

One bad day: the joker and american society

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In American society, where freedom of speech is a right that every one of its citizens exercises liberally, the social norms of the public aren't simply expressed through formal learning centers. What it means to be an American, in fact, has been broadcast in dozens of different forms of media, including through television and movies.

One such example is the Batman franchise, which has influenced Americans young and old and existed since the 1930s. Besides exemplifying courage, determination, and ingenuity through the Caped Crusader himself, the various interpretations of Batman villains have served the opposite purpose, highlighting American fear and hatred of their enemies at various periods of time. Then, does the Joker, perhaps the most famous and frequently used villain of the Batman Family, have these clear connections between his incarnations and the time periods they appeared throughout his seventy-year history? Although the Joker has spent a majority of his fictional existence only partially representing the time periods in which he appeared, his latest appearance in *The Dark Knight* has allowed him to become the symbol for the terrorism of post-9/11 America. In the spring of 1940, inspired by Conrad Veidt's role in *The Man Who Laughs*, Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson created the Joker for the enemy in *Batman #1*. Batman himself had only been in existence for about a year, but as Jerry Robinson put it, "Villains, I always thought, were more interesting" and subsequently built the character based on the contradiction of someone simultaneously menacing and amusing (Gustines 7).

In his initial appearances, the Joker served as simply a mass murderer who killed for his own amusement and played countdown clock games with

Batman in order to save his victims. From there, the Joker continued his mass murder (killing thirty-six people by hand), but would suffer from apparent deaths, always returning for the next issue. The end of this Joker came in Detective Comics #64 when he was executed via electric chair and revived by his henchmen. During the first few years of the Joker's creation, a mass murderer certainly wasn't a difficult concept to swallow. In spring of 1940, America continued her isolationist approach as World War II ravaged Europe. But, of course, the waning economic hardships of the Great Depression soon took the backseat when Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 21, 1941.

The Japanese attack on American soil marked the beginning of America's involvement in World War II. From there, America joined the Allies and gradually learned of the heinous crimes the Nazis were committing. Of course, the Nazis' "Final Solution" wasn't officially known to the American government until August of 1942, and to the public until December of that year. Then, America began to fully understand what her enemy was. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis not only killed American soldiers in war, but rounded up those deemed undesirable by their twisted standards, slaughtered them by the millions, and conducted inhumane experiments on human test subjects—every action plotted out as a highly organized plan of action. When the two timelines are mixed, the evidence of a pure connection between the Joker and WWII enemies isn't solid, but the Joker as a symbol for the Nazis seems more plausible.

Although America slid into World War II at the time of the Joker's creation, the American public—the writers included—didn't know about the crimes of <https://assignbuster.com/one-bad-day-the-joker-american-society/>

Adolf Hitler and the Nazis until six months after Detective Comics #64 was released. However, there were still some themes of the time evident. For instance, the Joker had a particularly high body count in his first comic book stint, and used more direct methods of killing. Conversely, World War II was made by technological innovations in weaponry and military vehicles, bringing aircraft and semi-automatic guns into warfare (“Advancements in Technology in World War II” 1). The blatant differences in this aspect may even suggest that the writers of the Joker at the time wanted a character that was the complete opposite of Axis at the time, serving as a foil. Whereas the Axis kept their plan hidden for years, planned out each move of their dark crimes, and looked as innocent as any country at war, the Joker was open about his evil deeds, worked spontaneously, and stuck out like the freaky clown that he was.

After the Joker was revived in 1942, he actually came back a new man. Instead of making Gotham newspaper headlines for murdering and disfiguring corpses, the Joker began to rob banks and transformed into a cackling trickster. The source of this change wasn't actually the writers, but a psychiatrist named Fredric Wertham who released countless studies citing the violence in comics as the reason for increased juvenile delinquency (Webster 15). His information began to spread in the late 40s, and by the 1950s, the Comic Code Authority was created to impose regulation on the violence presented in comics (Senate Committee 12). The CCA's legacy lasted longer than the fans of the grittier comics would have preferred, and the Batman franchise gradually toned itself down, resulting in the 1960s live-action television series, Batman.

As with the comics of the earlier decades, the Joker, played by Cesar Romero, was a harmless prankster whose weapon of choice was a squirting flower that shot out water and who couldn't hold his own in a fight for more than thirty seconds (Dozier 6). The 1950s and 60s certainly weren't time periods where the United States' enemies were so harmless that they used toys as weapons. Following World War II, the escalation of competition and distrust between the United States and the USSR led to the Cold War, a conflict that lasted up until the 1980s and had the country in fear's grip every step of the way. By 1959, Fidel Castro became the dictator of neighbor island Cuba, and there was little chance that he'd prove to be an ally against the Communist movement. By 1962, the Kennedy Administration and the American public faced the idea that the world may be coming to an end thanks to the Russians preparing nuclear launch sites in Cuba. (McLellan 11) The American enemy was no longer someone who killed American soldiers, but was prepared to kill every living creature on American soil.

By simply creating nuclear missiles, Russia came to represent an enemy who would be willing to completely annihilate a civilization with no true benefit to seek other than being the second country in the world to drop a nuclear arm. The fact that the fifteen minutes of fame would die with nuclear fallout didn't seem to matter to the USSR in their threats against America. The American enemy was a mass murderer on a scale of millions. Thanks to the CCA, the Joker of the Cold War days was the exact opposite of the enemy America faced at the time. Oddly enough, it would seem that the Joker of the early 1940s would've fit in rather well with the Cold War "villains": mass murder

was the game, and both knew how to play it. Both understood how to cause mayhem.

But, with the 1950s and 60s Joker, this conclusion is not so. With no direct correlations between America's enemies and the Joker, it would seem that if he represented anything of the time, it was a sugarcoated version of evil as a way to perhaps shield kids from the horrors of the real world. After all, having kids' favorite superhero's villain be a mass murderer while practicing living through nuclear fallout in school would have been too much for children. So, for a decade, the clown took a step back from representing American enemies and sunk into the fantasy of pranks and spandex costumes. But, the CCA ultimately couldn't keep the Joker's insanity from popping up again.

The 1970s and some bold comic book writers and artists returned the Joker to his homicidal ways, but it wasn't until 1988 when the Joker truly received an update that would transform his character. Writer Alan Moore created a graphic novel entitled *The Killing Joke* that transformed both the Joker physically and mentally. Suddenly, the Joker had a back-story, motives, and real substance behind his insanity. No longer was he drawn like a cartoon-ish clown, but a man who fell into a vat of acid and was permanently disfigured. *The Killing Joke's* legacy continued on when Jack Nicholson took on the role in 1989 in Tim Burton's *Batman*, but Nicholson decided to combine the clown-like interpretation with Moore's more serious one.

By the 1990s, the combination tactic Nicholson used was expounded upon, and spat out the most famous animated incarnation of the Joker to date:

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Mark Hamill's Joker of the DC Animated Universe. Even though Batman: the Animated Series was intended for children, the Joker was far from the giggling trickster of the 1950s and 60s. In the DCAU, the Joker had to hide his insanity behind gimmicks that only the adult audiences would truly pick up on; his main weapons were a flower on his lapel, playing cards, joy buzzers, and laughing gas. Or, that's what the surface showed. The deadly nature of the weapons was hidden behind their innocence, with the weapons serving as an acid gun, razor blades, a means of electrocution, and a serum known as Joker Venom that would incapacitate victims at best and permanently disfigure them at worst.

But, Hamill's Joker was also funny, able to genuinely deliver one-liners and concoct schemes that one would expect from a crazy clown. But, the 1970s insanity was clearly just under the surface: he didn't care at all about the lives and safety of his henchmen, physically and mentally abused his henchgirl Harley Quinn, tried to drop an atomic bomb on Gotham, slapped the man who supposedly killed Batman into a coffin and threw him into a vat of acid, and made his final "joke" kidnapping Robin and subjecting him to electroshock torture before nearly forcing the ten-year-old to kill Batman himself. So, the Joker of the 90s was a comedic troublemaker who slyly revealed his insanity. Was America's "enemy" of the time the similar? As time progressed, America's enemies weren't as clear as in wartime. Several smaller conflicts brazened the decade including a few terrorist attacks that preceded 9/11.

In 1993, a truck bomb exploded in a parking garage under the World Trade Center, killing six. In 1996, the Centennial Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta
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killed one person and injured over a hundred more. Finally, in 1999, the Columbine shooting, led by two high school students, resulted in thirteen deaths of students and faculty ("Army. Mil Features" 3). By the 1990s, the enemy suddenly wasn't so far away.

Instead, American deaths happened on American soil. The terrorists of the 1990s couldn't pull out the violent grandeur that the twenty-first century would bring, but they had the idea. The main idea was clear: American enemies were subtle, but they were deadly. Instead of starkly contrasting like the Joker of the 50s and 60s, the Joker of the 1990s began to encompass some real world evil in his character. The Joker of the 90s was not a mass murderer like in the 40s, but he still took glee in causing some serious damage to Gotham City. Similarly, the terrorists of the 90s weren't known for causing a catastrophic body count, but still made every death cause a sting; the public may or may not remember these tragedies, but the families of victims will never forget.

Also, Hamill's Joker began to take steps toward representing what could be a real person: the DCAU's back story claims that the Joker began as an enforcer for a local crime family before the Ace Chemical Factory incident that disfigured his face and for the first time in history, the Joker had a girlfriend whom he genuinely mistreated like a realistic abusive boyfriend. But, through all the dark layers placed on Hamill's interpretation, he did not fully represent 1990s terrorists. Despite getting away with some nefarious and/or dark material, the writers of the series were not allowed to show the Joker actually murdering anyone, hence the antidote and non-lethal effects of Joker Venom. The character's main mental focus is not as much on his <https://assignbuster.com/one-bad-day-the-joker-american-society/>

dangerous insanity but the whacky missions he sets up in order to dance his law-breaking dance with Batman. The passive viewer would remember the Joker's funny moments, not his sinister ones.

Conversely, the actual terrorists of the 1990s aren't remembered for anything other than their crimes. So, although Hamill's interpretation is largely regarded as the best in animated portrayals for his complex performance, being able to fully represent a real-world terrorist wasn't on the table just yet. Then, in 2008, a young Australian actor and an ambitious director came together to produce an interpretation of the Joker with the revolutionary power that hadn't been seen since Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*. With the release of the second film in Christopher Nolan's realistic, dark new interpretation of Batman, *The Dark Knight*, came Heath Ledger's Joker: grungy purple coat, greasy, unevenly dyed green hair, makeup, facial scars, and a demeanor that kept viewers shivering yet mesmerized, watching every second of his performance. But, what was it about Ledger's interpretation that made it so influential? When everything comes together in analysis, what set Ledger's Joker apart was the fact that he was terrifying, but he also was real enough to be allowed to exist in the outside world. Physically, the Joker got a complete makeover from his previous incarnations.

Ever since his first appearance in 1940, the Joker's white face, green hair, and red lips were a permanent part of him, causing him to stick out like a sore thumb in a common crowd. There was no fear that he could be lurking in the shadows of a gathering because there was just no way to miss him. Suddenly, the clownish appearance was able to shift with the man as the movie progressed; it was smeared, melted with sweat, and completely

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removed at times. The signature smile was no longer a frozen expression, but two grotesque facial scars whose mere origin is a mockery of the previous incarnations that stole the Joker's fearsomeness by taking away his mystery (Tyree 14). The Joker's chilling appearance superficially isolated him from the human population, but his demeanor, when scrutinized, reveals more signs of his humanity.

The unkempt hair shows a lack of care for personal hygiene, the makeup and clothing show a desire to hide himself from the world, and even his bright purple gloves seem less like a decoration and more like a preliminary step to avoid spreading his DNA at his crime scenes. But, his physical appearance only scratches the surface of the Joker's transformation. Besides the physical differences, Ledger's Joker made a radical step toward realism through his choice of weapons. In the Joker's last famous appearance in the 1990s, the weapons were beginning to transform into tools of murder, but there was always a clown-like gimmick to each weapon, making them wistfully deadly. But, Ledger's Joker took out every trick that could go into a "Joker" weapon in favor of the kind of weapons real-world criminals and terrorists would use: guns, knives, and bombs. Ultimately, while some may think the change would make the Joker a less unique movie villain, the effect actually made him more terrifying.

Anyone could become just like the Joker just with some makeup and a twisted enough mind. The Joker's insanity ultimately drove a new interpretation of the clown's personality, giving clear windows into the character's motivations, genius, and values. Ledger, in an interview described this character as a "psychopathic, mass murdering, schizophrenic
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clown with zero empathy.” (Lyll 10) Clearly, the Joker is insane—everything from challenging Batman to running him over to letting his makeup smear shows that he cares very little for anything, and fears absolutely nothing. The Joker has no clear motivations, burning his share of the mob’s money he worked so hard to swindle into his hands, and, although he himself tells Harvey Dent that “ I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are,” (Nolan et al. 13) as a motivation, others don’t buy it.

Alfred, Bruce Wayne’s wise butler, describes the Joker to Bruce as a man who isn’t “ looking for anything logical, like money,” nor can he be “ bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with.” Instead, he simply wants to “ watch the world burn.” (Nolan, et al. 13) Writer Ron Briley describes the Joker as “ bloodthirsty” and says that he “ assumes that everyone, when put to the test, shares his perverted values.” (Briley 4) Despite being a self-professed “ Agent of Chaos,” the Joker is a genius in both planned and spontaneous attacks and schemes.

While convincing Harvey Dent (then nearly famed villain Two-Face) that he has the choice between joining men like the Joker and ending the madness, the Joker places a loaded gun in Harvey’s hand and then puts the gun to his own forehead. But, through closer evaluation, one can see that the Joker has his finger placed in a way that even if fired, the hammer wouldn’t go down. Thus, the Joker only presented the illusion of choice, further complicating the views he presented about chaos and the random nature of life. But, to what real world “ villain” has Ledger’s Joker come so close to emulating? The years 2000-2009, when The Dark Knight was conceived and produced, were <https://assignbuster.com/one-bad-day-the-joker-american-society/>

a time in American history marred and controlled by the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the culprits of this catastrophe that took around 3, 000 American lives were Jihadi terrorists. During President George W.

Bush's speech about the event, he constantly refers to the terrorists as "evil," (Bush 5) and Briley describes Bush's view on the perpetrators as "an irrational hatred and jealousy for American freedom." (Briley 4) Jihadi terrorists, in the most basic terms, believe that they were in a war against infidels, or non-believers. For these extremists, the only way to fight against infidelity of the West is to sacrifice oneself while killing as many infidels as possible, thus granting them a special place in Paradise after death. But, what could bring these people to accept themselves as sacrifices? How do they justify it? As described by Farhad Arian in an article about Jihadi terrorists' motivations, he says, "violence...is mostly justified under the banner of defending Islam." The terrorists use mental tactics to push this ideology to others: they "take full advantage of the potentiality of socio-cultural values as a legitimate means of justifying violence..." as well as citing ideas such as "the whole world is in a state of ignorance and the true Muslims are in a state of weakness and under permanent attacks from the infidels," and that "armed jihad is a necessary tool to reinstate the rule of Allah" (Arian 2).

The twenty-first century America's enemy was unlike any enemies in previous times: they were calculating, determined, and with a mission that could recruit more and more people each day. They were smart enough to gain access to American soil and succeed in carrying out a major terrorist attack on the nation. There is no changing their deadly interpretation of <https://assignbuster.com/one-bad-day-the-joker-american-society/>

Islam, and if they can't prove that their way of life is the right way, they'll take out the other option one block at a time. But, how closely do these terrorists resemble a mass-murdering clown with a Glasgow smile and a lot of knives? When the mental threads are woven together, there are actually many of connections between the Jihadi terrorists and Heath Ledger's Joker. First, both of them are relentless in forcing their deadly deeds along, whether it be against the people of a fictional city or a real one.

Both aren't swayed by material goods or incentives, but are motivated by an ideology—Islam and chaos. Neither sees their own bodies as anything but a sacrifice that may be necessary: the Jihadis are willing to strap explosives to their chests and the Joker was willing to let himself die in a battle with Batman. Both hold the notion that their views of the world are in some way universal. The Joker believed that all on some level shared his viewpoint, while the Jihadis felt like everyone should hold their viewpoints. The Jihadi terrorists manipulate societal constructs to attract more recruits.

How is that different from the Joker's chaos speech to Harvey Dent, where he convinced the future Two-Face that "nobody panics when things go according to plan, even if the plan is horrifying," citing that if "a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics because it's all part of the plan." (Nolan et al. 13)? Within the Joker's first two lines of the film, he showed a habit of twisting common beliefs to fit his ideology, changing the common saying of "whatever doesn't kills you makes you stronger" to "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stranger." (Nolan et al. 13) Likewise, the Jihadis have twisted interpretation of their holy book to justify their acts of violence.

Similar to how the Joker presented Harvey Dent with a choice of joining him or ending the madness, but had secretly already made the choice for him, Jihadi terrorist also have a hold on the people they recruit. They present the Jihad as a mission that those holy enough embark on, promising Paradise after death, but once one chooses the mission, everything down to the moment of their death is out of the recruit's hands. But, the Jihadis and Ledger's Joker can't share everything. One could argue that the Joker never truly had a mission set up for himself the way Islamist terrorists do. And, although the character speaks of being an agent of chaos, he never truly shows that he's dedicated to the ideology, instead showing himself as a man who simply does what he pleases for his own amusement.

The Joker isn't proven to be dedicated to anything outside of himself, as the Jihadi terrorists are. While the Jihadis have never loosened their grip on Islam, the Joker shifted through motivations and beliefs almost as often as he tarnished and reapplied his makeup. Despite these differences, though, the similarities are still plentiful enough to stick out. Although the Joker never truly represented America's enemies in the earlier half of his seventy-year career, he gradually developed into a character so twisted and realistic that he could easily represent the same terrorists who currently hold the title of America's enemy. It could seem an odd phenomenon to connect something so deeply rooted in pop culture as a supervillain to American history and social constructs, but the connections the two make are truly fascinating.

After all, who would think that comic book, movie, and cartoon writers put so much deeper meaning into projects that have an audience that is historically easy to please? Wouldn't it be sufficient to enjoy the character in his dark

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glory as he continues to grace the Batman franchise? The answer perhaps has to do with the reason for having morals in stories. Perhaps Christopher Nolan never wanted the Joker to just be an evil for Batman to fight. Maybe he wanted the story to mean more than that. Perhaps the way in which Ledger's Joker is conveyed is supposed to serve as a reminder to the American people: the Joker's kind of evil does exist in the world, but the best way to prevent it is to keep reminding people that evil doesn't have to win. As long as the American people ban together and choose the right path, even if, like Batman, we end up being hated for it, there will be hope for the future.

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