

The Exploitation of Mental Illness in Hollywood

Mental health is a topic that has become more apparent in recent years as we've seen people increasingly opening up about their mental struggles and how they deal with it in a society that tends to hold certain stereotypes against them. With this spark in conversation, the subject matter has become a part of pop culture and entertainment where various television shows and even certain films have incorporated themes that follow characters with mental illness. One film in particular that has represented this shift in mental health awareness in film is the 2019 psychological thriller *Joker* starring Joaquin Phoenix. Based on the origins of the DC comic book character, the film follows Arthur Fleck, a clown and comedian dealing with psychological issues, who finds himself encountering a slew of unfortunate situations that impact him significantly, causing his mental and emotional state to worsen over time. From being bullied and ignored by most of society, Arthur becomes enraged and ends up committing crimes such as murder to not only get others to feel what he's been experiencing but to finally garner attention from others that he's never experienced. Aside from the extremities and exaggerated content Hollywood incorporates, *Joker* exposes the challenges of dealing with a mental illness and how it can significantly impact one's state of well being. The grittiness and darkness surrounding the film aids in staying on brand in relation to mental illness as it exposes a battle that many deal with in silence. The film utilizes a realistic approach when it comes to Arthur's battle with mental illness while living in a Western society, which aids in spreading awareness about a topic that continues to remain stigmatized. However, it exploits mental illness in a way that further stigmatizes the topic, which is problematic.

With anyone who is dealing with a mental illness in an area that has limited resources due to location, city/state funding and the consistent stigmatization, which takes away from the

seriousness of the condition, can further isolate them and worsen their mental health. Set in the early 1980s in the fictional Gotham City, strongly reminiscent of New York City, Arthur resides in a poverty-stricken area that is becoming a crime magnet with increasing rates of unemployment. As it's quite clear that there is no such thing as privilege in his environment, Arthur is working to make ends meet to support the lives of not only himself but his mother as he also plays the role of her caregiver. In addition to those responsibilities, Arthur suffers from a neurological condition and several mental disorders, including depression, which he receives therapy once a week. Sadly, Arthur's treatment isn't effective to which he expresses to the social worker that she never listens and points out one question that is asked every session about having negative thoughts. Arthur expresses, "I don't think you ever really hear me...All I have are negative thoughts but you don't listen anyway" (Joker). Arthur receiving treatment in a lower class neighborhood can be considered a reflection of the kind of services given in an area where mental health services are almost non-existent. In an article published in March 2012 for the *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* titled, "Effective Psychotherapy with Low-Income Clients: The Importance of Attending to Social Class", clinical psychologist Saeromi Kim and Esteban Cardemil, a psychology professor at Clark University, speak on the issues with mental health services offered to low income clients. One of those concerns is associated with psychologists and the ways they can impact treatment. The authors state, "...mental healthcare providers face their own psychological barriers when working with low-income clients. These include their assumptions of what constitutes 'good therapy,' as well as both negative stereotypes and idealizations of people who are poor, which can result in differential and inadequate treatment (Liu et al., 2007). L. Smith (2005; 2009) further delineates classist attitudinal barriers that reproduce additional blind spots" (Saeromi and Cardemil). In the film, Arthur's social

worker lacked warmth, compassion and doesn't even try to engage with him. Despite the cold shoulder of the social worker, it's important to acknowledge that this particular representation of a therapist is not something that should be generalized, as psychotherapy can actually be quite effective and beneficial in one's treatment.

In regards to mental health services and accessibility, the same barriers that existed during the time period of the *Joker*, more specifically to Arthur's situation, remains apparent in recent times. During Arthur's therapy session, the social worker ends up announcing that their funding was cut which would result in a loss of access to therapy and medications for his conditions and states, "They don't give a shit about people like you Arthur" (*Joker*). Aside from the bluntness of the social worker, this is quite a serious and realistic issue in today's world. In an 2018 online article published by the National Council of Behavior Health titled "New Study Reveals Lack of Access as Root Cause for Mental Health Crisis in America" based on studies provided by both National Council and Cohen Veterans Network (CVN), touches on the various factors that continue to complicate the lives of the mentally ill. One of the barriers that continues to affect those with mental health issues are in relation to health insurance as high costs or those without insurance find it extremely difficult to receive assistance for mental health resources. The article states, "Forty-two percent of the population saw cost and poor insurance coverage as the top barriers for accessing mental health care. One in four (25%) Americans reported having to choose between getting mental health treatment and paying for daily necessities" (National Council). It's important to acknowledge the time period of the *Joker* and how mental health was treated then but it's also quite telling how the circumstances that Arthur faced in the film are still relevant today and has not changed drastically. As Arthur is no longer able to receive his medications, which he is prescribed seven of them for various mental conditions, it can be

heavily suggested that the switch in his personality thereafter is correlated with the withdrawal effects from stopping treatment abruptly.

Throughout the film, the neurological disorder that viewers witness as being a significant part of Arthur's identity in society are his spurts of uncontrollable laughter, which is classified as pseudobulbar affect. According to the website of Mayo Clinic, a list of complications of dealing with pseudobulbar affect include "embarrassment, social isolation, anxiety and depression. The condition might interfere with your ability to work and do daily tasks, especially when you're already coping with a neurological condition" (Mayo Clinic). From constantly experiencing these sudden onsets of emotions, it affects his interactions with others as they continue to disregard Arthur and classify him as a freak despite carrying around a card to give to others that explains what his condition is. One scene that highlighted this issue significantly was when Arthur was taking the subway home after getting fired from his job as a clown. A group of rowdy men enter the subway and begin to taunt a young woman by saying disrespectful comments while throwing french fries at her. While observing the situation, Arthur begins to laugh which catches the attention of the young men. Becoming increasingly angry about Arthur's laughter, the three men walk over and begin to poke fun at not only his laugh but also his clown costume and proceed to physically attack him. Another situation that criticizes and bullies Arthur for his condition is when a popular talk show host gets a hold of Arthur's comedy skit from a local club and airs it on live television. Arthur, in the hospital with his sick mother, has his eyes glued to the television as the host introduces the clip by stating, "Here's a guy who thinks that if you just keep laughing, it'll somehow make you funny" (Joker). After a few clips are shown and the host makes snide remarks about his jokes and constant laughter, Arthur's spirit becomes broken and his big smile in amazement turns into an expression of disappointment. For a

moment, Arthur felt that he was no longer a mentally ill man that society continues to ignore and instead someone who is a human being that has dreams and aspirations just like everyone else. Sadly, these chain of events set off Arthur which led up to him murdering the three men on the train after being attacked and murdering the talk show host when invited as a guest for his stand up act.

When it comes to Arthur being classified as a hero or a villain, Arthur is easily a villain but it's vital to recognize how he became one. When following his story from the beginning, the sympathy for Arthur deepens with every unfortunate situation that occurs leading up to the first killing of the men on the train. On one hand, there is an understanding as to how Arthur got to that point as his life was turning in a downward spiral after feeling abandoned by society, losing his job, losing access to treatment for his mental disorders, his mother becoming very ill and no signs of becoming a stand up comedian. During his appearance on the late night talk show, Arthur exposes his hand in the murder of the three men where everyone expresses disgust and shock over what he did. As the host proceeds to request someone to call the police, Arthur responds and states, "What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loader with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? You get what you fucking deserve!" (Joker). Although it is quite disheartening to see a genuine and empathetic man being beaten down time and time again in a society that shows great disregard for individuals who are suffering like he is, it still doesn't justify his reasoning behind committing those crimes. It's still important to acknowledge that people living within society can be classified as enemies and they don't necessarily need to be violent or utilize weapons to fit the bill. In chapter 6 of the textbook *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* titled, "Heroes and Villains: Encoding Our Conflicts", authors Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon expound on the portrayals of heroes and villains within the realm of Hollywood films

and how they're defined within our society and American history. Maasik and Solomon touch on the way American audiences tend to hold a belief that problems are simple to fix but “they can be distracted from the uncomfortable fact that in America today, as Pogo cartoonist Walt Kelly put it so well many years ago, ‘we have met the enemy and he is us’ ” (449). Instead of focusing only on the havoc that Arthur caused and the lives that were lost, it’s important to take a look at how he was mistreated over the course of the film and realize that he isn’t the only villain here – it’s society as well.

Violent themes in Hollywood films have grown significantly within the past decade and continue to be a major selling point amongst many consumers. However, when violence and mental illness becomes tied together in a theme, it feeds into the stigmatized relation between the two, which is sadly a common misconception. In an article published in the *Nursing Standard* titled “Joker Distorts the Link Between Mental Illness and Violence”, author Ian Hulatt, who is a consultant editor of RCNi journal *Mental Health Practice*, touches on the film’s correlation between mental illness and violence and points out how this problematic theme in reality isn’t necessarily the case. Hulatt states, “Yet if there’s one message we need to get across, as healthcare professionals, it’s this: mental illness does not necessarily have a causal relationship with violence. People with poor mental health are more likely than the general population to be the victims of violence” (38). Although it is not Hollywood’s job to spread awareness of mental health issues, there needs to be more care and awareness in how this particular topic is displayed amongst the impressionable eyes of those who watch. Sadly, these controversial themes often support the theories and misinformation that many appear to have towards those who are mentally unstable where they are normally the ones with violence inflicted on them more than others. Overall, Hollywood’s realistic yet dramatized depiction of mental illness and violence in

the *Joker* further support problematic perceptions for viewers who aren't well versed in the topic. To the average person who is simply looking for entertainment and stumbles upon the film, it can come across as nothing more than an interesting and captivating fictional story. On the other side of the situation, it leaves mental health professionals in a tizzy as it creates more issues for them to have to deal with and speak out against. One can assume that producers and creators in Hollywood mean no ill intent when creating films around serious and realistic topics such as mental health but it's important for them to realize how their content can do more harm than good, especially to a significantly controversial and stigmatized topic. Viewers are expected to decipher fiction from any sort of reality in movies and television as most of its content is dramatized for entertainment purposes. When it comes down to displaying or incorporating themes that many are ignorant to or have limited knowledge on, viewers end up holding on to those depictions, which ultimately affects and furthers their personal perspectives.

There are strides being made to keep the conversations of mental health going while utilizing films such as *Joker* to spread awareness. The film does paint a realistic display of how mentally ill individuals navigate under societal pressures to conform to a norm that doesn't necessarily include them. Nonetheless, the film adds to a false narrative that those living with mental illness are highly at risk of committing acts of violence, which further demeans them. Although it is quite commendable of Hollywood to tackle such a difficult topic, there needs to be more care and sensitivity when handling a stigmatized, controversial subject.

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