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“Upset the established order”: Villains and the Shadow

Human existence has always been plagued by war, criminality, greed, political intrigue, and religious struggles. These are cultural calamities but there are still more on the personal level. Repressed desires that clash with moral standards, confusion, and doubt haunt the individual. Carl Jung described this as the shadow self, an entity within that is repressed and clashes with the more visible consciousness. He wrote in his collected works, “It is a frightening thought that man also has a shadow side to him, consisting not just of little weaknesses- and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism” (7: 36). In short, humans are plagued by chaos. It is ever present around us and constant within us. Chaos is an issue of universal proportions. Jung proposed that through careful work and over a long period of time, people may reconcile the differences between their conscious self and their shadow self (9: 287). According to him, that would limit the chaos within, but this is a life-long pursuit. If art is a representation of life, how do we cope with the ghost of chaos? What form does our greatest fear take and how is it resolved? Chaos and its solution often find their home in the persona of the villain. Villains are necessary for many forms of storytelling. They provide conflict for the hero and in many cases are fascinating characters in and of themselves. It is these villains, these strangely human yet hauntingly chaotic characters that intrigue us the most. Two dimensional stock villains are limited in depth. They are simple plot devices. But truly terrifying villains, those that are realistic, haunt us the most. Perhaps what we find most intriguing is that these villains, though despicable, and frightening, have achieved something we long for or find admirable. Perhaps

these villains have reconciled their shadow self and become comfortable with the chaos around them, by limiting the chaos within. Two villains, from vastly different genres of literature, and separated by hundreds of years, aptly express how this is true. If we consider Iago, from Shakespeare's *Othello* and the Joker from Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, we can see the continuity of this idea over time. These villains are especially fantastic examples of reconciling the shadow self. Observing them closely, their monologues and their actions, reveals that they have indeed succeeded in asserting themselves and become comfortable with chaos, which explains their extraordinary appeal.

When examining Iago, one cannot help but be confronted by his difficulty in assigning a motive to his crimes. The plethora of seemingly incoherent motives he produces is a striking aspect of his character. Villains often have, at the very least, some source of emotional pain that prompts them into action. Nevertheless, truly captivating characters also have a “dash of unpleasantness”, in that they enjoy what they do and require little to no reason (Markham). In essence, the very idea of chaos charms them. This idea of being comfortable with chaos is foreign to humanity, and very appealing. To feel at home in our chaotic world and to be comfortable with one's self is a longing that many people share. The question of motive is vital to the presentation of a truly engaging villain. Iago's first presented motive is the loss of a promotion. In one of his first speeches Iago declares:

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,

A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife...

He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,

And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship's ancient (I.i.19-32)

Here Iago explains the situation. He has been passed up for a promotion that he is certain he deserved. At first this appears to be Iago's motive. It seems clear enough, especially when he tells Roderigo, in regards to Othello, "I follow him to serve my turn upon him..." (I.i.42). At the beginning of the play it appears that this perceived wrong is the basis for all of Iago's evil. But something strange happens. Iago begins to accrue more and more reasons to betray Othello, as if he himself is unsure why he is seeking revenge. The following passage is an example of this:

I hate the Moor;
 And it is thought abroad that twixt my sheets
 'Has done my office, I know not if't be true;
 Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
 Will do as if for surety. (I.iii.392-96)

He is willing to destroy several lives simply based upon a rumor that he has no real reason to believe. That, in and of itself, is interesting, but what is truly fascinating about the character is the indecision within himself. At this point in the play, Iago is still striving to resolve his shadow self. Ambiguity of motive is common in everyone. Many times, we are confused regarding the basis for our actions and wonder what our true motives are. Why do people give to charities or help people? Is it to help others, or to help themselves? It is apparent that Iago is searching blindly because there is no basis of evidence in the play to support his claims. It appears instead, that Iago is simply making wild assumptions. The frantic nature of his search is all the more expressed because he never revisits the same motive twice in the play. His motives, "sink into oblivion, as far as Iago is concerned, for all the remainder of the play..."(Spivack 10). Consider again, another fanciful claim made by the villain, "I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip, / Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb / For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too" (II.i.296-98).

Now suddenly Cassio is cuckolding him as well? Isn't it odd that in the space of two acts his wrongs have escalated from a missed promotion, to his wife committing adultery with two of his intended victims? These are his soliloquies. This is his mind. He is not trying to convince the audience, but himself. It appears that he begins to believe his own imaginations and at their heart lies the universal feeling of jealousy. Iago's struggle to reconcile his motives and actions peaks by the end of Act I scene I. At this point, he has convinced himself that his claims are true. "That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it; / That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit..."(277-78). Why it is "likely" and "generally believed" that these two should be in love (Charney 8)? All of these instances have given rise to the thought that Iago has been looking for a reason to betray Othello, or that he is driven by "the motive hunting of motiveless malignity" (Coleridge 44). Indeed, it seems that Iago's shadow self is perfectly comfortable with chaos, destruction, and murder, but Iago has not yet become comfortable with it, not completely at least. However, by the end of the play, Iago has indeed become one with his inner self and determined his identity. When Othello asks the captured villain why he has worked so hard to destroy him Iago responds coldly, "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: From this time forth I never will speak word"(301-302).

It could be Iago has answered the question for himself and no longer feels any need to discuss it further. Or perhaps he realized that the question is immaterial and has ceased to ask it himself. Either way, he is not telling Othello, and the secret of his motives vanish with him from off of the stage. In the end, Iago saw no need to answer the question of "why", because he had finally realized who he was. He was a villain, a perpetrator of chaos, and he was comfortable with that realization. Though shocking and horrid, this ability to assert one's self, the capability to push against restraints and find harmony with repressed desires and emotions, is appealing.

Though the Joker does not have any soliloquies in the film, his monologues serve a similar purpose. Like Iago, he has several surface motives that he relates to various characters, never to think of them again, or to completely alter what he said in the first place. However, the Joker is not striving to reconcile the chaos within. If that ever were a struggle for him, it is long since passed. The various provided origin stories are all contradictory and are an extension of his character. He, having determined who he is, uses this ambiguity to inspire fear in others and to generate further chaos. Towards the beginning of the film he approaches the mob bosses and demands half of all their money to kill the Batman. At the end of the film, however, he burns all of their cash in front of their eyes. Money, though it was his first given motive carries no weight with him. Then there is the issue of his scars. The Joker seems to relish in reminding people about his gruesome scars and delights in relating how he received them, as though the terrible story is his excuse for madness and murder. Again, however, these stories change and have little bearing on what he does. Observe these two monologues. The first is as he is about to murder one of the mob bosses. The story he relates is:

Want to know how I got these scars? My father was a drinker and a fiend and one night he goes off crazier than usual. Mommy gets the kitchen knife to defend herself... So, me watching, he takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it (*The Dark Knight*).

The Joker continues to tell how his father placed a knife in his mouth and then disfigured him. At the end of the story, the Joker murders the mobster. For the audience this chilling and prompts a sense of disturbed pity for the Joker. For the other characters this is horrific. For the Joker, it is just another day at work. The chaos of the story and the fear it inspires have no effect on him. Instead, he generates it, uses it to his purposes. As the plot proceeds he gives the audience yet another story regarding the origin of his scars:

So I had a wife... who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks. One day they carve her face. We don't have money for surgeries. She can't take it. I just want to see her smile again. I just want her to know that I don't care about the scars. So I stick a razor in my mouth and do this to myself. And you know what she can't stand the sight of me. She leaves...(*The Dark Knight*)

Once again he provides a horrific event as the beginning of his madness. It generates a strange sense of humanity, though terrifying, in the Joker. Now, however, the audience is presented with two back stories regarding his scars. Which is true, if either of them? Just as Othello's question to Iago, this one is pointless. The likelihood of either of them being true is small. The importance is how comfortable the Joker is with fear and chaos. He uses these feelings to accomplish his goals of perpetuating yet more destruction and random acts of violence. In a conversation with Harvey Dent he declares that he, "...is an agent of Chaos." The Joker is fascinating because his identity is set. He knows exactly who and what he is. There is no difference between him and his shadow self. The two have merged completely. Again, we do not applaud his despicable actions, rather his ability to align himself so perfectly to his inner self. He does what he does because he enjoys the anarchy, the destruction, and the chaos. It is what drives him. This aspect of the Joker seems to be an evolution from Iago. He maintains his deep human psychology but drifts further into the realm of symbolism.

An identity crisis is a terrible form of chaos. The simple idea that one behaves differently around varied groups of people is sometimes unsettling. Questions regarding true identity sometimes arise from these differences. A character that is able to mold himself to his surroundings at will, and yet be entirely conscious of himself is a fascinating example of human control. Iago is impressive in this regard. With Roderigo, he is the scheming confidant, with

Cassio he is the drunken reveler, with Othello he is the “honest” soldier, with Desdemona he is the charming wit, and with himself, he is the clever unabashedly self-aware villain (Charney 13). It is worth noting that his transformation between roles is so complete that his very diction and rhythm of speech changes. When with Roderigo, he speaks prose as in the following lines, “Virtue? A fig! ‘Tis in ourselves that we are thus, or / thus. Our bodies are our gardens to the which our wills / are gardeners...” (I.iii.315-317). The rhythm of his speech is irregular and certainly not iambic pentameter. But when soliloquizing in the exact same scene, he speaks poetry, “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse: / For mine own gained knowledge should profane / If I would time expend with such a snipe...” (I.iii.372-74). This difference in language is just another example of his versatility and brilliance. More importantly, it is a further demonstration of his ability to adapt, to maintain his identity but always to play a part. He does this at command. He is capable of changing to any situation because he knows exactly who he is. Language is the most fundamental form of self-expression we have, and he is capable of altering it in an instant. Such ability requires an incredible understanding of self, and an admirable sense of control.

Like Iago, the Joker exhibits his self-awareness through his unpredictability, or devotion to chaos. He is completely changeable and kills at random. To be random or changeable certainly seems as though he is not aware of himself. He appears to have no bearings, no emotional or psychological anchor. However, the randomness of his mind *is* his anchor. When in the hospital with Harvey Dent, he explains himself, “Do I really look like a guy with a plan? I just do things. I am not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are” (*The Dark Knight*). The Joker is completely self-aware. He knows that unpredictability is the very essence of his being. Interestingly, it is the Joker’s influence that

creates Two Face, a character completely dominated by chance, and is completely unpredictable, like the toss of a coin.

Villains intrigue us not only because of their ability to reconcile the chaos within themselves but because they frighten as representations and creators of chaos. They are both what we long for and what we fear. This dichotomy is what creates the complicated relationship between the audience and a truly charismatic villain. Shakespeare drew the ideas of his plays from a great number of sources. If his plotlines were derivatives of histories, legends, and previous plays; why not his villains? The cultural climate of Elizabethan England suggests that Shakespeare may have based his villains upon the notorious criminals of his day. Sir Robert Cary, a warden along the borders of Scotland and England, wrote a memoir regarding the capture of the devious criminal Geordie Bourne (Borland 149). Sir Robert Cary, acting in true Shakespearean form, entered the convict's cell in disguise to see if he could coax a confession out of him. Cary's own words are:

He voluntarily of himself said that he had lived long enough to do so many villainies as he had done, and withal told us that he had lain with above forty men's wives, what in England, what in Scotland; and that he had killed seven Englishmen with his own hand, cruelly murdering them; that he had spent his whole time in whoring, drinking, stealing, and taking deep revenge for slight offences (Borland 151).

Iago may or may not have spent his time "in whoring" and "stealing" but we do know that he did indeed take "deep revenge for slight offences" (Borland 151). Remember, again, Iago's line, "I know not if't be true; / Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety" (I.iii.395-96). Geordie Bourne was captured and executed the late 1590's, only a few years before the writing of *Othello*, making it very possible that Iago's penchant for horrific revenge for minor

injuries was based on the infamous Geordie Bourne. Furthermore, such criminals were common in England. The plays were performed in one of the most violent and filthy parts of London. Crime and danger was not difficult to find. Chaos was a daily part of life for these people and to be confronted by a character that simultaneously resolves his inner chaos, yet perpetrates chaos, would both intrigue and frighten them.

Religious conflicts and full scale wars were common in Europe at this time. Protestants and Catholics waged devastating wars that destroyed enormous swaths of land and resulted in the deaths of countless people. England was more or less a protestant state, the Church of England being dominant. Based upon religious grounds many Catholics, foreign and domestic, sought to take the life of Elizabeth and place her sister on the throne instead. Two of these included the infamous Ridolfi and Babington plots. In both instances powerful aristocrats were deeply involved in the plots. Mary, the queens sister, was proven to be behind the Babington plot. These plots all occurred before the writing and production of *Othello* and would certainly still be remembered (Elizabeth I). For the Elizabethan's the idea that destruction and death could be perpetrated by a single traitor was a very real possibility. While Iago's religious affiliations are not certain, he is definitely a usurper, a murderer, and an anti-authoritarian. Could it be that Iago is a representation of the traitors of the past? Or, a more frightening possibility, of traitors not yet discovered in England? Iago, in the final act, says "I bleed, sir; but not kill'd" (V.ii. 278). This haunting line is a taunt and a reminder that even if evil is wounded, it does not die. Plots had failed in England's, but there would be more, and perhaps they would succeed.

The Joker adheres to this model very closely. He is truly terrifying because he embodies what people really find frightening. The film, *The Dark Knight*, plays very strongly on the fears generated by the 9/11 attacks (Fahraeus 86). Fear, chaos, and random destruction are deeply

rooted in the character of the Joker and the film as a whole. The Joker, like modern terrorists, cannot be dealt with, cannot be purchased, threatened, or coerced to do anything he does not wish to do. He is also actively against “the social contract, order, law, morals and plans...”(Fahraeus 86). The Joker can even be seen to be anti-capitalist. As he burns millions of dollars he throws American conventions of economy to the dogs (Fahraeus 87). In essence, he represents everything that American’s fear. He is the antithesis to everything the American culture holds dear. Perhaps the most poignant monologue the Joker has regarding this idea is the following:

You know what I notice, nobody panics when things go according to plan even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow I tell the press that like a gang banger will get shot or a truck full of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics because it is all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die well then everyone loses their minds.

Introduce a little anarchy, upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I’m an agent of chaos. Oh and you know the thing about chaos, its fear (*The Dark Knight*).

He represents an ideology without rules or order. Though human in his psychology, the Joker is very much a symbol for everything that modern American’s fear. His very essence is unpredictable. Our culture dreads inexplicable acts of violence. The Joker of *The Dark Knight* is a walking symbol of random acts of terror.

The Joker and Iago are two characters that are deeply related thematically and ideologically. They both are characters that have resolved the shadow self. They have reconciled the variety of personalities within them into one. For this reason, people discuss and are haunted by these characters. I do not suggest that we admire them because of their acts of evil. Rather we admire their devotion to an idea, their ability to control who they are, and their comfort in a

chaotic environment. They haunt us because while they are not afraid of chaos, they embody it. We need to look at villains from a wholly new perspective. They are not only great bad guys who give conflict to a story. They are not simply characters for the hero to topple. They are an expression of humanity. They express both what we long for and what we most deeply dread. This is the fascinating dichotomy of villainy.

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