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### Psychoanalytic Reading of *The Dark Knight*

The movie *The Dark Knight* is Christopher Nolan's second installment of his Batman trilogy. There has been many Batman cinematic adaptations since 1966 preceding Nolan's, examples range from Adam West's iconic *Batman* series, to darker portrayals such as the movie by Tom Burton and starring Michael Keaton. Joel Schumacher and George Clooney succeeded Keaton and Burton only to produce the notorious *Batman & Robin*, which is known for being the worst Batman movie; on the other hand, there are further version of the character in the working, such as Zack Snyder's *Dawn of Justice* starring Ben Affleck as Batman.

Despite all of that, Nolan's reboot of Batman was deemed successful and Snyder's adaptation is not presumed to top Nolan's. The success of Nolan's Batman wasn't solely because of the high aesthetic and theatrical value, nor was it because it gave a novel characterization of Batman on the silver screen while still being faithful to the comic story line. Nolan's Batman was successful because the movie was able to taps into the audience's unconscious as it personifies the different parts of the human psyche in a realistic way.

Using the characters of the Joker, Batman, and Harvey Dent, Nolan was able to accurately personify the human psyche as each one of these characters represents one part of it: the Id, Ego, and Superego respectively. Through this conceit, Nolan captures the instability of the ego as it is struggling to balance between the superego and ego, and he shows that on both a

psychological and physical level. An analysis of the three aforementioned characters and their interactions within the context of the movie in light of the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristiva, shows how the instability of the human psyche as it functions and clashes.

The movie begins with a robbery. A group of six men wearing clown masks attack a mob bank, it's a fully organized and methodically followed heist. Each of the members in the group is responsible for something, such as disarming the alarms, picking locks, etc... Once that member accomplishes the mission, they're killed by one of the others. All the members speak to each other except one, he remains silent throughout the whole heist until all the other members are killed. The silent robber is challenged by an injured victim who yells, "Criminals used to believe in something: honor, respect. What do you believe in?" At that moment the remaining member takes off the mask and the audience is introduced to the Joker (Heath Ledger). The first words the Joker says are, "I believe that what doesn't kill you makes you stranger." He then mercilessly stuffs a grenade into the mouth of the victim and strolls off with his loot in a school bus, as if nothing happened. In a following scene, mob leaders are meeting and discussing their finances and their current status in relation to Batman. The Joker enters uninvited, laughs at them sarcastically and says, "and I though my jokes were bad." He then makes sexual remarks at the mob and emasculates them by saying, "a year ago the police and these lawyers wouldn't touch you, but what happened now? Did your balls drop off?"

The Joker is a personification of the human id. According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the id is the bottommost part of the psyche and it is the most basic. The id is a place of chaos and irrationality, it desires gluttonously and demands instant gratification. The id also

drives people to be somewhat self-centered and narcissistic and as a result it disregards other's feelings; in addition to being oblivious of the consequences. Furthermore, the fixation on genitals is another symbolic trait of the id. These characteristics closely resemble those of the Joker.

A reading of the Joker in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory would also support the idea that the Joker is symbolic of the id. After leaving the mob, the Joker then goes to one of the mob leaders. The Joker attacks, and he holds the mob leader at knife point and tells him one of the many stories about how he got his scars. The Joker changes his story many times, but throughout, the only consistent aspect of his story is his hatred for his father. He says that his father was an abusive alcoholic who "put a smile" on his face. Here the Joker expresses his hatred for his father before killing the mob leader by slitting his mouth. Later on, his obsessive behaviors are directed toward Batman, in particular to the real identity of the Batman. He goes even as far as broadcasting how he tortures and kills innocent people who dress up as the Batman in order to tempt the real Batman to take off the mask and surrender himself, otherwise "everyday he doesn't people will die, starting tonight."

The Joker, then it appears is driven by his hatred toward his father and his affinity for chaos and entertainment. He gets kicks from killing people and breaking the norm, he wants to stand out and immediately gratifies his desires. He desires an object, usually one that can be explained by analyzing his dysfunctional childhood and especially his relationship with his father, and then he goes to extreme measures to fulfill his desire as soon as possible with no regard whatsoever for the consequences. He is driven by his bodily desires and thrives in chaos. In Lacan's terminology, the Joker is in the Imaginary Order. An order that is closely tied to the mirror stage and characterized by narcissistic behaviors and desires. He creates fantasies where

he images himself in an ideal way in relation to the ideal subject of desire: for the Joker, it's being in power and defeating the Batman. The Joker's existence in the Imaginary Order is shown also by his rejection of the Symbolic Order. His rejection is evident by his sparse speech, but mainly by his stark hatred for his father. The symbolic order is the entrance into society through language by the acceptance of the societal norms, rules, and the Name-of-the-Father. The Joker rejects that completely. His lack of speech and refusal to enter into society is best seen in light of Kristiva's theory.

The Joker is yearning to go back to the stage of the Imaginary, he refuses the symbolic by lack of language and reliance on grunts and repetition. He hates his father and thus refuses to accept the name-of-the-father and enter society via language. The Joker's lack of language also suggest that he is in Kristiva's semiotic chora, which is roughly the equivalent or preceding stage of the Imaginary and the Id. Whenever he's talking, whether to mob leaders or potential victims, the Joker's speech is limited to a few short sentences. The emphasis is on the breaths he takes in between words and he repeats things many times, especially the phrase "why so serious son." When giving the mob leaders a solution for their Batman problem, he proposes "it's simple, we kill the batman." He does that all in a sarcastic and darkly humorous way, and though he speaks he is not verbose and is very simple and unconventional.

According to Kristiva, before the id there was the stage of the semiotic chora. A stage of complete and utter chaos untainted by social expectations and ideologies. This even precedes the mirror stage. In this stage of the chora, a child does not need to express themselves nor does it have to let go of its animalistic and basic desires. Once a child grows out of this chaos, their desires aren't satisfied, and lack arises. This leads to the development of language. The Joker has

a limited lexicon, he speaks repetitively and makes more sounds than actual words. The Joker then could be considered as a person yearning and trying to get back to that stage of the semiotic chora. His chaotic nature and gluttonous behavior, such as that seen when he crashes into the fundraiser for Harvey Dent, exemplifies this kind of yearning for the semiotic chora. When the Joker enters Wayne's penthouse during the fundraiser, he calls himself "tonight's entertainment;" and just like a child he wants to be the center of attention—he wants people to talk about him. He walks around taking food from platters and drinking from other people's glasses and flirt with the ladies. If he comes across men that remind him of his father he is triggered and begins to attack them. However throughout he uses simple language and the sounds he makes rather than the actual words give a bigger insight into his character. He repeatedly asks "where is Harvey Dent? Do you know Harvey Dent? where is he?" In one way or another and he keeps grunting and groaning and giggling as he does that. This lack of actual intelligible language and behavior show that he is desiring a return to the state of the chora, the a child would desire returning to the pre-mirror stage. Because he yearns for the chaotic and simplicity of that place.

The Joker is presently in the abjection stage but his behaviors indicate a desire for the chora. Nonetheless, despite being in the abjection stage the Joker is unable to separate himself from the universe, he refuses to use language as a means of separating himself from the other and constantly giving up linguistic structure in an attempt to slip back into the chora.

After the first introduction of the Joker, Batman is introduced to the audience. Although the character of Batman has already been established in the previous movie *Batman Begins*, it is further developed in *The Dark Knight*. Batman's vigilantism was sparked by his parents' death,

he went deep into the world of criminals in order to understand them and then to vanquish them. In *The Dark Knight* he is introduced shortly after the Joker when a couple of mob leaders were buying drugs from the Scarecrow. During this transaction a bunch of citizens dressed up like Batman attack them, but they do so using guns. At first the mob leaders are afraid but then the Scarecrow correctly states that it's not the real Batman because it's not "his style." The audience so far has not seen Batman but he is being characterized by the villains which is highly significant. When he captures them he ties them up and leaves them for the police rather than giving into the killing instinct.

In *The Dark Knight* Batman takes on the full mantle of the superego thus becoming the Joker's ultimate archenemy. Their relationship is not zero sum, but it's reciprocal where one cannot exist without the other. The Joker even makes that explicit when he says, "I don't wanna kill you! What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off Mob dealers? No, no. No. No, you... You complete me." Notice how his speech is characterized as staccato which is symbolic of the id and the semiotic chora and this will be a sharp contrast to Batman's superego identity. The superego is the ethical unit of the human psyche. It is the opposite of the id and it strives to guide the ego. The superego ventures to serve a higher cause, it is highly critical and represents the ideal and perfect self that one should follow. The superego is also characterized by delaying gratification and having it in an immaterial form.

Batman is highly moral and acknowledges the presence of the police force as it shows with his liaisons with commissioner Gordon. Although he is similar to the Joker in terms of neglecting rules and jurisdictions of Gotham, he doesn't follow them because they hinder his higher cause which is justice, while the Joker does away with the rules because of his affinity for

chaos and anarchy. Batman, instead of working in a state of utter chaos and no rules, set very strict rules for himself. For instance, he cooperates with the police forces, refuses to kill, and claims to be driven by justice not revenge. Another similarity between Batman and the Joker is the fact that they're both faceless symbols. However where the Joker uses the mask to attract attention and set himself apart (id); Batman's mask is supposed to inspire and serve as a symbol of justice not personal gain (superego). Therefore the similarities and parallels between them only serve to set them further apart and show the distinctions between the id and the superego.

In light of Lacan's theory, Batman is representative of the Symbolic Order. He accepts the Name-of-the-Father, acknowledges social conventions, and accepts moral rules. He's stable and fixed in this order, not yearning to go back to the mirror stage or a time where there is no lack, but rather he strives to better the world that has the lack—he strives to satisfy the lack in Gotham. This is apparent in a turning point of the movie as Batman/Bruce Wayne is trying to understand the Joker. His butler Alfred Pennyworth explains to him the type of man that the Joker is by relating it to an experience he had with bandits in Burma. He tells Batman that he can't understand the Joker because he is thinking rationally and logically, "because men aren't looking for anything logical like money, they can't be bought, bullied, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn." Alfred highlights the chaotic and gratification-driven nature of the Joker, but also the Joker's refusal of entering the symbolic order and this is a great contrast to Batman's superego which is rooted deeply within the symbolic order. Logic and common sense become the divisive factor between Batman and the Joker when seen in light of Lacan's theory, where the acquisition of logic is symbolic of accepting the name-of-the-father and the rejection of it or adhering to chaos and entropy signifies the rejection of it.

The division between Batman and the Joker can also be seen in terms of Kristiva's theory. In her theory, the Joker would be in the chora or abjection stage, and Batman would be in the last stage where fetishes are developed. He displaces his pain that is a result of his parents' murder by avenging the city and indicting criminals, he uses language as a symbolic form of justice and action. Batman doesn't desire going back to the semiotic chora, despite longing for his parents he understands the process of having to separate oneself in order to enter the world.

The third character that plays a part in this construction of the psyche is Harvey Dent. Dent is Gotham's new DA, he's been tackling the mob and the crime underworld head on and gaining footing in his mission. The audience is first introduced to him from a video screen in Batman's layer, after that he is seen entering a courtroom fashionably late. Sitting at the prosecutor's table in the courtroom, he decides with Rachel, second in command, who should lead; he makes that decision using his "father's lucky coin." When Rachel refutes such logic, of leaving something as serious to chance he says, "I don't. I make my own luck." He then acts very composed and impresses the courtroom despite being threatened. After the session Dent goes to meet Jim Gordon, and as they're discussing the next move he asks Gordon for his trust. Gordon replies, "I don't get points for being an idealist, I work with what I have. But I'm sold Dent. We all know you're Gotham's white knight." Dent is called Gotham's white knight by many others, such as the prima ballerina. Then when discussing the Batman and the legitimacy of vigilantism with Rachel, Bruce, and Natascha, he states his ironic and famous line, "you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

Harvey Dent is representative of the human ego. The ego according to Freud is the part of the psyche that regulates between the superego, the id, and reality. It seeks to satisfy the needs of

the id without indulging and to follow the idealistic path set by the superego in a way that works with reality. The ego was long thought to be a stable entity, Freud viewed it as the fixed manifestation of the human psyche. In relation to the movie, Dent serves as a mediator between the Joker and Batman. He exemplifies the highly moralistic ideals that Batman seeks to enforce and at the same time is somewhat narcissistic as he sees himself being Gotham's white knight and enjoying all the attention as the Joker. Up until the middle of the movie, Dent primarily represents the superego version of the ego.

In Lacanian terms Dent is leaning more toward the symbolic order, though the imaginary order does influence him at times, he is mainly in the symbolic. He accepts the rules of society and enforces them, he doesn't show a desire for returning to the Real or the imaginary. Dent symbolically accepts the name-of-the-father by relying heavily on his father's lucky coin to make decisive choices. Batman even considers him to be an ideal inspiration for the people because he is the embodiment of the superego ideals and the symbolic order, but rather than a mask, he is real and people can relate to him. Dent then becomes literally the ego as he is the realistic representation of the interaction between the id and the superego.

Kristiva however has a different take on the ego. Rather than it being a stable and permanent manifestation of the interaction between the id and the superego, with one pole being dominantly represented; the ego is a site of clash. It is volatile and visibly divided, in no way is it stable nor can one pole of the psyche become dominantly represented in the ego. The instability of the ego and the ultimate split between the superego and the id becomes evident in Harvey Dent both physically and psychologically as the movie progresses.

In a pivotal point in the movie, havoc ensues during a ceremonial funeral for a judge, this was initiated by cops. Dent learns that the police is infiltrated by the mob and greatly corrupt. During the mayhem, Jim Gordon appears to be killed and this sparks the beginning of the change in Dent. He finds the officer that was in the scene and takes off with him. In a dark alley he starts to interrogate him and even threatens to kill him—of course leaving his fate dependent on his lucky coin. As Dent was about to kill the officer, Batman comes in and stops him. He explains that the officer is a ruse, he's not an actual cop but a patient at Arkham Asylum who has been smuggled out and dressed as a cop. In this scene Dent begins to veer toward his id-tendencies and away from the superego. This marks the beginning of the war for Gotham's soul.

As Batman explains, the Joker seeing that he can't destroy Batman goes instead for Dent, because Dent—being the ego is dominated by the superego steering him away from Batman and eliciting his id-tendencies would be a way to bring Batman down. As Batman explains, the Joker starts to pick apart the justice system to prove the futility of morality and order that Batman represents to Dent and Gotham. If he does so, Dent would become completely split.

Later on in the movie, Dent and Rachel are both taken by corrupt cops to locations designated by the Joker rather than to safe houses. Batman learns of this as he is interrogating the Joker, and the latter says that they're on the verge of death but not before explaining to Batman the morals and limitations of the people. He says, "You see, their morals, their codes...it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you [...] the only sensible way to live is without rules." The Joker's explication of morals is applicable to Dent, whom once the id and superego clashed, began to split and his morals

began to drop. However, the Joker and Dent make a point of equaling chaos and chance with fairness, and that's how they justify their actions.

After the interrogation, Batman and Gordon find out that Dent and Rachel have been locked in two different facilities that are rigged with explosives. Rachel dies, but Dent manages to survive. However he leaves with one half of him scarred and altered. This physical deformation marks the beginning of his split ego, and it is a manifestation of Kristiva's theory—that the ego is not a stable entity but ever changing. Once Dent is saved from the facility and taken to the hospital, he refuses all skin grafts and medication claiming that since they used to call him "Two-Faced Harvey, why should [he] hide who [he] is." After the split Dent begins to exhibit characteristics of his id more frequently and clearly, and this change is evident when looking at from all three theories.

In terms of Freudian theory of the psyche, Dent's ego becomes driven by the id rather than the superego, he seeks instant gratification and chaos. Dent begins to go on killing sprees to avenge Rachel's death and make himself feel better. Other people's lives become contingent on the flip of his coin (which is also burnt on one side). He begins to act in the chaotic order that is similar to the Joker's and no longer the moralistic and idealistic approach that resembled Batman's.

When looking at the change that happened to Dent from Lacan's theory, it is also evident that he begins to slip into the imaginary after once being in the symbolic. Dent desires a time before corruption and regrets believing that "they could be decent men in an indecent time." He refuses to accept societal norms, refuses the name-of-the-father, even his coin has become altered and is no longer identical on both sides. He becomes preoccupied with himself and his loss, the

narcissistic fantasy of the imaginary clouds his logic and continues to push away the symbolic order.

As for Kristiva's theory, Dent becomes the exact embodiment of the ego in her terms. He is split both psychologically and physically. He becomes unstable and constantly oscillating between the superego and the ego, no longer a fixed entity. In terms of language, when Dent first speaks after the incident to Gordon he is very taciturn and angry. Once the Joker visits him, Dent regresses completely into the abjection stage desiring to go to the chora and this shows by the fact that he is no longer articulate but he literally speaks in grunts and sounds, not words. The words that he utters are sparse and repetitive, they aren't as expressive as the sounds he makes while speaking.

Despite his regression to the semiotic chora, the imaginary, and the id; Dent is still not identical to the Joker and retains some of the superego qualities that he had before the incident. Dent starts to behave in a primary id-driven way, however he justifies his actions by superego claims, such as justice. Because he became the battleground for the clash between the id and the superego, Joker and Batman respectively, his actions are conflicted between the two and unstable. The Joker, according to Gordon, "took the best of [Gotham] and torn him down" because as Batman explains he wanted to "prove that even someone as good as [Dent] could fall." This explanation provided by both Gordon and Batman further proves to show how Harvey Dent was symbolic of Gotham's ego and that Batman and the Joker fought over his soul in order to win him over, but because of the instability of the ego he eventually broke. Therefore the movie succeeds in showing the interaction between the theories of Freud, Lacan, and Kristiva by personifying concepts, i.e. the human psyche, via the characters.

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