

Expectations Can Make Monsters: *Joker* Film Analysis

JoeMarcus Mireles

Angelo State University

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Jodi Picoult once said, “If you spent your life concentrating on what everyone else thought of you, would you forget who you were? What if the face you showed the world turned out to be a mask...with nothing beneath it?”. This may be a scary realization, but most if not all of us eventually put on masks. This can be for anything from fitting better into a social group, relating to something you don’t understand, or maybe even just trying to get through your day without drawing too much attention to yourself. Expectations from others cause us to put on these masks. In rare cases, the masks can cause people to turn into outcasts, loners, and even monsters.

The movie *Joker*, made in 2019, is an excellent portrayal of what others' expectations of a person can do to mental health. It not only shows what constantly degrading a person due to their conditions can lead to but also lets us investigate the mind of a person as they go through such treatment. I chose to view and write about *Joker* because this movie was nothing like I expected it to be. We all know DC movies aren’t the best when it comes to depicting superheroes, but it seems that when depicting villains they are capable of doing it in a way that shows the trauma, sadness, and anger of the character. The *Joker* made me want to understand the underlying thoughts of Arthur Fleck, the main character of the *Joker*, and what drove him to become the monster that he was shown to be in the movie.

The overall message of the film that the writers wanted to portray depends on the perspective of the watcher. When doing some online surfing of the “message” the writers wanted to portray, there wasn’t a concrete conclusion. For example, a viewer can correlate Arthurs’ strange behavior with his upbringing, which consisted of abuse and neglect, and come up with the idea that if he had received the proper love and affection then he would have never ended up

the way he did. So, the message for that viewer would be to spread love and understanding to the mistreated. Furthermore, another viewer could see Arthurs' anger toward society as a depiction of what happens when you don't let go of anger and choose to forgive. Therefore, the message would be to choose forgiveness over resentment for things you cannot control. I choose to interpret the message differently. From a more psychological perspective. I see Arthurs' rage as a byproduct of the mask he put on every day. Trying his hardest to fit in, Arthur continuously chose to be passive and let others mistreat him because of his mental condition. People, in the movie, judged Arthur and did their best to steer clear of him. They saw him as a freak, an outcast, and eventually, that's exactly what he became. The mask that Arthur was wearing eventually broke and all that was left was anger towards the society that saw him as a monster.

The authors of *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity* discuss the term, "Self-fulfilling Prophecy" from chapter three. The definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as stated in the book, is "when our expectations for an individual's personality or behavior cause that person to act in ways that confirm our expectations for them" (Blaine et al, 2021, p. 44). Multiple scenes in the movie depict this term, but the one that sticks out the most is when Arthur is in the changing room of his workplace and his co-workers are constantly harassing him for the incident that occurred earlier in the movie. His co-workers treated him like a freak and often spoke to their boss about the discomfort he brought to the work environment, This caused him to hardly speak in the scenes that they were in, he was an outcast because they deemed him to be. Another term that was consistently displayed throughout *Joker* was the term "Self-concept" which is a summary of a person's self-knowledge and consists of traits, roles, and abilities. Self-concepts that are mainly positive, clear, and multifaceted promote psychological well-being. However, many stigmatized people may struggle to maintain these mental health-promoting qualities of

self-concept (Blaine et al, 2021, p. 223). Arthur was consistently stigmatized throughout the entire movie by almost everyone he interacted with. One scene that caught my attention for this particular term was when Arthur was taking the subway back home after just being let go from his employment. A group of young men were bothering a young lady nearby and were making rude remarks toward her. Arthur's mental condition causes him to have uncontrollable laughter in the situation and causes the group to take notice of him. The group begins to torment Arthur for his condition, calls him a "freak" and begins to violently attack him. The situation then escalated to the point that Arthur used a firearm to brutally murder these young men. Keep in mind that this situation is not the beginning or the end of Arthur being stigmatized, but it is the circumstance that led to his fragile mask breaking and him becoming what everyone and himself believed him to be, a monster.

I believe these scenes are good illustrations of the terms Self-fulfilling prophecies and Self-concept because of how closely related these terms were in the *Joker*. Arthur had an upbringing that consisted of neglect and abuse from the people who were supposed to provide him with care and understanding. His Self-concept of himself was, in the very beginning, already in a negative outlook. He believed that he was unworthy of love and affection, and this led him to endure others' pessimistic assumptions of himself with no resistance. The self-fulfilling prophecy was the accumulative self-concepts that others had of him. They deemed him as a freak and an outcast, so he lived a life that supported their beliefs. He wore a mask to fit in. When this became too brittle to endure anything, it broke, and he became the violent man that everyone expected him to be.

References

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