

Drillability & Worldbuilding: Reconstructing Joker as The Tragic Villain (Penerokaan Mendalam dan Pembinaan Dunia: Merekonstruksi Joker sebagai Penjahat Tragis)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how participatory fanfiction reconfigures the Joker as portrayed in Todd Phillips's Joker (2019), transforming Arthur Fleck into a "tragic villain" whose psychological depth invites sustained reader empathy. While the film already departs from comic-book canon by presenting the Joker as a socially marginalised and mentally fragile figure, the Wattpad fanfiction Joker (2019) by artham_asylum extends this transformation through emotionally immersive storytelling. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study investigates how fan-authored narratives advance character complexity through narrative mechanisms not typically explored in canonical media. Addressing a gap in existing research, which often overlooks how fans reshape both canonical and non-canonical reimaginings, this study applies an adapted conceptual framework from Henry Jenkins's principles of drillability and worldbuilding, extended here to include reimagined themes and role-swapping. Drillability explores survivor's guilt, fractured agency, and moral ambivalence, while worldbuilding reconstructs the social and emotional architecture surrounding Arthur's descent. These mechanisms allow fans to produce original meanings and critique structural violence through character revision. The findings position fanfiction not as a derivative expression, but as a critical and creative form of participatory authorship. It challenges fixed character archetypes and contributes to broader discourses on authorship, trauma, and narrative ethics in digital storytelling.

Keywords: drillability; worldbuilding; Joker; fanfiction; transmedia storytelling

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini meneliti bagaimana fiksiyen peminat partisipatif (participatory fanfiction) mengkonfigurasi semula Joker seperti yang digambarkan dalam filem Joker (2019) arahan Todd Phillips, mengubah Arthur Fleck menjadi "penjahat tragis" yang kedalaman psikologinya mengundang empati berterusan daripada pembaca. Walaupun filem tersebut sudah pun menyimpang daripada kanun buku komik dengan menampilkan Joker sebagai sosok yang terpinggir secara sosial dan rapuh mentalnya, fiksiyen peminat Wattpad Joker (2019) nukilan artham_asylum memperluaskan transformasi ini melalui penceritaan yang mendalam secara emosi. Menggunakan analisis tekstual kualitatif, kajian ini menyiasat bagaimana naratif yang dikarang oleh peminat memajukan kerumitan watak melalui mekanisme naratif yang biasanya tidak diterokai dalam media kanonikal. Bagi mengisi jurang dalam penyelidikan sedia ada, yang sering terlepas pandang bagaimana peminat membentuk semula interpretasi kanonikal dan bukan kanonikal, kajian ini mengaplikasikan kerangka konseptual yang diadaptasi daripada prinsip penerokaan mendalam (drillability) dan pembinaan dunia (worldbuilding) oleh Henry Jenkins, yang diperluaskan di sini untuk merangkumi tema yang diolah semula serta pertukaran peranan (role-swapping). Penerokaan mendalam menelusuri rasa bersalah mandiri (survivor's guilt), agensi yang retak, dan ambivalens moral, manakala pembinaan dunia membina semula struktur sosial dan emosi yang mengelilingi kejatuhan Arthur. Mekanisme-mekanisme ini membolehkan peminat menghasilkan makna yang asli dan mengkritik keganasan struktur melalui pengubahsuaian watak. Dapatan kajian ini meletakkan fiksiyen peminat bukan sebagai sebuah ekspresi derivatif (tiruan), tetapi sebagai satu bentuk kepengarangan partisipatif yang kritis dan kreatif. Ia mencabar arketip watak yang tegar dan menyumbang kepada wacana yang lebih meluas mengenai kepengarangan, trauma, dan etika naratif dalam penceritaan digital.

Kata Kunci: penerokaan mendalam; Pembinaan Dunia; Joker, Fiksiyen Peminat; Penceritaan Transmedia

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INTRODUCTION

The Joker's transformation from comic book antagonist into a polyvalent cultural artefact reflects the evolving dynamics of media production and reception, wherein, as Jenkins (2014) argues, audiences are no longer passive recipients but active co-creators of meaning. In a media ecology shaped by participatory culture and convergence, the Joker's symbolic instability has become emblematic of broader socio-narrative tensions (Li & Pang, 2024; Reed & Boppre, 2020). As global storytelling shifts from linear, author-centric frameworks to interactive and decentralised modalities, characters such as the Joker are no longer confined to fixed ontologies or singular narrative arcs (Schober, 2019; Tobias, 2013). Instead, they function as contested symbolic terrains, open to re-articulation, appropriation, and resignification by diverse interpretive communities. The Joker's ideological volatility and refusal to stabilise within coherent moral or psychological boundaries render him a particularly fertile site for fan-driven reimaginings, in which, according to Brottrager et al. (2023) and Tian & Zhong (2022), canonical limits are not only blurred but actively interrogated and reconstructed. This phenomenon signals a paradigmatic shift in cultural production: the dispersal of authorial power and the emergence of networked storytelling as a platform for sociocultural critique (Coppa, 2017; Fathallah, 2017).

Amid this shift, fanfiction emerges as a potent form of participatory textuality, functioning simultaneously as a counter-narrative and an epistemic intervention within dominant cultural discourses (Fink, 2021; Jenkins, 2006; Jesty, 2018; Massanari, 2013). It allows marginalised readers and writers to engage with, rework, and reframe existing narratives, producing interpretations that challenge hegemonic assumptions about identity, morality, and representation. One such case is *Joker* (2019) by Wattpad author artham_asylum, a narrative that reconstructs the titular character not as innately malevolent, but as a product of trauma, social neglect, and institutional abandonment. The significance of this fan-authored reimagination lies in its ability to evoke reader identification with the Joker, not as an agent of chaos, but as a figure shaped by vulnerability, grief, and systemic betrayal. In doing so, the fanfiction amplifies the affective dimension of villainy and positions its protagonist within a psychological realism and moral ambiguity that mainstream texts often resist. Through the appropriation and recontextualisation of iconic figures, fanfiction asserts subaltern voices, emotional complexity, and transformative authorship. This creative practice aligns with Jenkins's (2014) notion of "textual poaching," where fans tactically inhabit dominant texts, subverting their ideological structures to create alternative meanings. As Diker & Taşdelen (2019) and Savitri & Utami (2016) note, audiences today are no longer mere consumers; they can re-imagine, re-narrate, and reconstruct fictional worlds with social, political, and emotional significance.

This paper examines *Joker* by artham_asylum, a thematically intricate fanfiction composed in response to the 2019 film *Joker*, which itself marked a pivotal cultural shift in the character's portrayal. Selected through a targeted search using hashtags #ArthurFleck and #Joker, the text was chosen for its narrative complexity and its deep engagement with Arthur Fleck's reimagined identity. As a publicly accessible, user-generated narrative hosted on Wattpad, the text is ethically permissible for academic analysis under fair use provisions and participatory culture research norms. The author's username is cited to acknowledge creative ownership and ensure transparency. Todd Phillips's film recasts the Joker from a chaotic antagonist into a psychologically fragile victim of structural violence (Howie, 2024; Zacharek, 2019). This reframing opened new interpretive possibilities, especially within fan communities, where Arthur's story has been extended, deepened, and ethically reimagined. In *Joker* (2019) by

artham_asylum, the character is not simply humanised but situated within a multilayered system of trauma and emotional disintegration. This fanfiction exemplifies how participatory narratives challenge moral absolutism, resist reductive binaries, and reclaim representational agency through narrative empathy and affective realism. In this regard, fanfiction becomes a site of ideological contestation and narrative re-authorship, inviting critical reflection on authorship, identity, and the ethics of storytelling within participatory culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Joker's transformation from a theatrical comic book villain to a multifaceted cultural archetype reflects a broader evolution in how audiences engage with villainy. Since his debut in *Batman #1* (1940), the Joker has undergone radical reinterpretations, evolving from a flamboyant trickster into a psychologically complex figure embodying societal trauma, ideological disruption, and systemic failure (Reboiro Martínez, 2017; Wheeler, 2024). While scholarship has extensively examined his development across comics and films, especially in canonical milestones such as *The Killing Joke*, *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *Joker* (2019), relatively little attention has been paid to how fanfiction expands, humanises, or reconfigures this already hybridised character through participatory reinterpretation. Early portrayals of the Joker adhered to Golden Age comic-book conventions, in which villains served as moral foils to heroic protagonists (Coletta, 2014; Jürgens & Visconti, 2024). As cultural sensibilities evolved, so did the Joker's characterisation, no longer a mere criminal mastermind but a disturbing reflection of cultural malaise. Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988) was pivotal in this shift, presenting the Joker as a failed comedian driven mad by a single catastrophic day (Belkhiri, 2023; Brake, 2024). Nolan's Joker in *The Dark Knight* offered a nihilistic disruptor untethered from origin, while Phillips's *Joker* (2019) humanised Arthur Fleck as a victim of social abandonment and psychological decay (Rozikin et al., 2021; Zaid, 2023). These versions reposition the Joker within a continuum of socio-political anxieties, yet they remain tethered to top-down, authorial control.

Here, fanfiction becomes an epistemic intervention. Situated within Henry Jenkins's theory of convergence culture, fanfiction is not merely derivative play but an act of textual poaching that recasts dominant narratives to foreground marginalised voices. As Salter & Blodgett (2021) assert, fan practices disrupt narrative authority and offer grassroots spaces for counter-narratives. Platforms like Wattpad provide fertile ground for such interventions, where fan-authored texts like *Joker* (2019) by artham_asylum revisit Arthur Fleck's tragic descent with even greater emotional granularity and ethical complexity. This study applies an adapted lens based on Jenkins's transmedia storytelling principles of drillability and worldbuilding. According to Jenkins (2009), drillability allows audiences to probe deeply into a fictional world, exploring complex backstories, emotional nuance, and alternative moral pathways. Worldbuilding, meanwhile, refers to the creation of immersive narrative environments that can support multiple storylines across media. These principles were widely used to study extensive franchises like *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Game of Thrones*, where fan and corporate narratives co-evolve (Joyce, 2023; Kinder, 2020; Lau, 2014; Spanò, 2016).

Past studies have demonstrated that worldbuilding serves as a tool for complex storytelling beyond fantasy and science fiction. Quina (2021), in a study of the *Mythspace* comic series, shows how interconnected narratives and narrative implication shape expansive storyworlds that can sustain multiple interpretations and genres. Similarly Dalby & Freeman (2023), Freeman (2017) and Scolari (2016), examine how transmedia ecosystems function through layered forms of official

and unofficial storytelling, including fanfiction. While these frameworks offer valuable insights into narrative expansion, they are predominantly applied to large-scale, franchise-based storyworlds characterised by extensive canonical depth. In contrast, the present study extends the concepts of drillability and worldbuilding to participatory fanfiction centred on a single, reimagined character rather than on an expansive corporate intellectual property. Unlike previous applications of these concepts, which often focus on canon-rich worlds such as *Game of Thrones* or *The Matrix*, this study examines how fan authors engage with the emotional and psychological fractures of a character whose narrative has already been reinterpreted. In *Joker* (2019) by artham_asylum, the fan author drills into underexplored dimensions such as survivor's guilt, moral ambiguity, and social ostracisation, reconstructing a morally grey protagonist through affective realism. At the same time, worldbuilding is employed not to expand lore horizontally, but to deepen and re-situate character motivations and ethical conflicts within an emotionally resonant narrative universe, effectively creating an “empathy architecture” within the participatory text.

Moreover, fanfiction offers a unique form of re-authorship. It collapses the binary between consumer and creator, allowing narrative agency to shift toward the reader-writer hybrid (Jamison & Grossman, 2013). In this context, characters such as the Joker are no longer fixed archetypes, but dynamic narrative figures continuously reshaped through collective reinterpretation. However, previous media and fan studies often discuss the “humanisation” of villains in broad psychological or cultural terms, focusing on sympathy, emotional depth, or moral complexity rather than on the specific narrative mechanisms through which such transformations occur (Arthamivea et al., 2021; Md Khalid & Nazmi, 2025; Schlögl & Zagalo, 2019; Traesar & Saktiningrum, 2024). At the same time, much of the existing research on transmedia and participatory storytelling continues to centre on expansive corporate franchises such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter*, where official narratives are strategically extended across multiple platforms within commercially driven storyworlds (Bowrey, 2011; Cheng et al., 2025; Halim et al., 2025; Hassler-Forest & Hills, 2018; Hills et al., 2018; Lustyik & Holtmeier, 2017; Prabha Parmar, Ayushi Gaurav Doval, 2025). As a result, grassroots fanfiction practices, particularly on platforms like Wattpad, remain underexplored as independent sites of narrative innovation and ethical re-authorship. This paper responds directly to that gap by examining how *Joker* (2019) is not only interpreted but actively re-authored through participatory fanfiction, positioning fanfiction as a legitimate narrative laboratory for reconstructing ideology, authorship, and identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on and reinterprets Henry Jenkins' principles of drillability and worldbuilding, initially formulated within the context of transmedia storytelling, to explore how participatory fanfiction reshapes the villainous archetype. In this study, these concepts are adapted and extended to interrogate the psychological, ethical, and sociocultural dimensions of the Joker as reimagined in fan-authored narratives. This theoretical lens foregrounds how fan practices not only expand narrative universes but also “drill” into emotional and ideological depths often left unexplored in canonical texts. In fanfiction, these adapted concepts serve dual functions: drillability becomes a methodological tool for deep character excavation. At the same time, worldbuilding emerges as an epistemic strategy for restructuring narrative logic and ethical alignment. Together, they enable a critical inquiry into how villainy is deconstructed and humanised within participatory storytelling frameworks.

Drillability, initially introduced by Jenkins (2010) describes the audience's desire to explore specific narrative aspects with precision and depth, in contrast to spreadability, which pertains to the dissemination of content across platforms. Drillability emphasises interpretive thoroughness. In this study, the concept is adapted to refer to how fanfiction authors engage in detailed narrative and psychological exploration, reimagining a character's backstory, motivations, and internal conflicts with intricate detail. When applied to the Joker, drillability enables fan writers to delve beneath the surface of villainy and explore the unresolved traumas, emotional vulnerabilities, and cognitive dissonances that canonical texts often overlook or obscure. This interpretive approach transforms the Joker from a mere symbol of antagonism into a subject of emotional and psychological inquiry, shaped as much by his environment and relational issues as by any inherent pathology. Through this perspective, fanfiction becomes not just a creative activity but a form of narrative examination, capable of redefining archetypes through emotional realism and moral complexity.

While drillability enables an intensive narrative deconstruction by exploring the details of specific aspects of character and storyline, worldbuilding is the subsequent phase in participatory storytelling, where fanfiction authors reconstruct and expand the existing universe to offer alternative character trajectories and thematic reconfigurations. Henry Jenkins identifies worldbuilding as a fundamental element of transmedia storytelling, emphasising its role in creating immersive fictional environments that extend beyond the original text (Pullen, 2019). Rather than merely replicating canonical stories, worldbuilding in fanfiction actively transforms them, allowing for a reinterpretation of characters, relationships, settings, and ethical dilemmas (Boillat et al., 2022). Through this process, fans exercise creative agency in ways that challenge mainstream character portrayals and narrative structures, offering new storytelling possibilities beyond traditional media representations' constraints (Klein, 2012; Quina, 2021).

Worldbuilding in fanfiction is particularly significant for redefining villainous archetypes, enabling antagonists like the Joker to be reshaped within diverse ethical and psychological frameworks. Fanfiction enables a broader and more detailed understanding of his character by expanding upon untold aspects of his story, recontextualising his relationships, and altering his moral positioning (García-Roca, 2019; Rosales & Díaz, 2024). Through worldbuilding, fan authors fill in the gaps left by canonical narratives and create alternative interpretations that complicate the Joker's traditional role as an agent of chaos. This process subverts established tropes, generating narratives that explore how external circumstances, trauma, and social structures shape villainy rather than simply depicting it as a personal choice. This paper examines two primary worldbuilding strategies in Joker fanfiction: reimagined themes and role-swapping. These strategies offer insight into how fans reconceptualise the Joker's identity, presenting him as a product of systemic failures, a morally ambiguous protagonist, or a tragic figure whose actions stem from his lived experiences rather than an inherent inclination toward destruction.

REIMAGINED THEMES: TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH – THE PRODUCT OF CIRCUMSTANCE

A key aspect of worldbuilding in fanfiction is its ability to reshape character narratives by introducing alternative thematic frameworks. In Joker's case, fanfiction often moves away from his traditional portrayal as a chaotic, remorseless villain, instead placing him within a psychological and sociological lens that explores trauma, mental illness, and systemic oppression. Rather than depicting villainy as an inherent trait, fanfiction reframes it as a consequence of

accumulated suffering, alienation, and neglect. While canonical portrayals often portray the Joker's madness as inexplicable, fanfiction interrogates the possibility that his descent into violence is a reaction to external forces rather than a manifestation of pure evil. This interpretation shifts the focus from a character born to be a villain to one shaped by circumstances beyond his control.

One of the most prevalent themes in Joker fanfiction is childhood trauma, with numerous narratives exploring his early years to consider how neglect, abuse, or emotional instability may have shaped his fractured psyche (Tüysüz & Adnan, 2021). By embedding these elements into his backstory, fanfiction humanises the Joker, presenting him not as an absolute evil figure but as a deeply wounded individual shaped by hardship and mistreatment. This reimagining complicates binary notions of good and evil, illustrating villainy as the product of deep psychological wounds rather than an innate moral failing. Another significant focus in fanfiction is social alienation, which challenges the canonical portrayal of the Joker as an autonomous agent of destruction. Instead, these narratives explore how systemic rejection, societal failure, and prolonged marginalisation contribute to his transformation.

Unlike traditional depictions that position the Joker as an outsider by choice, fanfiction often presents a man who initially sought connection but was continuously excluded, abandoned, and dehumanised by the very world that later feared him. This shift in perspective raises critical ethical questions about agency, responsibility, and the role of institutions in shaping individuals who are later vilified as threats to society. Furthermore, fanfiction challenges the idea that the Joker is entirely devoid of remorse, instead exploring the possibility that he experiences internalised guilt and fleeting moments of self-awareness. While canonical portrayals emphasise his unwavering embrace of chaos, fanfiction often suggests that he is trapped in a cycle of self-destruction, questioning his actions but unable to escape them (Bezio, 2015). This layer of internal conflict adds depth to his characterisation, presenting him not as an unstoppable force of villainy but as a man who has lost control, consumed by despair, suffering, and disillusionment. Fanfiction offers a more complex and psychological interpretation of the Joker through this thematic reconstruction, shifting his narrative from a symbol of mindless chaos to a reflection of systemic failure and human fragility.

ROLE-SWAPPING

Another primary worldbuilding strategy designed for this study is role-swapping, in which a character's traditional function within the narrative is altered, reversed, or subverted (Knight et al., 2024). Role-swapping is particularly effective at challenging static character archetypes, enabling a re-examination of the Joker's moral and ethical positioning and destabilising dominant readings of heroism and villainy. One of the most significant manifestations of role-swapping in Joker-centred fanfiction is his repositioning as the main character, in which the narrative no longer revolves around Batman's struggle against evil but instead explores the Joker's internal journey, moral dilemmas, and subjective experience of Gotham. This shift in perspective reframes the Joker's identity from an external antagonist to a central protagonist, allowing fanfiction to complicate his relationship with the reader. By immersing the audience in his consciousness, emotions, and justifications, these narratives prompt readers to consider his motivations with greater layers rather than merely categorising him as a villain without context. Role-swapping also reconfigures the Joker's place within Gotham's power structures, often challenging his fixed role as an outlaw or an enemy of justice. By imagining him as a vigilante, an antihero, or even a victim

of Gotham's institutional failures, fanfiction narratives explore alternative realities in which his actions are not purely destructive but represent a distorted form of resistance against corruption, oppression, or injustice. This form of worldbuilding challenges mainstream perceptions of morality, emphasising that villainy is often a matter of perspective rather than an objective classification.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN DRILLABILITY AND WORLDBUILDING IN FANFICTION

While drillability allows for an intensive exploration of a character's psychological depth, thematic relevance, and ethical implications, worldbuilding extends these insights into an immersive, multidimensional narrative framework. These two processes work in tandem, enabling fanfiction to move beyond static portrayals and actively redefine character identities, moral conflicts, and narrative trajectories (Spaulding, 2012). Through drillability, fanfiction interrogates canonical gaps and underdeveloped aspects of the Joker's character, and through worldbuilding, it reconstructs these elements into fully realised alternative interpretations that challenge traditional storytelling norms (McKenzie, 2023). By applying Jenkins's transmedia storytelling principles to the study of fanfiction, this research highlights the power of participatory narratives in transforming villainous archetypes. The Joker, often depicted as a one-dimensional agent of chaos, is reinterpreted within fanfiction as a psychologically complex, socially conditioned, and morally ambiguous figure, offering a compelling counterpoint to mainstream portrayals. Through drillability and worldbuilding, fanfiction emerges as an intellectual and creative space where audiences actively reshape the boundaries of storytelling, redefining the Joker not as a fixed entity but as an ever-evolving figure shaped by collective imagination, reinterpretation, and critique.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The transformation of the Joker from a symbol of chaos into a tragic villain represents a profound narrative shift that leverages fan agency, participatory culture, and narrative reconstruction. In the fanfiction taken from Wattpad, *Joker* by artham_asylum (2019), the transformation is achieved through two core processes: drilling into Joker, named Arthur Fleck's psychological and emotional depths and worldbuilding, which situates his struggles within a larger societal and relational framework. These processes result in a reimagined Joker archetype, defined not by inherent malevolence but by systemic failure, emotional trauma, and a longing for connection. Fanfiction thrives on its participatory nature, where authors and readers collaborate to reconstruct canonical narratives (Delwiche & Henderson, 2012; Irwin, 2023). This analysis examines how the intersection of drillability and worldbuilding reconfigures the Joker as a "tragic villain," an archetype that evokes empathy while critiquing the systemic injustices that drive individuals toward darkness.

DRILLABILITY AND WORLDBUILDING: RECONSTRUCTING THE JOKER AS A TRAGIC VILLAIN

In the fanfiction *Joker* by artham_asylum (2019), the story explores Arthur Fleck's emotional and psychological struggles. It portrays the Joker as a tragic villain, shaped by personal trauma and societal failures, rather than merely as a figure of chaos. The story, available on Wattpad, follows a young man named Arthur. He grows up in a violent home, finding comfort only in his mother's

love. Although Arthur is a sweet boy who adores his mother, his stepfather, Joe, is cruel and abusive, leaving deep scars on him. His mother shares inspiring stories about kindness and love, but Joe's violence impacts Arthur profoundly, filling his world with anger and betrayal. As he grows older, Arthur gets a job at a rehabilitation clinic, where he meets Natalie, a woman who becomes significant to him. Like Arthur, Natalie has faced her own struggles, but she wants to help others. This inspires Arthur. Even though Natalie cares for him, Arthur gets pulled back into darkness by Alex, an old friend from Natalie's past. Alex is manipulative and leads Arthur to make a terrible decision: joining a bank robbery in exchange for promises of wealth. This choice changes everything, forcing Arthur to lie to Natalie, the one person who makes him feel valued.

After the robbery, Alex continues to manipulate Arthur, creating misunderstandings between him and Natalie. This leads to a dramatic confrontation at a chemical factory, where Arthur realises he has nothing left to lose. In a final act of defiance, he tries to take Alex down with him, but fate cruelly leaves Arthur alive, yet broken. The story ends with Arthur alone, haunted by his choices. He remembers his mother's teachings about goodness and realises he has strayed from the path. Meanwhile, Natalie finds happiness with someone else, leaving Arthur to face his inner demons and the legacy of violence in his life. The story centres on Arthur Fleck's backstory, highlighting his traumatic experiences and struggles. The author uses this approach to examine Arthur's childhood, guilt, and coping methods. This analysis shows how neglect and dysfunctional relationships affected him, transforming his descent into villainy into a response to his environment instead of simply being evil. At the same time, the story establishes a broader context for his transformation, illustrating how societal factors contribute to his development. These elements, together, help reshape the traditional view of the Joker by exploring trauma, guilt, and neglect within society (Thomas & Herman, 2011).

While drillability, drill down, extracting and unpacking Arthur Fleck's internal psychological struggles, worldbuilding provides the structural scaffolding that situates these struggles within a richly detailed narrative universe. In *Joker* (2019), the fanfiction leverages worldbuilding to expand his story by repositioning him from a chaotic antagonist to a central figure whose psychological and societal battles form the crux of the narrative (Phillips, 2021). This reframing, achieved through re-imagining theme and role-swapping, repositions Arthur as the protagonist, allowing his backstory, motivations, and environment to take centre stage. Through this transformative process, the fanfiction creates an immersive exploration of Arthur's life, providing insight into how societal systems, relationships, and personal betrayals coalesce to shape his tragic descent into villainy.

RE-IMAGINED THEME: TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH - REFRAMING THE JOKER AS A PRODUCT OF CIRCUMSTANCE

In traditional media, the Joker is frequently depicted as a dangerous and chaotic force, a villain who revels in destruction without a clear motive or personal history (Langley & Rosenberg, 2011). This characterisation, while iconic, oversimplifies his complexity, reducing him to a figure of senseless madness rather than a product of circumstance. Such portrayals reinforce the notion of villainy as an innate quality, disregarding the potential role of trauma, neglect, and systemic failures in shaping his descent. Fanfiction offers an alternative lens through which the Joker can be reinterpreted, allowing writers to explore his psychological struggles, emotional pain, and the environmental factors that contribute to his actions (England, 2024; McClellan, 2018). Unlike mainstream narratives that often glorify his unpredictability, fanfiction dives into his suffering and

the institutions that failed him, presenting a Joker who is not inherently evil but rather a figure shaped by personal and societal injustices.

By reimagining the Joker through the lens of trauma and mental illness, fanfiction presents a more nuanced and empathetic view of the character. His transformation into a villain arises not from a desire for chaos but rather from unresolved pain, persistent rejection, and an indifferent society. These narratives often humanise the Joker by uncovering details about his childhood, experiences of abuse, and struggles with mental health. They depict his descent into violence as a tragic outcome rather than a mere choice. This fresh perspective does not excuse his actions but complicates the moral landscape surrounding his character. It encourages audiences to contemplate themes of punishment, rehabilitation, and social responsibility. By portraying the Joker as a product of his circumstances, fanfiction challenges conventional notions of villainy, illustrating that the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, sanity and madness, and hero and villain are far more ambiguous than mainstream media suggests.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND FAMILIAL BETRAYAL

In the chosen fanfiction, Arthur's psychological unravelling begins with his abusive childhood, vividly depicted through the actions of his stepfather, Joe. As shown in the fanfiction, a figure of relentless cruelty, Joe's words, "...I see why your daddy left you; your momma should have done the same. You bring death with you, boy," epitomise the verbal and emotional abuse that scars Arthur's self-perception. These statements, laden with venomous intent, echo throughout his life, fostering a narrative of inherent unworthiness and self-loathing. The psychological impact of Joe's abuse is further illustrated through Arthur's reflections, such as, "...Walking into Joe's house felt like stepping into the lion's den." This encapsulates the pervasive fear and helplessness that define Arthur's childhood, situating Joe as an antagonist and a symbol of betrayal and oppression. From a psychological perspective, Joe's actions align with theories of learned helplessness, where prolonged exposure to uncontrollable adversity fosters a debilitating sense of resignation and erodes one's agency (Duda & Joormann, 2022).

Arthur's relationship with his mother adds another layer of complexity. While she offers moments of comfort, her inability to protect Arthur from Joe's abuse creates a dual dynamic of love and neglect. Whether driven by fear or denial, her inaction exacerbates Arthur's sense of abandonment, deepening his mistrust of others. (Stoppelbein et al., 2024). Fanfiction captures this complexity by drilling into moments of familial dysfunction, inviting readers to empathise with Arthur's pain and recognise how these early experiences shape his later choices. By contextualising Arthur's later violence as a response to unresolved trauma, the narrative reframes the Joker's actions as tragic inevitabilities rather than senseless acts of chaos (Reinhardt, 2023).

SURVIVOR'S GUILT AND INTERNALIZED BLAME

The fanfiction adaptation of *Joker* undertakes a psychologically intensive re-imagining of Arthur Fleck by drilling deep into the emotional residues of survivor's guilt and internalised blame. Rather than portraying Arthur as a figure predisposed to violence, the narrative reveals a young man shaped by chronic fear, emotional abandonment, and the repeated message that he is responsible for the suffering of those he loves. This approach allows the fan author to transform Arthur from a symbol of villainy into a profoundly tragic figure whose moral collapse emerges from years of psychological corrosion. His early reflection "...If I'd just listened to her, if I'd just done as she

said... But I never” condenses the central pattern of his thinking: harm occurs *because* of him, and he is therefore undeserving of relief or forgiveness. This single confession encapsulates how guilt becomes an organising principle of Arthur’s identity long before he inhabits the Joker persona.

Joe, Arthur’s abusive stepfather, intensifies this internalised guilt through calculated psychological manipulation. In a pivotal confrontation, Joe forces Arthur to verbalise his mother’s near-death condition, twisting the moment into an accusation rather than an expression of concern. Leaning in close, he demands, “...Dead? Is your momma dead? Spit it out. Is your momma dead?” and, when Arthur, terrified and shaking, manages to nod, Joe weaponises the moment, “...If she does die... it will be on you; you did this, boy. Not many boys your age can say they’re responsible for the death of their mother.” Arthur later admits that in that moment, “he was right. If she died, it would be my fault.” (artham_asylum, 2019).

This excerpt distils the emotional architecture of Arthur’s trauma. Joe’s accusations do not merely wound; they redefine Arthur’s cognitive landscape. The narrative’s psychological drilling uncovers how Arthur internalises Joe’s words as truth, believing that he is not a victim of abuse, but the cause of suffering. This shift is crucial to the fanfiction’s re-imagining strategy: guilt becomes the emotional logic that structures Arthur’s world, shaping his understanding of relationships, morality, and himself. His relationship with his mother further complicates Arthur’s emotional world. Though he loves her deeply, her inability to protect him from Joe’s violence creates a painful contradiction. Her mantra, “...good people do good”, remains one of the few sources of moral guidance in his life, yet her silence during moments of abuse undermines its meaning. This tension intensifies Arthur’s sense of responsibility, leading him to believe he must bear the weight of their suffering alone. Such contradictions, when drilled into narratively, reveal a psyche torn between affection and shame, longing and resentment. They also expose the systemic failures, familial and societal, that fail to protect vulnerable children from abusive environments.

By exposing how guilt embeds itself into Arthur’s inner life, the fanfiction performs a re-imagining that fundamentally humanises him. The Joker is no longer an embodiment of chaos or nihilism; he becomes a product of psychological injury, shaped by manipulation, abandonment, and emotional contradictions he was never equipped to navigate. This is not an attempt to absolve Arthur of wrongdoing, but a deliberate reframing that places trauma, rather than innate evil, at the centre of his narrative arc. The fanfiction thus positions his descent not as a dramatic plot turn but as the tragic culmination of years spent believing he is the source of harm to those he loves. Through its meticulous psychological drilling and affective worldbuilding, the narrative constructs a compelling portrait of a man who internalised blame to survive and was destroyed by it. This reimagining transforms Arthur into a deeply human figure, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about abuse, guilt, and the societal failures that produce such wounded identities. In doing so, the fanfiction elevates Arthur’s story into one of profound tragedy, painfully intimate, ethically resonant, and impossible to dismiss.

ROLE-SWAPPING: JOKER- THE VICTIM OF A TRAGIC LIFE

The fanfiction' Joker' reimagines Arthur Fleck not as the canonical emblem of chaos, but as a profoundly wounded protagonist whose psychological deterioration is chronicled through a lifetime of trauma, betrayal, and emotional neglect. Central to this reinterpretation is the role-swapping strategy embedded within the fanfiction’s worldbuilding, a deliberate narrative shift that redefines Arthur not as Gotham’s adversary but as the emotional core of the story. This repositioning is not superficial; it fundamentally transforms the moral framework of the fictional

universe. By emphasising Arthur's internal voice and lived experiences, the fanfiction deconstructs the Joker's archetype as an agent of evil and re-establishes him as a victim of social apathy. This narrative approach enhances the worldbuilding beyond mere spatial or mythic expansion, fostering an emotionally rich universe shaped by trauma, institutional failure, and interpersonal discord.

Arthur's early monologue "...I wanted to be a good person... none of us are born truly evil. It is a turn of events that makes us like that" (artham_asylum, 2019), signals this narrative inversion. Rather than situating Arthur as a threat to social order, the fanfiction invites readers to perceive his descent through the lens of structural vulnerability. This internal reflection exemplifies Jenkins's (2009) principle of drillability: the fan author does not merely reframe Arthur's behaviour, but excavates the psychic landscape from which it emerges. The reader is drawn into Arthur's subjectivity, where morality is not absent but slowly eroded by a succession of betrayals. Role-swapping here functions not only to revise character alignment but to construct an entire affective world in which Arthur's actions are rendered legible, if not justifiable.

Worldbuilding in this context is executed through vivid emotional realism. The memory of abuse, "...his big hands around my mother's throat... slapping me... kicking me into broken glass" (artham_asylum, 2019), is not backstory for atmosphere, but a cornerstone of the restructured narrative world. Rather than mythologising Arthur's trauma, the fanfiction anchors his psychological rupture in specific, harrowing moments. The world being built is one in which the Joker's origin is not theatrical but causal, driven by a continuum of interpersonal and institutional failures. It is within this universe that Arthur's moral descent becomes not a spectacle, but a tragedy. The emotional contradictions in Arthur's relationship with his mother deepen this reimagining. Her moral instruction, "...good people do good," is repeated throughout the narrative, yet her silence during Joe's violence undercuts its authority. This dissonance fractures Arthur's internal world, destabilising his understanding of care, love, and justice. The fanfiction constructs a reality where maternal affection coexists with helpless complicity, intensifying Arthur's sense of isolation and betrayal. These emotional layers invite the reader to drill further into his disintegration, rendering his eventual collapse not as a turn toward evil, but as a consequence of unresolved trauma and narrative abandonment.

By integrating role-swapping into emotionally grounded worldbuilding, the fanfiction fundamentally reconstructs Arthur Fleck's ontology. Rather than portraying him as the Joker, an emblem of anarchic villainy, the narrative reframes him as a tragic figure whose descent is catalysed by systemic neglect, personal betrayal, and unresolved trauma. This repositioning is not a mere reversal of roles; it is a structural reorientation of the narrative universe that centres empathy and psychological realism. Arthur becomes an affectively layered character whose violent acts emerge not from inherent malice but from prolonged dehumanisation within a morally fractured world. The fan author does not excuse his transformation but invites readers to witness the conditions that make it inevitable. In doing so, the narrative humanises a cultural icon of chaos, challenging reductive villain archetypes and affirming fanfiction as a powerful site of participatory, ethical critique.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE TRAGIC VILLAIN ARCHETYPE

As discussed previously, in traditional media, the Joker is often depicted as dangerous and chaotic, seemingly without motivation or history (VanSlette & Boyd, 2011). This oversimplified portrayal reduces him to a one-dimensional villain, stripping away any potential for understanding his transformation. This fanfiction, however, offers a space to drill deeper into his psyche,

reconstructing his story through worldbuilding that expands his background and humanises his descent into villainy. By exploring trauma and mental health, fan interpretations present the Joker not as inherently evil but as a product of circumstance, shaped by neglect, systemic failures, and repeated social rejection. The fighting scene in the story exemplifies this shift in characterisation, marking Arthur Fleck's transition from victim to aggressor. His confrontation with Perry Menston represents more than just a schoolyard brawl. It is a symbolic clash between oppression and agency, where Arthur's humiliation and suffering crystallise into violent resistance. Initially, Arthur embodies learned helplessness, apologising despite years of torment, "...I turned to him, and even though he had mocked me... I still muttered sorry to him." When examined through drillability, this moment reveals the deep psychological conditioning that has shaped Arthur's passivity, highlighting his internalised belief that submission is the only way to survive. However, when Perry escalates the abuse, demanding total subjugation, "...Get on your knees and beg me to forgive you," Arthur's refusal marks his first true assertion of agency, signalling a psychological shift that leads him toward violence.

This transformation is further emphasised through Arthur's unsettling laughter during the fight, a drillable moment that exposes his psychological fragmentation: "...I stumbled back... and then. I laughed." Here, laughter is no longer a reaction to humour but a rupture in his psyche, marking his break from societal norms of fear and submission (Merchán-del-Hierro et al., 2021; Mpofo, 2021). Fanfiction's worldbuilding expands on this idea, showing how violence becomes both a defence mechanism and a newfound source of power. His exhilaration during the fight, "...A feeling of euphoria rushes over me, power. I should not like it, but I do." This highlights the intoxicating allure of control, something he has never experienced before. Arthur's conflict is also framed through his mother's teachings, creating a tragic irony as he clings to the idea that 'good people do good,' even while brutalising Perry. This internal struggle, a key focus in drillability, deepens his character by showing that his violence is not driven by malice but by the realisation that goodness has never protected him. His final moment of dominance, standing over Perry beneath an anti-bullying poster, exposes the hypocrisy of society's moral structures, reinforcing how systemic neglect fosters cycles of violence. By drilling into Arthur's trauma and reframing his narrative through expanded worldbuilding, fanfiction challenges the static portrayal of the Joker as an irredeemable villain. Instead, it presents an intensely human tragedy, where his descent is not a predetermined path to madness but a desperate response to years of suffering (Echeburúa & Amor, 2019; Kruglanski et al., 2023; van Dijk et al., 2017). This approach blurs the line between victim and perpetrator, forcing readers to reconsider whether the Joker is genuinely beyond saving or simply abandoned by the world that made him.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that fanfiction, particularly *Joker* (2019) by artham_asylum, functions as a transformative narrative space in which the Joker archetype is not only humanised but also ethically redefined. Through the combined use of drillability and worldbuilding, the fan-author reconstructs Arthur Fleck as a psychologically wounded individual shaped by abuse, neglect, and social abandonment rather than an agent of senseless chaos. Drillability exposes the emotional depth of Arthur's survivor's guilt, internalised blame, and moral confusion, while worldbuilding situates these struggles within a broader framework of institutional failure and broken relationships. In this reimagined context, the Joker no longer stands primarily as a symbol of

anarchic disruption. Instead, he becomes a figure who exposes the moral weaknesses of the society that produced him. He embodies the consequences of emotional neglect, social exclusion, and systemic injustice. His actions, while still violent and harmful, are framed as responses to prolonged dehumanisation rather than expressions of inherent evil. Thus, the Joker in fanfiction becomes a Joker of social failure, a character who reveals the gaps between moral ideals and lived reality. He challenges the audience to question how vulnerability is treated, how trauma is ignored, and how individuals are labelled as villains when support systems collapse. Through participatory storytelling, fanfiction transforms the Joker from a symbol of chaos into a mirror reflecting society's unresolved responsibilities. In doing so, it affirms fanfiction as a powerful site of ethical critique, narrative agency, and cultural reflection.

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