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### THE EVOLUTION OF MADNESS: A CHARACTERIZATION OF ARTHUR FLECK IN THE MOVIE "JOKER" (2019) BY TODD PHILLIPS

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**Abstract:** This study examines the evolution of Arthur Fleck into the Joker, exploring the psychological, social, and institutional factors contributing to his transformation. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the research analyses Arthur Fleck's character through his experiences of trauma, societal rejection, and mental health struggles. Researchers watched the movie multiple times, analysed the script, and identified relevant dialogue or words for the character. Key findings indicate that Arthur Fleck's descent into madness is shaped significantly by his childhood abuse, loneliness, and the systemic neglect he faces in Gotham City. The film serves as a critical commentary on contemporary issues surrounding mental health and societal responsibility, highlighting the urgent need for compassion towards marginalized individuals. This characterization not only reflects current societal anxieties but also emphasizes the impact of social dynamics on individual identity formation.

**Keywords:** Arthur Fleck, Joker, characterization, movie

#### INTRODUCTION

Literature uses language as a tool for emotion, exploring themes, and providing a view of the human experience. Literature has played an important role in human life since time immemorial. Not only as a means of entertainment, through literature, individuals can convey their aspirations to others, from the community to the government. According to (Lestari, 2019) literary work is platform for author to express their creativity and imagination through a piece of literature that possesses quality language and meaningful content that is appealing to reader. Literary works are not only limited to a written work, but literary works have many types such as poetry, prose, novels, dramas, even movies are also included in a literary work. literature can be understood as a form of creative expression that engages readers in interpretive practices, encourages symbolic interpretation, and offers insights into human experiences. It is a dynamic field that evolves through the interaction between writers, readers, and the broader cultural context, making its definition an ongoing subject of scholarly inquiry and debate.

Literature comprises literary works of art in various forms such as novels, dramas, and poetry. Over the past few centuries, this definition has been broadened to encompass

innovative oral literature forms such as movie. literature has several definitions according to experts. Literature is a dynamic and evolving art form that reflects societal changes and cultural diversity. It encompasses a wide range of written works and continues to be shaped by various influences, from classical traditions to contemporary multicultural voices. The creation of literature involves complex cognitive processes, as evidenced by studies on creative writing (Doyle, 1998; Shah et al., 2013) further highlighting the depth and richness of this art form. Literature is creative writing that depicts the human experience within society, offering enjoyment, comprehension, and utility to community and the writer express these imaginative ideas through various form of literary works (Moputi et al., 2019). Meyer (2018) stated that literature is the collection of literary works that a society uses to establish its cultural identity over time. This encompasses primarily artistic pieces, as well as those with aesthetic qualities that are of lesser importance. Based on definition above, it can be concluded that literature serves as a platform for authors to convey imaginative and creative concepts, as well as to reflect on societal experiences through eloquent language, ultimately creating an enjoyable reading experience for a wide audience

Literature serves as a versatile resource and guide for various activities, functioning as a reference point for acquiring specific information. It is a medium through which authors can articulate their thoughts and perspectives on life (Khairunas et al., 2018). Authors can use literature to depict events occurring in their local environment. Additionally, literature is characterized as an artistic creation designed to stimulate the reader's moral, spiritual, and emotional faculties through distinctive language, aesthetic appeal, and artistic presentation, while simultaneously conveying ethical lessons and life principles (Devi & Ro'is, 2021). Literature is a distinct class of discourse that encompasses genres such as novels, poems, and plays (Steen, 1999a). It is characterized by its ability to provide readers with opportunities to experience the world through different perspectives and explore interpretive meanings beyond the literal words on the page (Sosa et al., 2016).

Literature enables the expression of thoughts and feelings through eloquent language. Literature combines entertainment, beauty, and moral teachings to engage readers on conscious, spiritual, and emotional levels. It can be used to portray both positive and negative aspects of society and help individuals identify personality traits in others. A literary work is an author's artistic creation, involving a process of imagination to construct a fictional universe. The author bears responsibility for discussing, dissecting, and debating human life within this imagined world. Literary works aim to depict human life in relation to both the self and others through the interplay of internal events. Literature adaptations to film have been a significant part of the movie industry, with many films based on best-selling novels (Joshi & Mao, 2012). The adaptation of literature to film is a multifaceted process that involves various stakeholders and decision-makers in the adaptation industry. It encompasses not only the creative aspects of transforming written narratives into visual storytelling but also the economic and cultural implications of such adaptations. The study of literature as movies continues to evolve, with scholars examining the linguistic channels in literary works and their adaptations (Matricciani, 2023).

Movies are a form of visual storytelling that have become a fundamental part of our entertainment and cultural experience. These intricate creations go through various stages, including production, distribution, and exhibition (Bae & Kim, 2019). The movie industry is among the most significant and rapidly growing sectors globally, appealing to

audiences of all ages (Sahu et al., 2022). The concept of movies, however, extends far beyond the films themselves. The lifecycle of a movie includes not only production but also factors like promotional activities, titles, and the environments in which they are experienced. For example, a movie title, despite being a relatively low-cost element, can substantially influence box office performance, particularly for films with limited promotion (Bae & Kim, 2019). Furthermore, the connection between cinema and urban spaces is noteworthy, as cities have shaped cinematic forms just as cinema has influenced the perception of urban landscapes.

Based on definition above, it can be concluded that a movie is a form of artistic expression that encompasses various elements of literature, including cinematography, poetic imagery, and dramatic storytelling, as well as auditory elements such as music, dialogue, and sound effects. These components are intricately woven together, allowing filmmakers to evoke emotions, develop characters, and craft a narrative that resonates with audiences. The final product is then presented through various mediums – such as television, cinemas, and legitimate online platforms – ensuring accessibility to a diverse range of viewers and offering different experiences depending on the mode of viewing.

In literature, movies often serve as adaptations of written works, transforming narratives from page to screen. However, their relationship goes beyond mere adaptation. Both mediums are powerful forms of storytelling that offer audiences unique opportunities to experience the world through diverse perspectives, aiding psychosocial development, especially in adolescents (Sosa et al., 2016). Notably, the creative processes behind writing fiction and filmmaking share certain parallels. Both involve a "voyage of discovery," allowing creators to explore and refine ideas, though fiction writing distinctly requires "narrative improvisation" from perspectives beyond one's own (Doyle, 1998). Additionally, the study of literary genres is intricately linked to the analysis of other forms of discourse, including film (Steen, 1999).

The relationship between literature and film extends beyond mere adaptation. Films can also serve as a medium for teaching literary concepts and theories. For instance, motion pictures and television shows have been used to facilitate the learning of management and organizational behaviour theories (Bumpus, 2005). Additionally, the concept of "fiction and truth" in storytelling applies to both literature and film, exploring aspects such as truth-value, pretence, and the limits of fictionality (Gaut et al., 1996).

Movies are not only a significant art form and a popular source of entertainment but also a powerful medium for education and influence. As a unique art form, film captivates audiences by merging technology, drama, literature, music, and visual arts into a compelling experience. Through movement, gestures, and language, movies communicate ideas both visually and audibly (Purba & Gultom, 2023). Films convey messages ranging from education and entertainment to information, utilizing symbolic mechanisms such as message content, voice, speech, and dialogue. The personalities of movie characters play a pivotal role in storytelling, shaping character development and enhancing audience engagement.

Movies are a form of visual storytelling that have played a significant role in entertainment and culture for over a century (Tyron, 2009). They are feature films that can be classified into various genres such as comedies, action, dramas, or horror films, based on their themes and visual characteristics. Movies are complex creations that combine multiple elements, including visual cues, audio, and narrative structure, to engage audiences and convey stories or ideas.

Each movie falls under a specific genre, such as comedy, thriller, horror, romance, or action, among others. Within each genre, there is a main character who embodies certain traits and qualities that resonate with viewers. For example, comedies tend to have protagonists who are cheerful and funny, navigating comedic and light-hearted situations. Conversely, action films often feature protagonists who are serious and determined, excelling in physical ability and motivated by a strong sense of justice or a clear goal. These character archetypes not only set the tone and atmosphere of their respective genres but also significantly impact the story development and viewer interaction.

In a movie, character serves as a human portrayal that plays a crucial role in developing the plot of a story intended for a film audience. Different characters play different roles, such as protagonists, antagonists, and other supporting characters and each character plays important roles especially, main character. According to (Pratiwi et al., 2022) Character contributed and can bring various morality, emotional, and physical values to the scene.

Characterization is an important element in literature, especially in movies, that brings characters to life and keeps readers engaged. Characterization is the act of constructing and evolving characters within a story. This process entails unveiling the personality, motivations, and background of a character through a variety of methods. Characterization is a crucial element in narrative fiction, referring to the process of creating and developing characters within a story. It involves the techniques authors use to portray characters' personalities, motivations, and behaviours, allowing readers to understand and connect with them.

In literary analysis, characterization is often studied as one of the key issues in narrative fiction, alongside events, time, focalization, narration, and text interpretation. Characterization in movies refers to the process of creating and developing characters through various cinematic techniques, dialogue, and actions. It plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's perception and understanding of the characters' personalities, motivations, and roles within the narrative. In films, characterization often extends beyond the portrayal of individuals to encompass broader themes and societal issues. For instance, the depiction of mental disorders in cinema has evolved over time, with some films providing reasonably accurate representations of various disorders (Hylar, 1988). Moreover, the embodied cognition approach suggests that viewers infer meaning and attribute mental states to fictional characters through embodied simulation processes, highlighting the complex relationship between form, content, and reception in cinematic characterization (Coëgnarts, 2017).

The evolution of madness in literature often serves as a reflection of societal fears and individual struggles, providing insight into the complexities of the human psyche. Classic works such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" illustrate how madness can arise from external pressures and internal conflicts. These narratives challenge the boundaries between sanity and insanity, suggesting that societal rejection and personal trauma can exacerbate mental illness, leading to tragic consequences.

In this context, Todd Phillips' "Joker" (2019) emerges as a significant cinematic exploration that transcends traditional superhero narratives. Instead of focusing on action and spectacle, the film presents a nuanced character study that critiques societal norms and the pervasive stigma surrounding mental health. It invites audiences to engage with

the psychological aspects of Arthur Fleck's descent into madness, making it a profound commentary on contemporary issues.

Characterization is pivotal in "Joker," with Phillips employing a detailed portrayal of Arthur Fleck's experiences, relationships, and internal struggles. The film highlights his longing for connection and the constant societal rejection he faces, showcasing how these factors intertwine to shape his identity. The portrayal of Arthur's relationship with his mother and his desire for validation further emphasizes the impact of personal trauma on his mental state, ultimately leading to his transformation into the Joker.

Todd Phillips draws inspiration from a variety of sources to construct "Joker." While the film echoes elements from classic comic book narratives, it also references influential films like "Taxi Driver" and "The King of Comedy," both of which explore themes of isolation and the quest for identity in a harsh urban landscape. These influences provide a rich framework for understanding Arthur Fleck's character as a product of both fictional and societal realities, positioning him within a larger discourse on mental health and societal neglect.

Released in 2019, "Joker" features Joaquin Phoenix in a critically acclaimed performance as Arthur Fleck, a struggling stand-up comedian whose gradual descent into madness results in his transformation into the iconic DC villain. Set against a grim backdrop of a decaying Gotham City, the film addresses pressing themes of mental illness, societal neglect, and the complexities of identity, ultimately positioning itself as a critical commentary on the challenges faced by marginalized individuals.

In the aftermath of its release, "Joker" has spurred ongoing discussions about mental health representation in media, the consequences of societal disconnection, and the urgent need for compassion toward vulnerable populations. Recent analyses continue to explore how the film resonates with contemporary audiences, particularly in the context of rising mental health awareness and the cultural landscape of the 21st century. Critics and scholars emphasize that Arthur Fleck's portrayal not only reflects current societal anxieties but also serves as a call to address the systemic issues that contribute to mental health crises, underscoring the film's lasting relevance in today's discourse on mental health and societal responsibility. Based on the background of study and focus on study above, the writer formulated the problem by making it into some question. What factors contribute to Arthur Fleck's transformation into the Joker, and how are these depicted? And how Arthur's appearance and mannerisms reflect his mental state throughout the film?

The purpose of this journal is to make reader know and understand about the characterisation of Arthur Fleck in the movie "Joker". This journal will carefully be analysing Arthur Fleck's transformation into the Joker is a multifaceted process, shaped by the interplay between personal trauma, societal rejection, and systemic failure. In this section we will discuss the key factors that led to his transformation, categorized into three main domains: psychological factors, social dynamics, and institutional neglect.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Literature**

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## **Movie**

A movie is a visual storytelling medium that viewers watch on a screen or television. Movie have several definitions according to expert. (Yani, 2022) stated that film is the result of an extraordinary composition that combines various artistic components to fulfill the requirements of a transcendent genre. These components of artistry include various sciences that contribute to and enhance a movie, such as visual arts, cinematography, costume design, choreography, poetry, drama, and music.

According to (Fitriani et al., 2020) a movie consists of a sequence of dynamic visuals accompanied by various auditory elements such as music, dialogue, and sound effects, all of which contribute to conveying a central narrative. Subsequently, it is presented to audiences either through television broadcasts or in theaters where it is viewed by audience.

In movie, there is a genre that called fantasy. Fantasy is a type of literary genre that includes elements of magic and the supernatural, which are beyond the realm of reality. This genre is characterized by its imaginative and speculative nature, often delving into realms beyond what is possible in the real world. Fantasy is encompassing various forms of storytelling across multiple media platforms, exemplified by the existence of both fantasy novels and films.

Based on definition above, it can be concluded that a movie is a form of artistic expression that encompasses various elements of literature, including cinematography, poetic imagery, and dramatic storytelling, as well as auditory elements such as music, dialogue, and sound effects. These diverse components are seamlessly integrated to create a cinematic production that is showcased to viewers through various mediums such as television, theatres', and legitimate online platforms. Fantasy genre is a genre that includes magic and supernatural that are absent from real world. The Fantasy genre includes different types of stories told through various forms of media, like fantasy books and movies, that are widely available.

## **Characterization**

Characterization is the method used to create and develop characters in a story. This includes revealing the character's personal traits, desires, and past. In addition, characterization can also be defined as the strategy used by an author to convincingly portray a character's identity to the reader. Characterization has several definitions according to experts. Characterization in movies is a multifaceted aspect of filmmaking

that involves the development and portrayal of characters through various cinematic elements. It plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative, engaging the audience, and conveying themes and messages.

Characterization in movie can also reflect and shape public perceptions of specific professions or societal issues. For example, Felton et al., (2008) analyses the portrayal of accountants' ethics in cinema, while McDonald & Walter (2001) examines the depiction of electroconvulsive therapy in American films. These studies highlight how cinematic characterization can influence public opinion and perpetuate or challenge stereotypes. Based on definition above, we can conclude that Characterization is the method of forming and evolving characters within a story. It includes unveiling a personality, motivations, and background through different methods like direct description, dialogue, inner thoughts, behaviours, physical appearance, and opinions from other characters. Successful characterization is crucial for crafting credible and captivating characters that connect with the audience

## **METHOD**

Qualitative methodology is being used to examining characters and characteristics of Arthur Fleck in the movie "Joker" by Todd Phillips and connecting them to the research question and method. Qualitative research methodologies employ a structured approach to explore and understand complex social phenomena by meticulously analysing non-numerical data. This approach aims to gather detailed, subtle insights into human perspectives, behaviours, and lived experiences (Isaacs, 2014). To conduct this research, the writer watched the movie multiple times to carefully observing the development of Arthur's character and how his transformation into the Joker. During these screenings, the researcher took extensive notes on key scenes that illustrated shifts in Arthur's mental state and identity. The researcher also conducted a thorough analysis of the movie script and identified specific lines of dialogue that reflected Arthur's psychological state. Moreover, this research focuses on identifying the characters and characteristics of Arthur Fleck as the main characters in the movie.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Characterisation of Arthur Fleck in The Movie "Joker"**

In this section the researcher finds a couple of key factors and characterization that led to his transformation depicted through his actions and psychology through his evolving physical appearance and behaviour. Characterization is a crucial element in narrative fiction, referring to the process of creating and developing characters within a story. It involves the techniques authors use to portray characters' personalities, motivations, and behaviours, allowing readers to understand and connect with them. A character-based approach, incorporating script analysis and character interaction features, has been proposed to generate movie summaries that capture audience attention (Haq et al, 2019). Arthur Fleck's characterization of transforming into the Joker is a multifaceted process, shaped by the interplay between personal trauma, societal rejection, and systemic failure.

### ***Mental Illness and Psychological Struggles***

Arthur's mental health is central to his character. He suffers from a neurological condition causing uncontrollable bouts of laughter, which alienates him further in an already uncaring society. His struggles with depression and delusions deepen his sense of isolation, and the film starkly depicts the consequences of systemic neglect when his

therapy sessions and medications are abruptly discontinued due to budget cuts. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the critical role of mental health support in preventing crises among vulnerable populations (Stuart, 2006). The abrupt cessation of his treatment not only intensifies his psychological struggles but also reflects broader societal failures in addressing mental health issues, reinforcing the notion that systemic barriers can lead to individual tragedies. This loss of support creates a tipping point, leaving him without any coping mechanisms to navigate his increasingly hostile environment.

### ***Childhood Trauma and Abuse***

Arthur's upbringing is marked by severe abuse, both physical and emotional. His mother, Penny, allowed her boyfriend to harm Arthur as a child, resulting in significant physical injuries and lifelong emotional scars. Adding to this, Penny's delusional belief that Thomas Wayne is Arthur's father builds a false foundation for Arthur's identity. This mirrors findings in psychological research that highlight how childhood trauma can lead to maladaptive behaviours and identity crises in adulthood (Moustafa, Parkes, Fitzgerald, Underhill, & ..., 2021). When Arthur discovers the truth about his mother's lies and her role in his abuse, it not only destroys his last semblance of familial connection but also serves as a catalyst for his complete break with reality.

### ***Social Isolation and Rejection***

Arthur is a profoundly lonely figure, constantly seeking connection but facing rejection at every turn. His peculiar demeanour, partly shaped by his condition, makes him a target for ridicule and violence. Incidents like his attack on the subway, his public humiliation during his stand-up comedy performance, and his realization that his relationship with Sophie was a delusion all reinforce his sense of invisibility and worthlessness. This social rejection resonates with theories of social psychology that discuss the impact of ostracism on mental health (Anooshian, 2003). The public mockery he faces from figures like Murray Franklin highlights how societal rejection can transform an individual's perception of self, pushing them further into despair. Even his idol, Murray Franklin, who initially represents a beacon of hope, cruelly mocks him on live television, cementing Arthur's disillusionment with the world.

### ***Systemic Neglect and Poverty***

The broader context of Gotham's decaying social infrastructure plays a critical role in Arthur's transformation. The film paints a vivid picture of a city plagued by inequality, unrest, and indifference to its most vulnerable citizens. Arthur's story becomes a microcosm of this systemic failure, showing how an individual already on the margins can be pushed further into despair by societal neglect. The film critiques societal indifference towards its most vulnerable citizens, echoing research that links socioeconomic status with mental health outcomes. Arthur's plight serves as a microcosm for understanding how societal structures can exacerbate personal crises, ultimately leading to catastrophic consequences. Rejection of Morality and Embrace of Chaos Over time, Arthur internalizes the violence and rejection he experiences, choosing to abandon societal norms altogether. His killings—initially reactive and defensive—become deliberate acts of rebellion. This shift represents his acceptance of the Joker persona, where he no longer seeks validation but instead revels in chaos and anarchy as expressions of his identity.

### ***Depiction in Arthur's Appearance***

Arthur's transformation into the Joker is visually represented through his evolving appearance: physical condition, clown makeup, and clothing. In terms of physical condition, Arthur's thin, emaciated body reflects both physical neglect and emotional vulnerability. His unhealthy pallor symbolizes his diminished state, a man worn down by years of suffering and malnutrition.

Initially a part of his job as a party clown, his makeup becomes increasingly exaggerated and chaotic as he descends into madness. By the climax, the Joker makeup – a stark white base with smeared blue and red highlights – symbolizes his complete break from reality and societal norms.

Early in the film, Arthur's ill-fitting, muted clothes reinforce his status as an insignificant and overlooked figure. In contrast, his final Joker outfit – a brightly coloured red suit – exudes confidence and defiance, marking his complete transformation into a self-styled agent of chaos. This visual evolution aligns with theories on body image and identity formation, suggesting that physical appearance can reflect deeper psychological states (Malinda, Nirwan, & Wulan, 2024).

### ***Depiction in Arthur's Mannerisms***

Arthur's body language and behaviour evolve dramatically throughout the film, mirroring his psychological decline and ultimate embrace of the Joker identity. There are three main mannerisms that are highlighted here: body language, facial expressions, as well as speech and interaction.

In the beginning, Arthur's posture is hunched and defensive, reflecting his insecurity and desire to shrink away from the world. His movements are awkward and hesitant, emphasizing his discomfort in social settings. As he transforms, his movements become more deliberate and fluid. His slow, almost ritualistic dances serve as physical manifestations of his internal liberation, symbolizing his embrace of chaos and rejection of societal constraints.

Arthur's forced smiles and grimaces early in the film highlight his struggle to mask his pain and conform to societal expectations. His uncontrollable laughter, caused by his condition, contrasts painfully with his true emotions, creating a haunting disconnect between his outward appearance and inner turmoil. By the end, his expressions are filled with an unsettling confidence, as he no longer hides behind pretence but fully embraces his identity as the Joker.

Arthur's early speech patterns are soft, nervous, and hesitant, underscoring his lack of confidence and difficulty in connecting with others. By the time he appears on Murray Franklin's show, his tone is calm, deliberate, and even menacing, reflecting his transformation into a figure who no longer seeks approval or sympathy. These changes resonate with existing psychological frameworks that explore how behaviour is influenced by internal states and external perceptions (Malinda et al., 2024).

## **CONCLUSION**

Arthur Fleck's transformation into the Joker reflects the profound impact of psychological trauma, societal rejection, and systemic neglect. The film *Joker* emphasizes how these factors intertwine, illustrating the critical role of social and institutional support in preventing such psychological breakdowns. By presenting a detailed character study, Todd Phillips highlights the urgency of addressing societal stigma surrounding mental illness and the need for compassion towards marginalized individuals. Arthur's

transformation into the Joker is vividly depicted through his evolving appearance and mannerisms. Todd Phillips uses these visual and behavioral cues to mirror Arthur's psychological journey, illustrating the interplay between his inner turmoil and his outward expression. From fragility and vulnerability to confidence and chaos, Arthur's changes reflect his complete metamorphosis into the Joker.

The implications of this study go beyond just analyzing a film, they connect directly to ongoing discussions about mental health and society's role in addressing it. Arthur Fleck's story in *Joker* urges us to rethink how society responds to mental illness. It highlights the importance of building support systems that focus on empathy and understanding, rather than reinforcing stigma. Additionally, this analysis suggests that films like *Joker* can spark crucial conversations about the dangers of neglecting vulnerable groups. By showing Arthur's struggles, the movie challenges viewers to face uncomfortable truths about how society's indifference can shape people's lives. This study ultimately calls for more open and inclusive conversations about mental health, encouraging communities to create environments where people feel valued and supported, rather than pushed aside. When we think about Arthur's tragic journey, it's clear that addressing mental health issues isn't just about raising awareness. It requires real, tangible changes in our social systems. This story serves as a powerful reminder that compassion and understanding are essential in a world that often values fitting in over embracing individuality.

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