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Two Jokers in the Pack?

A Comparative Analysis of Iago in William Shakespeare's *Othello* and the Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* in Relation to W.H. Auden's 'The Joker in the Pack'

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Title: *Two Jokers in the Pack? A Comparative Analysis of Iago in William Shakespeare's Othello and the Joker in Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight in Relation to W.H. Auden's 'The Joker in the Pack'*

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Abstract: What would happen if we viewed the Joker of Christopher Nolan's 2008 motion picture *The Dark Knight* as a modern incarnation of Iago, the villain of William Shakespeare's *Othello*? Additionally, how well does Auden's argument about Iago as a practical joker ('The Joker in the Pack') explain them both? The analysis of this essay is performed by comparing similarities and differences found with the two villains and relating them to W. H. Auden's claims. Some concepts from narratology (encyclopaedic knowledge and character models) have been applied in order to examine how our perception of the villains might be affected. In the analysis, there is an emphasis on the motives of the villains since Iago's motives have been widely discussed for centuries. The results of the comparison indicate that the Joker can be seen as an ideological psychopathic practical joker with abstract motives whereas Iago seems to be a socially skilled psychopath with concrete motives and features of a practical joker.

Key words: Iago, the Joker, William Shakespeare, Christopher Nolan, Othello, The Dark Knight, W.H. Auden, The Joker in the Pack, psychopathy, narratology.

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Introduction

The British poet Wystan Hugh Auden surprisingly argues in 'The Joker in the Pack' (1963) that the villain in Shakespeare's *Othello* actually is a practical joker. In the essay, he states that "[i]f Iago is so alienated from nature and society that he has no relation to time and place – he could turn up anywhere at any time." (211) What if that has happened? What if Iago turned up in Gotham City in 2008? What would happen if we viewed the Joker of Christopher Nolan's 2008 motion picture *The Dark Knight* as a modern incarnation of Iago? Additionally, how well does Auden's argument about the practical joker explain them both? In his essay, Auden presents the nature of the practical joker and argues that this is also the nature of Iago. It is certainly an interesting argument although perhaps not completely convincing with the textual evidence presented. However, as we will see, it is perhaps not that far-fetched when compared to theories of psychopathy.

In this essay, I will argue that the villains' attitude towards morality combined with their sense of superiority plays an important part in their motives and the outcome of their actions. The sense of superiority and morality is also an important aspect of Auden's practical joker and studies of psychopathy. By adding some concepts from narratology, I will suggest how the awareness of psychopathy may affect the perception of these villains.

One interesting aspect of this comparison is that there are four centuries between Iago and the Joker. Scholars have studied Iago for four hundred years while it is only five years since *The Dark Knight* had its premiere. This created a challenge with this essay: to see if it is possible to shed some new light on Iago through comparing him with a twenty-first century villain and to see if the criticism of one is applicable to both. In addition, the primary sources of this essay, the play *Othello* by William Shakespeare, and Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, are of two different media: written drama and film. I have not experienced any problems with this, except that the amount of text with Iago, both in the play and the previous research, has demanded more time and sometimes more space within the essay. Despite this, the aim has been to keep the balance in the analysis. When applying Auden's argument to the comparison, I have chosen to refer to, almost exclusively, the first two sections of 'The Joker in the Pack' (199-210). The reason for this exclusion is that these sections are those that define the practical joker and thus have proven most useful for the analysis.

Since Iago's problematic motives have been in focus for several scholars through the years, I have chosen to spend an entire chapter on the motives of the villains. When

comparing a character with a feature so widely debated, I wanted to see whether there were similarities or differences in the motives and how that might affect the perception of the characters. In order to do this I have applied some concepts from narratology and psychology. *Encyclopaedic knowledge* is what we apply to a certain *character model* (a basic stock character such as 'villain') or a specific context when there is information left out in the text (or other media). For example, it would be enough to write, "she drank the whole wine bottle on her own" to make the reader understand that the person got drunk since we know that people get drunk from drinking alcohol. Encyclopaedic knowledge can also include conventions of a specific fictional world (Hühn et al 19). The psychological aspect of this essay mainly concerns the notion of psychopathy and will be further explained in chapter three.

When examining previous research, A.C. Bradley's lectures on *Othello* from 1904 proved to provide useful insights in Iago even today. Bradley is much interested in the psychology of the character and he agrees with Coleridge's famous argument that Iago's last soliloquy shows "the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity" (52). What I find less credible in Bradley's argument is that Iago would perform this "motive-hunting" in order to still a conscience that, as far as I have seen, is nowhere to be found in the play. Bernard Spivack is another famous Shakespeare scholar who questioned most of Bradley's claims. Spivack argued in his 1958 book that Iago is a version of the morality character the Vice. More recent studies include Joel B. Altman's *The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood* (2010) and Richard Strier's article in *Shakespeare and Moral Agency* (2010). Altman discusses how the revival of the philosophical schools, especially rhetoric, during the Renaissance influenced the creation of *Othello* and Strier examines agency in general in Shakespeare with an emphasis on Iago and Shylock (from *The Merchant of Venice*).

According to Wikipedia, a survey in 2013 revealed Christopher Nolan as the second most studied director in the United Kingdom after Quentin Tarantino, beating such names as Alfred Hitchcock and Martin Scorsese. The research that I have found on the Joker in Nolan's film consists in two articles by Fhlainn (2011) and Heit (2011). Fhlainn has performed a comparative analysis of Nolan's/Heath Ledger's Joker and Tim Burton's/Jack Nicholson's Joker from the 1989 motion picture *Batman*. Heit has made his analysis in relation to Nietzsche's philosophy and he unveils some interesting insights in the nature of the 2008

Joker. The character of Batman and the universe around him has been the study object of several scholars, among them psychology professor Travis Langley who wrote the book *Batman and Psychology* (2012), which has been very useful for this essay. Worth mentioning is that I was sadly only able to read the first thirteen pages of the doctoral thesis by Kessler, which I refer to in the last chapter. Kessler's dissertation seemed very promising, but I could not consult it since it will not be published in its complete form until 2014.

My essay attempts to combine Bradley's arguments with the more modern take on characters as found in Heit and Langley. One could say that it follows the tradition of Bradley's lectures, in that I have a psychological approach to the villains, but I also aim to intertwine it with narratological concepts and psychological theory instead of solely inferring conclusions based on the primary source. There is one essay, published on a blog, which performs the same comparison with Iago, the Joker and Auden (Coad), but to my knowledge, no further academic research has been made on this particular comparison.

Since the villains explored in this study are creations of such different times in history, I wanted to see what happened if we compared them to each other and applied the criticism of one to both. The critic that I mostly use for that purpose is Auden. The analysis has been performed by comparing similarities and differences found with the two villains and comparing them with Auden's argument. I have emphasised construction of the motives of the villains and also looked into two linguistic features that were found in relation to the villains, the use of the dog metaphor and the word "sport".

Bradley's statements are being referred to especially when discussing the sense of superiority in these two villains while I use Spivack to provide historical aspects to Iago's case. In order to discuss the credibility of some arguments and theories, I have had a great use of Marcus Nordlund's claim that we need to separate what is *possible*, *probable*, *plausible* and *certain* (176) when we look at mechanisms of events in a play (Nordlund examined the mechanisms behind Othello's jealousy). The 2010 article by Strier offered some new light on the discussion of Iago's motives. The first chapter of this essay will be dedicated to examine the nature of the villains. The chapter is divided in three subsections. The first subsection will present a brief history of the two villains and the following subsection will investigate the villains' sense of superiority. In the last subsection, the villains' differences and similarities in attitude towards morality will be in focus. The second chapter is also divided in three subsections and they are all dedicated to the motives of the two villains. Firstly, the motives

that the villains present will be examined. Secondly, it will be discussed how their motives correspond to their actions. Finally, the use of the word 'sport' and the dog metaphor will be investigated. In the last chapter, 'Jokers or Psychopaths?' I will apply the narratological and psychological concepts to the results of the previous chapters.

1. The Nature of the Villains

This first chapter will focus on the nature of the villains. The chapter is divided in three subsections; 'History'; 'A Thwarted Sense of Superiority', and 'A Flawed Paradigm'. The first subsection will present a brief history of the two villains and will be followed by the next subsection that will be dedicated to investigate the villains' sense of superiority. In the last subsection, the villains' differences and similarities in attitude towards morality will be investigated.

History

The history of these two famous villains looks quite different. Whereas Iago is a character that only appears in the play *Othello*, written by William Shakespeare around 1604, the Joker has appeared in several comics and films since the spring of 1940 (Batman Wikia). The character of Iago has since the 17th century been brought to life by a range of actors and directors. He has also been the study object of countless scholars through the times. According to Hyman, Iago has been viewed as, for example, a traditional stage villain (8-28); as Satan (29-60); and as latent homosexual (101-121). In addition, Fred West claimed in 1978 that Iago "is an accurate portrait of a psychopath" (West 27). The interpretations are many and varied, but the basic material, Shakespeare's play, has been the same.

The Joker was originally created in 1940 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in the comic paper *Batman #1* (Batman Wikia). According to Batman Wikia, he was first depicted as a psychopathic killer, but in the late 1940s and the 1950s to 1960s he became more of a "goofy trickster-thief". After the 1960s, he was once again written as a "vicious, calculating, psychopathic killer." The Joker has variously appeared, besides the comics, in the 1960's *Batman* television series; Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989); *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995); in "other DC Animated Universe shows" (Batman Wikia); and, most recently, in the movie that is studied in this essay, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008).

'A Thwarted Sense of Superiority'

When the play *Othello* begins, Iago has been robbed of the opportunity to advance in the military by the general, Othello, who has chosen the theorist Cassio as his lieutenant instead of Iago. In the following dialogue, Iago displays a great pride (1.1.8-33). The scene clearly

reveals, “that Iago is keenly sensitive to anything that touches his pride or self-esteem. [. . .] Whatever disturbs or wounds his sense of superiority irritates him at once” (Bradley 180). This statement might as well have been written about the other villain in question: the Joker.

In *The Dark Knight*, when the Joker has his first meeting with the mobsters, there is one man, Gambol, who calls him a freak. The Joker pretends not to hear the comment, but there is a pause in his speech and he gives Gambol an irritated glance. In a later scene, the Joker is at Gambol’s place and puts a knife in Gambol’s mouth as he for the first time reveals a story about how he got his scars. Then he slits Gambol’s cheek and the man falls down dead. In another scene, towards the end of the movie, a mobster named Chechen also calls the Joker a freak. This time, the Joker does not perform the killing himself but orders his thugs to cut him up. The others that he targets - Batman, Harvey Dent, Rachel Dawes and his accomplices at the bank robbery – he uses to prove his ideas while Gambol and Chechen are more or less being executed.

Obviously, both the Joker and Iago have a high sense of superiority and are “keenly sensitive to anything that touches [their] pride or self-esteem,” as Bradley puts it. It is a trait that makes them highly impulsive and dangerous. In both cases, there is dramatic irony at work since the audience, in contrast to the protagonists, has this knowledge from the beginning. As a result, the audience has to see how these villains are being underestimated by the protagonists (and other characters).

A Flawed Paradigm

Bradley wrote about Iago that “[h]e professes to stand, and he attempts to stand, wholly outside the world of morality” (179); a statement that once again might have been written about the Joker. As Heit observes, “[w]hen analysing the Joker, one must confront the uncomfortable reality that he eludes our moral judgment because he simply does not acknowledge that his actions and the consequences that follow have *any* moral worth” (185). These villains consciously reject morality, but the difference between them is that Iago is concerned with morality in the private sphere; his victims are close to him, while the Joker seems to question his society’s morality. The Joker’s facial scars separate him from society and therefore he attacks the society as an outsider. As seen in the previous section, he is highly sensitive to being called a freak. Iago, on the other hand, is a well-adapted social being with the opinion that the other people of the particular social sphere that he belongs to have

done him wrong. Iago attacks from the inside of that sphere. In short, they attack where the threats to their sense of superiority occur. The Joker's societal concern is displayed in the dialogue with Batman at the police station:

Their morals, their code... it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They are only as good as the world allows them to be. When the chips are down, these 'civilised' people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve. (*The Dark Knight*)

As Heit points out, “[o]ne of the Joker’s best tricks [. . .] is not to claim that evil is better than good, but, rather, to suggest that the entirely [sic] paradigm is flawed” (179). According to the Oxford Online Dictionary, *morality* can mean “moral virtue; behaviour conforming to moral law or accepted moral standards [. . .] personal qualities judged to be good,” a meaning which indicates that the morals and the code that the Joker talks about is the paradigm about good and evil.

The Joker attempts to prove the flawed paradigm, the “bad joke” as he calls it, as he goes out on live TV and lets the citizens know that he will blow up a hospital if the lawyer Reese is not killed within one hour. Another occasion is when he rigs two ships with explosives. However, the Joker’s grand plan does not succeed due to the success of this bad joke, the morality of the citizens of Gotham. The scene with the two ships is most significant in this case. Two ships, one full of criminals and one full of ordinary citizens, have been rigged by the Joker: on each ship there is a bomb and a remote detonator. In the speaker system on each ship, the Joker informs that at midnight, the two ships will blow up if they do not detonate the bomb on the other ship. But no one uses the detonator on either ship; one of the criminals even throws it into the water. The Joker had obviously not counted on this, he had counted on the people to desert their morality in order to survive, and, as he realises there will be no explosion, he says “you can’t trust anyone these days.” In fact, in *The Dark Knight*, the morality, displayed in acts of self-sacrifice (Bruce Wayne’s decision to become a hunted criminal and the people refusing to use the detonators on the two ships) is what prevents the movie from becoming a tragedy where the Joker wins. When describing the nature of the practical joker in his article on Iago, Auden claims that “[a]ll practical jokes are anti-social acts, but this does not necessarily mean that all practical jokes are immoral. A moral practical joke exposes some flaw in society which is a hindrance to a real community or brotherhood” (206). It seems as if the Joker is attempting to perform a perverted moral practical joke. He wants to expose a, in his opinion, flawed paradigm but luckily he does not succeed.

Iago's distaste for moral strength is displayed in the famous words: "Virtue? A fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus / or thus" (1.3.340-341). According to the notes in the RSC edition of the play, *virtue* could include the meaning of moral strength (46). Although the self-sacrifice indicated by Rodorigo in this dialogue (1.3.324-341) is of a selfish nature, (he would drown himself out of self-pity but believes it to be a noble deed since he would die for love) it reveals Iago's repulsion towards the idea of killing yourself for someone else. As Bradley argues, "[Iago] has a spite against [goodness in men], not from any love of evil for evil's sake, but partly because it annoys his intellect as a stupidity; [. . .] partly because, the world being such a fool, goodness is popular and prospers" (181). Iago does not want to expose any flaw in society, like the Joker. By manipulating the people closest to him, Iago seems to attempt to prove that virtue, moral strength (and goodness) of the individual, is a "fig!"

When demonstrating their repulsion to morality, these villains do succeed to "make good men fall" as in the case of Harvey Dent and Othello. Harvey Dent and Othello both represent the very symbols of strength and goodness: they are two good men who are being manipulated to the very point that they commit murder.

2. What Makes the Jokers Tick?

This chapter is entirely dedicated to the motives of the villains. The first subsection is concerned with what the villains *say* about their motives. In the following subsection, I will summarize the motives presented in the previous section and compare them to the *actions* of the villains in order to see if motives and actions correspond. The scene with Alfred and Bruce Wayne in the Bat-bunker, when Alfred suggests what motivation might drive the Joker, is the starting point of the last part of this chapter. The use of the word "sport" in that particular scene will be compared to the use of "sport" in *Othello*. In addition, the use of the dog metaphor will be briefly discussed since it occurs in both stories.

Do I Look Like a Guy with a Plan? - What the Villains Say

According to Bernard Spivack, the first scenes in Elizabethan dramaturgy were used as an "expository technique" (15) and the "[t]he soliloquy was an instrument, not simply for motives perfunctorily uttered, but for motives lavishly canvassed, for the conflict of motive with motive, for the effect of conscience upon iniquitous incentive" (27). What is revealed in those scenes is there to inform the audience, and those are the scenes in which Iago reveals his motives. The motives that Iago presents in each of these scenes, and what he motivates by means of them, will be examined in this section. After this, the Joker's motive(s) will be investigated, but Iago will dominate this section due to the vast textual material in the play and the many motives that he presents.

The first thing that Iago explains is why he hates Othello (1.1.8-33). Othello appointed the theorist Cassio as a lieutenant instead of Iago, who sees himself as much more worthy of the position than Cassio: "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1.1.12). As Iago then says, "I follow [Othello] to serve my turn upon him" (1.1.43), we get the first hints that Iago is scheming against Othello. Rodorigo's and Iago's mutual dislike towards Othello leads into the first action made against Othello: by revealing the marriage between Desdemona and Othello, they agitate Brabantio, Desdemona's father, to confrontation with Othello.

When we get to Iago's first soliloquy (1.3. 398-419), he suddenly reveals another reason for disliking the Moor and why he now begins to plot against him: he suspects that Othello has slept with his wife. "I hate the Moor: / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office" (401-403). The audience already knew why he hated Othello, yet this

new information seems to be added in order to present a really good motive for the audience as if to justify Iago's plot to them. Iago himself is not convinced that the rumours are true, but he does not bother about truth, since he "for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety" (404-405). Moreover, this soliloquy is where Iago includes Cassio in his plot by having Cassio pointed out as Desdemona's lover, something that he seems utmost excited about: "Let me see now: / To get his place and to plume up my will / In double knavery" (497-408). Note that he has not mentioned any grudge against Desdemona.

When we get to Iago's second soliloquy (2.1.303-329), he once again claims that Othello has slept with his wife, but this time it seems to be the main reason for plotting against him:

I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof
Doth – like a poisonous mineral – gnaw my
inwards:
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife [. . .] (312-316)

The lost lieutenantcy is not even mentioned, and, in addition, Iago adds a new motive for abusing Cassio: he suspects that Cassio might have had sex with his wife too (2.1.324). What from the beginning seemed to be revenge for a lost appointment has now turned into a love drama. In the soliloquy in act two, scene three (342-368), Iago's plot is completed as he realises that Desdemona is his last piece of the puzzle. By having Cassio to ask her to reason with Othello in order to get his lieutenantcy back, Iago creates the perfect opportunity to make his innuendos credible as Othello will be able to witness the two in intimate conversations.

At the beginning of the last act, Iago has an aside in which he reasons why he needs Rodorigo and Cassio killed (5.1.11-22). If Rodorigo stays alive, he will surely accuse Iago of stealing gold and jewels from him (which is true), and we have already heard two motives for Iago's plotting against Cassio: the lieutenantcy and the suspected adultery. These two motives are what we expect to hear from Iago, but instead, as Strier (2010) observes, "Shakespeare has Iago say something else, something entirely unexpected" (65): "He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly" (5.1.19-20). Strier continues, "what [Iago] finds intolerable with Cassio is his entire way of being, his ease and happiness in his being [. . .]" (66). That statement could be supported by Iago's later urge to see Desdemona dead. They are symbols of the foolishness of the world in Bradley's earlier mentioned claim (181); therefore he yearns to see them destroyed.

Considering Spivack's claim about "the expository technique of first scenes in Elizabethan dramaturgy" and the soliloquy as an instrument, combined with the information that Iago reveals in the first scene and in his soliloquies, is there any reason to mistrust him in those cases? As Nordlund argues concerning the reasons for Othello's jealousy, we must not "confuse what is merely *possible* with what is *plausible*, *probable* or *certain* as we explore the mechanisms that underpin his jealousy" (176). This should also be considered when examining Iago and his motives, despite the fact that Iago is a deceitful character. Of course, it is possible that Iago is always lying, but is it plausible or even probable? Considering the historical perspective that Spivack's claims offer, it is not. The information that Iago presents may not be satisfying, yet it need not be untrue, especially not from his point of view. The problem with Iago's motives is not whether he distributes false accusations, the problem is how the motives relate to what actions he follows through. To investigate this problem, Iago's actions will, in next section, be compared in relation to his presented motives.

While Iago tends to reveal his scheming and motives to the audience in soliloquies, the Joker prefers to discuss them with two other characters: Batman (in two dialogues: at the police station and in their final battle) and Harvey Dent (the scene at the hospital). These are the two characters that the Joker is most interested in: the two knights of Gotham, the symbols he has an urge to destroy in order to prove, "that the whole paradigm [of good and evil] is flawed" (Heit 179). Moreover, there is one big difference between these two villains' motives: Iago's are of a concrete nature while the Joker's are of a more abstract nature. As we saw when discussing morality, Iago aims directly towards specific persons for concrete, personal reasons, whereas the Joker acts on an abstract plan. His main goal of chaos is not as concrete as Iago's private revenge. The Joker's goals are based on a more societal, ideological, level. When Batman during a violent interrogation at the police station asks why the Joker wants to kill him, the Joker answers: "Kill you? I don't want to kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No you... You. Complete. Me" (*The Dark Knight*). The Joker needs Batman to play his game; he needs these symbols of goodness in order to prove that morality is flawed. In short, the Joker is not aiming for revenge; he seeks to prove his ideas:

Do I really look like a guy with a plan, Harvey? [. . .] I hate plans. Yours, theirs, everyone's. Maroni has plans. Gordon has plans. Schemers trying to control their worlds. I'm not a schemer. I show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are. [. . .] Introduce a little anarchy, you upset the established order and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos. And you know the thing about chaos, Harvey? It's fair. (*The Dark Knight*)

It is probably no coincidence that it is in this scene with Gotham's fallen white knight that the Joker reveals his schemes, when he succeeds to corrupt Dent completely. Towards the end of the movie, in the last scene that we see the Joker, he reveals the motive for having Harvey Dent fall:

BATMAN. This city just showed you it's full of people ready to believe in good.

JOKER. Till their spirit breaks completely. Until they find out what I did to the best of them. Until they get a good look at the real Harvey Dent, and all the heroic things he's done. [. . .] You didn't think I'd risk losing the battle for the soul of Gotham in a fist fight with you? You got to have an ace in the hole. Mine's Harvey.

The Joker wanted Harvey Dent broken down to villainy in order to prove his point that it is pathetic to attempt to keep things under control, that the paradigm is not to be trusted. If we consider the Joker's explanations of his scars, this is, as Fhlainn argues, something that he uses to intimidate people (84-85), but it is also an excellent tool of manipulation. By sharing a private story, the Joker plays the emotional strings; the person the story is told to does not know that he has different versions of it and at the same time as it is a frightening situation, he gains sympathy and humanity with his story. The story becomes an explanation or even motivation, for his outrageous behaviour.

Motives Versus Actions

In this section, the correspondence between the villains' motives and their performed actions will be investigated. At the end of the section the results will be related to Auden's arguments about the practical joker. The villains will be treated one at a time, as in the previous section.

The motives that Iago presents for his scheming are (a) that he hates Othello since he appointed Cassio as a lieutenant instead of Iago (1.1); (b) that Othello might have committed adultery with his wife, something that Iago does not know if it is true or not, but will act "as if for surety" (1.3.405); and (c) that he dislikes Cassio because of the lieutenancy and so schemes the plot against him in the soliloquy in the third scene of the first act (1.3.407-413). Later on, in act two, Iago suddenly reveals a new reason to have it in for Cassio: (d) that Cassio might also have been sleeping with his wife (2.1.324), which he has not uttered a word about before. In addition, we have Iago's surprising motive for having Cassio killed: (e) that Cassio makes Iago ugly (5.1.19-20). It is quite understandable that Coleridge interpreted this as "motive-hunting".

The soliloquy in the beginning of act two is important when discussing Iago's motives versus his actions. Iago makes a clear statement that

nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife,
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgement cannot cure. (2.1.315-319)

Iago believes that Othello has been sleeping with his wife; therefore the words "wife for wife" should mean that his purpose is to have sex with Desdemona. Yet, as Auden observes, during all five acts of the play, "no attempt at Desdemona's seduction is made. Iago does not make an assault on her virtue himself, he does not encourage Cassio to make one, and he even prevents Rod[ol]rigo from getting anywhere near her" (201). A jealous husband is more the type who knocks his wife's lover down or strangles his wife (like Othello) but Iago does not attempt to hurt his own wife until the very moment in the end, when she realises what he has done and reveals him to the others. Iago does not physically hurt anyone until they threaten to expose him, when they become a threat to his sense of superiority. We know that he passionately hates Othello, at least for the lost lieutenantcy, but the adultery reason does not seem plausible in relation to how he realises his scheming.

The disappointment of the lost lieutenantcy is what remains as a probable motive. The sense of superiority in Iago, which Bradley observed, is a credible motive for his commitment. However, what deviates then, in his actions from his utterances, is what happens to Desdemona. Iago has mentioned that what he will do (and actually does succeed with) is to take Cassio's place as lieutenant and to make Othello irrationally jealous. He has not mentioned any killing in this. Until the soliloquy in act two, scene three, Desdemona has been regarded merely as a tool for Iago's revenge on Othello, there has not been any sign of a personal grudge against her.

How did Desdemona become one of those to be enmeshed in Iago's net? In fact, if Iago only wanted to take Cassio's place and make Othello mad with jealousy, why does he, in the final act of his manipulation (4.2), encourage Othello to the murder of Desdemona? Iago even instructs Othello how to do it: "[d]o it not with poison: strangle her in her bed" (4.1.218-219). If we compare what Desdemona symbolizes, virtue and goodness, with his motive for having Cassio killed (that he makes Iago ugly), the answer might be close at hand. Iago does not believe in virtue or goodness. Iago is, as Strier suggests, "aware of the void within him, of what he feels in relation to persons who have the fullness of existence that he lacks" (66). In

other words, Desdemona and Cassio remind him of what he lacks, something that his sense of superiority cannot deal with. Thus, to make the respectable Othello, already fallen under the spell of jealousy, murder his most innocent wife, must be the utter satisfaction for Iago's sense of superiority. As Bradley states, "What fuller satisfaction could [his sense of superiority] find than the consciousness that he is the master of the General who has undervalued him [. . .]" (187). By destroying Desdemona, the symbol of virtue itself is being destroyed, like the destruction of Harvey Dent would have been for the Joker.

Although the Joker does not present as many problematic motives as Iago, there is, I claim, one particularly problematic issue. The goal for the Joker, we have seen, is to create chaos and his motive seems to be to reveal how useless it is to attempt to keep things under control. However, the paradox is that when the Joker creates his chaos, *he* is the one in control: the mob, Batman, Harvey Dent, the police, the whole city of Gotham are all under the Joker's control, he becomes the puppet master. When describing the practical joker, Auden states that, "though his jokes may be harmless in themselves and extremely funny, there is something slightly sinister about every practical joker, for they betray him as someone who likes to play God behind the scenes" (207-208). The sense of superiority plays an essential part in the character of the Joker, just like in Iago. If we put this claim in relation to the sense of superiority that we have seen in these characters, it does not seem that far-fetched to call them both jokers in Auden's sense.

When the Joker says to Harvey Dent that he has no plans, what does he mean by "plan"? A plan is not only an outline of what is to be done, but could also mean "an intention or ambition for the future" (OED). That meaning gives another perspective on the Joker's words. If he means that he does not have any future ambitions, he certainly only lives for the pleasure of excitement and control; it would explain why he cannot resist improvising, precisely like Iago cannot resist urging Othello to murder Desdemona. As Auden's practical joker, they like to "play God behind the scenes".

Good Sport and Mad Dogs: What Others Say About the Villains and What Words Might Say

In *Villains and Villainy*, Fhlainn observes that "[p]erhaps the only character who illustrates any understanding of the Joker's motivations is Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine)" (86). Fhlainn refers to a scene in the Bat-bunker when Alfred Pennyworth and Bruce Wayne

discuss the Joker after he has crashed Wayne's fund-raising for Harvey Dent. When Wayne dismisses the Joker as a common criminal of Gotham ("Criminals aren't complicated, Alfred. We just have to figure out what he's after"), Alfred warns him that he might not fully understand this criminal, just like the mobsters who have hired him. Then Alfred recounts a story from his time in Burma, when a thief stole some valuable jewels. They tried to find anyone who might have been trading with the thief, but they could not find any trace of the jewels. One day, a child was seen playing with a giant ruby – the thief had just thrown away the jewels despite their worth. When Wayne asks why, Alfred answers:

Because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn. (*The Dark Knight*)

As Heit observes, "Alfred's words capture the crucial distinction about the Joker, namely that he does not square with a definition of evil that simplifies his motives to the profiteering that otherwise defines evil in Gotham" (176).

In act one, scene three, Iago tells Rodorigo, "if thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport" (1.3.388-389). As we have seen earlier, Iago's motive about the adultery is not very probable, and, calling it "a sport" to succeed with his plotting against Othello supports that claim. As soon as Rodorigo has left the stage, in the soliloquy in 1.3:398-419, Iago lets us know that he uses Rodorigo for "sport and profit" (398-401). Additionally, as Auden observes, "so far as Iago's plot is concerned, there is nothing Rod[o]rigo does which Iago could not do better without him" (203). According to Auden, Rodorigo has no antecedent in Cinthio's story that *Othello* is based on; Shakespeare seems to have invented Rodorigo to be manipulated by Iago (202), for Iago's "sport and profit". The very involvement of Rodorigo in the plot makes it more exciting for Iago. As Auden states, "[b]y involving Rod[o]rigo in his plot, [Iago] makes discovery and his own ruin almost certain" (203). Hence, it seems more probable that Iago is driven by excitement, to have some "good sport" in order to display his sense of superiority, than any other motive he presents.

Furthermore, the dog metaphor is used extensively in different contexts in *The Dark Knight*. In two scenes, the Joker uses the metaphor: as he gives order to his men to kill Chechen: "Cut him up and offer him to his little princes. Let's show him just how loyal a hungry dog is", and when talking to Harvey Dent; "You know what I am, Harvey? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it. I just do things. I'm just the wrench in the gears". The "little princes" refers to Chechen's Rottweiler dogs that attacked

Batman at the beginning of the movie, and the line “Let’s show him just how loyal a hungry dog is” neatly summarizes the Joker’s general plan. A dog is loyal until it is hungry, just like humans are good until they need to save themselves, which is precisely what the Joker means to prove as he attempts to deconstruct the citizens’ morality in the following scenes with the hospital threat and the two ships. By comparing himself with a dog chasing cars, the Joker emphasises the previously discussed motive that he is doing things for “good sport”. He cannot help his excitement at doing things when given the possibility, just like a dog that chases cars. The chase, the excitement, is the goal, and therefore he changes his plan; if the dog catches the car, the hunt, the point of it, is over.

The use of the dog metaphor may not be as significant in *Othello* as it is in *The Dark Knight*, but it does occur. At the end of *Othello*, the first line of Lodovico’s last speech begins with “O, Spartan dog, / More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea!” (5.2.406-407). Naturally, the line is directed to Iago. A Spartan dog was, according to the notes in the RSC edition of the play, “a particularly fierce breed of hunting dog” (128). Both villains are being compared to (uncontrollable) dogs with a hunting instinct. When Harvey has become the villain Two-Face, he attacks Maroni, the head of the mob, with the words, “The Joker’s just a mad dog. I want whoever let him off the leash”.

The motives of the two villains look very different since Iago acts on a concrete, personal level while the Joker acts on an abstract, ideological level. The similarity is that their ways of following through their plans does not correspond to their said motives. The Joker aims for chaos, yet his scheming puts him in control of everything. Iago gives several motives for his plotting, but he does not follow through with his plans: when he sees the opportunity to have Othello kill Desdemona, he cannot resist. These irrational relations between motives and actions correspond with the uses of the word “sport” and the dog metaphor. Iago and the Joker do things for “good sport”, for the hunt, for the excitement of it. When they are presented with an opportunity to display their sense of superiority, they cannot resist it.

3. Jokers or Psychopaths?

As we have seen, the Joker and Iago show signs of quite deviating social behaviour in that they reject moral strength and that their motives do not correspond with their actions.

Therefore, it may not be a complete surprise to find that they have both been subject to critical articles on a personality disorder, namely psychopathy. In this chapter, I will suggest how the knowledge of psychopathy has affected our perception of these villains. There are several variations of psychopathy (Lykkens 29, 31-35), but for the purpose of this essay, I have focused on the general characteristics of the psychopath.

Some distinguished characteristics of psychopathy are a grandiose self-concept and lack of empathy but the “essential quality is lack of conscience” (Langley 104). As Lykkens puts it, a psychopath is a person with an antisocial behaviour who “has failed to develop conscience and empathic feelings” (30). According to Langley, the term *antisocial* means “antithetical to social norms, in opposition to society’s rules and expectations for how civilized people act” (102). Psychopaths are aware of social rules like morality and right and wrong, “but at heart they don’t understand it and they don’t care” (Langley 104). Consequently, they tend to break these rules. Furthermore, both Langley and Lykkens point out that a psychopathic individual might or might not become a violent criminal. Lykkens even mentions some historical leaders with what he calls “a talent for psychopathy” (31).

Iago was mentioned already in the landmark book on psychopathy, *The Mask of Sanity* by Hervey Cleckley, published in 1941 (West 29). Cleckley’s analysis of the psychopath is based on “thirteen in-depth case studies and close observations of still other cases” (West 29) but he also devoted one chapter to fictional characters, among them Aaron of *Titus Andronicus* and Iago. The list of psychopathic traits (see block quote on page 19 for examples) that Cleckley identified during his observations have been revised since 1941, but his work laid the foundation of today’s Psychopath-Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), the diagnostic criteria used by psychologists in order to recognize psychopathy. The first PCL was published in 1980 by Robert Hare. His later work with criminals in Canada, together with Cleckley’s theories, is the base of the PCL-R (Kessler 6).

In his book *Batman and Psychology*, Travis Langley presents case files on several characters of the Batman universe. In the Joker case file, Langley states that

[t]he Joker defies diagnosis. His behavior doesn’t neatly fit any specific mental illness beyond his obvious psychopathy. [. . .] We just don’t know what’s going

on inside his head and for storytelling purposes, it's best that we don't. Knowing he had a specific mental illness might engender our sympathy. (152)

The same may be said about Iago. If we understood his motives, we might pity him instead of detesting him. In addition, the lack of information about the villains also inflates the fear we feel toward them: we humans have a great fear of the unknown, of what we do not understand - like evil. As Langley claims, “[p]sychopathy, sociopathy, antisocial personality disorder, [. . .] sadism, adult antisocial behavior... these terms and more amount to psychological professional’s attempts to pathologize a non-psychological term: *evil*” (101).

The evil in Iago has been discussed and analysed for centuries and Bernard Spivack claimed in the 1950’s that Iago was just an allegory of evil, based on the old morality character of the Vice. However, I agree with Altman as he points out that “[a]s *personification* [Iago] is inherently evil and, in the strict sense, motiveless, however human he may appear. [. . .] As *historical* representation, however, he offers recognizably human reasons for what he does, though these are intermittent and often discontinuous, for he remains essentially a metaphysical black hole.” (157-158) We will never know exactly what makes Iago tick. He is a far too complex and well-designed character to only be regarded as a personification or allegory, but the Vice might have been a *character model* that the Elizabethan audience recognized in Iago.

A character model is a type of character that we recognize, “often associated with ‘character constellations’ such as cuckold, wife and lover” (Hühn et al 19). However, according to Hühn et al, the recognized character model alone does not provide a full “character description”. Encyclopaedic knowledge, both from “the real and [the] fictional worlds - comes into play, combining two or more items of character – (or person) related information (e.g. “too much alcohol makes people drunk” or “vampires can be killed by a wooden stake driven into their heart”)” (Hühn et al 19). Often, a text will not provide all pieces of information to the reader, so the reader will have to fill in the blanks on his/her own with the appropriate knowledge (19). Our encyclopaedic knowledge, I suggest, might shift over time due to development in areas such as science, popular culture and societal changes. What might have had such an effect on our encyclopaedic knowledge about characters is the development of psychology, and, in particular, the studies of psychopathy.

According to Kessler, the public has since Jack the Ripper’s days been fascinated by psychopathy, and thus “it is perhaps unsurprising that psychopathy came to become regularly portrayed in popular fiction. Initially, the portrayals were fairly straightforward, albeit

somewhat dramatized. [. . .] Over time though, psychopathy portrayal became more complex. Specifically, within the last decade, numerous fictional psychopaths have been filling the protagonist role in popular fiction” (2). Just take a look at famous fictional villains such as Hannibal Lecter (from the 1991 motion picture *Silence of the Lambs*), Dexter (from the TV-series *Dexter*) and Norman Bates (from Hitchcock’s classic movie *Psycho*). According to Lykkens, several of the characters played by Jack Nicholson show signs of psychopathy (30). With these facts in hand, we may today perceive a fairly new character model: the psychopathic villain.

According to Langley, the Joker (the Joker character in general) shows signs of all psychopathic traits that Hervey Cleckley identified in his studies. These traits include

superficial charm; absence of nervousness; unreliability; untruthfulness and insincerity; lack of insight; lack of remorse or shame; inadequately motivated antisocial behavior (as opposed to non-psychopaths, who might commit antisocial acts out of desperation or for other clear reasons); poor judgment and failure to learn from experience; pathologic egocentricity and incapacity for love; poverty in major affective (emotional) reactions; interpersonal unresponsiveness; impersonal, trivial sex life; and failure to follow any life plan. (Langley 104)

Most of these traits can definitely be seen in Iago as well. However, there is not textual evidence for every single one of these psychopathic traits. For instance, we do not know enough about Iago’s history to say whether he has “poor judgment and failure to learn from experience.” We do not know much about his life plans or sex life either, other than that he does not seem to care too much about his wife. Yet, if we consider the many traits that Iago does show signs of, it seems *probable*, to use Nordlund’s words again, that he is a psychopath.

Today’s psychopathic villains are based on these theories and therefore we recognize these traits; they have become part of our encyclopaedic character knowledge. As Lykkens points out, morality is “the very mechanism of socialization” (31). Therefore, we recognize Iago’s and the Joker’s attitudes toward morality, together with their sense of superiority (similar to the “pathological egocentricity” in the above list of psychopathic traits), their urge for excitement, and “inadequately motivated antisocial behavior” (Langley 104) as deviations from social behaviour, precisely as seen in other portrayals of psychopathy.

Another deviation from social behaviour, is the practical joke as stated by Auden in the first chapter of this essay: “[a]ll practical jokes are anti-social acts” (206). This statement, combined with Auden’s claim that practical jokers like to “play God behind the scenes” and

how well those statements represent the villains' traits that are mentioned above (their urge for excitement, their sense of superiority), indicates that the practical joker and the psychopath share a range of qualities. Those qualities are displayed in both villains.

4. Conclusion

In order to summarize the results of the analysis, the Joker could be described as an ideological psychopathic practical joker with abstract motives. The joker element in him is more distinguished than in Iago as he seeks to prove his ideas through perverted moral practical jokes. Iago is more a socially skilled psychopath with concrete motives and features of a practical joker. This also reflects the different human spheres they act within: the societal and the private. We have seen several similarities between the Joker and Iago: they have a high sense of superiority; they question morality and goodness; they do not approve of self-sacrifice as an act of nobility; and, their motives do not correspond to their actions satisfyingly. They seem to, as the Joker (and Alfred) says, “just do things” for sport, for the excitement.

The sense of superiority, which is seen in both villains, plays an important part in how their motives are perceived as unsatisfying. When these villains see an opportunity to demonstrate their sense of superiority, they simply cannot resist it. As we have seen, it corresponds well with Auden’s statement that a practical joker “like[s] to play God behind the scenes” (208). In addition, this sense of superiority is similar to the “pathological egocentricity” (Langley 104) that is found in Cleckley’s list of psychopathic traits. In fact, we have seen that all features mentioned above can be identified in Cleckley’s list as they all deviate from social behaviour.

It cannot be claimed that the Joker for certain is a modern incarnation of Iago, but the comparison indicates a development of encyclopaedic knowledge and the rise of a new character model, the psychopathic villain. This reveals how well Shakespeare depicted the human psyche and a good reason why the play is still interesting. Even though the term psychopath was not used in the Elizabethan age, it does naturally not mean that psychopaths did not exist. What is more, as the two villains perform their actions in different spheres, they demonstrate our contemporary moral concerns. As Fhlainn observes, *The Dark Knight* is “acutely aware of the post 9/11 landscape in which we now live. [. . .] That the Joker cannot be bargained with situates his ideology as foreign and alien (though we know his ideology to be nothing more than anarchy), thus making him a threat of terrorism [. . .]” (86). The Joker is, as Fhlainn states, also anti-capitalist as he burns a huge pile of money (87) and his said motives are purely ideological. This 2008 villain makes us question our materialistic values,

which is a significant moral question of our time. During the Renaissance, the thought that you shape your own self (“’Tis in ourselves that we are thus / or thus”, as Iago says in 1.3.340-341) was a relatively new idea (Logan et al 488) that brought the individual in focus. That may be a reason why *Othello* concerns individual instead of societal morality.

The focus of this essay has been on different aspects of these villains. In order to keep a narrow scope, I have not spent much time with the other characters of the stories, but I do believe that could bring some interesting aspects to the comparison. There is also more to be said about *how* the villains manage to manipulate their victims, which can be read in Coad’s blog entry. I would have liked to present some of his ideas in the essay, but I chose to exclude it in order to maintain a coherent argument, emphasising *what* the villains do and say instead of *how*.

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