

**THE ‘MAD’ LOOK OF LOVE:
PERCEPTIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS
AND DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP
THROUGH THE IMAGE OF THE JOKER AND HARLEY QUINN**

by

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Identities have always been established through difference: they have been set up as binaries, wherein abnormality is the opposite of what is considered normal, illness the opposite of health, and insanity the opposite of sanity. Additionally, the doctor cannot be the patient, and the criminal cannot take the place of the innocent or the victim. The Other appears to be rather easily defined so as to signify those who do not meet the norm, therefore cannot be regarded as ‘positive’ and subsequently threaten and defile the society's status quo. Is there, however, a possibility to set up concrete boundaries between health and illness? The former is a state of balance and well-being in spite of the existence of the latter. Taking that into account, can we tell the difference between sanity and insanity? At a time when everything appears to be changing, the holistic relationship between the doctor and the patient, which once existed, is deconstructed in the sense that the authority of the therapist is being questioned and altered to pursue a rather different approach, this time focusing on empathy instead of absolute control. At this point, what may happen if the otherwise strict professional loses control of their curative agency? Can, indeed, the so far fixed roles between the two change completely? Could the mentally disturbed patient surpass the supposedly sane doctor and be in control instead?

I would like to explore the fluidity of the above-mentioned binary pairs with regard to two of the world's most iconic comic book characters, the Joker and Harley Quinn, whose weirdness and absurdity has rendered them two of the most bizarre and dreadful supervillains in contemporary graphic novel culture. Why them? The Clown Prince of Crimes' madness has been identified as the most pronounced aspect of his personality, defining him as the despicable psycho-criminal, while Harley Quinn's transformation towards her patient's uncanny reflection of self can be described as the ultimate deconstruction of the doctor-patient relationship, emphasizing on its variability and lack of stability. The interaction consequently becomes transformative for both parties: the otherwise defenceless patient-victim unsettles the doctor's superiority, and gains control over her instead. This fluidity of the asymmetrical power relations becomes apparent when further examining the Joker and Harley's relationship dynamics. Usually depicted as a victim of abuse and diagnosed with dependent personality disorder, Harley fails to fathom the Joker's true motives. This fact seems to be entirely at odds with the psychiatrist's authority and power and reveals a profound clash between her professional identity and inner self. Could we blame the “insane” though?

According to the Joker himself, he is not mad; therefore, his criminal choices appear to be consciously made. Yet, despite the existing questions concerning the legitimacy of his insanity, the character's madness and mental illness seems to occupy the central point of this clown's examination of psychology. More specifically, the Clown Prince of Crimes'

otherworldly and absurd nature is responsible for his incapacity of having a conscience, empathy or sympathy for anyone. For the Joker, Harley Quinn is a ‘vigilant’ follower who is always willing to sacrifice her life for his own cause. His lack of compassion gives its way to the next closest feeling he could possibly have—obsession. The supervillain, however, is obsessed with his archenemy, not his loyal lover, who cannot be the object of such an overpowering emotional expression. My choice of placing the two characters across one another might as well be my way of highlighting their supposed position: as a binary pair themselves, they symbolize polar opposites; the doctor is thought to be detached from the mentally ill. Their connection, however, is present as they are looking at each other; the Joker malevolently smiles while Harley is staring at him in awe.

Having examined the two supervillains to a certain extent, I would like to point out another reason for my preference; the gradually increasing tendency that more and more people nowadays are deeply drawn to the intriguing supervillains instead of their heroic counterparts. One of the reasons explaining this preference might as well be the fact that the mentality of the villainous individuals reflects a great part of people’s darkest fears or desires, mirroring their own suppressed animalistic nature which strives to emerge. The image of Harley Quinn’s character as a sign of the Joker’s exemplified list of traits being also the result of a “collapsed” doctor-patient interaction cannot be avoided. Her entire personality appears to be completely and utterly based on the latter’s own identity; harlequin clothing, vulnerability to the Joker’s psychological and physical abuse and manipulation. Her former superiority as the madman’s psychiatrist entirely vanishes the minute she becomes fascinated by him and is voluntarily assigned to treat him. Her performing above and beyond the call of duty, ironically, was responsible for her own downfall.

The Joker as a character, on the other hand, appears to serve as the embodiment of the villain who represents current societal fears through his criminal deeds, mental illness and physical deformities. Drawing from Kristeva, he illustrates, in other words, the abject, the contaminated corpse whose lack of cleanliness of health, amorality and violence embrace the identity, the order and the norm. His plague-like-image of madness threatens to spread through the city and people signalling decay and death. This quite biased understanding of madness in conjunction with the ‘mighty’ clown’s physical deformities (i.e. white skin, enormous red smile) does unconsciously carry our expectations of this character’s sublime nature to be placed upon those we perceive to be mentally ill or mad in real world. Abjection signals exactly that—the terror which emerges from this uncanny threat. The excessive portrayal of the Joker as both evil and mad, therefore, appears to fuel the mass-media-influenced misconception concerning the depiction of the mentally ill as stigmatized and dangerous, most of the times emphasizing violence, crime and unpredictability regarding their social incompetence.

Attempting to answer the question as to whether we can apply concrete boundaries between the examined binary pairs is by no means an easy task. The power relations between the pairs are not equally proportioned; they can absolutely change at any minute. The other can easily displace the norm, while the previously existing fixity gives way to fluidity. What my drawing seeks to portray through this “mad look” between the Joker and Harley Quinn is this essential lack of stability, which is pervasive in contemporary times.

Works Cited

Kristeva, Julia. *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez. Columbia UP, 1982.