

Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know:

The Nolan/Ledger Joker, Morality, and the Hetero-Fictional Fan Impulse

by Leslie McMurtry

The Joker is:

'Fascinating, repulsive, and contradictorily attractive.' --Sorcha Ní Fhlainn

'He's done unimaginably awful things.' --Christopher Robichaud

'The ideal postmodern cult figure.' --Jim Collins

{Figure 1}

As the chapter epigraphs show, the Joker means different things to different people. Fandom cannot come to a consensus about whether he is sane or insane. Mary E. Camp, writing with a group of medical professionals in *Academic Psychiatry* in 2010, determined that the Christopher Nolan-written and Heath Ledger-performed Joker, at least, was insane. More than that, he represented a 'fearless predator, unconstrained by social rules and expectations.' From a different quarter of the world than the clinical came fandom's response. The release of *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan) in 2008 resulted in an almost instantaneous effusion of fan fiction in archives such as FanFiction.net. Much of the fiction written about *The Dark Knight* analyzed, and in many cases, eulogized, the Joker. Despite the acknowledged evil of the character, referred to by Camp et al as 'stigmatizing' to the mentally ill, much of the fan fiction was of a romantic/sexual nature. Who are the authors of these stories, and why do they write them?

Female Fandom and Archontic Literature

The comic book audience of the 1990s, as many fan ethnographies have pointed out, was overwhelmingly male. Yet all this was about to change; Francesca Coppa, writing in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities of the Internet Age* anticipated the spike in (female-authored) fan fiction upon the release of *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), with 'groups of female media fans now shar[ing] space with male comics fans.' Fan fiction has traditionally

been, in Abigail Derecho's words, the 'literature of the subordinate' and in that sense it has often been the domain of women writers, responding to an underrepresentation of women in media. With this criterion in mind, it's not difficult to see why women writers might want to reclaim *The Dark Knight* for their own; Rachel Dawes, Mrs Barbara Gordon, Detective Ramirez, and Judge Cerillo are the only females given any significant screentime.

But what, exactly, is fan fiction? M. Mackey and J.K. McKay summarize fan fiction as 'one relatively democratic version of that impetus to rework, to open up a previously finished story.' And *Batman*, despite the fact that we can confidently say that its origins are in 1939 with *Detective #27* and Bob Kane, is a perfect opportunity for reworking. Some scholars (and fans) maintain that fan fiction has an ancient and illustrious history, while others believe it should be understood as a (recent) product of fan cultures. Derecho, in naming it 'archontic literature,' from the word 'archive,' suggests that when reading fan fiction, you are really reading two texts at once: the text that inspired the writing, and the 'spin off' piece. Simply put, if someone writes a piece using the characters and settings of a cult text, it's fan fiction. For a cult text to succeed in producing fan fiction, it must have hyperdiegesis—a sense of breadth and depth in the text's setting, a sense that any one story being told is only the tip of the iceberg in a larger universe—and what Matt Hills calls in *Fan Cultures* 'an endlessly deferred narrative.'

When fan fiction was first studied, it was seen as a highly subversive act; because of its frequent sexual content, and because it mimicked in some ways the precepts of chick lit and romance narrative, its consumption was framed, according to Catherine Driscoll, as 'private and purely for pleasure and thus something like a guilty secret.' In my analysis of Joker fan fiction, I eschew an ethnography of the fan-authors themselves and instead focus on what their writing has to say about the way they view and craft a hyperdiegetic *Batman* universe. Critics like Deborah Kaplan have recognized that literary analysis of fan fiction rather than ethnography has been scarce. In archives like FanFiction.net, the rules for posting fan fiction—essentially sharing it with the entire online world—are much less proscriptive than the commercial publishing or film-making industries—therefore the quality of much, perhaps most, of fan fiction can be pretty poor. However, the most complex writing allows some insight into what Matt Hills calls 'just-in-time fandom,' ie, the immediate response allowed by online 'communities of the imagination.'

FanFiction.net, as of 27 May 2012, boasts 4,952 of fan fics author-identified as belonging to the *Batman Begins/The Dark Knight* genre, and of these, 521 are categorized

primarily as Joker-romance. A significant number of these works are ‘slash’ fiction, a term that originated with early, fanzine-based fiction describing a romantic/sexual relationship between Captain Kirk and Mr Spock of *Star Trek*; the term has come to identify any fiction that includes same-sex relations. The scope of this chapter is far too small to encompass the complex and much-studied genre of slash fiction, and we focus instead on heterosexual Joker-shipping. (Shipping is ‘supporting certain pairings at the expense of others,’ such as Rachel/Bruce as opposed to Rachel/Harvey.) Critics such as Alan Harris have characterized the Joker as asexual as well as amoral. Indeed, within the context of *The Dark Knight*, the only person for whom the Joker seems to espouse feelings is Batman. Yet, this has by no means prevented fan-writers.

Sympathy for the Devil

In *The Dark Knight*, DA Rachel Dawes is the love interest of both Batman/Bruce Wayne and Harvey Dent. A significant minority of fan fiction writers on FanFiction.net chose to link her in a ‘ship’ with the Joker. The pairing might, at first glance, seem unlikely given the fact the Joker murders Rachel during the course of the movie. Nevertheless, fans of the Joker/Rachel (Jokachel) ship draw their inspiration (and their justification) from the party scene during which, crucially, the Joker makes Rachel privy to his second origin story in an intense and claustrophobic moment. Although given a heroic, mainly moral guidance-type role in the film, Rachel’s appeal to most Joker fan fiction writers, who seem to prefer to make up their own Original Characters (OCs), is nominal. In this sense, perhaps, it is Rachel’s own moral rectitude that hinders her. On the sliding scale of a pure and saintly ideal and an amoral nymphomaniac (a characterization which, in Rachel’s case, would be Out of Character or OOC), fan fic writers have tended to present an OOC, more sexualized Rachel to complement the Joker.

Kendra Luehr’s *An Unhealthy Obsession* is a work that attempts to reconcile Rachel’s moral character with traits of heightened sexuality. Loosely following the structure of *The Dark Knight*, the novella realistically portrays Rachel’s relationships with Bruce and Harvey while making her susceptible to the Joker, whose interest in her is partly as subject in his chaos experiments on Gothamites, and also a lust object: ‘“It’s ok to want me, Miss Dawes, because all good women do—it’s just in their nature to want the bad boys.”’ In *An Unhealthy Obsession*, romance conventions do not interest the Joker; Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons describe the Joker’s sex aesthetic as ‘sheer lust and physical gratification, devoid of

courtship, commitment, durable relationships or mating effort.’ Rachel, for her part, is *more* seduced by the notion that she can repair the psychologically damaged Joker. Borrowing fan canon (‘fanon’) elements from previous visions of *Batman* (such as the Burton film), Luehr allows Rachel to discover a ‘definitive’ Joker origin as Jack Napier, whose father killed his mother and gave him his scars. Despite his continual spinning of ‘Glasgow grin stories,’ she has brought meaning to, in Sudipto Sanyal’s words, ‘the meaninglessness of his mythmaking.’

This ‘Beauty and the Beast’/reform motif in *An Unhealthy Obsession* actually reverses the importance of lust in the narrative and instead seems to reinforce romance conventions, with the obviously flawed hero, a culmination in heterosexual fulfilment, with suspense depending at least partly on obstacles based on distinctions in social status. With part of the Joker’s power in *The Dark Knight* hinging on the fact he has no one to lose, his murder of Rachel in the universe of the film would seem to negate any possibility of a romance narrative. However, in the final chapter of *An Unhealthy Obsession*, the author informs us that Rachel has not actually died and that she undergoes plastic surgery in a London clinic in the sequel. All along, the Joker has maintained that Rachel’s demonstrable moral goodness has been merely overcompensation for dark deeds done in her past that threaten to make her as violent and unconventional as him. Rachel is at least as tempted by the Joker’s ability to ‘see beyond people and beyond masks as well,’ as Stephanie Carmichael puts it, as she is by his sex appeal.

{Figure 2}

Guy with the Face

Original Characters paired with the Joker have included his ex-wife, a nurse, a French-Canadian seamstress, a college student, Bruce Wayne’s daughter, a small-time crook, a stripper, a police officer, and a journalist for the *Gotham Times*. ‘So, is he the alter ego of the author, or is he her ideal partner?’ asks Victoria Somogyi in an examination of heterosexual fan fiction. She found that typically masculine traits of independence, confidence, and workaholicism, as well as positions of authority, allowed a woman to be both, in Camille Bacon-Smith’s words, ‘masculine cultural model of active agent’ and subject of romantic, shipped fan fic. Such an unconventional (anti)heroine can be found in KatxValentine’s Joker/OC fan fic, *Dark Side of the Moon*. The heroine, Harvey Tinkle,

never completely establishes herself as a reliable narrator. Nevertheless, she immediately appeals to the reader's sympathies as a highly modern, deeply flawed character with whom to identify, strikingly different from Rachel in her moral ambiguity, profuse swearing, and generally abrasive personality. KatxValentine achieves this partially through a highly original and humorous writing style which quickly endears Harvey to the reader, and to the Joker.

Significant motifs in Joker-ship fan fiction include

- a weighing in on the sanity debate (see below)
- discussions—sometimes definitive, sometimes mysterious—of the Joker's origins, real identity, and where he acquired his scars
- careful prominence of moments when the Joker is without his makeup, as well as significance placed on his processes for applying and removing it

It is this latter category, of the make up-less Joker, that is depicted with great originality in *Dark Side of the Moon*. When Harvey Tinkle moves into a Gotham flea-pit, she makes the immediate and unwilling acquaintance of Cleveland R. Punsworth, who is, as far as she is aware, an irritating social misfit with severe facial scarring.

Through a series of comic misadventures, which rely on Harvey's unexpected reactions to rote rituals of the *Batman* universe (she is antagonistic and outspoken toward Batman), Harvey and 'Cleave' become best friends—all within the space of a week. This perhaps unlikely manipulation of time/reason coincides with Rabowitz's Rules of Notice; with foreshadowing implied and rules of signification, time *can* be speeded up believably within Harvey's universe, since the narrative roughly corresponds to that of *The Dark Knight*. Significantly, the writer makes her intellectual ownership clear not only of her OC Harvey, but also of 'Cleave,' the Joker's alter ego rather than his 'true' self. KatxValentine is able to subvert audience reaction in a number of ways, first by creating the loveable Cleave and then by combining and brutally reconciling this aspect of his character with the murderous Joker.

How does the writer resolve the Joker, who mutilates and kills a child in front of Harvey Tinkle, with the comically bizarre Cleave, who spends most of his time prancing around in underwear, loudly singing to Phil Collins and Cher? Away from the apartment and Cleave, Harvey also meets the Joker and is unable to make the connection ('I push the thought away because I just don't want to think it'). To further complicate things, Cleave tells Harvey that the Glasgow grin is revenge from his jealous boyfriend, making KatxValentine's Joker at least bisexual. A number of scenes from *Dark Side of the Moon* are

written from Cleave's perspective, announcing that Cleave is the façade, the Joker is the 'real' personality, and that Cleave's affection for Harvey is only really—again—the Joker's interest in her as another potential fellow agent of chaos. In this, the Joker appears to be proven correct, as by the end, Harvey has transformed from a law-abiding citizen to a gun-wielding vigilante who rescues the Joker from Gotham MCU, all the while admitting but not confronting her love for him. KatxValentine's Cleave is another example of the way the Joker can be 'his own mystery' and still be accessible, even appealing.

Without You, There Is No Me

J Horror Girl's novel-length *Can't Get You Out of My Head* posits an OC Joker-ship within the context of another fandom. Due to J Horror Girl's interest in, and familiarity with, the fandom of Asian horror films, her OC is as much a continual mystery (an 'endlessly deferred narrative') as the Joker is. This makes for gripping reading which sustains the narrative across 100 chapters and almost 200,000 words; by Chapter 26, the story shifts to a detective story, a mystery never fully resolved. The OC, Grace, is introduced as a voice seemingly existing only in the Joker's head. Although at first dismissed by the Joker and Batman as an alter ego, the voice gradually becomes more corporeal. At first, Grace and the Joker's relationship is one of mere physical symbiosis, each keeping the other alive, but Grace's personality is one that interrogates Batman's motives and *modus operandi* as well as the Joker's. What is more, her actions end up changing both the Joker and Batman for good.

In terms of conforming to the Joker-ship motifs identified earlier, Grace announces her existence by giving the Joker a Glasgow grin origin story involving dressmaker's shears, while at the same time acknowledging this as a 'shout out' to the film *Kuchisake-Onna/A Slit Mouthed Woman* (Shion Sono, 2007). In the words of Mackey and McKay, 'a shout-out hails the outside world from within the fiction, drawing on and speaking to fans' broader understanding of the story.' Once Grace manifests physically, though at first only visible in mirrors and on camera footage, the Joker betrays a physical attraction to her. Her identity is inherent in her diabolical pink shoes, another shout-out, this time to a Korean horror film, *Bunhongsin/The Red Shoes* (Yong-gyun Kim, 2005). But she only becomes corporeal in Chapter 83, which is the first time her face is revealed; having died a horrific death, she 'haunts' the narrative in multiple ways. In terms of creating a romance narrative between Grace and the Joker, it is also in this chapter that the Joker reacts in the manner of a romantic hero, 'I couldn't wait any longer. I leaned in and kissed her,' despite later dismissing romance

novels as ‘AKA, Porn for Women’ (what would he make of *Fifty Shades of Grey*?). Grace, neither dead nor alive, and a liminal figure in many other respects, completes the romantic narrative conventions: ‘Nothing about this relationship was normal or usual; it was already much more intimate than sex, and that was the deciding factor. I felt married to him, as if I had always been married to him.’

{Figure 3}

Author Anxiety and a Question of Sanity

As democratic and subversive as fan fiction may be, the fact remains that its authors crave reassurance from their readers, invest heavily in a community, and value concrit (constructive criticism). This is particularly interesting within the context of Joker-shipping, where many of the authors are self-identified as young, roughly in the same age bracket as most of their OCs (18-25 years old). In Authors’ Notes, writers of the above three fics have communicated regarding real-life events, thanked their readerships, and apologized for self-declared poor writing. Given that fan fiction is often externally represented as a secret substitute for relationships, Kendra Luehr’s declaring that *An Unhealthy Obsession* ‘will basically be a story your mother wouldn’t want you to read. :-P’ seems defiant in the face of criticism. Yet, in Chapter 9, after she has written a sexual scene too explicit for FanFiction.net, which has instead been posted on AdultFanFiction.net, Luehr writes, ‘Omg, I feel SO effing DIRTY for writing this!’

Of great concern to the authors of OC fics is avoiding the label of ‘Mary Sue.’ Although critics such as Chander and Sunder have tried to celebrate the Mary Sue as an aspirational, democratic figure, being identified as one is still seen as highly pejorative by fan fiction writers. ‘Mary Sue’ has a long history of being a character who is the thinly disguised author pasted into the fandom of her choice; moreover, the Mary Sue is somehow ‘better’ than any other character so she can merit the love of her chosen ship-object. At their best, ‘Mary Sue litmus tests,’ auto-created by fan fic communities, acknowledge the primal desire for hetero-fictional writing, but also discourage mere fantasizing. In the case of the *Batman Begins/The Dark Knight* communities, countless fics have been identified by ‘community policing’ as Mary Sue transgressors; the Harley Who? and Mary Sue community claims over 400 fics that are found to bear the stigma of a Mary Sue OC.

The fan fiction writers of Joker-ships are perhaps also aware of external fears that fan fiction will lead girls into pornography, so they address this, either with defiance or embarrassment. Surprisingly, however, the writers do not seem compelled to morally justify sometimes-sexualized, sometimes-romantic writing about an undeniably evil character like the Joker. Bill Boichel and Sorcha Ní Fhlainn have considered, respectively, why criminals fascinate us, and why clowns might double for serial killers/pedophiles; the morality of the Joker for the shipping writers seems fundamentally tied up with the central debate regarding the character's insanity. Interestingly, the majority of critics consider the Joker insane, while, by inference, the majority of the shippers suggest he is 'super sane.' The Joker's 'super sanity' is a term Mike Collins applies in connection to the graphic novel *Arkham Asylum*. Daniel Moseley describes this viewpoint as 'a type of aesthetic perspective that attempts to bring non-moral and higher forms of goodness into the world via acts of cruelty or sadism.'

Among the critics who ultimately choose insanity, Camp et al in *Academic Psychiatry* examined the settings, shot selections, music, lighting and editing in *The Dark Knight* to pick out representations of the Joker as other-than-human/a mad dog, concluding that not only was he violent, unpredictable, and antisocial, he also displayed apparent suicidal behaviour. For these health care professionals, not only was the Nolan/Ledger Joker insane, he reflected badly on the mentally ill. Mary K. Leigh and Daniel Moseley, both from philosophy backgrounds, came to similar conclusions. For Leigh, using Aristotelian categories, the Joker is 'vicious' and does wrong for wrong's sake. Moseley compared the Joker to Harvey Dent, the latter appearing 'morally ignorant,' the former appearing not to be. For Moseley, the central debate was between two categories, that of the sociopath (with no conception of right or wrong) and that of the moral monster (chiming with Leigh's definition of 'vicious'). Moseley suggested that, while 'evil people find some positive value (that is, they do see some good) in their actions,' this is not the same as moral goodness. When Christopher Robichaud asks 'Can we hold the Clown Prince morally responsible?', he asks ultimately whether the Joker's insanity (which he takes as a given) prevents him from being morally responsible. In his criteria for insanity, Robichaud cites the Joker's regarding people as objects and his lack of a sense of self-preservation.

For the fan fiction authors, is the Nolan/Ledger Joker insane? Can we hold him morally accountable? And whatever the answers, does that mean it's morally acceptable to write sexual/romantic fan fiction about him? What are the moral obligations of the authors to their OCs, and ultimately, their readers? *Can't Get You Out of My Head's* Grace goes so far

as to wonder, ‘When he hurt, I did, too. Emotionally, anyway. Damn it, why did I care about him at all? He was a mass murderer! Didn’t that make me sick—or at least deeply pathetic?’ When Robichaud describes one Joker origin story, that of the Red Hood, he suggests that if the Joker’s transformation into evil wasn’t originally his fault, he *can’t* be held morally responsible. To a certain extent, *An Unhealthy Obsession* takes this tack, at least in Rachel’s mind. Grace stumbles over the Joker’s memory of a group foster home, a hospital and (undefined) abuse. ‘“The problem is, every time you relate how you got your scars, every way you describe it, you’re always sincere—or almost always. It’s always the truth—but the truth is always different.”’

This description begins to tie in with a view of the Joker often espoused by shippers, one that by virtue of its ‘unique vision,’ seems to absolve them of any moral compunction in eulogizing such an evil character. This is the ‘super sanity’ idea explained by Collins, what Sorcha Ní Fhlainn describes as a state of ‘simply being.’ J Horror Girl has the Joker referring to himself as a god, ‘Small “g”, not big “G.” Batsy, here, he’s the god of fighting crime with hand and fist and really cool gadgets, and I’m the god of irony and banana peels over open manhole covers and the rictus grin.’ The *Arkham Asylum* aesthetic of, in Collins’ words, ‘so insane he may be sane,’ includes a spirit of showmanship, along with rejecting society’s conventional morality. In mimicking the Nolan/Ledger Joker as closely as possible, the fan fictional Joker *believes* that he embodies this aesthetic; whether he actually *does* is another matter. He likes to play around with other characters’ (and the readers’) perceptions of him. In *Can’t Get You Out of My Head*, he tells the reader, ‘*I’m not* [insane]. They just don’t know what else to label me’ (emphasis original). By emphasizing the ethical decay of society and turning a critical eye to the moralities of Batman and other typically heroic characters, the authors make the Joker’s chaos theory seem like a viable world view. When Michael Smith describes the work of Lanzman, who holds that those who try to explain evil move toward justifying it, he chimes with Harvey Tinkle’s experiences in *Dark Side of the Moon*, whose response to the evil the Joker has created in her by inspiring her love is denial.

‘Good depends on evil, light on dark, reason on irrationality, in order to define limits’: Fred Botting’s definition, but this is the world in which the Nolan/Ledger Joker operates and one that can be an ever-expanding universe, thanks to writers of fan fiction. *Can’t Get You Out of My Head*, for example, has stretched the limits of the hyperdiegetic universe of *Batman*; from the beginning, its length and breadth meant characters from *Batman Begins/The Dark Knight* (Gordon, Harvey, Rachel, Alfred) could exist alongside characters

from other versions of *Batman* (Detective Montoya from *Batman: The Animated Series*). The story is riddled with shout-outs from sources as diverse as *The Aeneid* to the manga *Death Note*, and this almost anticipates its universe folding back on itself when Grace, having become corporeal and having consummated her relationship with the Joker in virtually the same moment, is transported to a meta-fictional world where Death tells her that Batman and the Joker's struggle has been going on since 1940. Where will the story go from there? As of July 2012, with the release of *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan), the *Batman Begins/Dark Knight* category on Fanfiction.net is the twelfth most popular in the Movies genre—clearly, the storytelling tools of the future are in the hands of the fan fic writers.

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‘Dark Side of the Moon.’ KatxValentine

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‘An Unhealthy Obsession.’ Kendra Luehr

http://www.fanfiction.net/s/4412296/1/An_Unhealthy_Obsession

‘I Have a Name for My Pain . . .’ Nothing Tra La La? . . . A Blog for Simon Guerrier

<http://Otralala.blogspot.com/2008/07/i-have-name-for-my-pain.html>

‘The Joker Hypothesis.’ BlueEyesUndertheFedora

http://www.fanfiction.net/s/4418377/1/The_bJoker_b_bHypothesis_b

Metadata

‘Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know: The Nolan/Ledger Joker, Morality, and the Hetero-Fictional Fan Impulse,’ Leslie McMurtry.

Abstract: The release of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* resulted in an effusion of fan fiction in archives such as FanFiction.net. Much of the fiction written about *The Dark Knight* analyzed, and in many cases, eulogized, the Joker as played by the late Heath Ledger. Despite the acknowledged evil of the character, much of the fan fiction was of a romantic/sexual nature. This paper seeks to perform a brief survey of the heterosexual Joker-inspired fanfics as recorded within FanFiction.net, using the parameters of *Batman* scholarship and a framework of fan fiction studies. It will give definitions of fan fiction and 'Mary Sue.'