchess Josiana, the King's illegitimate daughter. Nevertheless,

when he delivers his speech in the House of Lords criticising the inequalities in society, the audience bursts into laughter and mocks him. Gwynplaine, disheartened but shaken awake to reality, renounces his privileges and engagement and seeks to find his former family. He unites with them, but in the novel, Dea dies in his arms, grief-stricken that he had abandoned her, which makes Gwynplaine throw himself overboard out of regret for having lost the only person who had loved him despite his disfigurement. In the film, a different ending is preferred, with the reunited 'family' sailing away together happily in the night.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) is a master of creating powerful romantic characters, who are either angelically good or diabolically evil. His greatest works, such as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), *Les Misérables* (1862), and *The Man Who Laughs* (1869), stand as proof in this respect. Characters such as Jean Valjean, l'abbé Myriel, Cosette, Javert, Thénardier, Quasimodo, Esmeralda, l'abbé Frollo, Gwynplaine, Dea, Homo, or Josiana carry so much weightiness in their moral construction that their physical aspect reflects either their inner self or the ethical battle inside their soul. More often than not, Hugo's utterly physical monsters are figures of great moral nobility, but socially misunderstood and repugnant. Hugo himself was repudiated by his own country because of his beliefs; therefore, he perfectly understood the status of an outcast. This is actually what all the Batman villains are: individuals whom society has disfigured, emotionally and/or physically, and then ostracized for not fitting in. The striking point, however, is that such monsters are not only a creation, but also a reflection of society, which bans monsters and madmen because they show its own ugliness.

Gwynplaine's mysterious genealogy and traumatic past echo in exactly the same story of treacherous memory and family tragedy as the Joker's, as we gradually uncover it. Both of them smile all the time, but the expression of apparent happiness has been painfully forced upon them, and does not convey the darkness beneath the white makeup. Whenever they reappear in public, society casts them away as undesirable because their ideals are not in line with its artificial prescriptions. The only context in which they are accepted is when the Joker and

Gwynplaine represent a distraction in the garb of fools that disguises their act.

In Hugo's world, the fool is always an unshapely character who provokes laughter through his physical oddity. The perception of him is only surface-deep, either because of people's ignorance or their fear of the truth that makes them insensitive to the fact that fools actually mirror an equally monstrous society. In the medieval world – depicted in Hugo's novels *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and *The Man Who Laughs* – the jester, or the fool, is the stand-up comedian of modern times that Arthur Fleck aspires to be in the film *Joker* (Phillips, 2019). His awkward comedy is a pungent irony aimed at the *moeurs* of society and the infatuated sense of importance of those who are appointed to serve the people, but in reality take advantage of their position to cheat, steal, and only accumulate more power. In the guise of a madman, the court jester or the market square buffoon derides the venality, intrigues, lechery, and stupidity of kings, officials, preachers, and philosophers who have lost contact with the people who produced them.

Considered crazy, or simply performing an act, the fool is spared from legal or political reprisal by a special privilege awarded to him by the king, who wants to have such a person around because the jester is the only authentic character who speaks the truth that nobody else dares to. No royal or nobiliary feast is ever successful without the presence of the buffoon, who both amuses and speaks words of wisdom. The Trickster spirit is that natural part of the human psyche that warns people it is time to unwind when too much reality becomes overwhelming.

At the community level, the outlets for personally long-repressed and politically stifled desires, frustrations, grievances, and conflicts are represented by concerts, festivals, and other such events that channel the people's energy in socially accepted ways. Revolts, rebellions, and revolutions are thus averted, the masses are superficially satisfied, and order is maintained. In the ancient world, during the goat bacchanals dedicated to Dionysus, and in the Middle Ages, at the time of carnivals occasioned by the Epiphany or before Lent, the city's lawful order gave way to the people's instinctual (natural?) order for a few days. *The*

Hunchback of Notre-Dame begins with such a *Fête des Fous* during which, following the Saturnalian tradition, the order of things was reversed. Masters became slaves, slaves turned into lords, holy became profane, and profane mocked sanctity. This happened not necessarily out of the generosity and tolerance of the privileged, but out of the vicious envy and animalistic instinct of the enslaved.

Amidst singing, dancing, morality plays, and allegories, but also drunkenness, debauchery, laughter, and disorder that professed unbound natural freedom for the people, Quasimodo is elected the Pope of Fools in a supreme gesture of parody and caricature addressed contemptuously to the sanctimonious order. Similarly, Gwynplaine is appointed Lord of England, but his ugliness and modest upbringing only arouse the Peers' disdain and jeers at the inadequacy of the situation. Notwithstanding the crowd's reactions, both have the illusion that they mean something from that seemingly honourable position when, in fact, they areplaced there just for the comedy of the situation. Moreover, Gwynplaine actually has a very sensible speech that somewhat echoes the Joker's sententious words from various stories:

> I am a monster, do you say? No! I am the people! I am an exception? No! I am the rule; you are the exception! You are the chimera; I am the reality! I am the frightful man who laughs! Who laughs at what? At you, at himself, at everything! What is his laugh? Your crime and his torment! That crime he flings at your head! That punishment he spits in your face! I laugh, and that means I weep!" (Hugo, Vol. 2, n.d./1869, p. 297)
>
> Losing your temper yet, Lex? I'll let you in on a little secret. I lost my temper long, long ago, and I've never found it. Maybe it's under one of the sofa cushions! Pain? You can't stop me by hurting me! Don't you know me at all? Pain is my boon companion! My stalwart friend! (Sturges et al., June 2008[3])

[3]The majority of comic books are unpaginated; therefore, page numbers cannot be provided in their in-text citations.

The Joker inherits from Hugo's medieval monsters the repulsive disfigurement, along with the idea that society fears what is different and therefore does not understand, all the while recognizing itself in the repulsiveness of monsters and the criticism of madmen. The medieval world started claustrating the fool on account of his madness, which, according to Foucault (1988/1961), had a vast array of 'symptoms', from genuine insanity to simply holding beliefs that diverged from the dogma. The Joker is excluded from society for presumed insanity and a pronounced antisocial personality disorder that results in criminality.

3. The Joker and Sadean Amorality

Philosophers and writers often bring into discussion the nature of man so as to explain human behaviour. Spinoza, for instance, expands on the divine essence of God's creation, Darwin, on the other hand, argues in favour of mere biology, while Marx insists on dynamics and cyclical change. Then, there are those who consider that Nature (as essence of humanity) is neither good nor bad, but *is*. The Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) is their most notorious representative. Not only does he affirm and practice a state of amorality in which the individual unreservedly follows the natural passions of his senses, but, in *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), he contemplates the prototype of a society that is governed solely by primal vice. It is the prospect of a community that validates the étatisation of instinctuality, where people are supposedly happier thanks to the abolishment of accountability. It is a projection of the Joker's idea that people are virtuous out of fear of punishment, and not out of a sincere creed. "Their morals, their code; it's a bad joke…" the Joker comments in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008, 1:24:00-1:27:00), while the Dying Atheist admonishes the Priest: "What man is there in the world who, seeing the scaffold beside his proposed crime, would commit that crime, if he were free not to do so?" (Sade, 1782/1997, p. 15)

In the citadel of vice, Sade's protagonists are notable members of civilized society: an aristocrat, a bishop, a magistrate,

and a banker, yet secretly, laureates of every sin imaginable: debauchery, incest, murder, corruption, and whatnot. They are the mirror of 18th-century French high society, where the official discourse in favour of the Enlightenment through reason coexisted with the growing preference for unrestrained sensuous libertinage. They despise virtue fiercely and seek to defile any form of innocence. This corresponds to the Joker's own aversion towards morality as a fabricated concept:

> The kidnapping of the mayor. The crippling of the city on numerous occasions. Oh, and my glorious abduction of the commissioner and his daughter. MASS MURDER, MAIMINGS, TORTURE AND TERROR! I'VE DONE IT ALL, LADY! YOU'RE LOOKING AT THE EINSTEIN OF CRIME! Sticking some poison on the back of some postage stamps, lady? Amateur night in Dixie. Simple as that.[4] (Dixon et al., 1995)

Moreover, there are elements in Sade's biography that resonate with the destiny of the Joker as a transgressor of morality. Sade himself was declared insane on account of his excessive libertinage ("libertine dementia") and imprisoned in state hospitals that, just like Arkham Asylum, were a combination of both mental institutions and houses of correction. As a matter of fact, it is in such asylums as Bicêtre and Charenton, which Foucault researched in his *History of Madness*, that Sade wrote his work. Unlike the Joker, who is confined to Arkham primarily because he commits appalling crimes, Sade is *imprisoned* in such institutions for scandalous conduct and writings.

Apart from sexual excesses and immoral ideas, accusations that today would be judged discriminatory and politically incorrect, no other charge was ever brought to incarcerate him. As it happened, in 1794, he was arrested and sentenced to execution for "moderatism" (!) during the Reign of Terror in France, while serving as commissioner for health and charity! In retrospect, this

[4] The bolding, capitalization, and italicization of certain words in lines taken from comic book stories are as in the original and reflect the stylistic choices of their respective authors; they are not alterations that we have made to the text.

would appear like a comedy of situations if it weren't real. Only now does Joker's line from the 2019 film start to make sense: for a guy to spend almost half of his life in and out of prison for ideas, and to nearly be executed for moderatism, this really does sound like his life was "nothing but a comedy" (Phillips, 2019, 1:35:00-1:46:00). That is why Sade denounces in his writings the hypocrisy of society, morality, and religion with such vehemence that all the glorification in which he holds abominable acts is made precisely because they "most outrage the laws of both Nature and religion." (Sade, 1785/1966, p. 219)

Sade makes the supreme goal of his happiness to topple the values upon which society is built, and, to prove their inauthenticity, his characters only find satisfaction inasmuch as their pleasures diverge from the ordinary practices. In Sade's citadel, vice is ritualized and raised to the level of religious observance: incestuous and sanctimonious weddings are performed by priests who are corruptors of morals rather than their betterers, in chapels destined not to praying but to relieving themselves. Everything gives the impression of a perpetual orgiastic bacchanal from ancient times dedicated to Dionysus, the god of excess, or the mockery of the church rites from the *fête des fouls* from medieval times, where norms and roles were reversed and the rawest biological senses were allowed a last outlet before being numbed by the Lent. The Trickster archetype is, therefore, validated, because time and again it finds frameworks to reiterate the theme of a figure who pokes fun in order to expose and who shakes old structures to erect new foundations. By this trickster spirit, the Joker too mocks the uptight religiosity of morality:

> Oh, yes! Fill the churches with dirty thoughts! Introduce honesty to the White House! Write letters in dead languages to people you've never met! Paint filthy words on the foreheads of children! Burn your credit cards and wear high heels! Asylum doors stand open! Fill the suburbs with murder and rape! Divine madness! Let there be ecstasy, ecstasy in the streets! Laugh and the world laughs with you! (Morrison et al., 1989)

Sadism, as a way of life in which causing pain arouses pleasure, is the Joker's ethos. Sade wrote that "crime has of itself such a compelling attractiveness that, unattended by any accessory activity, it may be itself suffice to inflame every passion and to hurl one into the same delirium occasioned by lubricious acts" (Sade, 1785/1966, p. 426). He also expanded on why such perverse brutality excites the senses, and concluded that it is the comparison between the untouchable status as a dominator and the vulnerable position of the victim that stirs up:

> It is the pleasure of comparison, a pleasure which can only be born of the sight of wretched persons. It is from the sight of him who does not in the least enjoy what I enjoy, and who suffers, that comes the charm of being able to say to oneself: 'I am therefore happier than he.' (Sade, 1785/1966, p. 362)

For the most part, we cannot even understand why the Joker wants to kill people and destroy Gotham, other than for his sheer fun and for the excitation he gets from seeing people fear what they don't understand: him and his frenzy:

> ***YOU*** know what it's like to walk into a room and have ***men*** catch their breaths. I get that from ***EVERYONE***. Darkness... solitude... stealth... It makes your ***heart*** speed up. It makes you ***SWEAT***. It's like ***SEX*** and ***I'M*** its ***master***. It's ***BETTER*** than sex, because I'm ***ALWYAS*** in the ***mood***. ***I LOVE*** murder. I love the ***look in their eyes***, looking ***ONLY*** at ***me***. In those moments, I am what I was ***MEANT*** to be... ***The Cosmic Joke***! (Englehart et al., Sept. 2005).

Psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing explains, a century before modern psychiatry manuals, that psychopathological manifestations rooted in sexual life originate in unfulfilled needs or abusive behaviours dating back to the individual's childhood (Krafft-Ebing, 1924/1886). Maltreatment and trauma gave birth to the Joker personality and the deviant behaviour associated with it. In the story "The House of Hush", the Joker had originally been an orphan in the care of the clinic of Batman's parents. The

scars on his face that give the impression of an eternal broad smile are the result of that boy being beaten to disfigurement by the gangsters who wanted to burn down the clinic (Dini et al., January 2011). Therefore, in the light of Sade and Sacher-Masoch's writings, and Krafft-Ebing's pioneering expertise, we now acknowledge more clearly the sexual undertones of the Joker's remarks, his abusive relationship with Harley Quinn, his sadistic drive to inflict pain on people, and, why not, his masochistic fondness for Batman.

It is true that the Joker and Batman represent two different worlds, one defined by chaos and eccentricity, and the other by order and reason. As a result, they always clash violently, but very often it looks like the Joker purposely wants Batman to go after him and whip him. Batman does not kill him for the ethical rule he has, while the Joker won't kill Batman because he's "just too much fun": "What would I do without you?" the Joker tells Batman in *The Dark Knight* interrogation scene while he's being manhandled by the Crusader, "Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No. No. NO! No, you - *you* complete *me*!" (Nolan, 2008, 1:24:00-1:27:00) In one story, he even shoots Catwoman in order to stop her from marrying Batman: "***I*** have to save ***Batman***. I ***need*** him... On the rooftops. In the alleys. ***I*** need him to tell me I'm a ***horror***. I ***need*** him to hit me. To ***bleed*** me. I ***need*** him to stand between me and everything. You don't understand. No one understands." (King et al., Aug. 2018.). And in another, Batman is offering his help to the Joker:

> Maybe I've been there ***too***. Maybe I can ***help***. We could ***work*** together. I could ***rehabilitate*** you. You needn't be out there on the ***edge*** any more. You needn't be ***alone***. We don't ***have*** to kill each other. What do you ***say***? (Moore et al., 1988)

The Joker declines Batman's help, considering himself irredeemable, but does throw in a joke about two lunatics in an asylum trying to escape. Even the grim Batman laughs heartily at it, probably recognising himself and the Joker in the anecdote in which only a lunatic would light the way for another one

when there's clearly no way out of it for either of them (Moore et al., 1988).

The Joker is indeed fascinated by Batman's intelligence and obstinacy in pursuing his mission uncorrupted by any temptation or impulse: "You can't kill me without becoming like me! I can't kill you without losing the only human being who can keep up with me! Isn't it IRONIC?" (Morrison et al., April 2007) But there is also a compulsive masochistic obsession that might be inferred from the Joker not feeling his act complete without drawing the attention of Batman, who he knows will unfailingly thwart his actions, beat him badly, and then have him locked up, as it always happens.

The suggestion moves one step further from implication to explicitness in the story *The Joker: Year of the Villain*, published by Detective Comics in December 2019. In it, the Joker and his young sidekick, Six of Hearts, break out of Arkham and assault people dressed as the Batman and Robin from the 1960s show. At a certain point, Six realizes everything they are doing is wrong, so he runs away to his mother. The Joker beats him to it and, having tied her up, threatens her with a knife, only to force Six's hand to jump up on him. As Six is strangling him, the Joker smiles mischievously and gives in to it, takes off his Batman cowl and puts it on Six's head while screaming "Harder...". Then Six regains himself, to the Joker's disappointment, who lashes at him with a crowbar and leaves him half dead.

The psychopathological deviations are manifold in this narrative, and they all concur with Psychiatrist Krafft-Ebing's rationale for such degeneracy. First of all, Six follows the Joker and considers him a model and a mentor because the absence of a warm, guiding father had crippled him emotionally. It turns out that Six's father had abused him till he could not take it anymore and killed him. His mother, although she loved Six, all the while justified his father's ill-behaviour. The Joker perfidiously picks up on the trauma, assumes the father role, and influences the kid into his twisted ways: "We've got to break this pattern harder than you broke your pop-pop's ***skull***, Sixy." (Tynion IV et al., Dec. 2019)

Secondly, the Joker sees in the situation an opportunity for him to satisfy one of his fantasies and seizes it: "We need to get ***weirder***. We need to get… ***kinkier***." (Tynion IV et al., Dec. 2019) Six meets all the criteria: underage, frail, broken, defenceless, mentally shaky, gullible. He's the perfect candidate for the Joker's fancy. Six falls into the trap because the Joker feigns teaching, protecting, and staying with him when others haven't, and Six's trauma makes his broken psyche select only those impressions that are, for once, heart-warming. When he sees the Enchantress, he is drawn to her erotically, but his history of mistreatment immediately makes him think that she wants a stronger man who would both possess and maltreat her, not "a little boy with a big heart" (Tynion IV et al., Dec. 2019), whom she would laugh about with her friends.

Thirdly, Six breaks loose from the Joker after he insults his mother with lewd words: "Your mom sounds like she ***sucks***. Yeah she… she sucks." (Tynion IV et al., Dec. 2019). The Joker thus triggering a jealous Oedipean reaction in him, Six runs away to find his mother and see if she is alright after five years since he last saw her. It turns out that the Joker did abuse her in his childhood home, where she still lives, as Six finds her tied to the chair, liquid spilled on the table, hair dishevelled, the top of her shirt unbuttoned, and the Joker pointing a knife at her in a perfect image of a phallic assault. This enrages Six because he realizes that the Joker had only been taking advantage of his mental frailty to bring him where he had wanted from the beginning: he "listened to every word I said about her. Remembered it all. So he could do ***this***. (…) He's ***evil***. Not crazy. I'm crazy. ***Not*** evil." (Tynion IV et al., Dec. 2019) He attacks the Joker, who submits unresistingly to Six choking him while putting the Batman mask on Six's head and screaming "Harder…". This is the Joker's masochistic fantasy that he's trying to enact with this role play: to be killed by Batman, or, at least, be heavily mistreated by him, as he, in his turn, abused in his childhood and youth, had inflicted pain onto many other innocent people in order to please himself and to numb old repressed wounds. After all, most of the sadomasochists in Sade's work are impotent.

The fantasy goes further when Six falters and resumes the position of the vulnerable. The Joker is disappointed with the exciting, but curt, tryst, – even refers to it in sexual terms: "Our ***fling*** was fun, my faithful friend" – and steps into the status of Six's torturer by beating him to near death with a crowbar, in a move that evokes him killing Jason Todd, Batman's second Robin, many years before (Starlin et al., December 1988). Yet, the Joker stops short of killing Six, and, just for the sadomasochism of having the game complete, he throws in the last mockery as he heads for the door: "By the way -- if you could swear eternal ***vengeance***, I'd appreciate it. It'll be ***much*** more fun to murder you once you've spent a couple decades training yourself." (Tynion IV et al., Dec. 2019) This is an allusion to both Batman swearing vengeance for his parents' murder and training himself to fulfil this mission, and to the Robins he's mentored as his sidekicks ("You get to fulfill the ***ultimate*** sidekick fantasy!"), some of whom have even lost their lives in the mission (such as Jason Todd, Damian Wayne, Stephanie Brown, but who have all been resurrected, nevertheless, in later stories).

Reiterating Sade's argument which started this section – that choice rooted in conviction supersedes decision haunted by punishment – we recall the words of the young man at the end of the story in *The Killing Joke*, contemplating the perspective of doing "something completely ***cruel*** and ***horrible***... and ***unnecessary***... and... and... ***motiveless***." (Moore et al., 1988) to see if it is good or evil that makes him feel better: "We're put on this earth with free will. We can choose to do this or that. We can choose to be good or bad. But sometimes I think most people are good and not bad only because they're scared they might go to jail or hell or someplace." (Moore et al., 1988). Whatever the origin and the substance of human nature, there are 'instruments' that can be used to control it or guide it in one direction or another. Batman chooses to apply reason and self-restraint for long-term satisfaction and solace. The Joker, on the other hand, seizes the moment and goes with the flow. One confronts demons while struggling to avoid becoming one; the other represents one such fiend, gaily trying to spread malevolence. The Joker illustrates here the Trickster's propensity

for rebellion against contrived moral notions. In the end, it is not trauma that turns people into monsters; it is their own will.

4. The Joker and Dostoevskian Evil

Dostoevsky, like Victor Hugo, is an exceptional creator of strong characters. If Hugo's characters are sublime, either in good or in evil, Dostoevsky's are prototypes of diabolism. As a matter of fact, the positive figures in Dostoevsky are blameworthy as well. They become responsible for the creation or propagation of evil through their very good nature, even if only by inadvertence. The overarching themes in Dostoevsky's works, such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, are evil, freedom, and guilt. These, combined with the ones inspired by the writer's own limit-experiences, such as *Notes from Underground* and *The Gambler*, make Dostoevsky (1821-1881) a seminal source for understanding the mechanisms of evil manifested through fictional personae.

The novel *The Possessed* (1872) (also translated as *The Devils*) occupies a central role in our analysis for the ideas of moral abyss, chaos, anarchism, and malevolence, organized around the Joker-like character of Verhovensky. Pyotr Stapanovitch Verhovensky is the antagonist in a novel without a 'good' protagonist. At best, his father, Stepan Trofimovitch Verhovensky, may be considered a positive character, but Stepan Trofimovitch is so ineffectual that he may actually be held accountable for the creation of the novel's vilest figures: his son, Pyotr Stepanovitch, for completely abandoning him in the care of his dead wife's parents when he was very little, and Nikolay Vsyevolodovitch Stavrogin, his student, for alienating him from his family and failing to provide him with a solid formative education. When growing up, the two, Verhovensky and Stavrogin, turn into viciously callous psychopaths and manipulators who form a conspiratorial anarchical group with the purpose of starting a revolution.

Our comparative assessment reveals that the plot of *The Possessed* presents similarities with both the *Joker* and *The Dark Knight* films. A juxtaposition of the two cinematic masterpieces

would get very close to the scenario in *The Possessed*. Taking the revolt from *Joker* and placing it in *The Dark Knight* as the end-stage in the destructive plan of the nihilistic anarchist Heath Ledger Joker, we get the development of *The Possessed*. Verhovensky is the Joker figure here. Like Momus, Loki, or Trickster, the chiefs of misrule banished from heaven for upsetting the gods with criticism and sincerity, he "seemed to have dropped on us from heaven to tell stories about other people's affairs (...) by touching on too painful a spot." (Dostoevsky, 1872/2014, p. 186) Verhovensky, paradoxically, causes disturbance and antipathy by coldly telling the truth without filtering any of his interventions. In such a manner, he compromises his father's reputation and even indirectly causes his death.

He also arranges the deaths of Stavrogin's wife and her brother just by picking up on an allusion from Stavrogin, who wants to be free to marry somebody else. Verhovensky has their bodies placed in a sector of the city where houses were burning from the civic violences he has caused, so there is no proof to suspect Stavrogin and, luckily for Stavrogin, Verhovensky has nothing to tell the police, otherwise the implication he himself makes is that it is highly possible he might have told the police the truth: "And you must admit that all this settles your difficulties capitally," Verhovensky tells Stavrogin: "you are suddenly free and a widower and can marry a charming girl this minute with a lot of money, who is already yours, into the bargain. See what can be done by crude, simple coincidence – eh?" (Dostoevsky, 1872/2014, p. 542) Seeing the calm indifference with which Verhovensky tells him that, a sign of sheer psychopathic failure to understand risk, accountability, and empathy, Stavrogin scolds him: "Are you threatening me, you fool?" (Dostoevsky, 1872/2014, p. 542)

On other occasions, Stavrogin calls him a buffoon, thus deepening the analogy with the Joker. Verhovensky himself admits that, despite starting a conspiracy and civil unrest with a socialist discourse, "I am a scoundrel, not a socialist. Ha ha ha!". His hysterical laugh to close the scene only strikes with how much of the Joker is in this character. And, just to make the whole irony of coincidences complete, and to make us wonder whether

Dostoevsky had any sort of ability to foresee characters such as the Joker, Verhovensky even *looks* like the Joker: "He had a wrinkle on each cheek which gave him the look of a man who had just recovered from a serious illness." (Dostoevsky, 1872/2014, p. 180), which draws him even nearer to the Joker's physical and psychical profile with all the particulars and pathologies associated.

He does not do his evil acts for any personal profit. As it turns out, the other subversive groups he convinces his followers he has established all over Russia to spark the revolution and seize power do not even exist. In this light, all the violence Verhovensky starts and the murders he commits appear absurdly gratuitous. Much like the Joker, Verhovensky embodies the same Jungian archetype of the Trickster because his sadistic satisfaction is to do evil for evil's sake: "I find that crime is no longer insanity, but simply common sense, almost a duty; anyway, a gallant protest." (Dostoevsky, 1872/2014, p. 435)

Verhovensky is a nihilist, like the Arthur Fleck Joker, who states directly and gleefully: "I don't believe in anything." (Phillips, 2019, 1:35:00-1:46:00), and an anarchist, like the Heath Ledger Joker who declares beyond any shadow of doubt that "I am an agent of chaos." promoting it as a political creed: "Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. (...) Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It's fair!" (Nolan, 2008, 1:43:00-1:46:00)

Verhovensky subordinates his creed to the obsessive attraction he has for Stavrogin, in the same way as we have seen the Joker being ecstatically drawn to Batman: "I love beauty, I am a nihilist, but I love beauty. Are nihilists incapable of loving beauty? It is only idols they dislike, but I love an idol. You are my idol!" (Dostoevsky, 1872/2014, p. 435) Verhovensky declares to Stavrogin, and, starting from here, the assimilation of Stavrogin with Batman becomes strikingly precise, which proves the validity of Jung's archetypes as patterns of behaviour stemming from the collective unconscious and perpetuated through time. Their reverberation is obvious in the Joker's final words– "I think you and I are destined to do this forever," – addressed to Batman towards the end of *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008, 2:08:41), as well as in Verhovensky's bordering on godlike fascination and masochism:

> You injure no one, and everybody hates you. You treat every one as an equal, and yet everyone is afraid of you – that's good. Nobody would slap you on the shoulder. You are an awful aristocrat. An aristocrat is irresistible when he goes in for democracy! To sacrifice life, your own or another's is nothing to you. You are the man that's needed. It's just such a man as you that I need. I know no one but you. You are the leader, you are the sun and I am your worm.
>
> He suddenly kissed his hand. A shiver ran down Stavrogin's spine, and he pulled away his hand in dismay. They stood still.
>
> "Madman!" whispered Stavrogin. (Dostoevsky, 1872/2014, p. 435)

Verhovensky does not manage, however, to seduce Stavrogin into being the leader of the new order he is trying to instate through revolution. The uproar only produces mayhem and violence, and the members of the conspiratorial group are not devoted to the revolution to the extent that they would jeopardize their freedom. When the situation worsens and they witness Verhovensky's viciousness, they run away, hide, or go to the police, prompted by a troubled conscience. Maybe with the exception of Kirilov, who commits suicide simply to put into practice his philosophy of the ultimate freedom. Claiming that people are enslaved through their fear of death, Kirilov wants to prove that he, not God, has the right to decide upon his life. Verhovensky, through his perverse manipulations, manages to persuade him into writing a letter before he kills himself, in which he takes the blame for the group's murders. Verhovensky is an unscrupulous seducer and a skilled puppet master. He does not believe in the revolution more than all the rest, and, despite the proclaimed populist ideals, his true intentions are to merely use revolution to disrupt society and then rule its reorganization through even more control and despotism than the ones he argues against as people scream in chaos.

This is actually the materialization of Joker's vision of society. If the Joker in Batman ever got to the point of being

victorious in his plans, this is what his new world and order would look like. We get a glimpse of it in the film *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan, 2012), where Bane conquers Gotham and opens the gates of prisons, letting criminals be the city's enforcers. Such a society becomes chaotic and abusive. Its citizens live in fear and poverty, while the rulers mete out justice arbitrarily and illogically 'in the name of the people'. The Scarecrow is the judge without a jury, the legal process being not the weighing of facts, but the mere hearing of sentences. People's guilt has already been determined, and only then are they offered a choice, in being allowed to opt for their penalty: exile or death. But even this mockery of freedom is illusory and absurd, for all who choose exile are cast out of the city and forced to cross the frozen waters of the East River, which swallow them. When Commissioner Gordon chooses death, however, he is sadistically granted the wish: "Very well then. Death… by exile." (Nolan, 2012, 1:57:50) Gotham has finally become T.S. Elliot's wasteland where death comes by water. The society based on the illusions that the Joker sells is a sham; it is Hobbes's bedlam State of Nature where people "eat each other" (Nolan, 2008, 1:24:00-1:27:00). The Joker creates it by exploiting people's frustrations, but does not produce anything that raises humanity; he only lets it consume itself with resentment and exasperation.

While the rest of the conspiracy – whose members and views are now exposed – will suffer the legal consequences, Verhovensky has already fled and lost his way in Petersburg. In standard Joker fashion, whose origin is murky and identity remains a mystery, Verhovensky himself becomes a man with no precise identity, yet another representative of the trickster/joker archetype, whose most valuable feature is not to assume a self, but to challenge ethics. Verhovensky and the Joker take advantage of people's naivety and enact the role of a providential leader, only to play with the notion of free will that people hold dear. Just like the Trickster, they only tear apart; they do not build strong, enduring worlds.

5. Conclusion

The numerous works of fiction in which Joker-like characters and worlds appear are arguments for the validity of Jung's theory of the archetypes, which articulates the view that patterns of thought and behaviour stem from the collective unconscious and are transmitted through art, dreams, and, exceptionally, hysteria (Jung 1959/1969). Due to space limitations, we have restricted our analysis to three writers and their respective works, but an archetype of such intriguing complexity can be traced in many more texts. In our opinion, Hugo's Quasimodo and Gwynplaine, and Dostoevsky's Verhovensky are personages who have either inspired or developed in literature a prototype that was perfected in the comics and films of the 20th and 21st centuries, where it was given a name – Joker – to identify more precisely a long-existing Trickster archetype. Sade's dystopian citadel and Dostoevsky's anti-idealistic society are concrete realizations of the Joker's most instinctual drives that, in the Batman mythos, are mere projections threatening to be perpetrated but never fully accomplished. The Joker, the insidious antagonist, is the latest, modern incarnation of a figure who has eternally symbolized both renewal and reform, and chaos and destruction at the same time.

Ultimately, Hugo's, Sade's, and Dostoevsky's characters, comparable to the figures in the Batman universe, are tragic. They are defined less by their deeds than by their conscience. Evaluating actions without delving into the psychology behind them is as misleading as a Joker story. Both heroes and villains are products of circumstances, and, if they were to rebuild themselves after debilitating trauma, they would have to be champions of their conscience and not its victims. The Joker is not one to have existential crises, like Batman; confronted with the world's absurdity, he becomes a nihilist who wants to destabilize the foundations of civilization itself. He is a complex and multi-layered character, whose enigmatic backstories and multiple literary reincarnations reveal him as an embodiment of the Trickster archetype theorized by Jung. His profile is characterised by constant change, both of himself and of the worlds he is part of. This is what defines his archetype that

continues indefinitely through reinvention, both as a mental projection of the collective unconscious and as the antagonist par excellence of multimodal narratives. To the Joker, heroism does not redeem, but madness does fascinate.

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