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## **Sympathy for the Devils: An Analysis of the Villain Archetype Since the Nineteenth Century**

Michel Martin Del Campo

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SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVILS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE VILLAIN ARCHETYPE SINCE THE NINETEENTH  
CENTURY

A Thesis

by

MICHEL MARTÍN DEL CAMPO

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2017

Major Subject: English

Sympathy for the Devils:

An Analysis of the Villain Archetype Since the Nineteenth Century

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## DEDICATION

To my wonderful wife, Mary, for sticking it out with a geek like me and for giving me the strength to keep going.

To little Mattie, who finally decided to sleep in her crib all night just as her parents were about to defend their theses.

To my undergraduate professors for showing me that the most dissimilar ideas and works often have more in common than we care to admit.

To my committee for going with me on this absurd ride of comic books and vampires with a little Hemingway in the middle.

And to the person or persons who first discovered caffeine. Without you, none of us would be here, and we'd be a lot less interesting.

## ABSTRACT

Sympathy for the Devils: An Analysis of the Villain Archetype Since the Nineteenth Century, (May 2017)

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The portrayal of villains has changed dramatically since the late nineteenth century. Modern villains are not necessarily punished, and they are presented as relatable or at the very least sympathetic. An analysis of the major events that shook the Western World in the last century reveals a pattern that links the classical style villain to the modern anti-villain via sociological and cultural changes.

The Victorian period showed the West that the British Empire was not eternal and could be threatened. Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* represented these fears and forced the Victorians to reexamine everything from their belief in science to the role of family.

The Modernists came to further question the validity of things like manhood and bravery, and characters like Robert Cohn Ernst Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* served as a way to teach readers that even assumptions about race said more about those who made the assumptions than the targets of said prejudices. His portrayal as a complex human being labeled as a "villain" simply because the other characters vilified him helped set up the idea that antagonists need not be vile creatures to stand against the "heroes."

Finally, the Post-Modern period continued this trend by showing the West that nuclear weapons could destroy life on Earth, not just target nations. As the Cold War overshadowed politics, the Joker in *Batman* comics came to symbolize the grotesque and evil Other, and yet his characterization in *The Killing Joke* draws parallels between his relationship with Batman and the relationship between the United States and Russia. The Joker represents the final evolution before the twenty-first century anti-villain. He forced readers to question just what separates a hero from a villain.

These three examples explain today's anti-villain. Today's antagonists are charismatic and sympathetic. The new wave of fear following the 9/11 attacks rekindled the old colonial fears of the Victorians, and the threat of nuclear or biological weapons has brought back the fears of the Cold War. Additionally, the War on Terror has created the kinds of trauma that plagued the Modernist period. Villains today help us cope with these problems by offering a way to examine questions that "heroes," by virtue of being "good," cannot answer.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

If Modernism is right, then God is dead, and we have no higher power to answer the metaphysical questions that still plague humanity. The insight of the First World War, the supposed war to end all wars, showed not only that only could Armageddon happen, but humans were capable of turning a continent into a patchwork of burnt-out battlefields. The Second World War showed just how naïve that initial shock was as Hiroshima and Nagasaki burned in nuclear fire and proved that humanity had at last gained the mythical power of gods to wipe all life from the Earth. We did not need God to do that with fire or floods. We had at last achieved physical godhood, and the Post-Modern movement came to life in that world that knew for a fact that all life on Earth could be extinguished in a moment.

That is the ultimate joke that art has tried to solve for many years, a joke that humanity first glimpsed as the Victorians witnessed their empire crumble after World War One and they saw the fragility of social classes and governments change with the introduction of something as new as machines. The Modernists saw it as armies turned Europe into a scorched landmass. The Post-Modernists, however, finally saw that God would not save us, that salvation perhaps existed, but the threat loomed from humanity itself. Prayers would not help, though having the bigger gun might stave off the impending catastrophe. In examining the human condition, it was not enough to simply conjure great heroes to serve as beacons and paragons of virtue. Even the tragic heroes with their examples and warnings would no longer suffice to shine a light on the darker aspects of humanity. Art needed a new type of character to represent

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This thesis follows the style of *The Hemingway Review*.

the visceral evil being felt starting in the nineteenth century, one that could not exist before Modernism, at least not so blatantly, and certainly one that today we have grown comfortable with.

Today, Western literature can look back over the last hundred years and see a collection of characters with very little precedent in the canon. The canon is now filled with villains and anti-villains, characters who are undoubtedly evil and are often proud of the fact, and yet the villains' actions can illuminate the protagonist's morality and character in a way that the hero's story can never accomplish. The new villain is a complex character, perhaps not a tragic creature, but certainly one with manners, and some semblance of redeeming qualities. The villain today teaches through pain and fear and, even when defeated, achieves a measure of success by changing the hero. Although villains have always existed to test the hero, the modern villain more often than not succeeds in proving the hero is not a knight in shining armor. The hero, the villain states, is just as flawed and dark. The new villain is an answer to the joke we played on ourselves by killing God. Modern heroes are flawed, often deeply, and they toe the line between being virtuous and falling into darkness. Likewise, the modern villain in Western fiction is undoubtedly a villain in the literary sense, yet there has been a trend in the last hundred years to make them more than just evil and antagonistic, something more than mere foils. Modern villains are charismatic, charming, and they teach the hero unwanted lessons that prove nevertheless illuminating. In fact, in studying various examples in this thesis, I argue the modern villain shows redeeming and familiar qualities; it has standards and is intended to be sympathized with, even if the villain him or herself would

scoff at the idea. The modern villain, like the modern hero, blurs the line between the classic concepts of hero and villain.

### **The Role of Villains**

Villains have traditionally been the antagonists in many works. Grendel and his mother stood against Beowulf. Calypso kept Odysseus from returning home. Claudius killed his brother to gain the throne of Denmark. In most cases, the villain has been a force to be reckoned with, a force to test the hero. The villain's defeat typically heralds the end of the story as an affirmation that the protagonist has triumphed in a physical, ethical, and spiritual sense. This defeat is symbolic of the hero's morals and convictions triumphing over evil, whatever definition of evil might suit the story depending on the time it was written. This is, of course, an oversimplification, but the basic role of the villain rarely strays from that formula. Villains tempt heroes. They may have been friends or even family, or they may serve to highlight some aspect of the hero's character.

Jean-François Lyotard summed up the role of narratives as "positive or negative apprenticeship" to show the virtues and legitimacy of society or to show what does and does not work or is otherwise acceptable or unacceptable. These stories help set boundaries and expectations (20-21). Additionally, they serve the same role as parables. Stories, according to Lyotard, are a kind of furnace in which the unwanted or unusable parts of a society are shown for what they are and can be discarded for the audience to see "truth" about the society portrayed within. Although Lyotard explains two other functions of narrative, this first one is the most important to this thesis since it explains the need for fiction in any society, and although not every story requires a physical villain as the complication opposing

the hero, the presence of a thinking being elevates a narrative and makes the conflict dynamic. A storm may hinder the hero's journey, but a god making the seas rise has a personal grudge that hinges on emotion, not just raw destruction, and it may be dealt with in more than just a physical manner.

Of course, villains are characters too, and many have become multilayered characters in their own right. Some stories have featured heroes of questionable morality, tragic heroes, or even villains that survive until the very end and receive their just punishment. This thesis is not about those kinds of characters, but about a different kind of character that has never existed before, or at least never to the degree it exists in the twenty-first century.

The modern villain is often a foil for the hero or at the very least a dark reflection of what the hero hides or could have become. Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde, for example, show two sides of the same man (Stevenson), while the more contemporary *Harry Potter* novels have foils in the characters of Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy (Rowling). Sherlock Holmes and James Moriarty are both brilliant thinkers, and while Holmes is coldly analytical and a drug user, he is not a criminal and doesn't seek to hurt others (Doyle). The concept of the foil is not a modern one, though current fiction often takes the concept of the foil to new levels. For example, in the television series *Hannibal*, one of the protagonists is Will Graham, a talented FBI profiler who has the uncanny ability to think like a killer and produce astoundingly accurate psychological profiles of the people he hunts. His foil, Doctor Hannibal Lecter, is a brilliant cannibalistic serial killer who also uses his knowledge of human psychology to trap and often torment his victims (*Hannibal*). In a work created a hundred years ago, Lecter would have rightfully been portrayed as a brutal killer with few, if any, redeeming qualities, an evil almost too visceral to contemplate. Today, however, his

character is not just one of the main cast, but is arguably more famous than any of the hero protagonists. Decades ago, when audiences thought of serial killers, they thought of Jack the Ripper and H. H. Holmes. Today, the term “serial killer” evokes Dexter Morgan and Jigsaw.

Tragic heroes and villains are other staples of literature that are similar to, though not the same as, the types of characters that will be analyzed in this thesis. A tragic hero can best be classified as a protagonist who is attempting to do something good yet fails through either human error or sheer bad luck. However, according to J. Hillis Miller, Aristotle claimed that tragic plays served as a sort of catharsis for the audience. By creating the feelings of loss and dread in the audience, the tragic play can then purge these emotions from the audience (Miller 67). This is the same effect of a horror movie that scares the audience and then creates relief by the realization that the terror and danger are not real. Alternately, fate or chance might conspire to make the hero’s goal unattainable. The tragic hero often dies at the end of his or her quest, or at best achieves a pyrrhic victory. Tragic heroes, however, are still characters that the audience is supposed to feel something for, often pity, and said characters have enough redeeming qualities to make their eventual failures sympathetic. As Miller also shows, Aristotle claimed that we need fiction as humans “to experiment with possible selves and to learn to take our places in the world, to play our parts there” (69). Not all fiction involves a hero, and yet given the prevalence of the formula throughout literature, audiences have, for thousands of years, looked for virtuous heroes as the vessel in which to learn to play our parts in society. If this is the case, then the nature of fallen and tragic heroes fits a niche in the literature, just like Aristotle’s own explanation for narrative shows that fiction serves a function greater than just mere entertainment and offers catharsis and “reduces the soul’s emotions of [pity and] terror by means of compassion and dread.” (43). Aristotle and

Lyotard, separated by millennia, both agree that even characters who might be considered vile due to their actions or pathetic in their failures still serve as teachers and as surrogates for the audience.

However, the tragic hero is still a character the audience needs to empathize with, a character that must offer a release for the audience and must do it by creating some sort of empathy. Even if a tragic hero falls into complete darkness, he or she must still be recognizable as a person, as someone who has redeeming features that outweigh the tragedy in the story and someone who could serve as a stand-in for the audience. Tragic heroes, like the common foil, are still not the focus of this thesis.

Likewise, this thesis is not about villain protagonists as they are traditionally used in literature. Characters such as Doctor Faustus and Barabas the Jew are clearly villains with ambition and desires that most people would hope to shun from society. Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* is very much the focus of the epic and even has moments that portray him as a well-intentioned extremist (Milton). Their characterizations and even over-the-top villainy is indeed required for the morality plays common in the Middle Ages and even in the Puritan works of early American literature. However, these villains almost universally received punishment for their actions, although the ratio of humanizing and evil deeds prevented them from being too familial for most audiences. The point of these villains was to show that their evil deeds did indeed catch up to them in the end. Doctor Faustus and Barabas, for example, both meet the ends the audience would expect evildoers to suffer. These characters are villains in the context of the societies in which their stories were told, and they suffered the punishments said villains would be expected to suffer if they were caught. While they wreaked havoc in their own ways and, in Barabas' case, committed mass murder and aided in

the fall of a city-state, they died and justice was served. This is not the type of character this thesis will address, either.

### **The Modern Villain**

The new villain is not necessarily caught at the end, nor does he or she simply oppose the protagonist in the traditional narrative sense. In today's literature, the villain is a reflection of the antagonist in much the same way a foil highlights certain aspects of the hero's character. Even if he or she commits acts of murder, torture, or even cannibalism, the new villain is a character that enthralls the audience and often steals attention from the designated hero. The new villain captivates in a way that the hero would have captivated in previous decades, and today's audience is willing to look past the villain's worst sins. While the modern audience can look at these villains in past works and see something redeemable, villains introduced after the nineteenth century and certainly in the Post-Modern period are written almost specifically to invoke sympathy and awe. The modern villain must be at least as interesting and captivating as the hero, and due to Aristotle's claim that tragedies and narratives are a way for the audience to experience emotions they may not feel in real life, the new villain raises the implication that something has monumentally shifted if readers can and want to step into the shoes of what could safely be categorized as sociopaths and degenerates. Do audiences want to be Hannibal Lecters and Darth Vaders? Based on the classical explanation for literature and the nature of tragedies and villains, this might seem to be the case. Based on Lyotard's theory that a character shows what works and what does not in a given society, this new villain furthermore seems to show that some of the most vile characteristics in literary villains can and do survive the designated hero's actions.

The abundant number of positive receptions of these characters began in earnest in the nineteenth century. The focus on villains, and indeed the general focus on morally ambiguous protagonists, is fueled by a series of events that shattered the Western viewpoint of absolutes, strength, and what it meant to have structure in life. These events, although ordinarily studied and labeled as vastly different periods in art, actually have more in common despite their differences in styles and themes. Each of them begins with the symbolic end of society in one form or another, a sentiment expressed by the Victorians and their fears late in the nineteenth century. This is the era where technology and wars forced a rapid change in the social order within a few short decades. The trend continued into the Post-War era of the Modernist movement, and continued well through the Post-Modern period that may still be going strong today.

### **Post-Colonialism**

The Victorian Era was the peak of the British Empire which had expanded over the centuries. They had moved into virtually every continent on the globe except for Antarctica, and although they remained a powerful nation both economically and militarily, they were faced with the prospect of their nation being built upon unsavory actions such as forced conquest. The Victorians were also faced with the possibility of others doing to them what they had done for centuries. The threat of reverse colonization, of the Other invading England, became a real fear. Every nation embraces patriotism and nationalism, but in Victorian England, that identity was under threat. That fear made the Victorians question themselves in ways they would never have considered. The institutions of marriage, the role of class, and even something as seemingly simple to the Victorians as the role of women were under attack from shifting social classes and the introduction of new ideas. The so-

called “Great Unwashed,” for example, were finally “seen as a threat to the stability of British life” (Childers 150). The change in the nineteenth century was not merely one of political borders, but also a change that struck at every level of British society. This is the environment in which Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*, a text that would lead its Victorian audience to react to their collective fears about invasion. It forced them to confront their fears regarding everything from societal roles to the dangers of foreign influence on their culture, influences that in the novel are akin to a plague.

### **Modernism**

The key tenet of Modernism is “Make it new,” according to Ezra Pound. The idea seems quaint to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. After all, shouldn’t every new piece of art, despite belonging to a movement or an established style, be new? However, the sentiment is more complex than that. The Modernists aimed to create art in a world still healing from the First World War. While the war was over, the wounds both physical and mental would linger for a long time before being overshadowed by the horrors of the Second World War. Before that, though, the Modernist movement grappled with humanity’s suddenly very real mortality.

Modernism, for the purpose of this essay, will be the term for literature post-World War I up to the end of the Second World War in 1945. Texts from 1946 and onward will be categorized as Post-Modern for the purpose of this research. The reason Modernism signaled this fundamental shift in the perception of the Other as a villain is intimately tied to the social and cultural changes created by the First World War. The post-Great War period is one of the turning points for Western civilization both physically and mentally. Borders, both literal and metaphorical, shattered in the wake of the Great War, and many saw the end of civilization as

they knew it. As Trudi Tate writes, “Whole nations found themselves bearing witness to events they did not understand and, by and large, could not see. Writing in 1915, Freud remarked that he was standing too close to real violence in our current reality to see it properly. As time passed, many writers struggled to express what they had seen—or not seen—in the event that was to shape the history of the entire twentieth century” (10). To those who lived through the conflict, the world was a changed place in many fundamental ways. Even civilians who were spared the sight of the battlefields and No Man’s Land suffered from the neurosis of such a fantastic event like a world-wide war, Tate writes (20-21). While other wars certainly had changed global politics or entire nations in the past, the Great War changed not just political borders, but also social dynamics. With so many men gone, for example, women were forced to take a more active role in the workplace. Following the end of the war, women wanted to keep that freedom they’d tasted. However, old ways have a habit of fighting back against change and progress, a reaction that continues to this day.

More importantly, the First World War was more real and visceral than any other before it. Tate concludes that photography and film captured the war in ways never before attempted. The sheer brutality of the war weighed heavily on the soldiers who came back. Every war has accounts of the dead and the carnage that follows a battle, but modern warfare saw the widespread use of automatic firearms, chemical weapons, and high explosives, weapons that, although not new, were never employed in such numbers. The writings of the time are filled with vivid accounts of the bodies left behind. The two things most commonly found images in many narratives talk about not just bodies, but the fact that many were in pieces or mutilated (75). More interestingly, nearly half of the dead left no corpse or

identifiable remains behind (77), meaning that many of the surviving families never got full closure, perhaps wondering if their loved ones were still out there somewhere. Events like this can weigh heavily on survivors, often creating survivor's guilt (50), and such events are devastating to, for example, those soldiers who survived. Survivor's guilt and lack of closure on a continental, even global, scale, caused much of the shift in cultural perception that would lead to the psychological scarring of the Western World on top of the already-traumatic years of war and destruction.

### **Post-Modernism's Birth**

Douwe W. Fokkema discussed the nature of Post-Modernism in relation to Modernism and made the assertion, found in other bodies of work, that the difference between the movements is purely academic. Though both eras have differences in the way they produced writing and though themes are somewhat different, he argues that the similarities between both periods are more pronounced than the likenesses (38). The cut-off date between Modernism and Post-Modernism is generally agreed to be 1945, the end of the Second World War; despite Fokkema's assertion, I will be using that same date, and I will use the term Post-Modernist to refer to works created after the end of World War Two. There is as distinct a difference in the content and attitude of the Post-Modern era as there is between the Post-Colonial and Modernist era, but all three eras are linked in the kind of shift in cultural perspective they created.

The end of the Second World War also saw the first use of nuclear weapons during war time, an event that altered the world much more than the Great War. While World War One showed the horrors of countries at war on a global scale and the use of chemical

weapons, World War Two ended with a single weapon wiping out cities in one strike. It showed that nations and humanity had the power to wipe out not just civilization and its infrastructure, but also all life on Earth without having to invade or resort to conventional weapons like airburst shells or tactics like firebombing. Faced with imminent nuclear destruction during the Cold War, the Post-Modernist period, despite its similarities with the Modernist period, produced work that was much more self-aware and cynical in many respects. Much like a dying patient may feel depressed and honest at the same time, the inevitability of death making pretenses moot, the specter of global death did in fact create a new style of writing that also helped to make the Other much less taboo and colored the way characters were used and portrayed. This is different from the Modernist Period, but it is arguably a more pronounced cause and effect. Both eras were kick started by a conflict that shaped nations' concepts of identity and cultural permanence. While World War One ended with entire cities laid to waste, World War Two ended with the realization life itself could be extinguished.

Lyotard defined Post-Modernism “as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). Lyotard first defined “postmodern” as “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” and clarified that this state is due to various changes that have altered the way science and art are perceived since the end of the nineteenth century (xxiii). Specifically, postmodern works lack the great heroes and stories of the past since they are not beholden to the great metanarrative. In other words, fiction in the Post-Modern Era stands apart from the past while looking at it and itself. Self-awareness is a key part of the movement, too. While the Modernists may have endeavored to “make it new,” Postmodernists seek instead of “make it aware,” or “meta.” A Post-Modern text is aware, at

least on a subtle level, that it is a work of fiction. This awareness goes back to works like Cervantes' *Don Quijote* (Cervantes); however, the Modernists sought to look forward to new ideas while Cervantes used his meta-awareness to comment on the state of his world.

### **Justification for Works**

The three works that will be discussed in this thesis were chosen for their representation not only of the key tenets of their respective periods, but also because each contains an antagonist that is more than simply a force to oppose the protagonist or protagonists. The antagonists in these works blur the lines between good and evil, serve as foils, and set the stage for the modern anti-villain that defies description by traditional means.

*Dracula* is the quintessential supernatural threat and the mold for nearly every vampire story in the last hundred years. However, a close reading of the text reveals that Dracula is not so different from the Victorians he terrorizes and in fact is a symbol of not just reverse colonialism, but also a mockery of the standards to which the Victorians held themselves, a taunt that calls into question many Victorian ideals. The Victorians in the novel, for their part, eventually take on many of the traits they find reprehensible in Dracula himself, and although they never acknowledge their faults, they win by succumbing to the barbarism they fear in the vampire himself. Dracula is perhaps the closest to being a classic villain in the traditional sense, but his multiple similarities to the heroes mark him as one of the early models for the new villain of the twenty-first century.

*The Sun Also Rises* is one of the classic Modernist texts and is indicative of Hemingway's overall style. Fittingly, the novel also offers one of the better examples of antagonists that defy the traditional nature of villainy and show us much about the

protagonists as they do about the author. The character of Robert Cohn is not a villain in the traditional sense, yet he is an antagonist by virtue of being Jewish and being considered “weak” by the other characters who did in fact serve in World War One. However, his relationship to the rest of the characters and the fact that Hemingway himself shared many qualities with Cohn suggests that he is designed to serve as a foil, indeed a reminder, to the protagonists that their ideas about masculinity are misguided. The identity of the Lost Generation, in fact the background of much of the West, was tied to the Great War. The national narrative in the United States was very much a white narrative. Cohn is an alien to these narratives and serve as a metaphorical punching bag for Jake and his friends, but he, like Dracula, has much in common with the protagonists. In the end, Cohn is only a villain because the characters say so. Much more than Dracula, Cohn serves to deconstruct the heroes.

Finally, the graphic novel *The Killing Joke* deconstructs the nature of Batman and the Joker’s relationship and is widely considered one of the most important tales featuring the Clown Prince of Crime. The story asks whether Batman can survive without the Joker and just what makes the Joker so different from Batman. The answer, the story posits, is a single choice. The Joker has become a cultural icon and the focus of a rabid fandom despite canonically being a domestic abuser, mass murderer, and terrorist. He is one of the characters most indicative of the state and role of villains in the twenty-first century and *The Killing Joke* even references many of the cultural and psychological changes that gave rise of the Modernist and Post-Modernist movements, cementing the Joker as the heir to those traditions. Despite easily being derided as popular fiction or as works unworthy of being called literature, comic books have had an indelible mark on popular culture. The longevity

of characters like Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and even old classics like *The Shadow* and *Zorro* show that these stories resonate with readers in various decades even as society and social norms change. In *The Killing Joke*, Batman and the Joker become analogues for the Cold War and the fears of invasion and propaganda. These themes were present throughout the mid-Twentieth Century and lived well into the 1980's when the graphic novel was written. As one of the villains that has survived nearly eighty years and has been interpreted in wildly different forms throughout film, television, and video games, the Joker and *The Killing Joke* are instrumental in understanding the third phase of the evolution of villains since the Victorian Era and where the continuing specter of war and death led to the concept of "villain."

### **Literary Review**

Joseph Campbell's work is the seminal work on the study of the hero in literature with the publication of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The presence of certain basic patterns and repetitive storylines throughout the world certainly hint that humans have a need for specific heroes, certain types of characters that need to adhere to paths that teach us about the world and society. However, the work does leave out the study of the villain since the villain has usually been an obstacle and maybe a lesson for the audience in terms of a morality play. Since the modern anti-villain is a relatively new concept and has only emerged in full force in recent decades, it is no wonder that Campbell's work would not make mention of these kinds of characters.

*Dracula* has been reviewed and analyzed for more than a hundred years. Much of the literature focuses on the symbolism of the vampire, and modern academia has studied the

vampire as a new form of the classic anti-hero. In “Archfiend to ‘Angel’: Dracula’s Political Dimensions,” for example, Elke Bartel maps the changing views of vampires in fiction, specifically contrasting Dracula with Angel from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. A lot of focus is given to the sexual undertones of the vampire’s bite, the symbolism of disease and plague concerning a vampire turning others into the undead, and the wave of teen fiction featuring vampires in the 2000s which created a surge of papers studying just why the vampire in general had been resurrected as a teen heartthrob instead of a bloodthirsty monster. Karen Backstein discussed the sexualization of the modern vampire in “(Un)safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire,” and John Allen Stevenson wrote on the sexual deviancy and contrasting norms between vampires and the Victorians. Generally, interest in vampires falls and rises with the times as vampires phase in and out of the popular consciousness. Few works, though, discuss Dracula himself in the context of the Victorian psyche beyond the general discussions of plague and invasion.

Much of the literature on *The Sun Also Rises* discusses Cohn in the context of his Jewishness and what this means to the themes of masculinity. Some works gloss over the similarities with Jake and do not analyze Cohn’s overlap with the other characters in terms of personality and history but rather try to explain his differences. Lesley M. M. Blume’s *Everybody Behaves Badly* chronicles Hemingway’s real-life adventures in Pamplona which inspired *The Sun Also Rises*, including the people he partied with who would become the basis for characters like Cohn. By profiling the real people and events behind the story, the book does give the characters more depth and provides insight into their thought process. H. R. Stoneback’s *Reading Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises: Glossary and Commentary* discusses the importance of Cohn in terms of his “Jewishness” and as an important character

to the others despite seemingly disappearing for much of the book. It even discusses why he is a foil and should not be seen as an anti-Semitic caricature.

Comic books in general have had less academic study than other works; however, there is a large body of work that has looked at the psychology and social impact of the genre. For example, in their article "Anti-Heroism in the Continuum of Good and Evil" in *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*, Michael Spivey and Steven Knowiton write on the nature of anti-heroes and their relation to villains, mapping out the relationship between the methods both use to achieve their goals and whether said means lead to good or evil. Tom and Matt Morris even analyze various superheroes in the context of religion and philosophy in their collection *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*. The book looks into the hero's and villain's paths and how they diverge, though only briefly and in the context of Spider-Man and Task Force X. However, Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Werner's collection *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime* contains various articles exploring everything from the Joker's political symbolism to his symbiotic or even parasitic relationship with Batman. The articles span the Joker's portrayals in various media from his earliest appearances to the *Arkham* video games.

## **Thesis**

Each of these villains is a symptom of a world that has lost the ability to look to a higher power, or any power, in search of answers. The protagonists in each story are heroes by the classic definition. They do in fact embody certain virtues the audience is expected to embrace, and they serve as surrogates that show the kind of behavior that is expected of someone who is "good." However, like all captivating protagonists, they are not pure and

have flaws that serve as internal conflict. In each of their stories, furthermore, the villains are a distorted mirror to show the protagonists who they could have become. Dracula, Cohn, and the Joker are not so dissimilar to the heroes they fight, and the symbolic collapse of empires and the subsequent perceived end of the world allow these villains to serve not just as obstacles, but as teachers. Each one leaves his mark on the heroes and shows that when God is metaphorically gone, then the metaphysical answers on the nature of good and evil must be found elsewhere.

If God cannot answer and appease our doubts, then perhaps the devil can oblige us.

## CHAPTER II

## MUCH TO BE LEARNED FROM BEASTS:

THE VILLAIN AS A CHARACTER IN *DRACULA*

Out of all the legacies of Victorian literature, few remain as consistent as the vampire in the public's imagination, specifically the portrayal of Count Dracula. Whether in the guise of the old aristocrat, the plague-carrier, the suave seducer, or even the tormented Byronic anti-hero, vampires remain one of the staples of modern fiction. Since 2005, however, a new resurrection in horror and fantasy has fueled an explosion of vampire-based literature that, for better or worse, targets the teen female audience and those looking for dark romances. Purists and fans of horror balk at this change in vampires from bloodthirsty killers and dark avengers to the objects of tween lust, but this new wave of interest in vampires is not without precedent. Indeed, the conditions that made *Dracula*, the archetypal vampire, so popular in Victorian England are the same conditions that have brought vampires back into the spotlight in the twenty-first century and are part of what makes vampires so enduring across various genres, not just horror, and for an audience that includes everyone from gothic horror fans to pre-teens hungry for the newest boy band.

The character of Dracula is a monster through and through, but his nature is not simply to exist as a physical threat, but also a social, sexual, and national menace to Victorian England. Such a threat is the basis for the vampire's enduring staying power and for its initial acceptance as a literary character. The vampire, as seen through various iterations but especially in *Dracula*, is also the perfect vessel for society's fears. Academics can learn a lot of about what a society finds virtuous, but studying a society's monsters is equally enlightening. The people and ideas pushed to the fringes say something about that

society's morals and norms and even the deep-seated fears a culture doesn't even wish to discuss. How society views the vampire, then, and the fact that this monster has survived for so long in so many shapes across a hundred years of adaptations in nearly every form of media, is indicative of fears and apprehension the concept can create even when the genre is not straight horror.

Dracula himself is one of the first examples of a villain that is more than just a force to stand against the protagonists. Indeed, his popularity and the fact that his name is the title of his novel show that the fascination with the grotesque and evil began in earnest only a few decades before the First World War. Dracula showed the heroes their own failings and crimes, showing the Victorian ideals were not as righteous as they thought; even though he doesn't "win," his influence, like that of Cohn and the Joker, is far from over after his end.

### **Vampires are Sex Gods**

One of the most primal fears in Victorian England was sex and the changing gender norms. The sexual norms of Victorian England underwent a direct assault through Dracula's arrival, and readers were confronted with various taboos. The weird sisters, often called the Brides of Dracula, provide a glimpse into a twisted home life. The description of two of them as having similar noses and eyes to the Count suggest that they might be related biologically in some way (Stoker 46). However, there is a sexual undertone to the relationship between the women and Dracula that would suggest an incestuous nature if the blood relationship proved true. Regardless, Dracula's obsession with Jonathan Harker and his rebuke of the sisters shows an almost homoerotic fascination with the Englishman. Dracula chastises the Brides feeding on Jonathan by reminding them that he too can "love" and that they should

know that by now and should be wary of “how [they] meddle with him (47). In addition, they describes their interactions with Harker as “kisses” (46). In a more subtle way, Dracula and the weird sisters represent a mockery of marriage. Lucy Westenra, though flirtatious, must later choose between three suitors. Mina and Jonathan Harker start as stereotypical Victorian sweethearts and do eventually marry and have a child. Both these situations are almost whimsical takes on the Victorian romantic novel, scenarios that would not be out of place in the world of Emily or Charlotte Brontë. Dracula, meanwhile, lives with three women in an unspecified relationship that, at least through popular culture, is sexual in nature. The brides appear to serve no purposes other than to live in Castle Dracula, to feed, and to hunt. They only appear to feed and hunt. This arrangement stands in stark contrast to the well-defined relationships between the English characters. In this, at least, Dracula functions as a standard foil and adheres to the traditional villain role.

The sisters’ preferred victims are children, a further mockery of the female role. While Dracula is sometimes redeemed in adaptations, this one aspect of the brides makes them monstrous since harming a child is typically a line few characters can cross and be easily forgiven. Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens (1840), for example, is an irredeemable monster if only because he targets Nell, a child, despite having done innumerable unsavory acts before and during the novel. Likewise, the brides are more bestial than the Count, and adaptations usually portray them as even more monstrous than Dracula. Dracula could easily have been shown engaging in this same sort of behavior and would have become a much more terrifying monster for it, but the fact that he isn’t makes him more human and gives him a connection to the Victorians, however tenuous at this point in the novel.

Even the vampire victims in the novel show a perversion of Victorian gender roles that question the permanence of said roles. When Harker is bitten, he becomes much more docile and compliant, the opposite of a strong, Victorian male figure. This physical weakness leading to a loss of manhood would be repeated later in *The Sun Also Rises* with Jake's perception of himself and Cohn. Furthermore, when women are turned, they became intent on feeding and fulfilling desire, the opposite of the Victorian expectation of motherhood and domesticity. Dracula himself can only enter if invited, a metaphor for being corrupted if one allows it. According to Bartel, the vampire confuses gender roles and Harker becomes more feminine and pliable while Lucy becomes aggressive and feral (18-19). More tellingly, Bartel writes, with the exception of the crew of the *Demeter*, Dracula's victims are all female, keeping in line with the Victorian taboo against homosexuality and the fear that the English race would be wiped out by being contaminated with impure blood (18). It's an almost forced approach to Dracula's attacks. The *Demeter* attacks were a series of feedings based on need since the ship is at sea for weeks, but when given the choice, Dracula feeds on women. As McCrea writes, "*Dracula's* subtle but persistent focus on marriage, and the uncanny continuity between Castle Dracula and the happy English home both suggest that the horrified fantasy is about life outside, not inside, the closet. *Dracula* [...] is a novel about heterosexuality as it is viewed from inside the gay closet—as an exotic foreign world, at once alluring and frightening" (253). The idea that such carnal perversions as homosexual relations could intrude into the idyllic world also created another layer to the horror of the vampire. The characters were confronted with monsters that show them the desires they fear lurk in their own hearts, as Harker himself notes in his journal when the brides first move to bite him and he "closed [his] eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating

heart” (Stoker 47). His fear is not being confronted with sex, but with the realization that those lusts exist in the hearts of every person and could be let out by the right person, Dracula in this case.

More importantly, once Dracula arrives in London, he targets Lucy, and much later, Mina. Both women are nearly paragons of Victorian femininity. While Lucy may lament that she cannot marry three men (Stoker 68), she is otherwise chaste and pure despite later adaptations such as Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 film version portraying her as somewhat flirty. Mina, as a school mistress, is similarly chaste and pines after Jonathan like a good wife should. Once they are bitten, however, both women experience personality changes. Lucy is overtly sexual and filled with “voluptuous wantonness,” becoming a creature that is seductive yet deadly (217). This perversion of the chaste and moral woman is an attack on purity itself. The Victorian middle class believed that a woman had two roles, either a virginal maiden or a mother. Sex or sexuality in any form other than that to procreate was taboo despite the upper class indulging its own appetites behind closed doors. However, while the middle class originally adopted chastity and purity in an attempt to copy the perceived morals of the upper class, the middle class did end up internalizing these norms until they became part of the Victorian middle class identity. Turning Mina and Lucy into sexual beasts made them perverted versions of themselves in more than just the sexual sense. They become the antitheses of the Victorian woman, even more so than the “New Woman” Mina laments early in the novel. Like the brides, Lucy targets children, an indication that to become a vampire is to not only forsake the norms of “civilized” society, but that being undead somehow makes the vampire seek out that which it held dear in life to destroy it or

mock it. While Lucy does not explicitly target her loved ones, she does go after children, the planned eventual result of her engagement.

### **Science versus Religion**

The Count also represents a fear of the traditional superstition coming back and replacing “enlightened” church-going British citizens who have embraced the scientific revolution. At the time of *Dracula*’s publication, the landscape had changed. Science and modern medicine had altered the way surgery and even illnesses were treated, and industry and smokestacks had replaced much of the agrarian economy of the past. With science even explaining the origin of species and seemingly taking God out of the equation, it appeared that magic and superstition were little more than the flights of fancy of a less cultured, less civilized era. *Dracula*, however, made the Victorians grapple with the real existence of the supernatural at a time when science had replaced faith.

A vampire is a creature of myth and magic, and its very existence is an affront to a society that has worked to distance itself from what it considers reactionary thinking and old folk beliefs. As Harker notes, Transylvania is the cradle of superstition and ancient beliefs (Stoker 12). Harker is polite yet scoffs at the locals’ fears. In one sentence, Stoker turned the Carpathians into something akin to *Dracula* himself, a single vessel for the West’s many fears. Calen writes that the Count’s retelling of his lineage and the power that once occupied Castle *Dracula* further drives the point home that this one location is a nexus of history’s tyrants and conquerors. Transylvania, and *Dracula* specifically, becomes frightening because of its strong connections with the medieval, the ancient, which later intrudes into the modern world (Clasen 382), a relatively contemporary concept now used in modern urban fantasy

and some horror. By merely existing, the vampire verified that the vaunted progress of the Victorian Era was not a triumph over the past and could in fact be undone.

This characterization of Dracula's homeland as an ancient, mystical land seems strange in light of England's own history, one filled with tales of King Arthur, magic, faeries, and elves. While the negative aspects of Transylvania's history are highlighted, England too had its own bloodthirsty periods, but the similarities are what eventually bring Dracula into the new century. This is one of the most important hints that the characterization of Dracula may not be to make him alien, but to make him relatable, a concept that fully comes into play later in the Modernist period. Harker and Abraham Van Helsing could curse at the vampire and try to dehumanize him, but their similarities cannot be overlooked.

Later in the novel, when the threat of an unknown illness presents itself in Lucy, the protagonists call not for a priest but for a doctor. Strangely enough, Van Helsing chastises the others for not having open minds and allowing for the existence of the supernatural. However, despite accepting vampires as real, Van Helsing does not simply jump to conclusions based on gut feeling or by consulting ancient tomes. His investigation is rational and methodical, like any other medical examination. He performs experiments and explains his line of reasoning before concluding that Lucy has in fact been turned into a vampire. As Bolen and Ingelbien state, society has slowly replaced intentional explanations with mechanical explanations, changing the idea of gods and monsters for static electricity and shadows, taking science and fighting against our own intuition (385). Despite "weaponizing" superstitions by finding out which methods must be used to fight the vampires, Dracula is ultimately done in by keen minds in contrast with what Van Helsing calls Dracula's child-like mind (Stoker 308), a mind that seeks pleasures much like an infant and yet has the

wisdom of centuries. Even the way in which Dracula is killed is practical and straightforward: decapitation and a knife to the heart.

The reliance on weapons and superstitions does put the protagonists in a gray area and finally cements the lesson that Dracula inadvertently taught the Victorians. In their quest to vanquish the vampire, the protagonists resort to savage means and superstition (Bollen and Ingelbein, 403). They do not resort to “civilized” means like going to the proper authorities or using legal means to remove Dracula from Carfax Abbey. Rather, they become vigilantes. Even something as simple as using a communion wafer on Mina to show she is a vampire is to use religion like a weapon. While there may be reason to believe the police would doubt the claim that a vampire moved into the heart of London, Van Helsing has what we today would call forensic evidence. If nothing else, the fact that the coffin is empty at certain points would be enough to get the police involved. Instead, the protagonists hunt down their enemy and hack it to pieces. While they employ the tools of the civilized world, they use the methods of the savage. The heroes, despite their calls for patience and their reliance on the tools of the nineteenth century, become knights of crusades of past centuries, the same kind of bloodthirsty conquerors and killers Dracula brags about regarding his own ancestry.

While the horror genre as it exists today did not come to be until the nineteenth century, and arguably until even the early twentieth century, Dracula was one of the first characters who could be called a modern villain. The nature of Dracula, an Other that should not be, intruding on the modern world, is a hallmark of nearly every modern horror story and one of the elements of the modern villain. Today, we have ghosts and specters, serial killers that will not die, or even aliens abducting and experimenting on their victims. Dracula, with his grounding in history and Victorian fears, was horrific to the Victorians specifically

because he was both recognizable and alien. Humans have an innate fascination with the strange, and Dracula was horrific for a number of reasons, and yet that horror was directed not just at the vampire, but at the audience as it saw itself in Dracula's character even if the protagonists never actually make the connection within the novel. Dracula's otherness forces the characters to fall back on the tools of past ages and realize that science alone could not save them, and they employ weaponized superstitions with little regard to the fact that in doing so, they are admitting that the science that had built the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not enough to stand against a single creature.

### **Reverse Colonization**

In the larger scheme, Dracula is a one-man invasion, a thoroughly different villain from anything the Victorians knew. Dracula's plan to arrive in England is not via some devious plan to sneak in or even some attempt to bribe customs officials. His plan is far simpler than that: he wishes to legally purchase property and acclimate himself to the culture. His adoption of a local accent and even his insistence that Harker teach him how to sound like an Englishman, combined with the large library of history books and other topics relating to England are not dissimilar to the kind of training a spy might undergo before infiltrating an enemy nation. Victorian readers would have been well-aware of their nature as citizens of a conquering nation, and in fact the fear of reverse colonization fueled national nightmares. England was, at the time of *Dracula's* publication, at the height of its power, and despite that achievement, Victorians knew how they had reached those heights and feared everything that could undermine that position.

Many English citizens knew a reckoning was inevitable, that the remaining colonies would rebel, or that the majesty of the British Empire on which the sun would never set would in fact fade away. Dracula is a representation of the old world, the primitive, moving into the modern era to further disrupt a society thrown off-balance by the weight of history. Transylvania was part of the “Eastern Question,” a place of political and racial strife, thus linking the vampire to the history of conquest and the fall of empires (Arata 626-27). Dracula, as a member of a foreign aristocracy, symbolizes a focal point of power shifting into the very heart of the empire. Arata writes, “[Reverse] colonization narratives are obsessed with the spectacle of the primitive and the atavistic [...] The primitive and the occultist alike operated beyond or beneath the threshold of the ‘civilized’ rational mind, tapping into primal energies and unconscious resources as well as into deep-rooted anxieties and fears” (624). Dracula would arrive and assert himself as one of the people, and in so doing, camouflage himself like any good predator.

The vampire’s colonization would be subtle, with no shots fired, and yet it would succeed. In many ways, his arrival and colonization of England was far more civilized and bloodless than the British colonization of other nations. This too, would force the Victorians to come to terms with their own bloody pasts. If Dracula could remain hidden and kill onboard the *Demeter*, an arguably small vessel, he could do untold damage in London itself as the city offered not just thousands more victims, but also the urban sprawl in which to hide. A disease on a boat has nowhere to go, but a plague in a major city can easily spread through the densely packed population and eventually jump to other cities via more boats. This also ties in with the image of the vampire as a plague, disease, and arriving via boat

reinforces the idea that Dracula is not just one man, but rather death itself, not unlike the Black Plague.

### **The Appeal of Darkness**

*Dracula* has no true heroes for readers, a key element that leads to the development of the new anti-villain in the Twentieth Century. While there are certainly protagonists, no one except for Van Helsing is proactive in his or her hunt for Dracula. They react and wonder, but their moments of action are few and far between. Dracula, although not appearing for much of the novel, is the driving force and therefore the most alluring part of the story. Despite his villainy, he did become for the Victorian reader, and for the modern reader, a symbol of the story and a formidable presence. He is abstract in his representation of Victorian moral fears, yet he is also a physical threat, a representation of an ancient evil, making him a visceral and more powerful fear than the standard fanged beast (Clasen 381-82). Audiences were and are still drawn to him because he is human and inhuman (388). He threatens to not just destroy the body, but also the mind and the spirit through his corruption. For the Victorians who had hoped to move away from superstition, he was the closest thing to the tempting devil.

Dracula wishes to settle in London through normal means. He makes dinner for his guest. There is something too human in his interactions, yet something also assuredly inhuman once his true nature becomes apparent. This slight inhumanity is part of Dracula's appeal. Primal fears play a part in how people react to something that looks human but is clearly something else, and the Victorians saw too much of themselves in the vampire, not

just their fears. They saw what they could have become, and many would have rightly seen the horrors they had inflicted on others.

### **Conclusion**

The fascination, and fear, of Dracula and his kin is not that they're inhuman abominations, monsters with animalistic or even alien goals. Audiences are drawn to the vampire narrative because, in the end, vampires are entirely too human. Whether their power comes from the occult or a virus as in modern-day versions, they are the dark desires within the very heart of humanity, and the Victorians were the first to be introduced to this type of villain, one who was both an affirmation of the barbarism of the old world and a reflection of the impermanence of their own beliefs and standards. Dracula is the manifestation of centuries of fears of conquest, disease, and blood. The vampire starts as a human, so whatever else it may become, it is the child of humanity before it is ever a child of the night, and it learns its cruelty and lusts from its parents, something which has forced readers for the last hundred years to take a hard look into the mirror and see the potential monster within everyone.

## CHAPTER III

## DECIDING NOT TO BE A BITCH:

THE MODERN FOIL IN *THE SUN ALSO RISES*

Ernest Hemingway is widely considered one of the great artists of the Modernist movement, and his works are often taught and cited as examples of the period. As someone who actually fought in a war, he had first-hand knowledge of the horrors of the new world brought upon by global conflict. Hemingway was in the unique position to write characters that reflected the new mentality of the Modernist movement. In particular, the character of Richard Cohn serves as one of the closest things to a villain in his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, and yet despite being held up in the story as an example of everything the main characters denigrate, he has more in common with them, and with Hemingway, than the story seems to show. Cohn is one of the early examples of a type of character now prevalent in the twenty-first century: the villain protagonist that has not just redeeming features, but serves as both a foil and a teacher to the protagonists. In this sense, he follows Dracula's example as a character, but in *The Sun Also Rises*, the concept of "villain" is not as clear-cut as it is in the classical sense. Cohn is a villain for the characters, and yet he does not fit the classical idea of a villain since he does not work against the protagonists. Instead, he serves as the manifestation of their insecurities regarding their own masculinity.

*The Sun Also Rises* tells the story of Jake Barnes, a veteran working as a journalist but also living as an expat. His complex relationship with Lady Brett Ashley is hindered by the new sexual norms of the time and Jake's own war-induced impotence. More importantly, though, the character of Robert Cohn works as a constant reminder to Jake that the concepts of manhood have changed in the same way that Dracula challenged Victorian norms.

Furthermore, Cohn, as a Jew, is often ostracized by his group of friends and is the source of much of their ire since he is seen as an outsider, a coward who never saw combat, is considered snobbish due to his education, and never really seems to fit in with Jake despite appearing and fraternizing with the main characters at various points in the novel. However, an analysis of the character's traits shows that, while critics often deride Hemingway for creating such a target for hate and anti-Semitism, Cohn is actually very much like Hemingway himself and shares many of the author's traits. Furthermore, he is based on a number of real-life people and, despite being constantly described as a reprehensible human being by Jake and others, Cohn never actually does anything in the story to justify this sort of treatment which, while fueling the accusations of anti-Semitism for Hemingway, shows more about Jake and his friends, and indeed Hemingway, than it does about Cohn himself, cementing the character as one that may function as an external representation of the protagonists' internal struggles, yet is much more than a simple anti-Semitic cliché much like how Dracula is more than a bloodsucking monster.

### **The Villain That Isn't There**

Cohn is a unique case in this thesis in that his narrative doesn't have a designated villain in the traditional sense. Many of the complications in the narrative are either internal or between Jake and Brett. *The Sun Also Rises* has protagonists and antagonists, as well as a revolving door of secondary characters that help Jake, Brett, and Cohn move along the story by serving as obstacles and companions for the expats. However, Cohn is a villain in name only, and even the word "villain" is not something to be lightly applied to him. It would be more accurate to label Cohn a supporting antagonist, perhaps even a protagonist with his own

story occurring parallel to Jake's. The fact that he willingly remains with Jake and the others, and that Jake and the others also constantly remain with him, makes the villain/hero relationship very different from traditional literature. Cohn doesn't actively wish the others malice. While he is, at best, a representation of the fears and insecurities in the other main characters like the Count in *Dracula*, he does fulfill the role of the villain in so much as he exists to thwart the hero's journey.

### **The Jewish Question**

Popular knowledge says that Hemingway based his portrayal of Cohn on Jewish-American writer and editor Harold Loeb (Rudat 265). Loeb's wife, in turn, became the basis for Brett, Jake's unattainable love interest. However, Jesse Biers argues that, although the idea for the basis for Cohn came from Hemingway himself, such an assertion is not the final arbiter of what makes Cohn the character as he is portrayed in the novel (478). Indeed, the idea that Cohn was based entirely on a single person or that his characterization is the result of a single designated flaw like being Jewish would make for weak writing. Additionally, in the text itself, Cohn is much more than just the result of Jewish stereotypes, and he has little in common with Harold Loeb aside from a few superficial details such as being from a wealthy family and being Jewish. Cohn may be portrayed as having various negative traits, and his Jewishness is often brought up by Jake and others, yet his shortfalls are not based on his being Jewish or rich.

For example, Cohn is said to have come from one of the wealthy Jewish families in New York (Hemingway 3), and while Loeb did in fact come from a wealthy family as well, in *The Sun Also Rises*, Cohn is often assailed by his lack of funds and his need to find more

money. Early on, he does appear to fit the anti-Semitic stereotype of the rich Jew when Jake notes that Cohn “liked the authority of editing” once he realized he had control of the magazine through his own money. At the same time, he is said to have quickly lost his money (Hemingway 3), something which does go counter to the stereotype of the rich Jewish banker. This is the first hint that Cohn may not be as straight-forward as most critics contend.

Anti-Semitic stereotypes include greed and cowardice, traits Cohn does show from time to time and are reinforced by others commenting on the fact that Cohn never served in the war. However, the fact that he is Jewish is never brought up by Cohn at all. In fact, his Judaism is something of an informed attitude since Cohn never practices the faith in the novel such as eating and drinking everything the other characters do without any apparent objection to it not being kosher food and drink. No mention is made of going to temple either or of observing the Sabbath. Throughout the novel, the only people who comment on his supposed faith are the rest of the cast, and although they may be referring to his Jewishness as an ethnic trait, the fact remains that Cohn’s supposed otherness is something that only becomes apparent because others point to it. Their obsession indicates their own anti-Semitism far more than anything Hemingway wrote about Cohn as a character.

For a modern comparison, Tyler Kingkade points to the rash of laws in the United States aimed at keeping transgender individuals out of public restrooms that correspond to their current gender identification. Such laws came about within the span of a year and are supposedly aimed at protecting children from predators, and yet, as Kingkade and many others point out, the so-called “bathroom predator” is a myth. This fear, however, from people who seek to regulate and ostracize a minority group tells us more about the perception of gender and the fear of otherness many conservatives feel towards those who do not

conform to traditional gender roles than it does about the actual transgender community. Transgender people have used the restrooms associated with their identity for decades without incident, and it's suddenly a problem now because of another group's unfounded fear based on prejudices. Likewise, Cohn is the victim of centuries of anti-Semitic prejudice prevalent throughout much of the world, and his being an antagonist due to them is only relevant because Jake and the others continue to bring up it up.

On another level, Jeremy Kaye argues that Hemingway had various Jewish friends and acquaintances and that jokes regarding Jewishness were not uncommon at the time. While this is similar to the modern equivalent of "I can't be racist because I have black friends," it isn't the only piece of evidence. Kaye even points out that Hemingway purposefully wrote Cohn to not be a shining example of humanity in order to buck the trend of making Jews into faultless paragons so as to counter the extreme anti-Semitism of the time (47). The interpretation that Cohn's Jewishness is informing his characterization as a villain is also tainted by the fact that many scholars start their investigations with the question of whether or not Hemingway himself was anti-Semitic (47). Such a question, though, while relevant in the context of analyzing the author, cannot lead to a definitive answer. While an author's personal beliefs certainly color his or her characters, authors also write many characters who are polar opposites to their own personalities and characters who are clearly nothing like the authors. No one, for example, assumes that Thomas Harris harbors cannibalistic urges due to his having created Hannibal Lecter just as no one asks if Stephen King really wishes to kill children because he created Pennywise the clown. While an author's history and beliefs clearly influence a work, relying on them wholesale is to cheapen

a work to be nothing more than an extension of the author's psyche instead of a work that merely starts there.

Bier is not the only scholar to point out the fault in labeling Cohn an anti-Semitic target, and Kaye even admits that while it's tempting to lump Cohn into the cannon of other Jewish stereotypes in the works of the time (45), such an assertion misses the fact that while Cohn may be a "whiner," a stereotype often applied to Jewish men that seeks to feminize them and make them appear as the "wimp, sissy, bookworm, or whiner, the Jew in obvious contrast to an idealized masculinity" (45), Cohn is hardly the wimp and castrated man others make him out to be. He keeps up with the others in terms of drink, food, and even approaches Brett better than Jake throughout the novel, and Jake is even forced to hire a prostitute for the express purpose of simply talking to a woman.

### **The Other Men**

Furthermore, Cohn is not simply a caricature of a single writer for whom Hemingway felt at odds. According to Jesse Bier, Cohn also shares many traits with Hemingway's contemporary, F. Scott Fitzgerald, bringing another layer to the characterization. Bier argues that Hemingway saw Fitzgerald as a rival in many ways and "Cohn, like Fitzgerald, is also from Princeton – where both felt that they were outsiders; indeed, the life-long outsidership that Fitzgerald felt was a close parallel to the alienated Jewish experience." Cohn also had a "pseudo-artistic career as – it could have been painter or sculptor – a writer, exactly like Fitzgerald; of course, he's a 'poor' writer" (479). Cohn's attempts to get money through various means in the later chapters and even the fact that he begins the novel by having an allowance show that he is accustomed to a certain lifestyle but perhaps not used to actually

working. The insult to Fitzgerald is obvious if Hemingway considered him a poor writer in both senses of the word. This makes Cohn a target of Hemingway's ire as well as his character's. However, this, like the belief of Loeb being the sole basis for Cohn due to his faith, is also an incomplete picture of Cohn. As Bier points out, being anti-Semitic was fashionable and commonplace, and yet being caught in a "virulent and uncontrollable professional jealousy" was something that a writer like Hemingway would not want to be involved in (480).

Perhaps, most tellingly, Bier argues that Cohn in fact has many of the characteristics that Hemingway himself possessed, such as being a boxer. This one trait is the first thing Hemingway shows regarding Cohn (Hemingway 3). Boxing only has four basic attacks and is a non-flashy combat style, and yet it is brutal when employed properly. Boxing is a very simple yet highly effective combat style without any kicks, spins, or anything that could be described as fancy in the twenty-first century, the kinds of moves audiences expect from action movie with a lot of wire-work. The simplicity of boxing, though this does not translate as easy mastery, is fitting given the Modernist approach to literature: simplicity in communication.

For all his perceived faults, Cohn is straightforward in his dealings with the group. Being a champion boxer and even having injuries to prove it shows his ability to not just fight but be able to take a beating, as it were, just like Jake and the other veterans took their own beatings on the battlefield. While a flattened nose is nothing compared to a shrapnel wound, Cohn is canonically able to hold his own in a fight and do so in a way that would make him lethal as a street fighter. The fact that the others dismiss him so off-handedly based

on what amount to details shows their own shallowness. After all, throughout the novel, Cohn goes to the same cities, the same bars, and runs in the same circles.

### **Unreliable Narration**

Despite being one of the most prominent characters in the story, one thing makes Cohn stand out amongst the others. It's something Jake does throughout the narrative and something which is evident even in this thesis. Jake almost always refers to Cohn by either his full name or his last name in the narration, almost never calling him "Robert" in dialogue. This shows that Jake actively has two identities as far as Cohn is concerned. Calling someone by full or last name is an indication of either lack of familiarity or professionalism, and given Jake's jealousy at Cohn's masculinity and the anti-Semitic remarks throughout the novel, it's more likely that such a distinct use of names is intended to show Jake's hidden distaste for him. Using a last name is also indicative of emotional distancing with someone. Military personnel often go by last names, so it's possible this is a habit Jake picked up in the service, yet he doesn't apply this naming convention to other characters.

Jake's narration, and the way he treats Cohn, are also at odds with what is actually shown in the narrative. Despite being labeled a coward and not being seen as masculine due to his wartime activities, Cohn is in fact perhaps the most masculine of the group. Combined with the descriptions of his athleticism in the first few pages of *The Sun Also Rises* and with the constant mentions of his body, it's apparent that Jake's animosity may in fact be jealousy towards someone who, given the fashionable anti-Semitism of the time, should not have Cohn's attributes. At one point, Jake muses that Cohn "was nice to watch on the tennis-court, he had a good body, and he kept it in shape" (Hemingway 24). This is not the idle thought of

someone who hates. Early on, the narration points out that Cohn had a “permanently flattened” nose from his mentor, and was a middleweight boxing champion (Hemingway 3). Mentions of Cohn’s body pepper the novel. In comparison, Jake’s own body is never described in any level of detail, but his infamous war wound, which is itself never indicated to be shrapnel, a bullet wound, or even the popular theory of an impromptu castration, is brought up a few times. Even the one time he is undressed in front of a mirror (Hemingway 16), Jake never actually describes the wound in any detail.

### **The Devil in Plain Sight**

The villains in *The Sun Also Rises* are not alien or foreign, but rather the devil in plain sight of the American dream. They are affluent and influential, everything Nick and others like him wish they could be, and yet they also treat each other horribly. Cohn, specifically, remains with Jake and his group despite being the friend that no one likes. Like the modern horror movie with its unlikable characters and fodder for the killer, Cohn is the character seemingly present only to be put down and mocked by Jake and the others, a designated victim. His role in the story is to be a punching bag of sorts, someone Jake and the others can beat up without any real repercussions since Cohn is, at the time of the novel, part of the Other, a Jew, an acceptable target. That being the case, the events of the story, and Cohn’s own backstory and achievements, undercut many of the attitudes Jake holds for his so-called friend.

With this in mind, Cohn in the role of the villain makes sense within the context of Modernism. While he never does anything outright villainous, he does stand in Jake’s way both physically and metaphorically by also trying to court Lady Brett. Cohn is the physical

representation of the masculinity that Jake wishes he had, and the fact that he is Jewish, even non-practicing, makes Cohn the kind of person that would be easy for Jake to abhor. The Great War is over, and Jake still has his wound. Like the continental sense of a lack of closure experienced throughout much of Europe (Tate 20-21), Jake had no closure for his pain and he had no way to move forward. Modernism came about due to the perceived end of the world, the death of God, the transition from the old world into the new, but for millions of people, there was no forward. Many people lost their loved ones, their cities, and most importantly their sense of innocence. War has been around since before recorded history, everything from tribes fighting over a patch of land to countries fighting over the right of kingship, but the Great War was the first time that people were afraid the world might end, that clouds of chemicals could wipe out cities without a shot fired. Jake fought in that war and saw the horrors first-hand, and he apparently left without his manhood. Whether or not the damage was physical or a combination of an actual castration and psychosomatic fear is inconsequential. The result is the same. After all, most of humanity didn't fight in the Great War, and yet the repercussions changed the world. The exact mechanism is not important.

## **Conclusion**

Despite being the Other and despite symbolizing what the characters hated, Cohn is still a player in their social circles and manages to do everything they wish they could do. In many ways, this is similar to Dracula's own characterization. He is a nobleman and the heir to a history of conquest and violence, something not dissimilar from the heroes. However, Dracula is a foreigner, something which marks him as a threat. Cohn too suffers this stigma by virtue of his Jewishness. He is the heir to tales of Jews being consorts to the devil in

medieval literature, of blood libel and murder of Christian children, and many other rumors and stereotypes that paint the Jewish people as monsters on par with Dracula. However, Cohn represents a new step in the evolution of the villain. He may have been a target due to social circumstances, but he was an antagonist because he was both everything Jake feared and hated and one of the most important things he didn't have. Cohn serves as a foil, but he also serves as a reminder that anti-Semitism had little basis on Cohn's actual traits. Like Dracula, Cohn is not just the opposite of Jake and the others, but a reminder of everything they hate and may secretly wish they could be.

Robert Cohn is a member of the Lost Generation, yet his upbringing, race, and lack of service record make him the sink into which other characters in *The Sun Also Rises* pour their hatred and contempt. However, this example is not about straight-up anti-Semitism as critics have alleged for many years. While the attitudes of his companions and Hemingway himself could certainly be characterized as such, and such attitudes certainly were common at the time of the novel, it's unfair to view Cohn as simply an example of the cowardly Jew stereotype. His faith is more of an informed attribute, something which Jake and the others use to justify their hatred of his actual positive attributes such as his athleticism and courage as a champion boxer.

In fact, various aspects of his character stem from sources that include Hemingway himself. Cohn does show many traits of overt masculinity such as his athleticism. He has his own successes and Jake's distaste lies in Jake's own insecurities being made manifest. This is the role of the villain in the story. Jake has other suitors with whom to compete for Brett's affection, but Cohn is the only one who poses a threat. He is not impotent and has managed to travel, drink, and eat with Jake and Brett despite money troubles. In the end, Cohn shows

that the old ways of thinking are dead, that the Modernist period has made it possible for the wimp to be strong, for the soldier to be weak, and for a supposed coward to still get ahead in the world.

## CHAPTER IV

## ONE BAD DAY

POST-MODERN EVIL IN *THE KILLING JOKE*

The Post-Modern era may or may not have ended. Debate continues as to whether we are currently in a new, unnamed era of art or if Post Modernism continued to be the movement that inspires the artists of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whatever the case, popular culture today has more of these anti-villains than ever before, and one villain in particular has captured in the imaginations of generations while remaining a captivating threat that embodies the primal fears of Dracula and the uneasy familiarity of Cohn. Although he debuted in 1940, Batman villain the Joker has endured and continues to be portrayed across multiple media including film, television, and video games by actors like Jack Nicholson and Cesar Romero. The character's popularity soared in recent years with his portrayal by Heath Ledger in 2008's *The Dark Knight*, a performance that won Ledger an Oscar posthumously. The character was next portrayed by Oscar-winning actor Jared Leto in 2016's *Suicide Squad*. Both actors also follow in the footsteps in Mark Hamill, who voiced the Joker in the 1990's adaptation *Batman: The Animated Series*, the 2000's video game series *Batman: Arkham*, and returned after a self-imposed retirement from the character for 2016's direct-to-video adaptation of Alan Moore's 1988 one-shot Batman comic, *The Killing Joke*.

This one-shot comic, though, is integral to the characterization of the Joker and offers insight into the current state of the villain in literature. Ledger cited *The Killing Joke* as an inspiration for his award-winning portrayal, and Hamill himself mused in 2014 that he would return to the voice the Joker if an adaptation of Moore's work was ever produced (DePaoli). The story is so iconic to the character that an entire level in the video game *Batman: Arkham*

*Origins* is playable from the Joker's point of view as he explores his memories of his origins (Katzman). In one comic book, Moore managed to create a plausible backstory for the Joker and wrote a series of conversations that highlight just how much Batman needs the Joker and vice versa. This is the next step from the antagonism between Dracula and the Victorians and the animosity between Cohn and the other expats. The villain is not a force to be defeated, *The Killing Joke* proclaims. The villain is an integral part of the hero's existence, and the Joker represents the evolution of the villain that is both charming and entertaining while engaging in horrific acts.

Furthermore, the titular killing joke is a metaphor for the insanity that Batman, according to the Joker, suffers from, a madness that is supposedly not so different from the Clown Prince's psychosis. Despite having been a staple of the Batman mythos almost since the Caped Crusader first appeared in print, and despite having undergone various interpretations in various media by more than a dozen actors, *The Killing Joke* remains the work recent writers and actors consistently look to when attempting to grasp the core of Batman and Joker's relationship, one that is both self-destructive and insightful as one cannot live without the other, and their bitter antagonism is due not to their opposing goals, but the fact that their personal crusades both began the same way: with tragedy and loss.

### **Wanna Know How I Got These Scars?**

*The Killing Joke* begins with Batman looking to speak with the Joker at Arkham Asylum. Batman wants to try and find a way out of their cycle of violence, a cycle he fears will end with one or both dead. That night, Commissioner James Gordon is visiting his daughter, Barbara Gordon, who also secretly fights crime as Batgirl. The Joker arrives and

shoots Barbara, paralyzing her, and simultaneously kidnaps Gordon. Batman tracks the Joker to an abandoned amusement park where Gordon is being physically and psychologically tortured so the Joker can prove that all anyone needs to be pushed over the edge of sanity is “one bad day.” As Batman fights through the carnival’s guards and traps, the Joker delivers an iconic monologue on the futility of morality and the impermanent nature of the world, the ultimate joke being individuals like Batman and Gordon who think anything they do matters. Batman, however, rescues Gordon and captures the Joker. The story ends with the Joker relating the titular killing joke, an anecdote about two insane asylum inmates trying to escape, both unable to recognize that while they blame the other for clinging to insane plans, both are equally mad.

Throughout the narrative, the Joker has flashbacks to himself as an ordinary stand-up comedian, family man, and soon-to-be father. However, he is a failure as a comic and decides to finally help a group of thieves break into the Ace Chemical plant to steal a small fortune. After his wife and unborn child are killed in a freak accident, he is forced to go through with the heist despite there no longer being a reason for him to do so. At the plant, however, the Joker falls (perhaps jumps) into a vat of chemicals which bleach his skin and turn his hair green. The physical disfigurement, combined with the tragedy of the day, drives him insane.

### **The Bat and the Clown**

As a character, the Joker is very much Batman’s foil. Batman dresses in black and dark colors in virtually every version of the character and yet is the good guy, a role typically associated with light. The Joker, on the other hand, wears garish costumes and colors and is

modeled on a clown, an occupation that is generally associated with laughter and merriment. Both use the tools and themes of their targets against them, Batman becoming an image of horror to strike fear into the hearts of those who commit evil and the Joker taking what should be a harmless motif and turning it into something grotesque by, for example, using lethal laughing gas. The Joker's supposed origin in *The Killing Joke* reinforces this relationship. Batman's family was killed as the result of a random mugging much like the Joker's wife and unborn child died due to a freak accident. Traditionally, Batman received the idea for his alter ego when a bat flew through his study window and gave him the inspiration to become a creature of the night. The Joker seemingly lost his mind the day his wife died and he was disfigured in the robbery of the Ace Chemical plant, finally snapping when he saw his own mutilated face in a reflection. Unlike Batman, however, he had no money and no support structure of any kind. The robbery was supposed to change that, and the panels showing his home life show a dilapidated apartment in a very bad part of Gotham City (Moore). Faced with the loss of his family, his career, and his physical normalcy, the Joker suffered an epiphany of the worst kind when he finally understood the futility of order and hope.

In his version of events, the Joker's failed career as a comedian followed an uneventful stint working at a chemical plant. The subsequent heist was forced upon him on pain of death. In the end, the Joker became the Joker through the choices of others, through the chaos in the world. The powerlessness and inevitability of death and entropy the Joker preaches is not dissimilar to the inevitability of nuclear conflict that filled the minds of much of the Western World during the Cold War. This fatalism leads to the single-minded pursuit of a goal in both the Joker/Batman dynamic and the United States/Soviet conflict. The Joker

becomes the grotesque what Bakhtin writes is “incredible and monstrous,” but “always satire” (306). The Joker’s clownish appearance and over-the-top sadism is “the exaggeration of the improper” (307), a show of what any person could do if pushed hard enough. His deeds are horrific because he fights someone righteous, much like the United States, with its history of violence and genocide, appears virtuous next to the Soviet Union and its “tyranny.”

Unlike Batman, however, who can take off his costume and return to a semblance of normal life as Bruce Wayne, the Joker’s white skin, green hair, and blood-red lips are a permanent fixture. His original purple suit is the result of his tuxedo being stained by the same chemicals that altered his body. The Joker can never take off his Joker persona, making him the opposite of Batman. Furthermore, he has no secret identity to speak of. Years after first fighting Batman, the World’s Greatest Detective is no closer to finding out the Joker’s true identity. Fingerprints, DNA, and even facial recognition have never given Batman any insight into the Joker’s pre-Joker identity. Since even the Joker himself admits he does not remember how he came to be (Moore), he has nothing to fear in the way of retribution from someone who knows his secrets. It’s also possible the Joker persona is actively blocking the memories. The Joker, unlike Batman, has no secrets at all, and even if Batman or someone else discovered who he was, it’s unlikely someone as psychotic as the Joker would even care or even be cured.

These differences serve to highlight how different the Joker is from Batman, but they also serve to draw a parallel between Batman and Joker’s relationship and the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, a relationship that shaped the modern world and the modern villain. The Post Modern period began with the use of nuclear weapons on Japan, but the Post Modern reader lived primarily in a world where two superpowers fought

for what they believed to be the soul of the modern world. Like the nuclear birth of the Post Modern period, the Joker's origin parallels the use of nuclear weapons for seemingly benign purposes. The United States used nuclear weapons on Japan to end World War Two, and yet their use left many disfigured and left a scar on the Japanese subconscious that resonates to this day. Likewise, the Joker's disfigurement and madness came about because Batman wished to stop what he thought was an ordinary robbery, an act with benign intentions that led to years of pain.

Charles Osgood wrote that the Cold War was marked by an increasing sense of superiority from both sides of the conflict, and that it was imperative to believe in the absolute certainty of one's side. He wrote that "If WE are good, kind, fair and so on, then cognitive consistency requires that THEY (THE ENEMY) must be equally bad, cruel, unfair and so on through the opposites of all traits we attribute to ourselves. The Bogey Man conception both justifies aggressive behavior on our own part and nullifies any non-aggressive ploys by the opponent" (13). Furthermore, the habitual responses of increased force to solve problems result in both sides failing to realize that the increased arms race will lead to the destruction of both sides. It is impossible, says Osgood, for two sides utterly certain of their moral superiority to be able to reach a solution that requires diplomacy or compromise (16). The Joker's final monologue in *The Killing Joke* regarding the inmates who refuse to see each other's insanity parallels this sentiment. Despite obvious "mirror image" parallels (13) between both men just as the ones between America and the Soviet Union, Batman and the Joker cannot find common ground and, like the real-life superpowers, their fight threatens to end in disaster.

In his own twisted way, though, the Joker's actions during the story are his own version of reaching out for a dialogue. He doesn't try to talk, but he instead wishes to teach Batman how close both men are to each other in terms of origin and motivation.

### **For Want of a Nail**

In the graphic novel, the Joker takes the role of torturer and lecturer to Gordon, finally showing his handiwork to Batman and revealing the philosophy that drives him to not only commit crime but try to show others the futility of the struggling against the world. As Batman fights through the carnival, the Joker relates the ultimate lesson he wishes Batman and Gordon to learn as he monologues: "I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everyone else! All it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy [...] Just one bad day. You had a bad day once, am I right? I know I am. I can tell. [...] You had a bad day, and it drove you as crazy as everybody else... Only you won't admit it! You have to keep pretending that life makes sense, that there's some point to all this struggling" (Moore). Suddenly, the anger the Joker feels towards Batman makes sense from a psychological point of view. As Joseph Romito noted, while Batman's tragedy pushed him to prevent his ordeal from happening to others, the Joker's loss was entirely random. The accident that took his wife was just that: an accident. The subsequent break-in at Ace Chemicals had a purpose at one point, but when his wife died, he was still caught up in the crime and had no choice. In essence, the Joker had all semblance of order taken out of his life. Chaos and the whims of others with their own agendas took over and he was finally forced to see that nothing he had done that one bad day was of any consequence. Instead of seeking to keep the same from happening to others, however, the Joker went the opposite route.

In another parallel to the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union saw their births due to the dissatisfaction with the ruling aristocracy. Economic turmoil and perceived unfairness led both nations to bloody revolutions, but while the United States pursued the path of capitalism and democracy, the Soviet Union moved in another direction that the Twentieth Century quickly labeled as the opposite. Communism and capitalism, like the chaos and order imposed by Batman and the Joker, took hold after similar backlashes against an aristocracy deemed too powerful. By showing these parallels, the idea of destiny, of a larger narrative, is called into question. Both men's paths through life depended not on a grand plan, but on choices and lack of choices.

As the Joker continues with his monologue, he has an insight into Batman, namely that the Dark Knight's entire mission and persona is fueled by a single event. The Joker finally asks, "I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some mugger? Something like that, I bet" (Moore). Amazingly from an in-story perspective, the Joker is utterly correct in his diagnosis. Batman's famous origin story begins with his parents being killed by a random mugger in front of him. The Joker's family is likewise killed by a freak accident, and yet both men embarked on crusades that ended in opposite directions. By the time of *The Killing Joke*, Batman had lost Jason Todd (the second Robin) and Barbara Gordon to the Joker himself, and although the relationships are not those the Joker mentioned, the fact that both were brutalized by him would give Batman ample reason to want deadly vengeance on the Joker himself. In fact, many years later during the *Under the Red Hood* storyline, Batman admitted that he constantly fantasized about inflicting the Joker's own tortures on him before he would eventually kill him (Winnick), and the *Flashpoint* storyline showed an alternate version of

history where Bruce, not his parents, was killed by the mugger in the alley, the result being that Thomas Wayne became a more cruel and brutal Batman and Martha Wayne, driven insane by grief, became the Joker (Azzarello). In particular, *Flashpoint* explained and paid homage to several events in *The Killing Joke* and shed new light on them.

In “Vengeance of the Dark Knight #3,” the *Flashpoint* timeline shows the backstory to that universe’s Joker. When Joe Chill attacks the Waynes in Crime Alley, he ends up killing Bruce, not Martha and Thomas Wayne (Azzarello). This event is linked to *The Killing Joke* via flashbacks. In 2008, a special edition of *The Killing Joke* was republished with altered coloring designed by the comic’s original illustrator, Brian Bolland. Bolland made several changes to the colors in the comic, taking out the more garish yellows and bright colors except for the Joker’s outfits and altered the flashbacks to retain black and white except for the occasional red. “Vengeance of the Dark Knight #3” had a similar coloring effect on the flashbacks detailing how Thomas Wayne hunted Joe Chill following the shooting and how Martha Wayne descends into madness. The coloring is a direct homage to *The Killing Joke* and confirms something about the Joker himself only hinted at in the original story.

While both he and Batman suffered “one bad day,” the difference is more subtle than that. The Joker was a lower-class comedian who lost everyone near him. Martha, despite being an incredibly affluent member of society, had no moral and emotional support following the loss of her son. Thomas wasn’t there for her and merely provided a therapist after embarking on his own vengeance against Chill. In his absence, Martha gives herself a Glasgow grin (deep cuts from the corners of the mouth towards the ears) and completes her journey into madness. Since the flashbacks are stylistically similar to those in *The Killing*

*Joke*, the parallels are clear. Martha becoming that universe's Joker shows just how close Batman came to becoming the Joker himself but didn't thanks to his support structure, and it shows just how far some people will go without the proper help. Martha and Thomas experienced the same tragedy and went in exactly different paths, showing once again the thin line that separates Batman and the Joker.

### **The Heir of Post-Modernism**

Despite having premiered during the Modernist period, the current perception and characterization of the Joker is firmly rooted in the Modernist and Post-Modernist movements while remaining as a metaphor for the state of the world during the height of the Cold War. As for Post-Modernism, the Joker is dismissive of the idea of narratives and the larger story connecting everything. He muses, "Something like that happened to me, you know. I... I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! Ha ha ha!" (Moore). The Joker's dismissal of a single story for his origins fits into the theory of postmodernism by casually separating himself from the very concept of stories. The Joker simply is, was, and will continue to be. He is a force of nature, and the deconstruction of his origin story by casually dismissing the entirety of the narrative he played in his mind as he tortured Gordon means that, while interesting, the story suffers from being told by a highly unreliable narrator. Lyotard, as mentioned before, claimed postmodernism was a move away from the greater metanarrative. The Joker has no background, no confirmable story, and he exists as a diametrically opposed force to Batman.

Finally, as the Joker watches Batman get closer to him, he explains the purpose of his kidnapping Gordon and, in his own words:

I went crazy. When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a coot! I admit it! Why can't you? I mean, you're not unintelligent! You must see the reality of the situation. Do you know how many times we've come close to world war three over a flock of geese on a computer screen? Do you know what triggered the last world war? An argument over how many telegraph poles Germany owed its war debt creditors! Telegraph poles! [...] It's all a joke! Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for... it's all a monstrous, demented gag! So why can't you see the funny side? Why aren't you laughing? (Moore)

In ending his famous monologue, Moore tied the Joker's madness to the middle of the Twentieth Century, to the era in which the Joker himself first appeared as a character. The Joker may not fear the end of civilization, even of life, but he's reached the clarity to see that society could be wiped out any minute. This insight into the birth of the Post-Modern period allows the Joker to reject any and all notions the past held for destiny and greater purpose. He will create his own past and, as seen with Gordon, show the world the merits of his point of view.

This twisted mentality is not unlike the propaganda the Soviet Union and the United States used in the Cold War or even today. The United States, despite a history of slavery, genocide, and racial inequality, billed itself as the land of freedom. It rewrote its own narrative. Kenneth Osgood wrote, "The Cold War [...] was an ideological, psychological, and cultural contest for hearts and minds. American policy makers increasingly realized that the Cold War would be won or lost on the plane of public opinion, rather than by blood shed on the battlefield" (86). *The Killing Joke* shows both Batman and the Joker trying to reach out to the other with the Joker explicitly taking his message to the masses (i.e., Gordon). In that sense, he fulfills the role of both American and Soviet propaganda during the Cold War.

It would be easy to claim that America is Batman and the Soviet Union is the Joker, but given that America shares this one key trait with the Clown Prince, it further places the Joker as embedded in the Post Modern world and as the next step in the evolution of the villain and even the anti-hero. These traits can be found in anyone, and as Osgood noted, the fact that America changes its past is a good thing in the fight against Communism, but it makes the Joker a liar and a cypher.

### **In the Kingdom of the Blind**

The ultimate joke in the story of Batman and the Joker is that *The Killing Joke* shows just how much sanity and insanity the Joker can possess at the same time. His analysis of Batman is dead-on, and his own rant against the perceived order of the universe is not too far from legitimate grievances and fears in the world following both World Wars. In fact, the Joker shows a level of awareness missing from Batman's analysis of the situation.

Romito notes that, from a psychological and medical point of view, "the Joker is not coping and has simply slipped into a sociopathic delirium in order to avoid the emotional pain of his loss and his disfigurement." Beginning in this story and in any others, the Joker forces "both Batman and the reader to consider the chaos of the world, confronting them with the possibility that adherence to the social contract is not truly the best way to survive." This, however, also places Joker on the side of evil as defined by Terry Eagleton, who writes, "Humans are the joker in the pack, the dark stain at the center of the landscape, the glory, jet and riddle of the world" (209). The Joker is as much on a crusade as Batman, but his motives are to undo the supposed artificiality of civilization and let the base instincts take over, to destroy faith in man-made institutions and show the thin veneer of sanity is an illusion that

can be wiped away with a few cruel acts. Like Dracula, he is proof that culture and civilization are not absolutes. In his case, the Joker is physical proof that savagery and madness can still take over an ordinary man. Eagleton continues by writing, “Death shows us the ultimate unmasterability of our lives and therefore something of the bogusness of trying to master the lives of others” (213). In his own way, then, the Joker might just be the sanest character in the Batman mythos. From a purely nihilistic perspective, and if we accept the observation that the world is constantly teetering on the brink of destruction, then the Joker has accepted the madness of the world and embraced it, ridding himself of any illusions of the permanence of society as a whole.

The final pages of *The Killing Joke* show the Joker seemingly winning in his mission to make Batman see the futility of ignoring his own madness. He tells the joke of two insane asylum inmates trying to escape. While on the roof, one shines a light across a chasm for his companion to walk over, but the inmate quickly calls the stunt a work of madness. After all, he muses, his friend will shut off the light when he’s halfway across (Moore). The joke, of course, is that neither man in the story realizes his own madness, much like the Joker believes Batman is incapable of seeing the absurdity of trying to maintain order in a chaotic world. Like two great superpowers locked in a cold War, Batman and the Joker can do nothing but laugh at the absurdity of the situation, each knowing that they are aware of the futility of doing anything but sticking to the old patterns, and even the invitations to a dialogue from both sides end in failure.

Comedy is the art of making the audience see the absurd. However, perhaps Batman is laughing not at the Joker’s viewpoint, but at the fact that he finally realizes just how mad he is and, like the Joker himself, admits defeat in the sense that there’s no point to try and

stop the inevitable end to their rivalry. The ending of *The Killing Joke* is ambiguous as to whether Batman kills the Joker, and that ambiguity shows even the hero can succumb to dark impulses, just as the villain can come from a background of good intentions. In the end, one or both may die, but to try and stop it would be true madness.

## **Conclusion**

The Joker as a character has lasted more than seventy years and continues to be reinterpreted each decade to fit the style of the times. In the 1960s, Cesar Romero imagined him as a prankster. Jack Nicholson played him as a psychopathic gangster. Heath Ledger did away with most of the character's more flamboyant gimmicks and reintroduced the Joker as a murderous anarchist trying to show the world that sanity is an illusion. Since 1988, however, *The Killing Joke* has remained as the standard by which the character's appearances have been judged. In this story, he is physically intimidating as he cripples Batgirl and become a psychological and moral menace by almost breaking Commissioner Gordon and Batman himself. The Joker comes the closest to explaining his motives and shows what one bad day can do to a person. In the world of Post-Modernism, the Joker is a representation of the fear seeded by World War Two, a force that exists without origin or reason that makes him truly horrifying, yet the brief glimpse into a possible backstory temper that appearance while also showing how easy it is for an ordinary man to become a living nightmare.

Even when he seemingly loses, the Joker does succeed in proving his point. The fact that his point involves the destruction of society and a wanton disregard for suffering and dignity make the fact that he remains a popular character all the more fascinating. In the Post-Modern world, the Joker represents the new villainy. He is the charismatic devil trying

to tempt the hero, but he does so with style and a smile, giving a performance on the page that engrosses readers even as he waxes poetic on the absurdity of sanity, civilization, and hope. Almost a hundred years before, Dracula presented an existential threat in the form of a reminder everything the Victorians did to their colonies. He was supernatural, an affront to science, and yet he was also very human in his desires and methods. His alien yet familiar nature made him a monster who threatened the Victorians both physically and ethically. Later, Cohn presented a similar threat as a reminder of everything Jake and the expatriots hated about themselves while serving as the villain simply by virtue of being labeled as the Other due to being Jewish. The similarities he shared with Jake and the other expats, however, went largely unmentioned in the narrative. Like Dracula, Cohn shared the same kind of background as those who opposed him. The Joker continues this trend of providing insight into the hero's mind but adds to it an awareness of the absurdity of social norms that targets not just one culture, but all of humanity as a Post Modern threat. He is both everything Batman fights against, a reminder of just how close Bruce Wayne himself came to becoming an agent of chaos. In the end, the Joker achieves a partial victory in showing how one bad day can change an ordinary man into either a city's hero and protector or the kind of criminal and monster that scares other criminals and monsters with his evil and madness.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The history of narratives is filled with villains. From the stories of great antiquity to the tales of cinematic superheroes, the villain has existed as an obstacle, usually the final hurdle for the hero to overcome in his or her journey. However, the last hundred years have created an environment where the villain is often just as important as the hero, not just from the perspective of providing conflict, but as a force that cannot be truly beaten and that, in some cases, attracts more attention and curiosity from readers and viewers than the works' protagonists.

#### **The End of Post-Modernism**

Each of the works in this thesis is from an era that was marked by the changing of society in very fundamental, often violent ways. The Victorians were faced with a world where their conquest and empire building were reaching a peak. They grew more fearful of the Other, the stranger, the changing world that industry heralded, and that is what made Dracula one of the most enduring villains for that era. He was both horrific for being the antithesis of the "modern" world and yet he was driven by very human goals on a mission of conquest not unlike that the British had undertaken many times before with other nations. When the horror of the Great War showed itself, the new Modernist movement declared the end of history. The Great War was, to the world, a sign that God was dead. Armageddon was not heralded by angels and plagues but by clouds of mustard gas and the establishment of No Man's Land. In the aftermath of the supposed end of history, writers like Hemingway grappled with what it meant to be a man, to be brave, and the character of Cohn turned that

on its head by questioning if such labels and standards were even relevant. Finally, in the Post Modern period, the use of nuclear weapons and subsequent decades living under the threat of global annihilation drove artists to look at the world through highly cynical viewpoints. For decades, the world stood on the verge of destruction. The Joker, with his anarchic agenda and origin thematically linked to that of his greatest foe and foil, represents the third evolutionary step of the modern villain in the last century. The Joker rejects the idea of narratives and engages in murder and mutilation, yet he was and remains one of the most popular villains of the last hundred years.

While it is impossible to claim when art enters a new movement or a new era with any certainty, I believe the September 11 attacks pushed art into a new era different from the Post Modern period. Post Modernism built on the themes and feelings fostered during the Modernist period, just like this new period builds upon what came before. When the Cold War ended, the world breathed a collective sigh of relief at the prospect of no more superpowers aiming nuclear weapons at each other and threatening the end of all life on Earth. At least for a time, the West felt as though a heavy weight had been taken off. However, the September 11 attacks shattered the decade of relative peace for the West. Conflict had not gone away in that time, of course.

The wars in Kosovo and the Persian Gulf showed that America was still involved in global affairs, and the Oklahoma City bombing and the Columbine Massacre made America realize the threat of terrorism even from domestic sources. However, there was no mass shift in the national consciousness until Al Qaeda agents crashed a plane into the Pentagon while also destroying the Twin Towers. Suddenly, the belief in relative peace and the nature of

warfare changed for America and a new era began as our cultural thought process shifted once again.

### **The Post-9/11 World**

For decades, America was told that the enemy would come in planes and ships, that Communists would infiltrate the government and civilian life in an effort to subvert American values. Americans feared soldiers and the possibility of sending men and women to fight on the battlefields of some country halfway around the world. However, the September 11 attacks were shocking not just for the thousands dead and the billions in damage, but because they were more damaging than Pearl Harbor, the last time America was attacked on its own soil by a foreign power. The fact that such destruction was caused by a handful of individuals with little more than gumption and box cutters shocked the West into reexamining where the enemy could come from and what an individual could do when properly motivated. Suddenly, the enemy didn't need massive infrastructure or even a proper army.

In the fifteen years since 9/11, America has had to face its own demons, much the same way the Victorians had to see the fallout of their own conquests. America's role in nation building was heavily called into question after the Middle East destabilized following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Even more so than the negative view of the Vietnam War decades ago, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were marred by confirmed reports of war crimes on the part of American troops, most notably the torture in Abu Ghraib and the subsequent revelation that American forces had killed well over a million people in the War

on Terror (Lazare). Thousands of soldiers returned with PTSD and failed to receive proper care.

In way, we've become the Victorians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rapidly changing technology moves faster than we can sometimes adapt. Additionally, we're dealing with the aftermath of two wars that have left thousands of men and women with what the Modernists would have described as shell shock but today we call post-traumatic stress disorder. While the era of superpowers aiming missiles at each other may be gone, recent events involving Russia and North Korea point to a new possible cold war. Given the threat of terrorist groups and rogue nations using weapons of mass destruction we once feared would come from behind the Iron Curtain, the world is once again poised on the brink of annihilation, and the same fear of another, more cataclysmic world war, looms over civilization once again.

Our villains and heroes have also changed to reflect this new time.

### **The Modern Villain Achieved**

Some of the most popular fiction of the last fifteen years has featured heroes and villains of questionable character, as well as works that feature villain protagonists audiences apparently fall in love with. *Hannibal* and *Dexter* starring Michael C. Hall featured serial killers as main characters. *Game of Thrones*, created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, is filled with morally ambiguous and outright heinous heroes and villains that alternate as protagonists. Loki has become extremely popular despite his disdain for humanity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Although Walter White as played by Bryan Cranston in *Breaking Bad* dies at the end of the series, he does achieve several victories that make his apparent defeat questionable. At the same time, heroes have become darker and more

morally questionable. Batman as portrayed by Affleck uses guns and kills in *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. *Deadpool* played by Ryan Reynolds became one of the most critically acclaimed superhero films of all time while showcasing a foul-mouthed mercenary who tortures and brutally kills his enemies. More and more, villains have become more humanized while heroes have fallen further into darkness.

In politics, we've become accustomed to elected officials cheating, lying, or simply behaving unethically. Donald Trump ran his campaign on racist proposals and outright vitriol, and yet many of his supporters, including evangelical Christians, will vehemently state that his faults and toxicity are irrelevant if he can do good work for the country (Woodruff). Now that he is in office, he continues this same pattern of outright, bold-faced lies and yet retains supporters who will defend him despite his flagrant disregard for honesty. Society is willing to overlook major moral faults if the person or character is charismatic or entertaining enough. This is equally applicable for society's ability to express admiration and awe at villains who perform even worse acts in their stories.

All signs point to a society that is comfortable bending its morals to accommodate both heroes and villains in their quest to entertain, disgust, or work for us as guilty pleasures.

### **Future Research**

A cynic might claim that society has simply been corrupted, which is a claim that can be put forth by the elders of any generation, but given the nature of the last three major shifts in public consciousness, such an accusation is simplistic. The stories of the twenty-first century, and conditions that led to their development, should be analyzed. We have the benefit of hindsight when it comes to Dracula, Cohn, and the Joker. As an old joke states,

history may not repeat itself, but it does on occasion rhyme (“History Does Not Repeat Itself, But It Rhymes”). The past hundred years have various historical and sociological parallels to the current situation in the West, particularly to the United States. Changing technology and the fallout from wars color everything that happens. This gives us a head start in terms of putting the effects of the War on Terror into context and analyzing the works of the past fifteen years within that framework.

Furthermore, popular reactions to these works are not hard to come by thanks to social media and a breadth of online reviews and reactions that are posted almost as soon as episodes or films premiere. It’s possible to gauge a work’s effect on the population almost instantly since fans and fan clubs can quickly post their thoughts of works almost as soon as they are released. The critical acclaim of works like *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead*, developed for television by Frank Darabont, mean that academia should look at works of fantasy and horror, typically genres dismissed as being trivial, as serious works worthy of study.

This line of study can and should be applied to horror, a genre which has also been around in its modern incarnation for roughly a hundred and fifty years, and which today has a massive worldwide fanbase. This is a genre where the villains take center stage in nearly every work, and studying the appeal and endurance of characters like Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees could likewise lead to insight into the phenomenon of the new villain throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

### **Closing**

The hero as an archetype may be eternal, but it exists only because villains exist. There exists a force that requires the presence of heroic, moral characters that for centuries

embodied everything societies held up. To study one without studying the other is to see only half of what a society values and fears. A villain is more than a storm to batter a ship at sea. A villain has goals, a history, and a past. The villains of today have their own paths which could easily have led them on the path of the hero, and audiences today are just as enamored by the fallen angels and the devils of fiction as they are the shining knights once standing front and center in storytelling. Villains are not the all-encompassing antitheses and paragons of darkness. Whatever their faults and vices, whatever else they may be to the hero, modern villains are a way for readers to explore the darker aspects of humanity and themselves and seek answers to the questions the hero cannot answer.

The new villains give us the full picture of the human condition and the state of society whereas focusing on the hero is a limited exercise. To study villains is to study the world's own sins and what leads some to be shining examples of virtue while others are cast aside and ostracized or simply embrace their darkness impulses. The Western World has been constantly falling apart and rebuilding itself through seemingly cataclysmic events since the nineteenth century. We no longer have just great heroes to show us what it means to be virtuous. We can now also look into the shadows and learn from the devils within so as to better understand both our greatest potential and our darkest possibilities.

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## VITA

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