

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background of the Research

When one think of villains, one would perhaps imagine a moustached man, twirling his moustache as he commits evil deeds, or a mastermind pulling the strings of crime as he sits while stroking his cat, or perhaps a crazed maniac blowing explosives on his surroundings as he laughs. Whichever it is you picture, they all have one common trait: they commit acts that society deems wrong or even 'evil'. These characters embody values deemed negative by society, and, for the most part, is meant to be unliked or even hated. There could be an issue, however, if there is a villain that made the audience feel sympathy for them.

It is this oddity that the researcher found themselves in. After watching *'Joker'* (2019), the researcher was not sure on how to feel about the main character, Arthur Fleck/Joker. The movie shows the journey of Arthur as the world seemingly kicks him down repeatedly and he descends into madness. He gets beaten up twice, lost access to medical and mental help, lost his job, and found out that his mother has been lying about who he is his whole life. While the researcher felt sympathy towards Arthur due to these plights he found himself in throughout the movie, it is an undeniable fact that he is a villain. He killed multiple people throughout the film, and

killing is one of the most heinous things a person can do in the eye of society. Surely then it is wrong to feel sympathy for such a character.

As it turns out, the researcher is not the only one to feel sympathy for Arthur. For example, one review states that the movie “positions him as a somewhat sympathetic character” (Andersen, n.d.). Another review even accused the director of the movie, Todd Phillips, of “lazily ticking off all the manipulative boxes of generating sympathy for the central character” (Fadnavis, 2019). This sheds light on the possibility that Arthur being a character people would sympathize towards is intentional.

Of course, this would make no sense at all. To accrue sympathy as a villain would defeat the intended purpose of being a villain, that is, to embody values considered evil by society, an example of what not to be. Not only that, it is also a large departure from the Joker character as the researcher knew. The researcher has always seen the Joker as an insane, maniacal criminal who commits heinous acts seemingly at random. Thus, it is an oddity that a villain, even less Joker, managed to gain sympathy from the audience.

After searching for some time, the researcher came across some research papers on what could be the answer: so called “Sympathetic Villains”. An example of such a villain is, as asserted by Hardt (2012) in her paper, is Hans Beckert of 1931 film ‘*M*’ by Fritz Lang. Despite being seemingly responsible for multiple child murders, Hardt argues that Hans Beckert is portrayed sympathetically through making other characters in the

movies seemingly mechanical and by showing Hans as a reluctant murderer who, despite knowing that his murders are immoral, simply cannot stop himself from committing the crimes. Another example is Frankenstein's Creature from the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary-Shelley, as analyzed by Bokma (2017). Bokma shows that while the murders the Creature committed made it a villain, it is also a victim in the story as it was left to fend for itself as its creator abandoned it, only to find later on that not only it is afraid and disgusted by its own self, the townspeople would feel the same and try to murder them. The common thread between the two examples seem to be that while both characters committed murder, there are factors that give them some deniability on the immorality of the murders. Perhaps it is possible, then, for a villain to be shown in a sympathetic light.

Considering that Arthur's murders were committed out of self-defense or while he was under emotional stress, perhaps he would count as one of these "Sympathetic Villains." The next question that arose is "Why?" Why make such a character? After looking further on both the movie itself and several literary theories, the researcher came to a conclusion. The problems Arthur come across in the events of the movie seem to mirror real life problems that currently exist in American society, and thus embodies the concept of Realism, that is, a way of producing literature that replicates the real world in such a way that makes it believable (Nicol, 2009, p. 18). The researcher would like to suggest that this Realism would remind people

of real-world problems through the movie, and show a possible consequence that could happen should these problems are allowed to continue to fester.

## **B. Questions and Scopes of the Research**

### **1. Questions of the Research**

Thus, from reasons as described in the Background of Research above, the researcher asks:

- a. How is Arthur/Joker portrayed sympathetically in this movie?
- b. Is the portrayal of Joker in this movie more sympathetic compared to other portrayals of Joker?
- c. How does Joker's sympathetic portrayal embody the concept of Realism?

### **2. Scopes of the Research**

As for the scope of the research, the focus is on the sympathetic portrayal of Arthur Fleck/Joker from the movie '*Joker*' (2019). The object of the research is limited to film portrayals of the character Joker from *Joker* (2019), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *Batman: The Killing Joke* (2016). These objects would then be analyzed using theories of Sympathy from Sklar, Characterization from Rimmon-Kenan, and Realism from Barrish.

## C. Objective and Significance of the Research

### 1. Objective of the Research

The objective of this research based on the questions presented above, is to:

- a. Find out how Joker is portrayed sympathetically in the 2019 movie.
- b. Compare 2019 Joker with other Jokers to see if the 2019 portrayal is different.
- c. Show how Joker embodies the concept of Realism through his sympathetic portrayal.

### 2. Significance of the Research

From this research, the researcher expects it to provide benefits to multiple parties.

For the field of literary theory, this research would show that Realism, despite its age, is still relevant and this relevance is shown through how it is embodied in the '*Joker*' (2019) film.

For society at large, this research would show that there is more to movies than what is going on in the screen, and to show them a possible meaning to the film.

## D. Operational Definition

In this research, the researcher uses three theories to analyze the movie. Here are the definition of said theories that has been synthesized from various experts' definition:

### 1. Sympathy

Sympathy is a negative feeling that comes from seeing the unfair plight of an entity. For an entity to be portrayed sympathetically, they need to be shown suffering unfairly.

### 2. Characterization

Characterization is the way a character is described, whether directly or indirectly, which paints said character a certain way.

### 3. Realism

Realism is a way of creating literature that, while fictional, reflects reality in such detail that the events described in the story are deemed to be plausible were it to happen in the real world.

## **E. Systematization of the Research**

The researcher divided this research into five chapters as follows:

In Chapter I, the researcher introduced the background of the research, defined the question and scope of the research, explained the objective and significance of the research, described the operational definition used in the research, and outlined the systematization of the research.

In Chapter II, a short explanation of the history of *The Joker* was given, a preliminary analysis on the main object, *Joker* (2019), was written, further detail on the theories of Sympathy, Characterization, and Realism were described, and research that are relevant to this research were shown.

In Chapter III, a description of the method of the research was provided, along with the procedure of the research, data collection technique, and data analysis technique, and data sources used in the research.

In Chapter IV, data found in this research are described, analyzed, and interpreted.

In Chapter V, the researcher gave a conclusion based on the analysis done in the fourth chapter and gave suggestions related to the significance of the research along with suggestion on further research on the film.

