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Filmic Representations of Contemporary American Masculinity in Crisis:
The Joker Figure

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I, Amira Rihab Saidi, declare that the research contained in this doctoral dissertation is entirely my own original work. This dissertation emanates from my efforts, and all data and sources are duly cited and referenced. Unless indicated otherwise, the perspectives, conclusions, and findings expressed in this document are exclusively mine. This dissertation includes no material that has been recognized as fulfilling the criteria for any other academic degree or non-degree program, whether in English or any other language.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the representation of post-9/11 American masculinity in crisis through an in-depth analysis of three significant cinematic depictions of the Joker character: Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* (2016), and Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019). Anchored in the theoretical framework of masculinity studies and masculinity in crisis discourse, this study explores how these films portray fractured and subverted masculine identities in response to broader socio-cultural and political shifts. R.W. Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity serves as the analytical framework. I focus on three critical elements: patriarchy, class hierarchies, and emotional toughness, all of which serve as markers of hegemonic masculinity in crisis. These elements interrogate the tensions within traditional models of manhood and identify how these crises are articulated through the Joker's cinematic representations. This dissertation contextualizes American masculinity, tracing its evolution from the 20th to the 21st century. It examines cultural shifts influenced by events like 9/11 and the Great Recession. By integrating Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the analysis explores how cinematic depictions of the Joker reinforce or subvert specific models of masculinity. This study contributes to the understanding of various masculinities in post-9/11 American cinema, reflecting broader socio-cultural anxieties and reshaping dominant gender norms. It analyzes each manifestation of masculinity, determining whether these films react to, represent, or challenge rigid expectations of manhood in the United States. I define Nolan's Joker as the embodiment of an anarchic masculinity that profoundly rejects hegemonic norms in favor of anarchy and anti-capitalist insurrection. Secondly, I regard Ayer's Joker as a prime example of dissociative masculinity, which is characterized by emotional disintegration, misogyny, and violent patriarchal traits. I ultimately defined Phillips's Joker as embodying a carnivalesque masculinity, in which Arthur Fleck's unsightly physique, fractured relationships, and social marginalization combine to facilitate his transformation into a mock-king archetype. Through this role as a carnivalesque jester, he temporarily subverts conventional ideals of manhood, challenging hegemonic structures before ultimately reaffirming his position's (in)stability. Viewed holistically, this dissertation examines how cinematic representations of the Joker surrounding power dynamics, body politics, and intimacy illustrate the post-9/11 American masculinity in crisis, socio-cultural anxieties, and the shifting challenges to hegemonic ideals in contemporary society.

Keywords: Filmic representation, hegemonic masculinity, Joker figure, masculinity in crisis, post-9/11 American masculinity, villainy

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Introduction

The depiction of masculinity in films offers essential insights into the changing cultural, political, and social landscapes of the United States. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, perceptions of masculinity have undergone significant transformations, shaped by profound shifts in American culture. The traditional ideals of strength, resilience, control, and dominance have been profoundly challenged. On that day, nineteen Middle Eastern terrorists hijacked four American aircraft, crashing two into New York's World Trade Center and one into the Pentagon while the fourth aircraft crashed in Pennsylvania after passengers intervened. This attack led to around 3,000 fatalities, representing not just challenges to America's state sovereignty and security but also to its national identity. The images of the Towers collapsing are one of the most haunting and symbolically charged spectacles in contemporary American history. These skyscrapers stood not only as feats of architectural prowess but as phallic emblems of capitalist success and masculine prowess. Their destruction represented more than mere physical devastation; it exposed the myths of American invincibility and hegemonic masculinity rooted in strength and dominance. This notion aligns with Adam Morton's assertion that urban forms reflect dominant class rule, utilizing abstract space to organize production for profit (2018, 125). Historically, monumental buildings have symbolized the bastions of the ruling class's hegemony (Barras 2019, 461). Barras notes that such hegemonic buildings like castles and cathedrals carry symbolic value, allowing the ruling class to assert supremacy through their construction (Barras 2019, 466-468). Architecture reinforces social structures, exemplified by buildings like the Towers, the Pentagon, and the White House, which symbolize human power and masculine dominance. The 9/11 attacks represented not only an assault on these structures but also on their predominantly white male rulers, highlighting a crisis in American white masculinity.

This dissertation interprets the "crisis" as an accumulation of historical, cultural, and social transformations challenging American hegemonic masculinity. It emphasizes the attacks as a critical juncture disrupting ideals of white masculinity. Masculinity in crisis, as explained by Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman, is "marked by uncertainties over social roles and identity, sexuality, work and personal relationships –and often manifested in violent or abusive behaviours towards self and others" (2002, 1). Sociologist Michael Kimmel further emphasizes that understanding manhood historically reveals it as a constantly evolving construct, shaped by interactions with ourselves, each other, and the broader world (2006, 3). This perspective underscores the examination of masculinity not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic element that reflects the complexities of human relationships and social expectations. Throughout the 20th

century, expectations of American white masculinity were transformed notably, and wars and cultural and socio-economic changes influenced them. This dissertation explores the ongoing masculinity in crisis, identifying pivotal events, challenges, and national traumas that exacerbate this phenomenon. The attacks represent a moment revealing profound inconsistencies within hegemonic masculinity from the mid-20th century to the 1990s, intensifying anxiety around gender roles and national security while generating new issues.

The post-9/11 era encompasses more than the immediate repercussions of the attacks and the emblematic fall of the towers, since it cannot be analyzed in isolation. Its impact permeates the broader socio-political landscape shaped by persistent conflict, economic instability, and significant cultural shifts, including the Great Recession, rising gun violence, and a digital backlash against feminism, culminating in movements such as #MeToo, which profoundly influenced the digital era. Furthermore, platform capitalism, which prioritizes exposure and on-screen performativity, has impacted gender perspectives. To comprehend the masculinity in crisis in this context, one must acknowledge its historical continuity throughout the 20th century. The national trauma has highlighted anxieties related to national identity, moral integrity, and a sense of belonging, especially concerning hegemonic masculinity, viewed as the benchmark of manhood. The complexities, vulnerabilities, and ambiguities of masculinity are frequently portrayed in films, exemplified by characters like the Joker, who embodies the profound challenges associated with masculinity in crisis. After September 11, the state of American masculinity being in crisis cannot be exclusively ascribed to the pain of the assaults themselves. The unforgettable images of the attacks incited extensive anxiety and uneasiness, while prompting a moral evaluation of American masculinity during that period. The national conversation transcended simple physical damage, probing the reasons for the significant impact of the assaults on the American psyche, particularly in contrast to earlier, more catastrophic military confrontations such as the World Wars or the Vietnam War, which happened overseas. The uniqueness of 9/11 lay in its distinction as the first significant assault on American territory since Pearl Harbor. In contrast to Pearl Harbor, which aimed at a remote military installation in Hawaii, 9/11 directly assaulted emblematic concentrations of American authority: the financial epicenter in New York and the political hub in Washington, D.C. The objectives were strategic; they symbolized the essence of American identity.

The need for protection after the attacks exposed the hollowness of the prevailing muscled and trim bodies at the expense of American morality, which is deep-rooted in the puritan-protestant heritage. In the late 20th century, up until the beginning of the 21st century, American society exalted a shallow paradigm of masculinity, idealized in advertising and

movies through hyper-sexualized and hyper-muscular physiques, exemplified by Calvin Klein commercials and action blockbusters. These representations promoted physical perfection as a symbol of leadership and power. Nonetheless, these depictions fell short in conveying genuine vulnerability and existential peril. Susan Faludi (2007) contends that 9/11 revealed the vacuity of performative masculinity. Once esteemed as an emblem of American supremacy, the idealized masculine physique was abruptly exposed as impotent during critical crises. At this juncture, the media-propagated representation of hegemonic masculinity disintegrated—not due to opposition, but because it proved incapable of safeguarding, motivating, or ethically guiding when it was most essential. Post-9/11 discussions examined the attacks through a moral lens, viewing them as a form of divine punishment tied to a perceived decline in American values. This was partly due to society's admiration for celebrities, who promoted sexualized advertising, suggesting that secularism had steered the nation away from its Christian foundations. Morally, society gave tacit approval to immorality by idolizing fame, straying from puritanical Protestant beliefs in earthly rewards and punishments, reflecting a crisis of morality (Uhlmann, Poehlman, and Bargh 2009, 28). The contemporary fascination with violent or psychopathic male figures such as the Joker does indeed reflect a crisis of morality in media representations. This dissertation seeks not to replicate that uncritical fascination but to interrogate it, examining how these figures reflect more profound social anxieties around manhood, power, and recognition in a fragmented cultural landscape.

This dissertation, however, places the moral crisis within the broader framework of the American masculinity in crisis, highlighting the uncertainty of hegemonic identity from the mid-20th century to the 21st century. During this period, ideals became more superficial, challenging the notion of hegemonic masculinity and prompting a reevaluation of hegemonic archetypes and their legitimacy. This doctoral dissertation's main question concerns how 21st-century Hollywood films depicted the post-9/11 American masculinity in crisis through the lens of the Joker figure. It contends that the Joker, embodying various roles tied to his criminal identity, fundamentally challenges the prevailing norms of masculinity that shape social perceptions of American white masculinity. Through this lens, I analyze how the Joker embodies the struggle for hegemony, particularly regarding hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously rejecting the social constructs that he deems unjust for all. To finalize the analysis of my dissertation, I utilize the theoretical framework of masculinity studies and the masculinity crisis discourse. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic manhood serves as a charter to identify masculinity in crisis, to see how these films discuss these questions, and to see how the various versions of the Joker character become sites of contestation. In this PhD

dissertation, I investigate how and why he embodies the complex challenges to American masculinity today and the means by which he tests, counters, and questions the environment that shaped him, thereby contributing to its evolution. My research primarily focuses on the 21st-century film adaptations of the Joker character to examine the post-9/11 American masculinity in crisis, excluding earlier film versions and comics due to their lesser relevance to the current crisis. Therefore, my findings will be drawn from a thorough analysis of three significant cinematic portrayals: Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* (2016), and Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019). This analysis aims to uncover the complexity of the Joker character and the various manifestations of the ongoing masculinity crisis. Additionally, I will demonstrate why the Joker serves as a potent and adaptable figure for exploring the intricacies of this masculinity crisis.

The Joker figure is one of the most compelling popular cultural characters of the 21st-century, frequently associated with crime, terrorism, social protests, and political uprisings. His face is widely acknowledged as the emblem of a complex entity capable of opposing various forms of mainstream politics. He represents a radical rupture in the ethical and normative social fabric, opposing values, order, and norms, as well as the dynamics of power, including those tied to gender politics. As the "Clown Prince of Crime," he serves as a medium for critiquing various aspects of social structures and ideologies. In this PhD dissertation, I explore the various aspects of how and why he stands for being the symbol of the multifaceted challenges to American masculinity in our current times and through what means he tests, counters, and questions the very environment that shaped him, contributing to its changes. My dissertation primarily focuses on the 21st-century film versions targeting the Joker character to explore the post-9/11 American masculinity in crisis, and the earlier film versions or the comics will not be taken into consideration due to the specificity of the current crisis. Thus, the research results will be achieved through a detailed analysis of three key cinematic representations: Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* (2016) and Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) to reveal the complexity of the Joker character as well as the multifaceted nature of the current masculinity crisis and its various manifestations. In addition, it will be revealed why the Joker is a very potent and flexible figure to highlight the complexities of this masculinity crisis.

The Redstockings Manifesto of 1969 critiques American masculinity, concentrating on social expectations and expressions rather than its origins. It claims that "all power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented," pointing out that these men have controlled all political, economic, and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. All men

receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy" (Einspahr 2010, 2). This corresponds with the Joker, who operates inside a hierarchical framework where males exert dominance over one another and women, leading to pervasive patriarchal authority. Nonetheless, the Joker subverts this structure; he adeptly navigates this system by both embracing and repudiating these attributes in his endeavor to undermine them. The Joker's repudiation of social conventions is deeply embedded in the manifesto's social criticism, which condemns males for perpetuating dominance. Through his incarnations, the Joker character embodies multiple forms of rejecting control through his actions and the events around him. This underscores a critical need for liberation from oppressive structures.

Male privilege constitutes key elements of dominance, such as patriarchy aligning with sexual prowess, economic advantages, political privilege, and physical supremacy, as well as emotional repression. These components remained crucial in defining American hegemonic masculinity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, more than twenty years after *The Redstockings Manifesto*, Kimmel acknowledges the rigidity of these norms, expressing concern that American masculinity cannot depend on "obsessive self-control, defensive exclusion, or frightened escape" (1996, 333). He calls for a more inclusive definition of national manhood, which "emphasizes the character of men's hearts and souls rather than the size of their biceps or the weight of their wallets" (1996, 333). Despite Kimmel's vision, the struggle to embody dominant traits persists, creating barriers for both women and men. This complicates gender power dynamics, leading individuals to stray from established norms. Difficulties in projecting hegemonic ideals—such as physical strength and emotional control—prompt reactions that include rejecting these norms. Subversive acts, such as embracing positive masculinity or protesting violent masculinity, emerge as responses. This ongoing dynamic has instigated a profound reevaluation of masculinity, influenced by cultural and historical changes, resulting in a masculinity crisis. Factors like wars, politics, and economic shifts further complicate expectations around masculinity. The interplay of conformity and resistance fosters characters like the Joker, who embody mixed behaviors of rejecting and subverting traditional norms, ultimately revealing the flaws within established gender dynamics.

This analysis explores how the Joker signifies and reacts to the masculinity crisis in America, using Stuart Hall's representation theory, which asserts that popular culture mirrors actual culture. Hall (1997) claims that the importance of culture comes from a system of representation that connects cultural meanings with visual representations. I focus on the portrayal, discussion, and complexity of masculinity issues within the Joker films. Hall identifies three methodologies: the reflective approach, which echoes social reality; the

intentional approach, which highlights artists' intentions; and the constructionist approach, which regards representation as influenced by audience perceptions and creators' objectives. This study employs a constructionist approach to investigate how narratives entwined with cultural norms and intertextual discourses produce meaning. It illustrates how these films challenge and shape hegemonic masculinity by closely examining various Joker narratives, each representing unique concepts while still embodying the archetype of the Joker. Hall's constructionist perspective connects the Joker's role as a cultural product influenced by the film industry with the social context in which the character exists. Thus, the Joker reflects post-9/11 social turmoil and operates at the nexus of cultural narratives, influenced by and influencing contemporary anxieties, through genre conventions and transmedia strategies that respond to market needs. Consequently, the Joker serves as a cultural barometer, mediating the tensions between real-world crises and the generic and economic codes that define their cinematic representation. By applying content analysis to the selected films, I will gain a deeper understanding of my research context within these works, exploring overarching narratives and answering my research questions. Content analysis is a research method that allows scholars to draw replicable and valid conclusions from texts or other significant materials regarding their contextual applications. (Krippendorff, 2004). This method can be applied across various materials to understand and interpret the narratives they convey. In analyzing the representation of masculinity in crisis in the Joker film, I see that focusing on the narratives is more critical than the cinematography, as I aim for the narrative to give meaning to the reflected world. This approach emphasizes the building and deconstruction of masculinities in cinema rather than cinematography, notwithstanding the latter's contribution to narrative enhancement. I am not addressing the impact of lighting, composition, camera angles, or other cinematographic techniques that enhance each film's cinematic mood and tone.

I sectioned this dissertation into six chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical background for my dissertation. It surveys the theoretical frameworks employed in masculinity studies to examine crisis tendencies and how historical events and cultural shifts have influenced notions of masculinity. This underscores the necessity of scrutinizing male behavior and its historical backdrop before the emergence of masculinity studies, along with the perspectives it offers for comprehending masculine constructs. This chapter explores masculine ideals, norms, and conventions through R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (2005). It draws on further studies by Demetriou (2001), Goffman (1963), Hammer (2023), Kimmel (2006), and Messerschmidt (2005, 2018) to discuss the plurality of masculinities, their fundamental elements, and the hierarchy that shapes them. My examination of the Joker

character will specifically focus on three essential aspects: patriarchy, class hierarchies, and the ideas of physical and emotional toughness. These aspects will be discussed in detail throughout the chapter. This chapter further debates moments of masculinity in crisis, framing it as a discourse and exploring the challenges and changes affecting hegemonic masculinity. It also emphasizes different practices that challenge conventional norms and encourage shifts away from them.

The second chapter examines the evolution of American masculinity from the 1960s onward, emphasizing the current crisis facing masculinity in the 21st-century. It traces developments from the mid-20th century, focusing on the impacts of war, the economy, politics, and cultural attitudes towards masculinity. Additionally, this chapter portrays social change as an ongoing process, asserting that the "masculinity in crisis" in the U.S. is influenced by both external historical events, like wars and conflicts, and ingrained social beliefs. A key event that underpins my analysis is the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. This traumatic instance in American history will form the basis of my discussion, exploring the psychological, economic, and political effects of the attacks and their role in shaping a new understanding of masculinity in the United States.

The third chapter analyzes the evolution of American cinema about hegemonic masculinity, highlighting the shift from conventional hegemonic masculinity to portrayals of male characters as insecure, defiant, and psychologically complex. This chapter, furthermore, traces the change in the cinematic idealized notions of American manhood and examines how heroic masculinities have shaped American society over the past two centuries. This chapter discusses various forms of masculinities in film genres, including crime fiction, noir, neo-noir, western, and neo-western, as well as thriller. This chapter expands on concepts previously discussed in my published work, "Anamorphic Masculinity: Post 9/11 Cinematic Masculinities" (2024). It explores the trend of villainizing protagonists in American cinema, highlighting villainized masculinity as a representation of masculine transgression. This discussion emphasizes the growing discourse on evil amidst a crisis in masculinity.

The fourth chapter explores Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), delving into its intricate themes of justice, anarchy, and disorder, particularly through the lens of hegemonic masculinity. I investigate how Nolan's depiction suggests that his masculinity faces rejection and stigma due to his reluctance to follow erratic governing principles. I refer to his masculinity as anarchic masculinity, emphasizing the Joker's masculinity in crisis as portrayed by Nolan. This idea challenges established societal norms, authority figures, and economic conditions impacting individuals like him. His masculinity acts as a means to interrogate, critique, and

subvert traditional social norms and expectations of manhood. In my analysis, I identify a direct link between the portrayal of masculinity in the Joker character and the concept of American masculinity. My argument hinges on the idea that the Joker is a byproduct of American culture, designed to reflect and confront significant societal issues in the United States. I approach the film from three perspectives. First, I examine the Joker as an anti-hegemonic and anti-authority figure, shedding light on his anarchic masculinity, a term I coined to capture his defiant masculine behavior. Second, I analyze his iconic yet vaguely defined interests, highlighting how the Joker symbolizes anti-capitalist ideology by targeting Gotham's elite society. Lastly, I discuss his philosophy of chaos, which seeks to create a city without authority, allowing his principles to dominate through violent acts that reject established power dynamics. This analysis interrogates the Joker's motives and how he critiques prevailing norms, viewing them as burdens rather than affirmations.

The fifth chapter analyzes the dynamics of David Ayer's Joker in *Suicide Squad* (2016) and his relationship with Harley Quinn, and explores its implications for his masculinity. Patrial discussion of this chapter has already been published in the examination of Ayer's Joker as modern homme fatal in my article entitled "The Reconfiguration of Homme Fatal in the Third Millennium Joker Adaptions" (2022). Within this dissertation, however, the examination starts with the Joker's aggressive conduct towards Harley, illustrating it as a reflection of his entrenched patriarchal views, emphasizing his mistreatment and promotion of others' disdain. The second section presents a perspective that reduces Harley's humanity, viewing it as indicative of his misogynistic tendencies. Harley is perceived as an object or possession under the control of the Joker, yet she continues to be fascinated by him. The third section analyzes Harley's character by exploring the concept of *amour fou,* or mad love, to assess the impact of her obsession with the Joker on the narrative. This point seeks to clarify whether their relationship is inherently abusive or stems from a deep fear of intimacy linked to his dissociative masculinity.

The sixth chapter examines carnivalesque masculinity through Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019), drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnival. It clarifies how the Joker embodies societal upheaval, challenging established norms. During crises, marginalized masculinity surfaces, eroding power dynamics and empowering those on the fringes while momentarily diminishing mainstream authority. A partial discussion of the Joker's struggle with marginalization was previously addressed in my 2023 article, "The Representation of Racism and Social Invisibility in Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019)." This chapter defines carnivalesque masculinity as a defiance of authority, emphasizing Arthur Fleck's physicality and the

grotesque imagery that accompanies it. It complicates his overt masculinity in personal connections, particularly with his mother and neighbor. It reveals how his care for his mother and imaginary bond with his neighbor present reality *á l'envers*. Ultimately, this frames him as a mock hero, highlighting the evolving nature of gender identities in carnivalesque contexts and raising critical questions about masculinity. As a carnivalesque character, the Joker exhibits a profound understanding of moral distinctions, and he intentionally defies conventional rules due to his inherently chaotic nature. Moreover, labeling the Joker as a monster and a clown accentuates clowns' intrinsic repulsiveness and imaginative nature. In analyzing Arthur in *Joker* (2019), one observes his deliberate challenge to and mockery of conventional ideas surrounding masculinity. I choose the typology of carnivalesque masculinity, a notion that stems from Bakhtin's theory of the carnival. Bakhtin delineates the carnival as a domain where social hierarchies are temporarily suspended and established norms are reversed. This thesis explores how the Joker deliberately undermines conventional masculinity by rejecting societal norms and crafting his own warped identity. Arthur Fleck's embodiment of flamboyant masculinity is evident in numerous facets. At first glance, his flamboyant and hyperbolic persona after transforming into the Joker represents a defiance of the conventional and subdued masculinity often expected in societal norms. He embraces a dramatic expression of masculinity that challenges established norms. He chooses to partake in laughter and dance in the face of adversity, thereby upending the typical gravity and restraint linked to conventional masculinity. Despite being fictitious, the Joker holds considerable cultural significance in the United States since he represents the changing masculinity in crisis in various periods in which he appears.

This work aims to contribute significantly to discourses on gender, culture, and cinema, especially in exploring how iconic characters like the Joker embody social anxieties and function as a cinematic agent of cultural critique. The central aim of this dissertation is to argue that the Joker functions as a cinematic barometer for the crises afflicting American masculinity in the 21st-century. Through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and its three core criteria— patriarchy, class hierarchies, and physical and emotional toughness—this study analyzes how each version of the Joker embodies a distinct reaction to these crises. Nolan's anarchic Joker rejects hegemonic norms by embracing chaos and anti-capitalist rebellion, Ayer's dissociative Joker exhibits hyper-aggressive patriarchal traits and emotional fragmentation, and Phillips's carnivalesque Joker challenges and subverts conventional ideals of manhood through grotesque and marginalized embodiments of masculinity.

The Joker's complex embodiment of masculinity in crisis challenges simplistic categorizations of heroism and villainy, offering a nuanced commentary on the instability of

hegemonic ideals. By analyzing how these films interrogate and reimagine masculine identities, this dissertation contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of media in shaping cultural narratives about gender. Ultimately, it seeks to demonstrate that the Joker's cinematic representations are not just reflections of a society in turmoil but active participants in reshaping the cultural imagination of manhood in the 21st-century.

Chapter 1. Masculinity Studies: Theoretical Framework

In the 20th and 21st centuries, expectations of masculinity in the United States have undergone significant reevaluation and reinterpretation, similar to earlier periods. As the nation grapples with conflicting ideals, cultural influences, and historical changes, masculinity in crisis has emerged, leading men to exhibit diverse behaviors that challenge traditional cultural norms. This chapter explores masculinity studies as a theoretical framework to analyze the Joker's embodiment of masculinity in crisis and its various portrayals in selected films. It also examines how these male characters disrupt established hierarchical structures, inducing disarray in social norms.

This chapter consists of three sections. The first examines the emergence of masculinity studies as a distinct discipline, focusing on the construction of masculinities within cultural and historical contexts. This establishes a foundation for understanding the stability of established masculinities. The second section analyzes social norms through Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, illuminating the implications of masculinity in crisis, considering factors like patriarchy and class hierarchies. Finally, the third section addresses masculinity in crisis, highlighting social challenges and cultural disputes affecting hegemonic masculinity.

The analysis of the Joker films relies on a systematic approach, divided into two focal points to explore how these films portray masculinity in crisis. First, foundational theories contributing to masculinity studies will be discussed, contrasting social constructionism with male sex role theory. This historical basis is essential for guiding the study, excluding reductionist viewpoints on masculinity formation, in order to facilitate nuanced interpretations. The second point examines masculinity studies as an evolving field, aiming to reconceptualize masculinity beyond a monolithic framework. Connell's writings are foundational, presenting concepts such as hegemonic and marginalized masculinities. This perspective is crucial for analyzing how Joker characters navigate and subvert these classifications through their repudiation of power dynamics and conventional defiance.

1.1. Introducing Masculinity Studies

Simplified stereotypes, grounded in sociobiology, have historically influenced perceptions of manhood, constraining the varied experiences of men. The perspectives that suggest fixed, biologically determined roles have faced criticism for not considering the variety of male identities present in different social and cultural settings. In recent decades, the study of masculinities has gained momentum by integrating fields such as feminism, sociology, medicine, psychology, and psychiatry. This interdisciplinary approach analyzes the

sociocultural construction of manhood and explores the complex interplay of cultural, social, and historical factors that shape men's social status. In this context, this research relies on the definition proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt that masculinities are "configurations of practice" influenced by social interactions and subject to changes based on gender dynamics in a specific social context (2005, 836). This conceptualization illustrates how distinct experiences shape various manifestations of masculinity, resulting in a hierarchy where hegemonic masculinity stands at the apex. Hegemonic masculinity serves as the cultural standard against which other forms of masculinity are evaluated, classified, and critiqued.

In this dissertation, I will utilize two closely related but distinct terms in my analysis of masculinity in crisis: "manhood" and "masculinity." These terms are often used interchangeably in much of the literature I encountered during my research. However, I make a nuanced distinction between them to guide my usage. I refer to "manhood" when discussing the overarching concept of being an American white heterosexual man, as my focus centers specifically on this demographic. By definition, manhood generally denotes the status or condition of being recognized as a man, embodying various societal expectations associated with this identity. According to Gilmore (1990), manhood is constructed by intertwining distinct cultural codes with universal ascriptions of masculine ideals (as cited in Hammond and Mattis 2005, 115). Kimmel (2016) similarly asserts that manhood "is neither static nor timeless; it is historical. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it is socially constructed […] It is created in culture. Manhood means different things at different times to different people" (59). In essence, manhood serves as a guideline for fulfilling societal expectations of masculinity, reflecting the cultural and historical contexts in which it is embedded.

Conversely, "masculinity" pertains to the myriad ways in which men can embody their manhood, influenced by factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class. The range of these socially constructed roles significantly impacts each group's perception and experience of manhood. For instance, acknowledging the existence of Black masculinity, Latino masculinity, gay masculinity, Jewish masculinity, and working-class masculinity implies a fundamental similarity in the gender enactments of men from these diverse backgrounds (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009, 280). In my research, I employ the term "hegemonic masculinity" to denote the idealized form of manhood in the United States. Additionally, I use "manhood" to describe the normative state of being a "real man," which is often associated with traits such as dominance, emotional stoicism, strength, and power as Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) state, "[a]ll manhood acts imply a claim to membership in the privileged gender group" (284). Since the norm encompasses the entirety of masculinities, I refer specifically to

American white heterosexual manhood as a broad umbrella for understanding the plurality of masculinities.

The distinction between these terms, shaped by cultural constructs, has long been a pivotal aspect of feminist thought, predating their incorporation into discussions of masculinity. *Le Deuxième Sexe*, or *The Second Sex* in English, is the title of Simone De Beauvoir's 1949 work that famously questions the sociobiological interpretation of femininity. H.M. Parshley translated De Beauvoir's famous statement that defends the social construction of femininity, and it reads, "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1951, 283). The appropriated statement "[o]n naît pas homme: on le devient (one is not born a man: one becomes a man)" captures a fundamental principle about the definition of manhood and has been taken by men to oppose the sociobiological approach to the study of men (Mallet 2015, vi).

In *The Myth of Masculinity* (1976), psychologist Joseph Pleck argues that no coherent framework existed for understanding male sex role identity. He criticizes the reductionist perspective that simplifies masculinity into rigid traits like violence, dominance, and emotional repression, defined by conventional male sex theory. Pleck contends that men must adopt an aggressive stance to navigate a "devouring" male society (Pleck, 1976, 262). Alongside scholars like Harry Brod in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (1987), he advocates for a nuanced understanding of masculinity, highlighting the diversity of male identities and roles (Brod, 1987, 7). Masculinity studies emerged to challenge rigid interpretations of masculinity, drawing from foundational work by Carrigan, Connell, Lee (1985), Kaufman (1987), Kimmel (1996), Segal (1990), Seidler (1997), and Connell (1987, 1995, 2005). Subsequent scholars, including Beasley (2004), Hawson (2006), Hearn (1998), Messerschmidt (1995, 1997), and Whitehead (2002), enhanced this theoretical framework by integrating insights from feminism, criminology, queer theory, and sports studies. Todd Reeser emphasizes the need to move beyond traditional male experiences, which have historically seen the male sex role as a static construct (2015, 13).

The understanding of masculinities emerged in Australia in the 1980s through studies, primarily discussed by Connell. In 1982, Sandra Kessler, Connell, and colleagues launched *Ockers and Disco-Maniacs*, a booklet for teachers published by the Inner-City Education Centre, Sydney. This sociological report surveys gender inequality and educational sexism in Australian high schools. Notably, it reveals that schools are structured around "sex stereotypes" or "gender stereotypes" that reinforce the lower status of groups like girls and homosexuals. Researchers concluded that educational institutions perpetuate gender stereotypes and promote "hegemonic masculinity." that,

particular kinds of behavior, particular ways of being, are made culturally dominant [and] come to be seen as the pattern of masculinity or femininity in general, [while] other kinds of behavior and character are defined in relation to them as deviant or inferior, and attract derision, hostility, and sometimes violence. For lack of any snappier term, we have come to refer to the culturally dominant patterns as "hegemonic masculinity" and "hegemonic femininity." (Kessler et al. 1982, 10)

This was the first instance of "hegemonic masculinity" in academia. In this context, it refers to the dominant masculinity defined by behaviors that justify men's superiority over women, leading to oppression (Hearn, Aboim, and Howson 2016, 3). It was initially developed to promote democratizing gender relations and dismantle power disparities rather than merely uphold hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 853). Connell's further writings established this as a key analytical category. In her rebuttal to Jefferson and Hall, "On Hegemonic Masculinity and Violence" (2002, 90), she argues the concept arose from three interconnected lines of thought: first, the exploration of gender power structures through women's activism; second, insights from homosexual men regarding oppression; and third, empirical research on men in diverse settings like workplaces and schools. Thus, various social, cultural, and political elements shape hegemonic masculinity.

Connell's writings articulate the evolution of masculinity studies, shifting from a fixed notion tied to male roles to a more fluid understanding of its diverse forms. Her study with Messerschmidt (2005) explores the multiplicity of masculinities, suggesting that males adapt their behaviors based on social interactions. This perspective highlights masculinity's fluidity in different contexts. However, while their research shows diverse masculinities, it seems to follow the exclusionary patterns of male sex role theory. This theory excludes men who are not tough, dominant, or emotionally stoic, similar to hegemonic masculinity, which recognizes various masculinities but maintains a hierarchy of desirability. All men are acknowledged under hegemonic masculinity, yet they are not regarded equally due to this hierarchy. This informs my dissertation rationale, suggesting that while there has been progress in theorizing plural masculinities, exclusionary power dynamics continue to shape male identity, causing tension in managing hierarchical dynamics and the consequences of not fitting hegemonic norms.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 841) argue that men adopt hegemonic masculinity when it benefits them and disengage from it when it is detrimental. This observation aligns with the trajectory of my analysis. The various representations of the Joker highlight their distinct positions within the dominant discourse: at times, they occupy marginalized roles, while in other instances, they challenge established norms. As the embodiment of these complexities, the Joker unveils the hollowness of American men's struggles in striving for hegemonic

masculinity. His rejection of masculine ideals becomes essential to his character. Analyzing these relationships reveals how the different Jokers reject and respond to hegemonic masculinity. This assessment evaluates whether this rejection signifies the harmful nature of hegemonic masculinity or if it arises from an alignment with their objectives. For instance, Nolan's Joker exemplifies the crisis related to institutional pressure to conform to masculine norms amid economic hardships. The character embodies a crisis within institutions that uphold hegemonic masculinity, which increasingly feels burdensome; as such, the Joker threatens the stability of those institutions and their leaders. Furthermore, Ayer's Joker dramatizes patriarchal dominance and the complicated relationship between femininity and patriarchy. The crisis depicted here embodies the conflict between what men desire in their romantic partners and what societal norms dictate regarding patriarchal rule. This tension is an exaggerated portrayal that fits the nature of the Joker. Phillips' Joker takes a carnival-like approach to the crisis, showcasing various aspects of the challenges of maintaining hegemonic masculinity through interpersonal relationships, work, and social recognition. All these embodiments manifest different forms of the male crisis.

To explain masculinities' contextual nature, Connell and Messerschmidt assert that "'masculinity' does not represent a specific type of man; rather, it denotes a way men position themselves through discursive practices" (2005, 841). Men may accept or reject hegemonic masculinity based on circumstances, illustrating the fluidity of masculinities. Kimmel succinctly articulates that "masculinities" vary for different groups of men, influenced by social class, race, ethnicity, age, geography, and global economic position (2001, 338). The term suggests that various experiences are neither homogeneous nor confined to a specific paradigm. Kimmel and Aronson (2004, 503) elaborate in *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*, noting that "masculinities" reflect diverse definitions even within the same community. They add that "[a]lthough social forces create systematic differences between men and women, even these differences are not as significant as those among men or among women" (2004, 503). Thus, recognizing and studying variation within gender groups is more crucial than focusing solely on diversity. Kimmel, in his chapter "Globalization and Its Mal(e)contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism," examines how the global dimension of hegemonic masculinity can incite violent resistance and protest, resulting in the emergence of radical masculinities that reject change and plurality, exemplified by white supremacists in the United States and Al-Qaeda in the Middle East (2005, 417- 418). The label "extremist groups" indicates their rejection of widely accepted norms, as they assert their own version of hegemonic masculinity and unique expectations of men. This rejection often stems

from a desire to differentiate themselves and appear superior to others. Consequently, while masculinities may be localized, they are still influenced by broader ideologies and cultural values.

In her book *Masculinities* (1995, 2005), Connell explores various forms of masculinity within the Western world, shaped by and contributing to social hierarchies. This localized perception of masculinities highlights the complex and permanent intersections that exist between these forms. This arrangement is believed to establish the superior status of males and the subordinate status of women. First, the archetypal form represented at the pinnacle of these constructs is hegemonic masculinity, which pertains to male groups that possess power and riches, sustaining their supremacy via social networks (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985, 592). Connell stressed, however, that this dominance is a historically dynamic relationship in which new groups can challenge established solutions and establish a new dominance (2005).

Second, Connell's concept of "complicit masculinities" explores the nuanced ways in which men benefit from the dominant structure of hegemonic masculinity without fully embodying it. Men in this category possess a certain level of association with the dominant social project, but they do not fully represent the hegemonic form of masculinity. Connell describes them as "slacker versions" of hegemonic masculinity, as they maintain patriarchal views while lacking the traditional masculine traits of strength and aggression (2005, 79). In contrast to those who embody hegemonic masculinity, individuals exhibiting complicit masculinity do not seek to demonstrate the performative aspects associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as hypermasculine behavior or overt control, which are aimed at maintaining gender dominance. They continue to benefit from hierarchical structures, as their inherent dominance is evident in the acceptance of privileges such as higher salaries in the workplace and overall entitlement, highlighting their involvement in this system. This analysis of complicit masculinities encourages profound contemplation of the gender power relations between males and females, as well as the role of patriarchy in constructing a hegemonic male figure. Building on this, Mimi Schippers contends that it is crucial to differentiate masculinities that endorse unequal gender relations from those that do not, specifically identifying masculine traits and practices that align with hierarchical structures, thereby excluding those who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity (2007, 101).

Complicit masculinity holders may not fully benefit from their privileges. Yet, their reliance on the prevailing paradigm often goes unnoticed, allowing certain individuals to remain unstigmatized due to their invisibility, actions that typically go unrecognized, like advocacy. In contrast, visible factors such as sexual orientation, race, class, and ethnicity shape perceptions

of masculinity, making some vulnerable to stigmatization. Subordinated masculinities, particularly those straying from heterosexual norms, face stigma for not conforming to dominant standards. Acknowledging hegemonic male characteristics is vital for understanding privilege, as these traits contribute to marginalization. Connell examines how homosexuals challenge hegemonic masculinity, sometimes illustrating subservient masculinity, noting that the visibility of sexual orientation often arises through actions perceived as less masculine, linking homosexual behavior to femininity. This reinforces the notion that being gay is tied to feminine traits, distancing it from hegemonic behavior. This perspective reveals a hierarchy with heterosexuality at the top, though it is open to contestation without undermining hegemonic masculinity. Irén Annus (2021) offers a compelling example in her analysis of the show *Queer Eye* (2018-present), arguing that while it allows homosexual men a transient status over straight men, it also reinforces hegemonic masculinity. The show supports patriarchal norms, depicting homosexual men as transforming "deviant" heterosexuals into traditional, heteronormative versions (Annus 2021, 17). While Connell often associates subordinated masculinity with homosexuality, it also includes men perceived as insufficiently manly, such as effeminate men or those considered inferior due to frail behavior or lack of virility (Connell 2005). Connecting Annus's research with Connell's framework illustrates how characteristics like sexuality and emotional weakness reinforce hegemonic masculinity, which manifests only in contrast to these subordinate forms, emphasizing intricate interactions.

Fourth, marginalized masculinities refer to subordinate social classes or ethnic groups that are positioned in contrast to the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group (Connell 2005, 80). According to Messerschmidt (2018, 29), masculinities face discrimination not only due to gender but also because of various underlying factors that exacerbate their marginalization. This marginalization stems from a complex interplay of social factors, including financial status, racial origin, ethnic identification, and age. Therefore, marginalized masculinity results from intersecting systems of inequality rather than a single factor like class (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1984). Intersectionality is crucial for understanding how the gender of oppressed groups intersects with their identities, such as race, ethnicity, and economic background, impacting their disenfranchisement and status within patriarchal and economic structures of poverty. Individuals from varied socioeconomic and racial origins often face discrimination and economic hardships, limiting their access to social and financial resources.

The acknowledgment of these subversive masculinities by theorists, which are not inherently negative but merit examination, has led to new typologies that challenge hegemonic norms. Terry A. Kupers' toxic masculinity (1970) illustrates the harmful effects of abusive and

aggressive masculine behavior. In contrast, Eric Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory (2010) presents an alternative masculinity that is hegemonic yet non-homophobic, promoting egalitarian masculinities. Karla Elliott's caring masculinities (2015) sharply oppose toxic masculinity, advocating for empathy and emotional expression as positive traits. Additionally, Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe's hybrid masculinities (2014) describe men who consciously incorporate elements of subordinated masculinities while still benefiting from hegemonic structures. These diverse theories illustrate the nuances of masculinities that do not necessarily fit into the larger categories Connell describes alone. Examining these nuances allows insight into the Joker's subversive portrayals in films. The diverse manifestations of masculinity extend beyond the examples I have provided. I am ready to analyze them further using established theoretical frameworks to develop new typologies and terminology for each portrayal of the Joker, adhering to my set criteria. Andrea Waling (2019, 94) critiques the proliferation of terms in masculinity studies, noting a compulsion among researchers to label specific masculinities. While Waling finds this trend peculiar, I argue that integrating new typologies is essential for understanding diverse responses to evolving gender dynamics, which is the primary goal of this dissertation. Whether contentious or not, presenting a new male manifestation must prioritize its singular study within a comprehensive analysis.

The various typologies of masculinity—such as hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, subordinated, toxic, radical, inclusive, hybrid, and caring—provide significant insights into the relational constructions of masculinities and their hierarchical nature. However, these frameworks fall short in capturing the diverse and subversive roles that the Joker embodies in cinema. While these categories typically explore how males conform to, resist, or face marginalization by hegemonic masculinity, the Joker's character fundamentally challenges conventional behavior. He aims to expose the inherent flaws of hegemonic masculinity rather than striving for dominance or social validation. The Joker represents a masculinity characterized by crisis and fragmentation, as seen in various cinematic portrayals, including those from Nolan, Ayer, and Phillips. His masculinity is marked by fragmentation and lack of closure, highlighting a rejection of normative structures. The representations of the Joker significantly disrupt traditional classifications since they do not neatly conform to hegemonic, dominant, or subordinate categories. Interestingly, these characters embody a form of heterosexuality that defies typical understandings of queer masculinities. They resist compliance with mainstream gender stereotypes and reject conventional notions of positive sexual and emotional bonds. In Nolan's portrayal, the Joker lacks intimacy, with anarchic motivations rooted in chaos and disruption. He rejects notions of compassion and inclusive

masculinity, failing to adhere to Kimmel's idea of "radical masculinities," as his ideology is inherently chaotic. Similarly, Ayer's Joker, often labeled as toxic, defies simplistic categorization. His tumultuous relationship with Harley Quinn oscillates between obsessive love and emotional domination, revealing a conflict between his longing for connection and the hyper-masculine persona driven by fear and societal expectations. This conflict leads to what I term "dissociative masculinity," which is marked by emotional fragmentation and identity confusion, ultimately resulting in a collapse under patriarchal pressures. Phillips's Joker (2019) adds another layer of complexity to traditional masculinity classifications. Arthur Fleck starts as a nurturing son searching for love, but becomes a grotesque figure representing rebellion. His physical frailty and emotional sensitivity sharply contrast with prevailing notions of masculinity. By the film's conclusion, Arthur is ironically "crowned" as a leader through acts of violence. This ironic twist of masculine success, where vulnerability morphs into a form of strength via defiance, aligns with my concept of "carnivalesque masculinity."

These categories do not merely supplement existing models; they represent pivotal conceptual advancements that underscore the nuances of current frameworks. Connell underscores the interconnectedness of these masculinities, particularly their relational characteristics. Each form of masculinity exists within an intricate hierarchy, revealing that the hierarchy represents the unequal distribution of privilege among different groups of men (Connell 2015, 44). Thus, varying masculinities arise from specific norms and standards, ranking them from the most to the least desirable forms of manhood. Hegemonic masculinity serves as a crucial reference point for understanding other masculinities within a broader social context.

By examining these variations independently, we can conduct a more detailed analysis of how diverse masculinities engage with modern societal issues, ultimately enhancing discussions about male identities. Connell highlights the interrelatedness of different masculinities as they do not exist in isolation, stressing their relational aspects within a hierarchical system, creating a structural system that mirrors unequal privilege between hegemonic masculinity and other subordinated and marginalized ones (Connell 2015, 44). This hierarchy is shaped by specific norms, with hegemonic masculinity serving as a significant reference point. I believe that hegemonic masculinity influences various male identities and intersects with factors like race, class, sexuality, and physical characteristics. The interplay of hegemonic masculinity affects the experiences of masculinity across various groups, all linked to its hierarchical nature. Understanding this hierarchy is crucial for categorizing the different Jokers within it and analyzing how they subvert their positions, whether by attempting to ascend

or remaining marginalized. Is this hierarchy forced on them, or do individuals consciously reject it to embrace marginalization just to rebel against the whole system?

1.2. Defining Hegemonic Masculinity

This study employs Connell's theories on masculinities in contemporary Western societies, focusing on hegemonic masculinity as a primary concept. She defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2005, 77). Connell emphasizes the relational nature of masculinities, primarily structured around power dynamics in gender relations. Reeser (2015) posits that hegemonic masculinity operates as a relational framework, highlighting the dynamics of masculinities within a hierarchy defined by dominance and subordination. This examination will explore how masculinities in crisis differ from American hegemonic masculinity across cinematic contexts. By probing this hierarchy, I will illustrate the masculine disparities in Joker characters. Intersecting factors like class, age, ability, race, ethnicity, and sexuality shape this dynamic. Hegemonic masculinity serves as the ideal standard for measuring other masculinities. Individuals deviating from this standard, often due to socio-economic marginalization or challenges to conventional gender roles, are frequently portrayed as being in crisis. This subsection will highlight key concepts of hegemonic masculinity to uncover the reasons behind the masculinity crisis, demonstrating how evolving gender dynamics challenge norms and create new expressions of masculinity.

Connell outlined manhood through power, production, and cathexis (emotional attachment) (2005, 73-74). She argues that power relations are crucial to dominance within the gender hierarchy in Europe and the U. S., establishing men's superiority and constructing patriarchy (Connell 2005, 74). Patriarchy stems from imbalanced power dynamics, forming hegemonic masculinity that oppresses women and marginalizes diverse masculinities. These relations reinforce male supremacy across social, political, and economic realms. The nature of power is complex, involving physical force, authority in personal and work settings, and control over decision-making. This masculine authority includes manipulation, coercion, rule enforcement, and decision-making for women, perpetuating male superiority. Following Connell's framework, I stress patriarchy as central in examining hegemonic masculinity in 21st-century Joker films. For instance, Nolan's Joker reflects power-related turmoil, revealing elite authority to challenge patriarchal dominance where men rule over other men and women.

The production component relates to labor affected by gender, causing disparities in salaries and job assignments (Connell 2005, 74). Connell emphasizes that the production field is key to understanding male hierarchy, detailing how economic systems shape masculinity. Labor markets often operate on gendered assumptions; variations exist among workers, employees, and employers. The divide between ownership and execution grants financial independence to the controlling party, creating a workplace class division with higher-status roles and lower-income jobs. This division places women at the bottom of the hierarchy, illustrating hegemonic masculinity's pervasive influence. In my research, I draw on Connell's production concept to highlight class hierarchies, exploring portrayals of the Joker within hegemonic masculinities and how socio-economic positions influence male identity. This is clear in Joker (2019), where Arthur, from a working-class background, faces economic oppression, highlighting how masculinity depends on financial success and desperation from failure.

Additionally, cathexis helps understand idealized masculine behavior in emotional and physical pursuits. It examines emotional and sexual dynamics, emphasizing traits like heterosexual dominance, stoicism, and violence valued in Western culture (Connell 2005, 74). Cathexis reveals themes of dominance, control, and detachment that contribute to emotional and physical resilience. In the three films, the Joker mocks ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity, embodying this crisis through his physical presence and emotions. My analysis connects power dynamics to patriarchy, production to class hierarchies, and cathexis to emotional and physical toughness, illuminating the Joker's emotional dimension and how his identities shape his masculinity. However, all these factors are shaped by a hegemonic system rooted in Antonio Gramsci's seminal work, *Prison Notebooks* (1929), where he introduces the notion of hegemony. Connell utilizes Gramsci's theory of cultural and political hegemony to analyze class relations. Gramsci argues that hegemony arises from the widespread acceptance of a dominant group's superiority—a belief that the proletariat has been historically and systematically led to accept. He also contends that hegemony depends on:

> the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci 1971, 12)

Connell's view of hegemony in masculinity studies reflects Gramsci's concept as "a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural practices" (1987, 184). Hegemonic masculinity is "a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance" (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985, 592). It operates within a social hierarchy legitimizing specific men's authority through institutions, laws, and policies, reinforcing male dominance. Connell emphasizes relational aspects of masculinity, connecting it to emphasized femininity and nonhegemonic masculinities (Connell 1987, 183; Messerschmidt 2019, 86). Hegemonic masculinity presents itself as the ideal, contrasting with other masculinities. Emphasized femininity reinforces patriarchal views, shaping gender role perceptions. To be hegemonic, one must embody traits valued by a hierarchical system defining idealized masculinity. This creates inclusion and exclusion, marginalizing those with subordinated traits and reinforcing power dynamics. Kimmel defines hegemonic masculinity as "power that some men have over other men and that men have over women," illustrating a tiered model (1996, 125). This structure highlights the "interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy" (Jewkes and Morrell 2012, 40).

Demetrakis Demetriou (2001) introduces a chained hierarchical system through his concept of two categories of hegemony: external and internal. External hegemony maintains male dominance over women through institutional means. Connell (1983) notes that "force and competence are […] translations into the language of the body of the social relations which define men as holders of power, women as subordinate [and] this is one of the main ways in which the superiority of men becomes 'naturalized'" (28). As highlighted by Connell and others, institutions like educational systems, workplaces, and political organizations perpetuate this type of hegemony (Connell 2005). Educational environments often promote competitive behavior associated with masculinity, while businesses emphasize the role of males as primary earners (Lerner 1986, 239). Moreover, patriarchal family structures reinforce the role of men as protectors and providers (Lerner 1986, 239). In this context, the household can be seen as a domestic institution where men display this external dominance in their roles.

In contrast, internal hegemony denotes the social dominance of one male group over all males (Demetriou 2001, 341). Connell and Messerschmidt argue that internal hegemony grants an "elitist" rank to masculinity, distinguishing it as ideal in comparison to nonhegemonic masculinities; nevertheless, these nonhegemonic types "exist in tension with but never penetrate or impact hegemonic masculinity" (2005, 844). John Tosh links this elitist status to

the idea that hegemonic masculinity encompasses the traits and behaviors that society views as ideal for men (2004, 47). This concept serves to both include and exclude certain individuals, shaping society in a way that reinforces gender inequality. Similarly, Brett N. Billman (2006, 2) supports this idea by defining hegemonic masculinity as an "unattainable version" of masculinity, highlighting its extremely high, often impossible, standards and demands, which many men find deeply difficult to embody or fully achieve. For instance, in 1963, the American sociologist Erving Goffman wrote in his book *Stigma* that in the U.S., there is only

> One complete, unblushing male: a young, married, white, urban, northern heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective. Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. (1963, 128)

Goffman characterizes the hegemonic man as a "complete, unblushing male," highlighting the idealized, utopic and unattainable nature of these traits. This concept of hegemonic masculinity establishes a rigid standard that pressures many men to conform, often resulting in feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. These ideals are neither fixed nor universally applicable; instead, they reflect the socioeconomic climate of the 1960s. This standard is inherently discriminatory and rigid, changing over time and across different contexts. Hegemonic masculinity responds to historical, economic, and social shifts, and Goffman's portrayal highlights the limitations placed on men during his time. However, it was not meant to be an unchanging ideal. Expanding on this concept, Nick Trujillo (1991) identifies five characteristics of hegemonic masculinity based on Connell's insights. Trujillo followed what Connell proposed in 1990 as an idealized form of masculinity. She argues that hegemony strikes when it is primarily accepted within a culture, hence reinforcing the prevailing gender ideology (1990, 94). These ideologies underscore "toughness" and "competitiveness," along with the subjugation of women and the marginalization of gay males (Connell 1990, 94). For Trujillo, hegemonic masculinity then encompasses: "(1) physical power and control, (2) occupational success, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiermanship, and (5) heterosexuality" (1991, 291). All these qualities operate within the realm of "common sense and conventional morality," defining "what it means to be a man" (Trujillo 1991, 291). However, Connell challenges this view, arguing that hegemonic masculinity "is not a fixed character type"; instead, it represents the dominant form of masculinity within a specific gender framework, subject to contestation (2005, 76). Connell and Messerschmidt emphasize that while hegemonic masculinity is not statistically standard, it remains normative because "it embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it

required all other men to position themselves in relation to it" (2005, 832). In their sense, hegemonic masculinity regulates masculinities as men strive to live up to the "ideals, fantasies and desires" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 838).

Connell describes the hegemonic ideal in Western culture as "a man who is independent, risk-taking, aggressive, heterosexual, and rational" (as quoted in Barrett 1996, 79), serving as a foundation for many masculinity studies. This interpretation is contested; these traits are not inherent to all males but are social constructs defining behaviors deemed appropriate for men. Stephen Whitehead (2002) highlights this by asking who exemplifies the hegemonic man: "Is it John Wayne or Leonardo DiCaprio; Mike Tyson or Pelé? Or perhaps, at different times, all of them?" (93). He argues that hegemonic masculinity varies based on context, influenced by temporal, spatial, and cultural factors (2002, 93). While I see the argument's complexity, I believe it is no longer valid. Hegemonic masculinity has been culturally reframed within specific contexts, providing a nuanced understanding. Thus, while multiple forms can be hegemonic, only one may be dominant in a particular culture at a time. Additionally, Michael Flood critiques Connell's broad term use, questioning whether it relates to "a particular configuration of gender practice related to patriarchal authority or simply whatever type of masculinity is dominant in a specific social order" (2002, 208). This warrants further examination, as Connell's concept seems contradictory. It claims flexibility but establishes certain traits, suggesting adherence to gender norms, which creates ambiguity in its application and undermines adaptability. Moreover, Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley question how the four-category structure "actually prescribes or regulates men's lives" (1999, 366), raising issues about the rigidity of characteristics within each category and the model's potential for democratizing masculine relations amid its apparent flexibility.

Theoretical concerns surrounding masculinity are clearly reflected in the cinematic portrayals of Gotham City. This dissertation delves into the city's social hierarchies, highlighting key figures such as Batman, the police, and the Wayne family, alongside symbols of social elitism. In contrast, it also explores the rebellious nature of the Jokers, providing a comprehensive examination of these dynamics. Gotham imposes strict behavioral expectations of masculinity; failure to adhere to these norms leads to personal and social crises. The city continually faces crises, highlighted by its dark urban landscape, which exposes disparities between the lower and upper classes. Gotham serves as a microcosm of post-Depression America, illustrating the growing issues of corruption, crime, and poverty characteristic of that era (Lukić 2018, 4). The architecture of Gotham features hegemonic symbols, such as phallic skyscrapers like Wayne Tower and Arkham Asylum. These structures represent

institutionalized masculinity, reinforced by influential male figures like Bruce Wayne, Commissioner Gordon, district attorneys, and mayors. They maintain the idealized norms of Gotham's hegemonic masculinity, promoting morality, order, and emotional and physical toughness. Gotham thus becomes a visual manifestation of corruption within any capitalist American city, attempting to expose the crises underlying this facade rather than merely sustaining it. The character of Bruce Wayne exemplifies this struggle; he feels compelled to adopt the persona of Batman because his identity as Bruce alone is insufficient to embody social norms. His transformation reflects the city's darker structures, emphasizing that he cannot resolve the crises surrounding morality, masculinity, or legality alone. As noted in Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman asserts, "Tonight I am the law," highlighting the collapse of societal norms and his attempt to reconstruct them in a new light (Lukić 2018, 8). Gotham is further depicted as a city "continually reproduced and modified through the actions of its inhabitants" (Ilgaz 2019, 6). This portrayal presents Gotham as a vibrant metaphor for societal governance and the evolution of masculinity in response to shifting public expectations. In contrast, Ayer's *Suicide Squad* presents a Gotham steeped in traditional hegemonic masculinity, showcasing its most militarized, repressive, and state-driven aspects. Here, the city becomes a site controlled and surveilled by governmental entities striving to restore order. This governance transforms the territory into a realm of deviant masculinities and femininities, as the government transitions individuals from perceived threats to protectors of the established social order. Similarly, Phillips' Gotham in *Joker* (2019) depicts a darker, more depressed version of the city, rife with social anxieties under capitalist rule and dominated by powerful patriarchs. Through vivid depictions of lower-class life, including subway scenes, dimly lit homes, and impoverished neighborhoods, Phillips crafts a visual representation of the darker side of the hegemonic model. This portrayal reveals the experiences of those left behind by the democratization of hierarchy, effectively illustrating the collapse of societal consent surrounding those embodying hegemonic masculinity.

Connell's framework serves as a valuable lens when applied critically and with attention to fluidity, contradiction, and cultural specificity. The films indicate that masculinity is shaped by conformity to hegemonic norms and resistance, breakdown, and parody of these ideals. This study examines the key criteria of patriarchy, class hierarchies, and emotional toughness. By observing the narratives within these films, I identified the most emphasized elements and those that are challenged, highlighting how these elements reflect a crisis in hegemonic masculinity. It is essential to recognize that whiteness and heterosexuality play crucial roles within hegemonic masculinity in the United States, alongside education and religion, even though

these aspects are often overlooked in the films examined. This discussion deliberately excludes religion and the attributes of well-educated individuals, as Goffman pointed out, because they are not central themes in the films being analyzed, nor are they evident elements of the crisis portrayed in Gotham. While marriage and parenthood are not central themes in these films, the importance of fatherhood is highlighted, demonstrating its profound impact on the formation of American masculinity. Furthermore, the films under review do not pose substantial narrative challenges concerning the protagonists' racial or sexual identities. The Joker is consistently portrayed as a white, heterosexual male across all three films, with his heterosexuality explicitly depicted.

Meanwhile, his racial identity is subtly suggested, remaining thematically unaddressed yet always present. This illustrates that these characteristics do not negate the crisis at hand; instead, they underscore the persistent normative dominant influence of white, heterosexual masculinity. As a result, I have integrated discussions of whiteness and heterosexuality into the broader analysis of patriarchy, considering them foundational aspects of white, heterosexual American hegemonic masculinity central to this study. It is also crucial to differentiate between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. A crisis occurs when those positioned for potential hegemony fail to meet societal standards due to personal struggles or national distress, leading to a loss of privilege. Non-hegemonic masculinities, as categorized by Connell's framework, are often tied to immutable characteristics such as race and ethnicity. In contrast, class is a mutable trait, allowing individuals to ascend the social hierarchy through wealth. Furthermore, effort and training can develop both emotional and physical toughness in a similar manner. This differentiation highlights the complexity of masculinity and its various expressions in society. In the case of the Joker, I interpret him as a figure that embodies the crisis experienced by a white American man. As a white heterosexual male, he represents a person who has the potential to be hegemonic; however, through his character, he dramatizes the various ways in which one can fail to achieve hegemonic status.

In the subsequent chapter, I will explore in detail how aspects of hegemonic masculinity can lead to a loss of hegemony or inhibit its attainment. However, it is crucial to explicitly clarify this analytical choice from the outset, as these dimensions are foundational to understanding the crises surrounding class, emotional regulation, and patriarchal authority.

1.2.1. Gendered Power Structure: Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a fundamental element in solidifying the supremacy of men within the social structure. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity highlights the relationship between

masculinity and femininity, particularly underscoring the structural dominance of men over women globally (Connell 1987, 183). Adrienne Rich (1980) defines patriarchy as "the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, educations, and the division of labour – determine that part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (1976, 57). Sylvia Walby's definition in her "Theorizing Patriarchy" (1989, 229) aligns with this understanding, framing patriarchy as a system that includes "patriarchal relations in waged labour, the patriarchal state, male violence, patriarchal sexuality, and patriarchal culture." Walby's framework shows how the patriarchal system depends on and reinforces male dominance over women. Drawing from the work of these researchers, patriarchy continues to be a system that is supported by a variety of institutions that consolidate male authority. However, Kate Millet parallels gendered power and racism. She states that gendered power relations were "sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, and certainly more enduring" (1980, 25). Millet's claims highlight that patriarchy is deeply linked to various forms of oppression. This gendered power relates to hierarchical dynamics, positioning men as authoritative figures in specific social contexts.

Patriarchy, as described by Walby and Millet, is an intricate system intersecting various forms of oppression, establishing what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls the "matrix of domination." Collins emphasizes the experiences of Black women facing patriarchal oppression alongside racism, classism, and sexual oppression (1990, 543), a perspective that applies broadly. Patriarchy operates within a system where factors like class and family roles give men advantages throughout life. Similarly, bell hooks refers to this as the "politics of domination," functioning through the ideological and structural intersections of power (1990, 543). Analyzing the patriarchal roots of hegemonic masculinity in film highlights the matrix of domination's impact on each female character. Each character reflects a distinct form of male domination shaped by various intersecting oppressions, necessitating a nuanced approach that acknowledges different forms of oppression without oversimplifying male dominance. Furthermore, understanding women's role in upholding male privilege is vital for analyzing men's experiences. Women often support the patriarchal system by aligning with dominant agendas, intentionally or due to systemic influences. This perspective reveals that patriarchal structures rely not only on direct male dominance but also on women's roles in sustaining these systems.

Being a patriarchal male means power and leadership, especially in families. This patriarchy creates a sexual hierarchy, assigning women subordinate roles as caregivers. Hegemonic masculinity supports the nuclear family, viewing the husband and father as dominant, illustrating fatherhood as "a form of certain men's power" (Hearn 2002, 245). Barbara Hobson and David Morgan argue that "the social politics of fatherhood cannot be divorced from masculinity politics. Men's authority in the family and male breadwinning is central to masculinity politics" (2002, 5). This connects masculinity to economic ableism and social dominance. Connell (2005) complicates this, suggesting women can challenge male dominance by embracing traits associated with hegemonic masculinity and social power. Schippers expands on this idea, arguing that certain masculine traits legitimize men's authority over women "only when they are symbolically paired with a complementary and inferior quality attached to femininity" (2007, 91). She emphasizes the precariousness of hegemonic masculinity, which necessitates the existence of other empowering factors and relies on femininity to assert dominance, as it is defined in opposition to femininity marked by traits such as passivity and dependence. This dependence jeopardizes the viability of the hegemonic masculinity paradigm. If femininity starts to reflect aspects of hegemonic masculinity, it could potentially weaken the very concept of hegemonic masculinity, impacting authority in business, home life, or leadership roles. In response to these dynamics, men's power and ability to support women may decline. Consequently, traditional standards could be challenged, enabling women to assert dominance while men may lose their patriarchal privileges. Nevertheless, this is only one example where women can challenge men's privilege; most cases, however, indicate that men still prevail

> [w]hen conditions for the defense of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony. The dominance of any group of men may be challenged by women. Hegemony, then, is a historically mobile relation. Its ebb and flow is a key element of the picture. (Connell 2005, 77)

Connell suggests that men's patriarchal authority can be contested by changing perceptions of femininity, departing from conventional standards. This transformation has given rise to the concept of the "New Woman," symbolizing cultural shifts that can lead men to feel a decline in their power over women and a possible erosion of dominance over other men. This dynamic underscores masculinity's relationality to traditional femininity. Ultimately, this evolution is driven by the empowerment fostered by feminist politics. While I recognize that complete female dominance over men is not yet feasible, women can still successfully confront

hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal system. While post-feminism asserts that gender equality has been achieved, this assertion is misleading given the ongoing struggles faced by women today. As cited by Zsófia Kulcsár, Kristyn Gorton cautions that post-feminism diminishes feminism to a superficial trend—stylized, commodified, and devoid of political urgency. She claims it is an outdated trend, asserting that women no longer require it as they have achieved the empowerment they sought (Kulcsár 2011, para 9). Post-feminism, by definition, can be understood as a collection of discursive beliefs surrounding the perceived irrelevance of feminism, an attitude that can be recognized, lamented, or even celebrated (Rumens 2017, 248). Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that women still have not attained full equality in today's post-feminist landscape. An insightful ethnographic study by Attila Bruni and Silvia Gherardi (2001), conducted in a multinational corporation in northern Italy, reveals the prevalent masculine discourses and highlights the innovative strategies women employ to navigate and contest these entrenched norms, indicating their ongoing struggle to affirm their equality. Bruni and Gherardi introduce the concept of "heterogeneous engineering," which refers to how social competence drives professional women to adopt masculine traits at work, thus developing a gendered professional identity (2001, 194-195). Still, Whitehead argues that, although women can compete alongside men in the workplace, they are often viewed as "Other," while men continue to dominate the existing work culture (2002, 137). This disillusionment regarding female empowerment is vividly illustrated in *Suicide Squad* through Harley's transformation from a doctor to a follower of the Joker. Initially depicted as strong and able to outwit men, her role diminishes to loyalty to the Joker. Despite her potential as a "New Woman" who could challenge the Joker's ego, Harley relinquishes her autonomy out of love. Her accomplishments as Dr. Harleen Quinzel, a distinguished psychiatrist, are ignored in favor of a subservient role beside a violent individual. This transition emphasizes female characters who, despite their power, frequently adhere to or are compelled to follow patriarchal narratives. Similarly, other female characters in Joker films—such as Sophie in *Joker* (2019) and Rachel in *The Dark Knight* (2008)—mainly support male protagonists, stabilizing their narratives rather than opposing them. The representations in these films emphasize the challenges of embodying the "New Woman" ideal, which aligns with post-feminist critiques suggesting that women's empowerment in media often remains superficial. This perspective reveals how patriarchal structures shape cinematic narratives, thereby rendering claims of gender equality within post-feminist rhetoric misleading. Furthermore, it illustrates the intertwined nature of masculinity and femininity, indicating that shifts in one directly affect the other. Such interrelations advocate for the inclusion of women's roles in masculinity studies, as a

comprehensive understanding of the male crisis necessitates an examination of women's positions. This approach will elucidate the connections between gender constructions, framing femininity through the lens of masculinity studies rather than through a solely feminist viewpoint.

It is essential to recognize that masculinity studies, akin to postfeminist thoughts, have not yet offered a clear answer to achieving gender equality. Many researchers criticize the limited perspective of hegemonic masculinity for overlooking conflicting viewpoints, especially related to patriarchy. Hearn et al. (2012) offer a detailed examination in Sweden, underscoring a lively debate among scholars. They argue that considering hegemonic masculinity merely as a "gender stereotype evaluated without the framework of legitimizing patriarchal (elite) male power" overlooks patriarchal discourse (2012, 47). The link between patriarchy and hegemony frames hegemonic masculinity as a gendered concept, contrasting with "the Swedish gender-equal, modern man" (2012, 47). They challenge the belief that only a few can embody hegemonic masculinity, noting that marginalized groups, such as immigrants and working-class men, actually make up the majority (2012, 47). Hearn et al. argue that hegemonic masculinity is not statistically "normal," as only a minority of men perform it. This reframing identifies hegemonic masculinity with the 'other,' rather than dominant white middle-class males, shaping the empirical "Swedish" view (2012, 47). This underscores the need for cultural specificity in hegemonic masculinity. Traits from American and Australian cultures do not necessarily apply to Sweden. Hearn et al. stress that while hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally changeable, its ideal remains essentially unchanged, resulting in a rigid standard. This aligns with my intent to examine these dynamics critically. Chapter 2 will revisit this issue, exploring the evolution of American cinematic masculinities from the 1960s to pre-9/11, where portrayals of masculinity were homogeneous, equating ideal traits with power and resilience. Despite historical changes making this ideal more elusive, post-9/11 depictions shifted toward a more attainable standard reflecting significant societal changes.

Christensen and Jensen (2014) argue that hegemonic masculinity fails to address gender hierarchy issues as Connell intended. Its original aim was to eliminate hierarchies, but it ultimately supports patriarchy (66). I partially endorse their argument as they highlight the mismatch between the idealization of hegemonic masculinity and the flawed patriarchal system. However, I contest their claim that hegemonic masculinity fundamentally reinforces patriarchy. Connell's concept does not endorse patriarchy; it examines power dynamics among masculinities and women over time. While emphasizing hierarchies may increase awareness of gender dynamics, its primary objective is to understand these mechanisms, not eliminate

hierarchies. Therefore, claiming that hegemonic masculinity undermines its goals may misinterpret its true intentions. I find it unacceptable that a negative view of patriarchy can form part of an idealized masculinity. Nevertheless, Connell does not see patriarchy as central to hegemonic masculinity, differing from perspectives that view patriarchy as key to understanding male dominance and power relations. Thus, critiques should target cultural consent to patriarchy within hegemonic manhood. For example, Nas Alparslan's (2021) study on sexist Axe Turkey advertisements shows that statements like "'does not fit into the manhood' is itself a sexist sentence" (2021, 80) reveal strict norms defining masculinity, upholding rigid standards, and propagating sexist beliefs. Axe's advertisements may appear to be marketing strategies, but public opinion does not support them. These ads obscure Connell's paradigm, as the promoted masculinity is not widely accepted and misaligns with hegemonic goals in Turkey. Moreover, they communicate patriarchal sentiments that may not resonate with the public, challenging the idea of masculinity as dominant in this context.

The perception and expectations of men's behavior depend on the cultural and temporal context, even amidst ongoing criticism of patriarchy. These patriarchal sentiments shape interactions between men and women, reinforcing the notion that hegemonic masculinity equates to male supremacy. This perspective fosters a damaging idea of manhood that diminishes the value of anything associated with femininity. Kupers characterizes this form of manhood as "toxic masculinity," which he defines as "a constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (1970, 714). This shows how pursuing idealized masculinity in a patriarchal context can have adverse effects. Carol Harrington argues that toxic masculinity emerged in the 1980s, derived from Shepherd Bliss's analysis of his abusive father, who represented a militaristic and authoritarian masculinity (2020, 3). Harrington asserts that toxic masculinity and abusive behavior arise from inadequate parental guidance on healthy masculinity, referencing family therapists Frank Pittman and Steve Biddulph (2020, 3). This issue will be revisited in Chapters 2, 4, and 6, where I will explore the influence of parental figures on masculinity development. Harrington argues that toxic masculinity arises from a harmful environment and misconceptions about hegemonic masculinity. She links this discourse to post-feminist language, proposing that sexism is an intrinsic flaw in certain men (2020, 3). This perspective differs from other explanations of toxic masculinity that attribute it to broader familial or cultural influences. Instead, it presents toxic masculinity as a personal trait, unrelated to national crises or cultural changes. I cannot align my perspective with this one, as I believe that the patriarchal factors contributing to toxic masculinity are learned behaviors. These traits are shaped by exposure to

patriarchal norms and the privileges that are often afforded to men. The sense of masculine entitlement that arises from oppressing women results from personal observation and self-reflection. Therefore, I argue that toxic masculinity is not an inherent trait in all men but rather a negative characteristic that develops over time. In her *Masculinity in Transition* (2023), Allison K. Hammer expands on this view by illustrating how toxic masculinity is not merely a product of patriarchal oppression but also has political implications in nation-state politics. She differentiates between normative and toxic masculinity, the latter marked by sexual control, limited democratic engagement, and traits like impenetrability and racial supremacy. Hammer claims that toxic masculinity often manifests as projecting concerns and anxieties onto women and marginalized masculinities (Hammer 2023, 1-2). A key point in the discourse on toxic masculinity, as highlighted by Hammer, is that it transcends sexism. This phenomenon reflects an externalized male hegemony that seeks to subordinate and marginalize alternative masculinities. Toxic masculinity thus serves as a means for men to assert dominance over others, regardless of gender, while simultaneously reinforcing rigid norms of control. This idea will be explored further in Chapter 6, which focuses on the Joker's flamboyance and its implications for his acceptance or rejection of toxic masculinity. Moreover, Chapter 5 will revisit this theme by analyzing Ayer's portrayal of the Joker in *Suicide Squad* (2016).

The toxicity of patriarchy does not signify hegemonic discourse, as it hinders hegemonic masculinity. Messerschmidt, in *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation, and Amplification* (2018), differentiates between positive and negative hegemonic masculinities, emphasizing patriarchal types essential for hegemonic masculinity. He identifies hegemonic masculinity as the ideal, produced by patriarchy. The absence of patriarchy distinguishes dominant and dominating masculinities from hegemonic ones. Dominant masculinities are the standard or acknowledged forms within specific social settings and do not necessarily relate to gender domination, representing the most respected expressions of masculinity. In contrast, dominating masculinity features attributes like aggression and violence (2018, 76). Nevertheless, Messerschmidt does not endeavor to dispute the notion that hegemonic masculinity fosters sexism. He observes that masculinities beyond the scope of patriarchy are neither hegemonic nor dominant. He explained that non-patriarchal types of masculinities are known as positive masculinities and offered an unambiguous and exact explanation for them

> One place to begin is with what I refer to as positive masculinities and femininities, or those gender constructions (locally, regionally, and globally) that contribute to legitimating egalitarian relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. Such masculinities and femininities are counterhegemonic

because they actually are, or they have the means to become, culturally conceptualized as legitimate and authentic alternatives to gender hegemonic relations. (Messerschmidt 2018, 142)

By labeling it as positive and depicting it as a challenge to hegemony, Messerschmidt unintentionally highlights the fundamental flaws of hegemonic masculinity and its detrimental qualities, which need to be reformed and should never be seen as the ideal standard.

Examining patriarchal relations raises whether patriarchy defines hegemonic masculinity or if cultures have progressed beyond this notion. Analyzing American masculinity in crisis is challenging, particularly regarding patriarchy's role. If patriarchy is integral to hegemonic masculinity, its absence may lead to crisis. Patriarchy exists under rules prohibiting the oppression of both women and men, suggesting that men can lead without abusive behavior. However, when patriarchy becomes toxic, it indicates a crisis in masculinity, leading to toxic masculinity as a distinct form of abuse. I also consider Connell's complicit masculinity, which is not hegemonic as it does not enact patriarchy, and Messerschmidt's positive and dominating masculinities, which are counter-hegemonic alternatives. This framework is the basis for analyzing masculinity in crisis concerning patriarchy as the primary criterion in examining the Joker films. I aim to explore how the Jokers interact with women: Is their patriarchy reinforced? Is it toxic or positive? Do female characters sustain patriarchy by cooperating in their subjugation? Are they New Women? Additionally, I investigate how female characters are portrayed in contrast to their male counterparts, through toxic behavior, empowerment, or reinforcing hegemonic status. Finally, I examine men's struggles to assert patriarchal dominance over women, both sexually and emotionally, and how this inadequacy influences their self-perception of masculinity.

1.2.2. Class Hierarchies

Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity involves men's dominance over women and the superiority of wealthy men over those with less privilege (1987, 184). She also highlights the role of production in shaping masculine power, linking it to capitalism's drive for competitiveness and financial success (2005). Judith Lorber (1998, 469) reinforces this view by arguing that hegemonic masculinity is represented by men who are ethnically and racially dominant, openly heterosexual, and, crucially, economically successful. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is economically defined by the inclusion of the wealthy and the exclusion of the poor from the hierarchy of social legitimacy.

Economic dynamics surrounding masculinities reinforce the hierarchical structure outlined in Connell's model. Class stratification plays a significant role in the social acceptance of different masculinities, with economic power serving as a crucial factor influencing these dynamics. David Morgan (2006) emphasizes that class represents one of several social hierarchies or stratification systems crucial to sociological analysis, including slavery, caste, and feudal systems. However, he argues that class is particularly linked to industrial and capitalist societies (Morgan 2006, 165). Connell explains how hegemony plays a role in shaping masculinities as follows

> In the concept of hegemonic masculinity, "hegemony" means [...] a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes. Ascendancy of one group of men over another achieved at the point of a gun, or by the threat of unemployment, is not hegemony. Ascendancy, which is embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare⁄taxation policies and so forth, is. (1987, 184)

Connell asserts that hegemonic masculinity permeates social life and culture without relying on force or coercion. In this context, hegemony involves a "knowing and willing participation of the dominated in their subjugation" (Burawoy 2019, 68). This distinction emphasizes the difference between hegemony achieved through overt coercion and that granted by cultural norms. This raises the question of whether individuals consent to their exclusion from recognizing privilege. Richard Howson notes that hegemonic masculinity operates as both a political mechanism tied to hegemony and an embodiment of dominant manhood (2006, 109). Similarly, Robert Morrell describes it as a "matter of cultural domination relations," noting that "beyond oppressing women, hegemonic masculinity also silences or subordinates other masculinities, positioning them in relation to itself, so that the values expressed by these other masculinities lack currency or legitimacy" (1998, 608). Both Lorber and Morrell concur that Connell's exploration of hegemonic masculinity, which extends beyond direct coercion, reveals its harmful effects on social group divisions. This is reflected in Andreas Giazitzoglu's statement, emphasizing the obligation to conform to norms, stating that "[m]en are not intrinsically hegemonic; they must achieve hegemonic masculinity through their actions, referencing the specific codes of the (hegemonic) masculinity sought" (2020, 69). However, when gaining such privilege proves difficult, rejection frequently emerges as the sole option, exposing social tensions and challenges to dominant power structures.

Hegemonic masculinity is closely linked to capitalist values that emphasize financial success and power. By supporting the notion of hegemonic masculinity, capitalism perpetuates

its foundational ideals. Michael Schwalbe, in his work *Manhood Acts: Gender and the Practices of Domination* (2014), illustrates the strong link between male dominance and capitalist production methods. He claims that "men are essential to the reproduction of capitalism, and capitalism is what transforms humans—predominantly but not exclusively males—into men" (2014, 99). Schwalbe emphasizes that economic benefits serve as a source of hegemony, granting individuals, irrespective of gender, privileges akin to those held by hegemonic men. This highlights how economic power can provide advantages traditionally held by men in dominant roles. For example, affluent women who assume breadwinner roles can challenge yet simultaneously reinforce hegemonic masculinity. This link between hegemonic masculinity and capitalism is rooted in economic ambition, with men often seen as primary providers. David Harvey (2009, 3) argues that neoliberalism has shaped our thought processes, emerging as a dominant discourse that influences how many understand and navigate their surroundings. Consequently, neoliberal ideology impacts notions of masculinity and legitimizes social hierarchies, where personal success is highly valued, and the definition of manhood is framed within this capitalist context.

Kimmel posits that 19th-century capitalism fostered a distinct form of hegemonic masculinity in the United States, epitomized by the self-made man who held sway over the marketplace, ultimately evolving into the concept of the Marketplace Man (1997, 60-61). This economic shift disproportionately affected working-class men who struggled to maintain a higher financial dominance with the rise of financial competitiveness and economic dominance, a core component of making a man hegemonic. Capitalism has exacerbated the class divide and reinforced financial success as a key aspect of hegemonic masculinity. Kimmel argues that Marketplace manhood, characterized by physical strength, competitiveness, financial success, and heterosexuality, represents the idealized masculinity in the U.S. during his writing period (1997, 63). However, in the 21st-century, capitalism has further refined hegemonic masculinity, increased its prominence, and deepened the marginalization and polarization of diverse masculinities. This is especially evident in the working class, whose labor often does not elevate their social standing, as attributes linked to hegemonic masculinity are more accessible than economic success (Walker and Roberts 2017, 1).

Gail Bederman's analysis of 19th-century capitalism highlights its significant impact on American society. She argues that the late 19th-century consumer economy prioritized pleasure over moral restraint, weakening traditional middle-class masculinity (1996, 153). This rise of consumer culture undermined the working class's position, benefiting business owners instead. Today, capitalism continues to reinforce class hierarchies by defining masculinity through

financial success. While the absence of traditional male providers does not threaten relationships, thanks to working-class wives providing support, it may hinder men from fulfilling their roles as financial providers (Pyke 1996, 533-534). Lower-class partners, coping with diminished breadwinner status, increasingly adopt compensating masculinity through alcohol, drugs, and promiscuity, challenging power dynamics and asserting independence. This exaggerated masculinity not only promotes self-indulgence but also reinforces masculine ideals (Pyke 1996, 538). Messerschmidt notes that the loss of economic advantages compels men to engage in illegal activities to conform to the idealized image of American manhood (1993, 82). Cunneen and White's study (2007) supports this, revealing that working-class boys often resort to violent crimes to assert dominance through physical power rather than economic means (Cunneen and White 2007, 216). Economic expectations in both the 19th and 21st centuries contribute to the marginalization of working-class men, potentially leading to a crisis in masculinity. Violence, linked to toxic masculinity and abusive behavior, cannot compensate for or equal hegemonic acts, as it falls outside the parameters of the hegemonic project. Berdahl et al. (2018, 429) observe that dominance is achieved through control over valued physical, social, and economic resources. For men facing financial hardships, the workplace becomes a less viable space for expressing masculinity and transforms into a battleground for supremacy. Jack Sawyer argues that society's image of a successful man includes exerting power over women in social settings and over men in the workplace (as cited in Tolson 1977, 20).

Andrew Tolson (1977) connects discussions of labor discrimination to Karl Marx's concepts of labor alienation and social stratification. He suggests that employees often perceive the results of their work as isolated entities. Although increased effort can lead to greater productivity, poverty can diminish their sense of ownership over that labor (1977, 49). Furthermore, Andreas Giazitzoglu and Daniel Muzio (2021) highlight how terms like "the lads," "parochial," "laddish," and "loutish" contribute to the stigma faced by the working class. The prevailing narratives surrounding the working class serve to reinforce this stigmatization, obstructing their ability to conform to idealized labor expectations. Their exclusion is not merely the result of individual economic failures; it is also a consequence of the structural limitations imposed by hegemonic masculinity. To fully understand these dynamics, it is crucial to analyze the impact of hegemonic masculinity, particularly regarding its economic privileges, the oppression of marginalized groups, and the emphasis on class differences. This analysis is essential for comprehending how the portrayals of the Joker in cinema reflect broader social issues related to class and masculinity within my research. I can delve into the wider social challenges associated with class and masculinity by evaluating these cinematic representations.

The Joker emerges as a figure that embodies masculinity in crisis, often representing those who feel marginalized and disempowered for failing to meet hegemonic standards. His portrayal serves as a critique, questioning, or outright rejection of traditional societal norms and expectations. This study will assess the institutions perpetuating these crises by scrutinizing such depictions, illustrating how disadvantaged masculinities arise as both effects of and responses to these systemic pressures.

1.2.3. Physical and Emotional Toughness

Connell posits that the third aspect of masculinity worthy of examination is cathexis, which I will interpret in this section as encompassing physical and emotional toughness. Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon (1976) articulate that there exists a framework for American culture, which they designate as the "Blueprint for Manhood." In this framework, David and Brannon delineate four characteristics of the masculine gender role:

> 1. No Sissy Stuff: The stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability.
> 2. The Big Wheel: Success, status, and the need to be looked up to.
> 3. The Sturdy Oak: A manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance.
> 4. Give 'Em Hell!: The aura of aggression, violence, and daring. (1976, 12)

A persistent factor across all four categories is the need for men to showcase toughness in every facet of life. Toughness includes physical strength, mental resilience, and financial success, previously addressed with economic dominance. The characteristics of personal resilience and physical strength, especially aggression and violence, present significant challenges for masculinity scholars, with many examining how much aggression, physical superiority, and emotional restraint men should embody. Connell argues that "true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies, to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body" (1995, 45). The construction of masculinity is deeply rooted in the physical body, with masculinity often seen as arising from men's physical traits or shaped by the limitations of their corporeal existence (Connell 1995, 45). Connell argues that not all men need to exhibit aggression; rather, the prevailing notion of masculinity suggests that many men inherently display aggressive traits linked to their biological makeup (Connell 1995, 45). Tolson elaborates that traditional expectations dictate men embody traits like "authority, self-assertion, competitiveness, aggression, and physical strength" (1977, 8). Although these descriptions may still align with traditional male sex role theory, which I find problematic, masculinity researchers continue to associate idealized and dominant masculinity with physical well-being.

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The standards for masculinity continue to be linked to physicality and performance, as noted by David Cohen (2010, 525) when addressing the three key traits of contemporary American masculinity: "heterosexual, not feminine, and physically aggressive." This framework omits qualities typically associated with femininity for being a hegemonic man.

Additionally, Cohen pointed out another factor: violence, which Connel dismisses in her definition of hegemonic masculinity, emphasizing that "[h]egemonic masculinity' is not the same as violent masculinity" (2012, 13). Connell argues that violence leads to gendered power and domination, but not hegemony. She states, "where violence is central to the assertion of gendered power, we can be fairly certain that hegemony is not present" (Connell 2012, 13). Connell and other masculinity scholars frequently use the terms "aggression" and "aggressiveness" to describe the assertiveness and physical strength expected of hegemonic men, omitting violence from this discourse. My interpretation suggests a clear distinction between these terms, with aggressive behavior encompassing a broader range of harmful actions, whether "physical, verbal, direct, indirect, reactive, or proactive," that relate to various social issues, while violence is an overt harmful act often associated with crimes like "[…] cyber-bullying, child to parent violence, intimate partner violence, violence against women, sexual violence" (Malonda et al. 2023, 582). Connell discusses aggressiveness in a positive, reactive context, linking it to protective masculinity, as argued by Katarzyna Wojnicka (2021). She asserts that this form of masculinity emphasizes the need for physical strength (2021, 3). However, I argue that coercion and aggressiveness, as highlighted by Crawshaw, Scott-Samuel, and Stanistreet (2015, 20), reflect negative attributes of hegemonic masculinity. While not classified as violence, their implications are debatable. Connell emphasizes this distinction, as hegemony denotes the cultural acceptance of power and authority. Unfortunately, many individuals fail to discern between the theoretical and etymological differences between positive aggressiveness, such as protective reactions, and harmful direct aggression aimed at others. This misunderstanding contributes to the choice of violence as a means to achieve hegemony. This has been further expounded by several scholars who argue that violence serves merely as a defense mechanism in response to threatened masculinity. For instance, Roy Baumeister, Laura Smart, and Joseph Boden (1996) assert that individuals with a strong belief in their honor or prestige are likely to cultivate self-esteem associated with their perceived masculinity. When self-esteem is compromised, individuals frequently react aggressively to regain dominance (Baumeister, Smart, and Boden 1996, 5). David T. McMahan (2011) examines how aggression and male masculinity are symbolically represented in rural America. He posits that masculinity is reinforced during bar fights through the skill to fight and emerge

victorious, which garners admiration (2011, 55). Importantly, the emphasis is placed on causing injury rather than receiving it, as this alleviates fears and uncertainties about one's masculinity (McMahan 2011, 55). This interplay functions as a way to showcase the fighter's robust manhood.

Alongside bodily performance, a man's appearance is crucial in shaping masculinity. In Susan Bordo's *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999), the representation of male muscularity is linked to sexual ability. Bordo discusses how the cultural imagery of Calvin Klein models and well-known Hollywood actors strengthens the association between fit body proportions and their appeal to sexual promiscuity. She notes that John Travolta, who rose to fame in the 1970s with films like *Grease* (1978), and Marlon Brando in Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), exemplify the prevailing ideals of male sexuality (Bordo 1999, 141), an influence that persisted into the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond. However, adhering to ideals of corporeal beauty implies that men ought to completely forsake attributes associated with femininity. This idea is illustrated by David and Brannon's principle of "No Sissy Stuff," which advocates against emotional openness and vulnerability. Roger Horrocks rightly pointed out that every variation of masculine identity, from the macho to the effeminate, shares a common message: "I am not a woman" (1994, 33). This highlights that the requirements of manhood strictly exclude any behaviors associated with femininity, necessitating emotional toughness and a complete rejection of softness in behavior.

In 2018, Reeser and Gottzén examined stoic masculinity through hooks' critique of patriarchy, highlighting her claim that "stoicism is a form of psychic self-mutilation that cripples men" (147). hooks (2004) argues that the patriarchal system pressures men to suppress emotions rather than resorting to violence against women (as cited in Reeser and Gottzén 2018, 147). Victor Seidler (1989) adds that men often view emotions as signs of vulnerability, leading to a dilemma that threatens their foundational perceptions of masculinity, which demand power and control (1989, 157-158). David Buchbinder notes that men are generally portrayed "to be stoic, bearing their agony discreetly, dismissing mortal wounds as mere scratches, and thinking of others—family, girlfriend, home, another soldier—rather than themselves" (1994, 75). This portrayal reflects traditional masculinity rather than hegemonic masculinity, which is associated with negative traits like aggression and social dominance. These traits often lead young men to adopt violent behaviors (Malonda et al. 2023, 587). Despite progress toward equality, moving away from traditional masculinity remains challenging. Traditional masculinity includes roles like defender, breadwinner, father, leader, and protector, which create a hierarchical structure opposing femininity (Dyer 1997, 25). Men who struggle with emotional regulation may

experience depression, which can lead to aggression, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies (Brownhill et al. 2005, 921).

The Jokers, representing hegemonic masculinity in crisis, struggle with emotional expression and management, impacting their interpersonal interactions and complex feelings like fear, love, and family. Furthermore, analyzing patriarchy, class hierarchies, and resilience helps us understand their struggles within hegemonic masculinity. Observing their attempts to meet or resist these standards reveals insights into perceptions of their masculinities in crises. Importantly, their challenges highlight broader cultural tensions surrounding American masculinity. To fully contextualize these portrayals, we must consider theoretical frameworks that address the situation of masculinity amidst significant structural changes.

1.3. Understanding Masculinity in Crisis

In his chapter on the crisis in masculinity, David Morgan (2006) identifies two distinct types: the crisis *in* masculinity, which involves manageable challenges and issues, and the crisis *of* masculinity, characterized by collective uncertainty and numerous questions about contemporary hegemonic norms (Morgan 2006, 109). Bridges and Anthony's 2024 study clarifies the distinction between "masculinity in crisis" and the broader "crisis of masculinity." They argue that the former applies only when historical changes and national crises impact a considerable number of people, leading to national trauma or economic recessions that inhibit individuals from embodying hegemonic traits. Despite these challenges, many still exemplify hegemonic masculinity. The crisis of masculinity, in contrast, stems from social and cultural transformations that impact nearly everyone. These changes may lead to the emergence of a new form of hegemonic masculinity. Bridges and Anthony question the existence of a crisis of masculinity in the U.S., a phenomenon that Connell refers to as "gender vertigo" (Bridges and Anthony 2024, 2), where established gender norms are all destabilized. In my study, I do not observe a collective crisis of masculinity during the mid-20th and 21st centuries. In my dissertation, I use the term "masculinity in crisis" to refer to a phenomenon that primarily affects a significant portion of the population, although it can impact the entire nation, as seen after 9/11. Despite this crisis, the underlying norms largely remain unchanged, a topic I will explore in detail in the following chapter.

Connell uses the phrase "masculinity tendencies toward crisis" to reflect the diverse behaviors within masculinities rather than a rigid structure (2005, 83). She posits that various forms of masculinity are susceptible to crisis, defined as "disruptions or transformations" from their original state (2005, 83). This crisis suggests a clash between hegemonic masculinity and

evolving social dynamics, marked by uncertainties in social roles, identity, sexuality, work, and personal relationships, often resulting in violent or abusive behavior (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002, 1). In this sense, my working definition of the crisis means the accumulation of historical changes and cultural and social changes that would generate disruptions and transformations to the hegemonic masculinity from the original state. Explaining here the original state means that there should be something sudden to happen to trigger and make the other transformations more visible, which in my dissertation is the 9/11 attacks.

Bridges and Anthony argue that the concept of masculinity in crisis positions white men as victims of social changes, thereby reclaiming gendered and racialized status as the "real" victims of gender inequality (Bridges and Anthony 2024, 2). This perspective reinforces the superiority of white masculinity as hegemonic.

A key factor in this crisis is the decline of hegemonic male roles in the workforce, further intensified by the erosion of patriarchal structures due to women's empowerment through feminist movements. Alternative masculinities that diverge from traditional norms also face significant challenges. The concept of masculinity remains intertwined with enduring issues, notably the rise of feminism, as explored by Michael Kaufman in his introduction to *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure Power and Change*

> What makes feminism a threat for so many men, or at least a source of confusion and struggle, is not only that we have privileges to lose, but that it appears – or at least feels – as if our very manhood is at stake. What is actually at stake...is not our biological manhood, but our historically specific, socially constructed, and personally embodied notions of masculinity. We confuse maleness (biological sex) with masculinity (gender) at our peril. (1987, xiv)

Kaufman further explores how feminism also threatens masculinity by challenging male dominance. At this point, the distinction between gender and sex becomes evident, as traditional gender roles no longer apply. Women have disrupted traditional norms by becoming breadwinners and asserting their leadership. Michael R.M. Ward (2014) argues that the crisis in masculinity is intensified by uncertainties surrounding paternal figures, complexities of sexuality, rising suicide rates, and a tendency toward violence among young males. He identifies employment as the primary factor contributing to this crisis (2014, 54).

Furthermore, Nicola Ingram and Richard Waller highlighted other elements contributing to the crisis, which are "inextricably linked to unemployment and the resulting challenge to patriarchal dominance rooted in economic power" (2014, 36). This dominance is frequently upheld through violence as a means to reclaim their wounded masculinity (Hunnicutt 2009,

559). In this sense, violence is a reaction to the loss of individual status and the expression of anger toward society. Dorie Klein writes,

> Male physical power over women, or the illusion of power, is nonetheless a minimal compensation for the lack of power over the rest of one's life. Some men resort to rape and other personal violence against the only target accessible, the only ones with even less autonomy. Thus, sexual warfare often becomes a stand-in for class and racial conflict by transforming these resentments into misogyny. (as quoted in Messerschmidt, 1993, 116)

Klein argues that men often resort to violence to reclaim perceived losses in social standing, seeking to restore authority both at home and in society. This reaction fosters hypermasculinity, a strict adherence to traditional male standards manifesting as heightened displays of masculinity for self-defense (Zernechel and Perry 2017, 7). Hypermasculinity acts as a defensive mechanism against threats to male authority and dominance, which Kimmel (2017) refers to as aggrieved entitlement—the belief that one's rights have been infringed upon by stronger forces (Kimmel 2017, 3). This behavior indicates a masculinity in crisis, as men show their struggles through actions that violate societal norms. Connell (2005) describes protest masculinity as aggressive yet rooted in a desire for respect, women's rights advocacy, and greater emotional expression (2005, 112). Such activism is reactive, different from mere hostility. Shifts in masculinities have changed societal expectations in the U.S. and UK, moving away from homophobia, femininity, and stoicism (Iacoviello et al., 2022, 21).

American masculinity is in crisis due to challenges in adhering to hegemonic standards amidst ongoing historical, cultural, and political changes. Many men, even those not in crisis, feel compelled to conform to fit within hegemonic definitions. This pressure results in what Traister calls "anxious masculinity," as American men confront internal anxieties while resisting strict identity constraints (2000, 290). Neither Traister nor I view this masculinity as in crisis; instead, it represents a hybrid masculinity that navigates different categories while reinforcing dominant norms. Understanding this adaptive, yet ultimately restrictive framework is essential for analyzing the masculinities portrayed by the Joker.

In this chapter, I discussed key theoretical frameworks relevant to researching the diverse depictions of the Joker, emphasizing the inaccessibility of hegemonic masculinity. I outlined three main elements: First, patriarchy, embodied by dominant males, relies on women's emphasized femininity, yet fosters sexist behaviors. Second, class hierarchies, rooted in capitalist ideals, create expectations for employment and form an alternative economic patriarchy, influenced by labor division and pay discrepancies. Third, physical and emotional

resilience underscores the opposition between masculinity and femininity, indicating that any deficiency could lead to a masculinity crisis. As James Gilbert (2005, 16) notes, various factors contribute to this crisis, including social-psychological changes and national trauma, leading to new cultural forms amid fear. The next chapter analyzes cultural and historical developments from the 1960s to the post-9/11 era, highlighting their impact on masculine perceptions and exploring significant historical triggers for the crisis.

Although not unique to the 21st-century, the American masculinity in crisis has significantly evolved over the 20th century, destabilized by wars and the rise of feminist movements. Post-9/11, this crisis intertwines with national trauma and media saturation. Within this context, the Joker emerges as a uniquely resonant figure. While his origins are rooted in a more extended history of male antagonists, his 21st-century cinematic iterations embody a modern form of masculine collapse, reflecting emotional volatility and isolation. The next chapter will historicize masculinity in crisis in the American context, examining how political and cultural shifts destabilize dominant ideals. This historical context is vital for understanding how figures like the Joker express ongoing tensions.

Chapter 2. Contextualizing American Masculinity in Crisis: From the Mid-20th Century to the 21st-Century

Scholars like Anthony Rotundo in American Manhood (1993) and Kimmel in Manhood in America (1996, 2006) have established a framework for understanding the historical progression of American masculinity. Their works explore their evolving nature in crisis, influenced by feminization, consumerism, and societal expectations (Whitehead 2002, 65). The crisis arises from external events like wars and internalized social beliefs about masculinity. Traister emphasizes that to understand manhood's history, one must analyze its evolution, transformation, amalgamation, and contestation, which are interconnected to grasp beliefs about masculinity (2000, 274).

This chapter situates the discussion of American masculinity in crisis within a historical trajectory, beginning in the 1960s. It examines the continuities and disruptions that have shaped American manhood, emphasizing that understanding earlier developments is essential to recognizing their lasting influence on masculine anxieties in the post-9/11 era. Furthermore, the 1960s were a pivotal decade, referred to by Kimmel as "the Masculine Mystique" (2006, 174), which marked significant changes in the representation and understanding of masculinity. Kimmel argues that the crisis in masculinity during the latter half of the 20th century was influenced by various factors, including industrialization, the rise of feminism, the civil rights

movement, the Vietnam War's adverse effects, and increasing immigration (2006, 178). During this period, portrayals of distressed men gained prominence, challenging social norms and highlighting their struggles. This included working-class men facing the hardships of industrialization and Vietnam veterans coping with emotional and physical scars. Race significantly affected men of color, particularly African Americans, enduring segregation and economic exclusion, issues underscored during the civil rights movement and emphasizing their disconnection from mainstream masculinity. Immigrant men also faced cultural displacement and rejection of traditional male values, exemplifying diversity as a perceived threat under American hegemonic masculinity. Kimmel notes that feelings of threatened masculinity often coincide with significant economic, political, and social upheaval, particularly when men's connections to work, nation, families, and aspirations are disrupted (1996, 10). He identifies a common reaction: American men may manage emotions, project fears onto others, and seek escape when confronted with overwhelming challenges (1996, 9).

Furthermore, my discussion begins in the 1960s, coinciding with the release of *Batman: The Movie* (1966), which introduced the Joker as a villain. The Joker has become a significant symbol of American masculinity in crisis. Each incarnation reflects broader cultural tensions regarding power dynamics, emotional control, strength, and traditional masculine ideals, illustrating the complexities of contemporary American masculinity. The first section of this chapter outlines the historical context beginning with the 1960s, emphasizing the significant impact of wars and political upheaval during that era. It also covers the social movements and activism of the 1970s, then explores the emergence of consumer culture and hypermasculinity in the 1980s and its influence on American masculinity. It notes how these trends persisted into the 1990s, influenced by presidential changes, and highlights the tragic events of the early 21st century that challenged hegemonic norms. The repercussions of the Great Recession in the post-9/11 era intensified emotional vulnerability amid rising unemployment and class conflicts. Collectively, these factors shape the prevailing discourse surrounding dominant masculine ideas.

2.1. Cultural Change: Shifting Masculine Ideals Mid-20th Century onwards

The events of the 1960s were deeply shaped by earlier events, especially the Second World War. This discussion will briefly explore the war's impact, linking it to the significant events of the following decades. The mid-20th century conflict transformed perceptions of hegemonic masculinity, associating it with ideals of physical strength and toughness. This association continued through subsequent conflicts, notably the Vietnam War and the post-9/11 era,

particularly during the Iraq War. These experiences intensified the masculinity crisis, revealing veterans' psychological struggles.

Militarism became central to American society, with soldiers symbolizing strength and endurance. Conscription led to assessments of men's physical conditions, linking national security to fitness and body image (Locke 2013, 44-45). Millar and Tidy (2017, 7) argue that attributes and dedication of American combat soldiers align with hegemonic masculinity ideals. While they did not fully embody this ideal, their toughness was deemed essential for defense. Many came from less-educated backgrounds, but the military prioritized protection over education. Joining the military concealed nonhegemonic traits like lower-class status, lack of education, and diverse racial backgrounds (Bruscino 2010, 71). This alignment idealizes the soldier, highlighting privileges tied to physical strength and endurance. Sasson-Levy (2003) introduces "hegemonic masculinity of the combat soldier," suggesting those embodying this masculinity risk losing status if they fail to display essential traits. Similarly, David Morgan (1994) explores "militarized masculinity," emphasizing how war and the military shape perceptions of American masculinity, positioning the soldier's version as crucial during conflict.

> of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and deployed, those associated with war and the military are some of the most direct. Despite far-reaching political, social, and technological changes, the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity...The stance, facial expressions, and the weapons clearly connote aggression, courage, a capacity for violence, and sometimes, a willingness for sacrifice. The uniform absorbs individualities into a generalized and timeless masculinity while also connoting a control of emotion and a subordination to a larger rationality. (1994,165)

Morgan's concept of militarized masculinity defines a soldier's identity through aggression, bravery, and resilience—traits essential in combat and reflective of hegemonic masculinity. To wear the uniform, soldiers conform to these standards, seeking to reclaim heroism in idealized roles. General George Patton stated, "without war, man and nation would have lost their virility" (Davis 2002, 20), highlighting physical strength's critical wartime role, contrasted with civilian life's less tangible threats. Soldiers leverage their strength in battle but face contrasting outcomes. War acts as a two-sided coin; the defeated influence fighters' masculinity, while even victorious soldiers suffer negative effects. In 1945, the initial euphoria of Americans after Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan's defeat quickly faded. Many soldiers returned facing disabilities, demobilization, and job shortages (Huebner 2008, 50). Veterans often struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder and reintegration challenges into civilian life. Kimmel's analysis

indicates soldiers experience a decline in social status upon enlistment, returning to find their roles taken by liberated women (Kimmel 1996, 208). Their absence deprives them of genuine fatherhood, especially for those who left while expecting their first child. In response to post-war erosion, military engagements, particularly the Vietnam War, provided the U.S. with an opportunity to reclaim its masculinity and restore national pride after World War II. This conflict highlighted idealized notions of physical toughness, reinforcing a sense of power compared to adversaries. Connell asserts that "violence on the largest possible scale is the purpose of the military, and no arena has been more critical for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture" (2005, 201). This underscores the role of military engagement in shaping hegemonic masculinity within the Western world, where violence intertwines with notions of patriotism and protection, often overlooked in theoretical discussions. Davis notes that the Vietnam conflict represented a significant shift in traditional American military tactics, as the U.S. faced disadvantages in this engagement, saying that

> It was not the masculine war like all others that preceded it. It seemed more like a war against a domestic population. It seemed like a political war. Rather than fully committing the soldiers' power to overtake an enemy, we seemed engaged in a battle where power could not be unleashed. We were fighting a limited war because we did not want to unleash an unlimited one. (2002, 22-24)

While Davis argued the fight lacked masculinity, I see it as a patriotic conflict driven by purpose. The individuals were determined to display American military power despite entering a war with no extra benefits. They demonstrated hegemonic masculinity globally, overshadowing other aspects of American manhood. This illustrates the contextual nature of hegemonic masculinity, contrasting the strong global image of American militarized masculinity with the local experiences of injured soldiers. Anti-war movements prompted a reevaluation of the link between aggression, warfare, and masculinity, challenging beliefs that equated military service with manhood. As the U.S. military's virtues were scrutinized, soldiers, once viewed as paragons of manly virtue, began to be seen as failures, leading to a crisis in American masculinity and questions about the nation's overall manhood (Kimmel 1996, 263). The repercussions of war lingered after conflicts ended, as returning soldiers faced disruptions in their roles as workers and fathers, particularly due to industrialization. This shift emphasized hegemonic masculinity aspects, like the ability to provide and navigate class hierarchies, beyond physical strength. Loss of physical abilities, injuries, and mental vulnerabilities led to disorders that jeopardized their masculinities, affecting nearly all families. Such issues strained patriarchal structures, causing men to lose their sense of fatherhood from wartime participation.

Robert Bly (1990) argues that this arises from fathers neglecting their children for factory work, allowing women to take on dual parenting roles (cited in Kimmel 1996, 208). Kimmel references Bly's *Iron John* (1990), noting that the decline of father figures has led young boys to learn about masculinity mainly from women, particularly their mothers. This situation creates conflicts for soldiers seeking to balance their roles as civilian fathers with their military identities, threatening their masculinity. Such disruptions challenge their ability to uphold traditional masculine ideals and heighten the instability of their gender roles.

At the same time, the feminist movement emerged, advocating for women's rights and amplifying their voices while confronting patriarchal structures. This movement not only liberated women from domestic confines but also reshaped American men's environments and perceptions of masculinity. Kimmel (1996, 258) highlights that feminism often threatens men's societal status. He references Betty Friedan's influential work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which initiated the second wave of feminism. Friedan identifies the challenges faced by American women, who remained silent due to societal expectations, asserting that they "can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" (1963, 27). She further critiques the educational system and media portrayals that confine women to domestic roles, inspiring many women to voice their opinions and fight for their rights. Friedan's call to action ignited a historical revival in the women's rights movement. Second-wave feminism questioned conventional gender roles and power structures, advocating for equality in work, politics, and home life, as well as seeking equal pay and political representation. Kimmel observes that men often perceive feminism as an "emasculating force" that exacerbates feelings of guilt, stating, "today's man is fed up with efforts to make him feel guilty. It's men who are the victims" (1996, 300).

Feminism critiques hegemonic masculinity, exposing limitations for both genders. It highlights how the patriarchal system pressures men to conform to aggression and women to accept these norms. Feminist research, while not primarily focused on men's rights, reveals significant social pressures. Influenced by second-wave feminism, men's liberation organizations emerged to advocate for diverse identities. Participants in this movement are often identified as profeminists, male feminists, or progressive men, embracing feminism's egalitarian and liberal principles (Wood 2008, 82). The Berkley Men's Centre, a distinct group that represented the liberation movement, published a manifesto that includes the following proclamations:

> We want to relate to both women and men in more human ways — with warmth, sensitivity, emotion and honesty .... We want to be equal with women and end destructive competitive relationships with men. We are oppressed by conditioning which ... serves to create a mutual dependence on male (abstract, aggressive, strong, unemotional) and female (nurturing, passive, weak, emotional) roles. (Richardson 1988, 246)

Academically motivated activists aimed to contest conventional masculinity through publications like Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1974), Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1974), and Jack Nichols' *Men's Liberation* (1975) (Messner 1998, 256). The movement opposed conventional masculinity, advocating for egalitarian perspectives that allowed men to express emotions, engage physically, pursue diverse professions, and build relationships without traditional constraints (Messner 1998, 256). This shift challenges hegemonic masculinity, advocating a redefinition away from male strength and dominance over women, highlighting harmful traits of hegemonic manhood. A key organization was NOMAS (the National Organization for Men Against Sexism), focused on combating sexism and redefining masculinity (Wood 2008, 86). In response to pro-feminist and feminist movements, masculinist groups emerged, promoting traditional masculinity, such as Free Men, which opposed profeminist views (Wood 2008, 91). In contrast, the mythopoetic men's movement prioritized positive masculinity, modernized male roles, and encouraged camaraderie and self-discovery, without fundamentally opposing feminist ideals (Wood 2008, 92). These movements represent varied responses to the changing discourse on masculinity, blending progressive reform and conservative reaffirmation. Moreover, the Civil Rights Movement significantly emerged to eradicate the social marginalization of African Americans and the institutionalized racial segregation imposed upon them (Kimmel 2006, 179; Campbell 2020, 24). Bret Carroll asserts that the Civil Rights Movement enabled minority men to articulate their political aspirations and reshape their male identities, hence broadening American masculinity (2003, 93). This movement promotes equality, denouncing supremacy among groups and external influences that define masculine identities. Furthermore, the Gay Liberation Movement arose, challenging the belief that homosexuality stems from insufficient gender identification (Kimmel 1996, 190). This movement advocates for men's emancipation from cultural standards that constrain their humanity (Kimmel 1996, 185) and repudiates male sex role theory and hegemonic masculinity, which marginalize homosexual men by linking them to femininity. These movements critique the hegemonic model of American masculinity, emphasizing how various categories are subordinated to it. They advocate for equality and challenge traditional notions of masculinity, highlighting the need for a more inclusive understanding of gender roles.

This shift triggers a crisis in masculinity as they work to dismantle the existing hegemonic structures.

The 1960s and 1970s masculinity in crisis arose from the struggle to balance hegemonic masculinity with evolving societal expectations for all genders. This tension especially impacted working-class men, who felt pressured to fulfill their responsibilities amid a rise in employed married women (Rubin 1976, 183). Their self-esteem suffered as their authority was largely confined to the family, their primary sphere of influence (Rubin 1976, 183). Meanwhile, men began redefining the Self-Made Man archetype from the 18th and 19th centuries, emphasizing the need to display masculinity publicly, particularly in professional settings where scrutiny from authority figures was intense (Kimmel 1996, 149). During this era, American men increasingly exhibited aggression and competitiveness as they sought to address perceived inadequacies (Kimmel 1996, 265). They aimed to support their families while affirming their masculinity, intertwining financial provision with a sense of manhood. According to Robert Davis, the rise of feminism and women's integration into the workforce diminished the breadwinner's role, which he viewed as a crucial aspect of male heroism, linking a man's virtue to his productivity (2002, 19).

The 1980s witnessed profound cultural shifts encapsulating consumer culture's complexities, particularly during economic recession. This era marked the onset of deindustrialization and a staggering loss of 32 to 38 million jobs compared to the previous decade (Bluestone as cited in Cowie and Heathcott 2003, ix). Amid this backdrop, societal standards regarding body image and masculinity underwent significant transformations, heavily shaped by magazine culture, which idolized well-defined physiques as ideals of success and desirability. Ronald Reagan emerged as a central figure during this transformative time, crafting a public persona that contributed to narratives of heroism and strength alongside Hollywood's adventure films. This portrayal was instrumental in shaping the Reagan Revolution (Jeffords 1994, 15). As the decade unfolded, societal expectations concerning masculinity evolved, with a growing emphasis on toughness. This shift coincided with the emergence of "the wimps and the whiners," archetypes who represented a departure from traditional masculine norms by embracing emotional openness and a more nuanced understanding of manhood (Kimmel 2006, 193). Transitioning into the 1990s, these earlier concepts of masculinity faced scrutiny and redefinition. In "Issues for Men in the 1990s," Kimmel (1992) articulated the complexities American men confronted as they strived to redefine their identities in the wake of the women's liberation movement, which challenged historical models of masculinity portrayed by iconic figures like John Wayne and Rambo. This struggle to replace outdated masculine tropes with

evolving perspectives became increasingly apparent, especially as contemporary figures such as Alan Alda and the mythic Rambo no longer resonated as effective role models (Kimmel 1992, 647).

Many faced declining incomes amid economic hardships, with nearly one-third of individuals reporting significant financial losses. This economic strain further eroded the middle class, traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel 1992, 676). Such circumstances necessitated a critical reevaluation of masculinity principles in light of harsh economic realities. The 1990s thus represented a critical moment in the evolution of masculinity, reflected a time marked by the emergence of HIV/AIDS, burgeoning gender egalitarian activism, particularly within queer communities, and significant economic transformations (Kimmel 1992). In summary, the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s encapsulates a broader narrative of masculine identity that is inextricably linked to social, economic, and cultural transformations, revealing how these elements fundamentally reshape our understanding of gender roles and identities over time.

Understanding mid-20th-century masculinity informs the exploration of contemporary themes. This period challenged hegemonic masculinity through wars, social activism, including gender-based movements, and economic recessions, disrupting traditional notions of toughness and highlighting issues like PTSD and disabilities. Gender-based activism, including feminism and the Men's Liberation Movement, contests conventional views by exposing flaws in patriarchy and aggression. These movements show how masculinities are shaped by broader forces, revealing employment and capitalist inequalities. Recent changes have increased the visibility of the gender hierarchy, necessitating an investigation into the influence of activism, social protest, and research on masculinity in shaping 21st-century public opinion and media portrayals, such as representations of the Joker. Historically, figures like soldiers and actors have defined hegemonic masculinity, serving as examples of hierarchy and privilege. Analyzing these figures reveals how Americans position themselves relative to them. In my analysis of the Joker as a social rebel, it is essential to note his opposition to power and privilege, with the police and Batman as the primary security forces trusted by the masses. My analysis does not start with the 20th-century Jokers due to a lack of complexity in their characterizations related to manhood and masculinity in crisis; these portrayals primarily aimed to create a cinematic version of the comic Joker. In contrast, the 21st-century adaptations present more compelling narratives with deeper underlying issues to discuss, especially post-9/11.

2.2. 9/11 and American Masculinity in Crisis

On September 11, nineteen hijackers seized four transcontinental flights. They crashed two planes into New York's World Trade Center and one into the Pentagon. The fourth plane crashed in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, after passengers resisted, preventing the attackers from reaching their planned target in Washington, D.C. This attack resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths, marking the World Trade Center as a symbol of global capitalism and the Pentagon as the U.S. military's center of power (Kellner 2004, 41). Martti Gronfors (2002) contends that the pivotal moment did not arise from a comprehensive attack on the entire United States but rather from the precise geographical area within the country that was singled out. He believes selecting two apparent symbols of power and control caused the transformation and intensified the shock (2002, 201). The World Trade Center, a highly populated center, symbolized economic success that was difficult to undermine, rendering it a significant target. Likewise, the Pentagon epitomizes military authority and is the nucleus of America's defense apparatus, safeguarding its populace. The terrorists targeted these locations to threaten both the nation's economic stability and security while also undermining the core framework of American society. The architectural icons of the United States, specifically the White House, the Pentagon, and the Twin Towers, serve not only as crucial national symbols but also as profound reflections of the country's gendered power dynamics. The collapse of these architectural phallics triggered a crisis in hegemonic masculinity, prompting compensatory performances of toughness, aggression, and militarism.

This section explores the aftermath of the attacks, emphasizing several interconnected themes: national trauma, coping mechanisms, and the heroes of the rescue operations. It highlights the revival of physical toughness, perceived as a hallmark of hegemonic masculinity among those who assisted in the aftermath. In contrast, we see a developed emotional vulnerability and growing solidarity, which showcases the complex relationship between strength and sensitivity. Although these emotional responses challenge traditional notions of masculinity, they do not wholly integrate into the hegemonic model. The section further examines the reactions to 9/11, particularly regarding the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. These military actions are linked to concepts of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity, portrayed as defensive strategies in response to perceived threats to national masculinity and the wounded masculinity experienced at home. The analysis also touches upon the rise of urban violence, increased gun ownership, and class dynamics. It observes how the middle and upper classes seek to protect themselves from marginalized groups. The association of guns with hegemonic masculinity raises significant concerns regarding reactive aggression. This further

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complicates the traits associated with American masculinity, leading to a discourse on whether these traits manifest as protective instincts or as forms of violence.

In his article "Confronting the Monster" (2002), Noam Chomsky portrays the attacks on the towers on September 11 as among the most heinous crimes in history, with perhaps the most devastating immediate human toll recorded outside of war (2002, 24). The 9/11 attacks undeniably had a profound global impact, igniting a declared conflict between Middle Eastern terrorists and Western nations. Chomsky emphasizes the significance of these crimes not solely due to their brutal nature but also because of the specific choice of target (Chomsky 2002, 26). He notes that the attacks resulted in widespread cultural, national, and global astonishment due to their unprecedented nature, recalling the last analogous event in 1814 when the British set fire to Washington. Chomsky argues that this marked a historical turning point, as it represented the first instance of weaponry being directed from a perceived periphery toward the core of American power (Chomsky 2002, 26). While the 9/11 attacks may not be as brutal as many significant atrocities, they nonetheless stand out. For instance, the comparison to President Clinton's bombing of Sudan, which lacked credible justification and resulted in the destruction of half of the nation's pharmaceutical supplies and countless casualties, highlights a critical perspective on the nature of violence inflicted in the name of power (Donnelly 2020, 16). In this sense, what made 9/11 uniquely disruptive was not only the scale of destruction but also the symbolic reversal it represented: it was an attack at the heart of American strength rather than its periphery. Moreover, the trauma of that day was deepened by the ideological and religious dimensions, as the attackers, identified as Islamic radicals, seemed to strike not only at a nation but also at the very essence of what many Americans viewed as their Christian values. In the wake of 9/11, a crisis of morality emerged, revealing a society teetering on the edge of neglecting these values while becoming enamored with superficial cultural models. Ultimately, tragic events like September 11 have awakened and strengthened individual religious faith, highlighting the complex interplay of faith, identity, and morality in the aftermath of such events (Uecker 2008, 482).

The moral aspect is vividly depicted in Gotham, a city lacking Christian values. As an allegorical representation, Gotham reflects not only the fears of the post-9/11 period but also illustrates a society struggling with moral decline, perpetually threatened by crime. Lukić observes that Gotham is "a city of graveyards and gargoyles; alleys and asylums. Gotham is a nightmare, a distorted metropolis that corrupts the souls of good men" (2018, 8). In this context, the principles that once shaped society are disrupted, leading to the emergence of a vigilante hero as the dominant figure in the city. This establishes a clear connection between the city's

condition and the well-being of its inhabitants. The devastation caused by the attacks impacted not just the physical landscape but also the populace's understanding of fundamental values and societal norms.

The attacks challenge the traditional image of American masculinity, revealing its weaknesses. Unlike the post-World War II and Vietnam War crises that primarily affected military families, this unprecedented event impacted nearly all civilians, prompting them to question the effectiveness of national bodies, including intelligence and military institutions. The fallout from the attacks led to a reevaluation of hegemonic masculinity. Unlike the Cold War model, which emphasized rational control and national duty, the current crisis reflects a loss of power and a longing for moral clarity and national pride. The crises in the 20th century have undergone significant transformations, particularly in cinema, as we transitioned from the Cold War to the post-9/11 era. The dominant masculine figure was marked by rationality, emotional restraint, and loyalty to the state and capitalism. However, this ideal faced challenges from sociopolitical shifts, including the second-wave feminist movement and the civil rights movement. These shifts sparked anxieties about emasculation and led to idealizing hypermasculine figures in media, such as Rambo and the Terminator. These characters confronted societal anxieties by reestablishing order through force and aggression, while maintaining a clear understanding of societal norms. Following the 9/11 attacks, many questioned whether these idealized figures truly served as protectors, as the norms supporting them began to disintegrate. Nevertheless, despite showcasing strength, this portrayal of masculinity often lacked a moral foundation. This moment signifies a critical juncture in the narrative of masculinity, urging a reassessment of the definition of a strong, hegemonic man in a transforming landscape world.

The moral aspect represents just one facet of the tragedy. While this period highlights resilience, it also exposes the terror individuals experienced, linking emotional vulnerability with victimhood. This normalization of fragility and trauma can resonate with anyone. Therefore, the focus must shift towards equitably empowering all individuals as the nation strives for recovery. Trauma has significantly affected many people, warranting a collective response to build strength and support. Research conducted by Yuval Neria, Laura DiGrande, and Ben Adams (2011) revealed that 12% of people had acute stress symptoms within the initial month, whereas 8.9% demonstrated indicators of functional impairment. Post-traumatic stress symptoms increased from 17% two months after the attacks to 5.8% six months post-attack, indicating the significant effect of the 9/11 attacks on PTSD symptoms among the U.S. population (2011, 430). Furthermore, a study by Nancy Eisenberg and Roxane Cohen Silver

(2011) explored the psychological impact of the attacks on younger generations raised in their wake. Their research indicated that parents reported signs of distress in their children, including post-traumatic symptoms, underscoring the emotional consequences of national crises on adolescents and children (Eisenberg and Silver, 2011, 469). This is particularly relevant as I see that these children and adolescents are in a pivotal phase of identity formation, shaping their understanding of masculinity. The traumatic context hindered the usual paths to developing masculinity as these youths grappled with fears and uncertainties related to national insecurity and danger. They faced the vulnerability inherent in the traditional ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which are usually associated with protection, authority, and stability, before attaining the capacity to embody such principles themselves.

Overall, life in the U.S. underwent a significant transformation during this challenging time, marked by enhanced security measures and a prevailing sense of vulnerability. The trauma affected everyday life, reshaping routines, perceptions, and understandings of safety. The destruction of the Twin Towers resulted in immense economic repercussions, including nearly 3,000 deaths, the loss of 150,000 jobs, and financial damages estimated between $50 billion and $100 billion (Neria, DiGrande, and Adams 2011, 430). Roxane Cohen Silver points out that airports and public transport systems have shifted from symbols of convenience and freedom to areas dominated by strict security protocols. This situation was not just limited to the U.S. but occurred globally, where prolonged waits for screenings and X-rays became commonplace, as many viewed these procedures as vital for identifying and mitigating potential risks (2011) 426).

The aftermath exposed weakness, powerlessness, and dread that undermined conventional masculine norms, resulting in the acceptance of fragility. Men grappled with the challenge of reconciling strength with emotional distress, leading to feelings of inadequacy and an identity crisis. Ultimately, Americans acknowledged that a prevailing masculinity characterized by power is no longer present in this era of mourning

> the broken defeated bodies of the firemen and police officers stand as proof of our vulnerability, fallen icons that demonstrate the profound tragedy that has befallen the country. At the same time, the repeated discussions of these same fireman and police officers' constant vigilance in rescuing people from the World Trade highlights a national masculinity that is still strong and intact. (Malin 2005, 147)

Despite the challenges of finding a sense of panacea during tumultuous times, the fleeting moment of uncertainty quickly gave way to a restoration of Americans' confidence in their nation's strength. Malin posits that fragility did not signal the end of the narrative or a decline

in strong American masculinity. The fortitude of soldiers and firefighters fostered anticipation for a revival of manhood from the ruins. Similarly, Kimmel (2006) notes that terrorists' masculinity no longer affected American manhood, as views shifted to see "the terrorists are cowardly and diabolical, American men are courageous but peace-loving" (248). Accountability was shared, not only by terrorists but also by intelligence services, especially the CIA, for their failure to prevent catastrophic events. This led to a "ping-pong accountability game," where multiple parties tried to shift blame for these events (Tetlock and Mellers 2011, 543). This raises critical issues of responsibility in crises as institutions face public scrutiny over systemic failures. President George W. Bush addressed this in his speech to Congress and the nation on September 20, 2001, confronting the collective fear and uncertainty after the attacks. His speech aimed to reassure the injured and rebuild trust in criticized government institutions, while showing his commitment to counter-terrorism. He emphasized the readiness of individuals, stating, "the FBI agents, intelligence operatives, and reservists […] our military: Be ready. I have called the armed forces to alert, and there is a reason. The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud" (Bush, 2001). He acknowledged, "I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat" (Bush, 2001). In his speech, he sought to comfort people facing loss, urging them to fully embrace their lives and families. While recognizing the emotional toll, his call for calm and resilience suggested that sensitivity should be temporary. His remarks about the army highlighted the idea that physical toughness and direct strategies affirm the nation's dominance and reveal who holds power on the battlefield.

This era recognized police officers, firefighters, and the army, regardless of gender, including women and countless civilians who rescued, protected, and assisted victims during the national catastrophe. Their endeavors were undeniably heroic; however, public discourse, particularly in Bush's speeches, often blended heroism with physical strength and endurance, traits predominantly linked to masculinity.

Moreover, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan significantly influenced the notion of military masculinity, characterized by the tension between emotional restraint in conflict and corporeal potency, maybe more so than the attacks themselves. In his 2020 article, David Kieran highlights the apparent disaster stemming from neglecting troop welfare. He critiques the media's coverage, which has increasingly been criticized for portraying the Army's hypermasculine culture. This depiction is seen as a barrier for soldiers seeking mental health assistance. American soldiers faced pressure to adhere to hegemonic masculinity, complicating their ability to cope with the wounded masculinity developed during and after the war. Kieran

(2020, 306) underscores the escalating suicide rates among active-duty personnel, especially veterans of the Iraq War, highlighted in a report from October 11, 2005. This report describes these veterans as exemplifying a damaging version of masculinity marked by aggression and sexual exploitation. Kieran (2020, 306) argues that persistent hypermasculine behavior may result in harmful effects as individuals seek to compensate for a perceived loss of dominance. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq exemplify hypermasculinity, but such behaviors extend beyond this era. In the late 1990s, aggressive conduct and animosity were evident, as seen in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by a troubled ex-soldier, which killed 168 people in protest against government policies (Shary 2013, 3). This mindset was further highlighted by the Columbine High School massacre on April 20, 1999, where two adolescent males killed 13 individuals and injured over 20 before taking their own lives (Shary 2013, 3). These events underscore the severe repercussions of unrestrained rage and feelings of isolation in American culture.

Gun violence has markedly increased in the 21st-century, particularly following the 9/11 attacks. Nonetheless, its underlying reasons are more complex than just leading to an observable increase in anger. In his work "Gun Rites: Hegemonic Masculinity and Neoliberal Ideology in Rural Kansas," Levi Gahman (2015) analyzes the impact of hegemonic masculinity on the American belief that gun ownership equates to power. According to Gahman (2015, 1203), weapons possess a symbolic significance closely linked to the expression of dominant masculinity. This connection arises from the shared attributes of power, control, and dominance associated with both guns and hegemonic masculinity. He conducts a more in-depth analysis of the opinions of Kansas residents about gun ownership: Andrew, a 34-year-old father of two, emphasizes that,

> […] if owning a gun helps me protect my wife and kids and provide for the family - then I'm surer than shit going to have one. Don't get me wrong, I know guns can be dangerous and all, but I respect the hell out of them. I keep them around just in case I ever need to use them, cause you never know when a criminal may be on the loose and all drugged up, or when a pervert may come sneaking around. It's times like that when a guy has to 'man up' and protect what's his. And if that requires shooting some nutcase then that's what he's got to do. (Gahman 2015, 1209)

Andrew connects gun ownership to his sense of masculinity, believing that having a gun enhances his ability to protect his family and affirms his manhood. However, this reliance on weapons may reflect underlying insecurity, fear, and anger, rather than an assertion of power. Anger, as an unrestrained emotion, threatens the resilience of hegemonic masculinity by

endangering self-control. Moreover, the need to use a gun links courage and assertiveness to the traditional role of American males as protectors. Maria Scaptura and Kaitlin Boyle (2021, 356) argue that the drive for gun ownership in the U.S. stems from the belief that gun owners defend a perceived crucial right, emphasizing the dominance of privileged groups at the expense of marginalized communities. In this context, guns symbolize hegemonic masculinity, preserving societal dominance. Consequently, gun owners may resort to violence to defend established norms, vital for their safety and comfort. The dynamics of gun use are influenced by status concerns, shaped by race, socioeconomic class, political beliefs, and sexual orientation (Scaptura and Boyle 2021).

In their book *Gender Threat: American Masculinity in the Face of Change* (2022), Dan Cassino and Yasemin Besen-Cassino assert that "the crisis of gun violence in our country is, to an extent, crisis of masculinity" (91). The authors detail that gun purchases have risen markedly, from 600,000 monthly in the 1990s to 2 million monthly in 2018. This rise has transpired, notwithstanding an almost 25% reduction in violent crimes during the same period (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2022, 91). The Cassinos argue that attributing men's increased anxieties around victimization only to psychological factors neglects the influence of firearms on hegemonic masculinity (2022, 91). The necessity for protection—whether for oneself, family, society, or the nation—remains a central theme in masculinity depictions. This focus on safeguarding through roles as providers and protectors increasingly link masculinity to violence and patriarchal norms, complicating efforts to move beyond harmful aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, the weaponization of fear and insecurity may catalyze a significant shift in masculinity that challenges the traditional paradigm. This is evident in the Batman franchise and the Joker movie, where armament symbolizes violence's role in affirming male identity while the Joker offers a counter-narrative. Ultimately, these narratives illustrate how authority and control are often measured by the ability to wield force in a culture that equates masculinity with dominance.

The post-9/11 era marks a pivotal moment for America, characterized by profound cultural, political, and psychological shifts stemming from the trauma of terrorism. My dissertation examines how both national and personal traumas—ranging from significant events to familial dysfunction—shape concepts of masculinity. These influences are essential for understanding characters like the Joker, whose lack of a nurturing environment intensifies his yearning for connection and complicates his sense of self. Central to this narrative are hypermasculinity and violence, with the latter often serving as a means to conform to unattainable male ideals. This raises questions about whether such violence is a reaction to these

unrealistic standards. Additionally, the discussions explore men's frustrations and their tendency to blame women for their shortcomings. Masculinity is frequently framed in opposition to femininity, leading men to assert their masculinity through sexist behavior and harmful actions against women. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the Joker's relationship with Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad* (2016), where the vulnerability of women reflects the shaping of masculinity. My research will delve into how their interactions mirror broader gender dynamics, illuminating persistent issues of toxic masculinity, violence, and sexism within a patriarchal framework.

In the next section, however, I will analyze how masculine distress links to broader societal discussions, particularly during periods of economic hardship, including the aftermath of 9/11 and the Great Recession. Nevertheless, its enduring consequences continued to wield influence in the years that followed, a subject I will address in the next segment.

2.3. The Great Recession Deepening the American Masculinity in Crisis

The Great Recession (late 2007 to mid-2009) significantly impacted the notion of hegemonic masculinity, with expectations often clashing with the financial realities many faced during this time. Following the 9/11 attacks, youth unemployment rose sharply, surpassing adult unemployment rates (Bell and Blanchflower 2011, 4-5). During this period, Americans grappled with the profound psychological effects of the attacks, coupled with the ongoing war on terror. This led to widespread questioning of the capability and effectiveness of government institutions in safeguarding the public. There was a growing skepticism regarding the inadequate regulation of banks and financial institutions, as well as criticism of these entities' risky lending practices. Additionally, individuals were scrutinized for taking loans beyond their means, and large corporations were also held accountable, albeit to a lesser extent (Mansfield, Mutz, and Brackbill 2016, 3).

The Great Recession had a profound effect on the workforce, with 32% of adults facing unemployment (Taylor et al. 2010, i). According to the 2010 Balance Sheet, 55% of adults dealt with unemployment, pay cuts, fewer hours, or were compelled to take part-time positions (Taylor et al. 2010, i). This underscores the recession's significant impact on the workforce and social conditions in the U.S. It represented a shift in the relationship between economic governance and social inequality, as the government's focus on income groups mirrored economic discrepancies rather than exacerbated divisions. The economic downturn exposed these inequalities, further widening the gap between social classes. Taylor et al. (2010) found that 48% of Americans felt their financial situation deteriorated, particularly those earning

below $50,000, who reported a stronger sense of decline (Taylor et al. 2010, ii). Just 21% of the general population noticed any improvement. Furthermore, government statistics revealed that household wealth plummeted by approximately 20% from 2007 to 2009, marking the steepest decrease since World War II (Taylor et al. 2010, ii). The crisis also challenged traditional notions of masculinity, as many opted for retirement, exacerbating the instability associated with conventional male roles, especially among primary earners.

The intersection of housing and employment arises in discussions about the recession's effects. The economic crash hit male workers in housing hardest, reinforcing narratives of male economic disadvantage in masculine professions (Leonard 2014, 33). Homeowners also faced a drop in property prices, indicating widespread economic adversity that crossed gender and professional lines. This contrast highlights the conflict between the specific impacts on male-dominated industries and broader economic repercussions affecting many groups (Taylor et al. 2010, iii). The crisis in masculinities reveals men's performance challenges hindering their dominance. Connell, Hagège, and Vuattoux argue that masculinity, defined by financial success, leaves unemployed men feeling diminished and socially isolated (2014, 95). Leonard (2014, p. 33) notes that manufacturing's 33.1% job loss from 2000 to 2010 had a severe impact on working-class males. Researchers like Bell and Blanchflower (2011) point out that despite government efforts such as tax incentives for marginalized workers, the neoliberal model largely ignores working-class males. This research shows how systemic economic changes reflect and worsen the vulnerability of masculinity today.

Analyzing the statistics, I note that the middle class, representing hegemonic masculinity (Annus 2021, 25), has been adversely affected by the economic crisis, leading to a decline in their status. The idea that masculinity manifests as emasculation stems from disempowerment factors like unemployment (Messerschmidt, 1993). The Great Recession has intensified this crisis by stripping men of their traditional breadwinning roles, vital to hegemonic American masculinity. This highlights men's struggles to maintain dominance in the workplace and in financial responsibilities. Notably, coping strategies adopted by men facing powerlessness include taking on feminine roles in the service sector, facing hurdles in advancing beyond entry-level positions (Walker and Roberts 2017, 3). The economic downturn has intensified the gendered division of household labor, placing greater emotional burdens on women in financially strained families. This shift has temporarily fostered a matriarchal structure (Banet-Weiser 2014, 91), alleviating anxiety and creating a hopeful outlook.

Nonetheless, the state of the economy and capitalism inevitably evolves following each crisis. It tends to restructure its foundations to prevent similar crises, gradually developing an

immune system that fosters the emergence of new market technologies, innovative exploitation strategies, and diverse job types, all contributing to a renewed method of capital accumulation (Srnicek 2017, 27). Since the late 2007 economic crisis, scholars have observed a shift in capitalist approaches, centered on "technology, automation and the sharing economy," primarily through online platforms (Srnicek 2017, 27). This model has proliferated throughout the economy, with numerous businesses embracing platforms—from major tech firms like Google, Facebook, and Amazon to emerging start-ups like Uber and Airbnb (Srnicek 2017, 29). Collectively, they define platform capitalism, rooted in online platforms. On the surface, these platforms may appear to enrich the global economy with their multi-billion-dollar revenues while providing millions of individuals worldwide the opportunity to work for their companies. However, this platform capitalism has also engendered a new type of crisis, disproportionately impacting the working class, who constituted the majority after the Great Recession.

After Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election victory, he held a summit at Trump Tower with leaders and CEOs of prominent tech companies (Little and Winch 2021, 1). This meeting was pivotal in acknowledging the emerging power figures in the nation's economy, establishing a basis for national authority. As noted by Ben Little and Allison Winch, these digital elites hold significant sway, legitimizing Trump's outreach to them (2021, 11). Additionally, Frank Pasquale points out that while these platforms benefit their founders and create job opportunities, they also exacerbate existing inequalities and foster instability by diminishing workforce bargaining power and job security. Moreover, these platforms hinder economic growth by lowering wages (2016, 311).

This economic transformation led to the emergence of a new class known as the "Precariat," a term coined by Guy Standing in 2014. This concept does not necessarily trace back solely to the rise of platform capitalism, but rather to the broader economic crisis as a whole. Standing (2014, 11) identifies a growing class that suffers from social vulnerability and unstable employment, often missing out on social recognition and benefits. They frequently lack flexible labor contracts through labor brokers or agencies (Standing 2014, 11). Standing views the precariat as a dangerous class due to their resentment towards the state and monopolistic companies, ignoring their social rights. Lacking political or institutional rights, they are perceived as a group that might threaten political institutions as they reject these systems (Standing 2014, 11). This anger is evident in the Tea Party movement, which emerged after the 2008 financial crisis, driven by white, middle- and working-class Americans who felt economically threatened and politically betrayed by bailouts, rising government spending, and cultural changes (Madestam et al. 2013, 1643). While the Tea Party purported to embrace a

libertarian ethos, it was frequently characterized by a reactionary populism. This populism stemmed from a belief that the political elite is neither responsive nor accountable to the concerns of "average Americans" (Madestam et al., 2013, 1643). The resentment portrayed in *Joker* (2019) is strikingly evident as the people protest outside, expressing their anger towards a government that has neglected them. Phillips presents Gotham as a city plagued by numerous economic issues, with the character of Arthur serving as a poignant representation of this struggle. The pervasive gloom in society mirrors the signs of financial collapse, particularly affecting the precariat, like Arthur and those around him, who endure unstable employment and the constant threat of job loss, ultimately channeling their rage into a broader social discontent.

These platforms have shifted economic power dynamics and enhanced discussions on gender flexibility, yet they remain under patriarchal control. This crisis encompasses both financial and ideological dimensions. While they assert the creation of inclusive environments for various gender identities and roles, they are primarily dominated by a small group of men who exemplify hegemonic masculinity. These men motivate their followers to adopt their perspectives, and even without personal connections to these leaders, individuals still choose to align with them. As a result, platform capitalism serves as an institutionalized version of patriarchy that reinforces gender hierarchies rooted in hegemonic masculinity within both digital and economic contexts. For example, Caitlin Lawson notes that Reddit's design choices can promote hate speech and marginalize users who do not identify as white, cisgender, heterosexual men (2018, 21).

The platforms that facilitated hate speech have also empowered women to speak out against patriarchal oppression and sexual abuse. This includes the #MeToo movement, which has raised awareness about toxic masculinity, changes in sexual norms, and progress in LGBTQ+ rights. The #MeToo movement confronts conventional masculinity and patriarchy by exposing sexual harassment and gender-based violence, while underscoring the persistent masculinity crisis impacting women. Launched by Tarana Burke in 2006, the campaign aimed to empower women to speak out against their abusers. Its momentum surged in 2017 after Alyssa Milano's tweet about her experience with Harvey Weinstein. In this sense, it was the same platforms that gave women the chance to discuss men's patriarchy. The movement underscored how the crisis of masculinity affecting men also impacts women through the spread of toxicity. Maricourt de Clotilde and Stephen Burrell (2022, 65) observed that the increased scrutiny of masculinity spurred by #MeToo might reflect men's greater willingness to change and actively help dismantle the patriarchy from within. I believe this movement strongly prompts men to reevaluate their behavior and the consequences of their actions, encouraging

self-reflection and urging them to eliminate harmful traits. While it does not definitively determine #MeToo's influence on masculinities, it emphasizes that the onus for change lies with men.

To conclude, this chapter addressed economic anxieties, patriarchal concerns, and emotional toughness prominent in the mid-20th century and continuing into the early 21st-century. These themes link to broader cultural and ideological struggles. Clive Baldwin (2020, 17) argues that discussions about the masculinity crisis in the U.S. remain integral to the ongoing "culture wars" affecting views on abortion, gun control, feminism, family values, gay marriage, transgender rights, and religion. Debates on these issues challenge hegemonic masculinity by questioning traditional family structures and creating new power dynamics. The culture wars illustrate the lack of consensus on ideals, with Americans fighting for acceptance on multiple fronts. Seidler (1997, 49) refers to hegemonic masculinity as part of "the myths we inherit about who we are to be as men," Suggesting these myths no longer reflect current realities and create conflicting expectations about manhood.

The following chapter will examine the significant expressions of masculinity in crisis as depicted in cinema across different film genres. It specifically investigates how these masculine anxieties are represented through the lens of the Joker characters and films, serving as a limitation of my dissertation.

Chapter 3. Cinematic Responses to Post-9/11 Masculinity in Crisis

This chapter explores how films reflect the changing socio-cultural landscape. These films either reinforce or challenge social structures and ideals through their narratives, particularly amid the significant changes in the 21st-century United States, where films have vividly depicted shifting masculine norms, addressing social and cultural concerns tied to economic instability, changing power dynamics, and new artistic standards.

I see films and visual narratives as powerful media that offer deep insights into genuine experiences through fictional plots. They serve as creative expressions for entertainment and vital reflections of societal structures, anxieties, and conflicts, revealing important truths about the human experience. Tim Edwards argues that representation is essential in discussions of the masculine crisis, contending that there is little evidence supporting the widespread belief in a masculinity in crisis (2006, 24). This perspective implies that the idea of masculinity in crisis is more a cultural narrative than a structural reality, a point I find somewhat unpersuasive, highlighting a substantial connection between cultural portrayals and actual gender issues. If Edwards is correct in asserting that masculinity is not in crisis, why do films still explore

masculinity's vulnerabilities through themes like patriarchy, class issues, and mental and physical endurance?

This chapter is organized into three sections to clarify how films portray cultural realities. The first section analyzes Hall's representation theory, illustrating how films mirror reality and actively construct and reinforce cultural perceptions about social issues. The second section investigates the varied representations of American masculinity in crisis across diverse post-9/11 film genres. The discussion focuses on three main categories, and the four representations are chosen based on their analytical significance: crime films (which encompass detective, noir, and thriller genres), Western and neo-Western films, and superhero films. These categories are crucial as they showcase Hollywood's portrayal of 21st-century American masculinity, illustrating the conflict between the fight for conformity and the growing resistance to traditional norms, which align with the genres of the films in which the Joker appears.

3.1. Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation: Decoding Meaning in Cinema

In the introduction to his book "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" (1997), Hall explores how culture is portrayed through language across different media platforms. He argues that cultural meanings are interconnected in a phenomenon he refers to as "circuit culture" (1997, 1). This expression and framework are used to elucidate the process by which meanings, concepts, and cultural ideas circulate through language. According to the British cultural theorist, language serves as a "representational system" regardless of its form, be it written, spoken, broadcasted, electronically transmitted, or expressed through musical notes. It effectively conveys and "stand[s] for or represent[s] to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings" (1997, 1). The topic in question pertains to the fluid and interrelated exchange of significations, concepts, and cultural notions that circulate and undergo transformation across many forms of communication. Hall further explains that representation encompasses more than only the creation of something meaningful that refers to a shared cultural concept, but...

> [r]epresentation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this is a far from simple or straightforward process. (Hall 1997, 15)

Representation is complexly linked to a shared culture. To create a coherent conceptual framework, it is necessary for the symbols, pictures, and their interpretations to be consistent within a shared cultural context. Therefore, Hall argues that the analysis of representation is a

complex task as it relies on studying semiotics, which focuses on interpreting symbols and pictures. The establishment of meaning in a language relies heavily on the interplay between our conceptual understanding of the universe, encompassing the cognitive arrangement of these symbols in different languages (Hall, 1997, 19). Hence, when this conglomerating process takes place, it is referred to as "representation" (Hall 1997, 19). Hall contends that the process of representation is inherently prejudiced, particularly within the film industry.

My rationale for using Hall's method in my film study is to investigate how narratives, codes, scenes, and actions generate meanings for audiences, rather than reducing them to a single meaning. This is the focus of content analysis, as I examine the various Jokers, each symbolizing distinct concepts. Each cinematic production distills the circuit of meaning into representations, such as criminals, superheroes, toxic lovers, or social rebels. Each film explores distinct interpretations as portrayals of various Jokers, often marginalized individuals, engage with or contest dominant societal norms.

Analyzing the representation of men through cultural symbols of deviance or success elucidates the influence of privilege on the construction of masculinity and shows how the cultural meaning of each masculine representation is directed through different narratives, shaping the collective understanding of people towards it. Hall views media representation as constitutive since it plays a role in the meaning-making process; it is shaped by both the producers' intentions and the viewers' subjective interpretations. He delineates three methodologies of representation: the Reflective approach, the Intentional approach, and the Constructionist approach (1997, 10). The reflective approach posits that media representation acts as a mirror, accurately reflecting social reality, and this representation conveys the authentic significance of the depicted, resonating with the audience/viewer (Hall 1997, 25). It serves as a mechanism to replicate social realities inside fictional contexts. The intentional approach serves as a direct antithesis to the reflective approach, concentrating on the intentions of the representation's creators. This implies that meaning is deliberately generated following the producers' intentions, rendering it uniquely personal to the individual who crafted it (Hall 1997, 25). The constructionist method asserts that representation transcends mere imitation of reality, being shaped by both audience reactions and producer intentions. This interplay influences overall representation (Hall 1997, 25). My analysis follows this constructionist approach to examine how the Joker represents not just an objective reality but also a dynamic creation influenced by cultural codes and social contexts. While I do not directly address audience response, my focus lies on how meanings are constructed through narratives linked to cultural norms, intertextual discourses, and fictional narratives. With the help of content

analysis, my analysis will reveal how these films actively construct notions of masculinity that, while not entirely reflective of reality, are nonetheless rooted in it, challenging and shaping the discourse of hegemonic masculinity.

The cultural landscape post-9/11 amplifies contestations of masculinity, resulting in diverse cinematic portrayals. These representations reflect varied political goals and ideological conflicts, creating a perspective that can endorse or oppose prevailing narratives. Understanding the impact of these portrayals on masculinity is crucial, as films entertain while shaping public attitudes and addressing societal issues. In his book, *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, Terence McSweeney (2017) posits that post-9/11 cinema serves as "a cultural barometer," underscoring its significance beyond mere entertainment amidst digital competition (7). While acknowledging that representations of masculinity in crisis existed before 9/11, it is evident that this competition compels filmmakers to engage more intimately with societal challenges. This engagement results in works that provide social critiques and foster critical engagement with reality. Consequently, films capture the complexities of society, asserting cinema's role as an essential cultural platform. Analyzing post-9/11 films reveals that contemporary cinema establishes a framework for historical documentation. This framework facilitates dialogue on social crises, national tragedies, and the emergence of new narratives within existing film genres. Examining these genres, we can better understand the representation process and how film reflects and shapes cultural values, including gender ideologies.

The following section examines the depiction of masculinity in American films released post-9/11, in response to the societal repercussions of these terrorist atrocities. This part examines the portrayal of male characters in Hollywood's reaction to the 9/11 attacks and how they have both mirrored and strengthened gendered notions about the nation's failure, recovery, and challenges within the various films. Furthermore, it examines the impact of this representation on the formation of national identity from the perspective of masculinity.

3.2. Film Genres and Their Representations of Masculinity in Crisis in Post-9/11 American Cinema

In their article "Cinematic Symptoms of Masculinity in Transition: Memory, History, and Mythology in Contemporary Film," Caroline Bainbridge and Candida Yates argue that film portrayals of masculinity are intricate and evolving (2005, 304). They propose that these portrayals encompass both protective narcissism and a more flexible viewpoint, rejecting rigid representations (2005, 299). The authors stress the importance of viewing masculinity in film as a spectrum (2005, 299), recognizing that it is not monolithic but reflects varied cultural

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narratives and personal experiences. This approach encourages examining how film genres, viewed as a spectrum, affect and are affected by real-world issues. Building on this concept, scholars such as Steve Neale (1980) have examined how social transformations impact genres, as they aim to tackle genuine societal issues while maintaining their stylistic elements. Neale suggests that genres serve as frameworks for coherence and closure, assisting viewers in understanding familiar structures (1980, 19). He states that genres should not be regarded merely as forms of textual codification, but as systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions circulating among industry, text, and audience (1980, 19). Neale highlights that the distinctive characteristics of a genre arise from specific mixtures of discursive types, emphasizing that order's arrangement and disruption must be interpreted in terms of various discursive categories and functions (Neale 1980, 37).

The following subsections will explore how post-9/11 films depict masculinity and represent diverse cultural narratives and individual experiences. These genres establish a foundation for examining multiple masculinities, revealing the challenges associated with masculinity during this period. Together, these components analyze the evolution of masculinity, highlighting societal issues and the tendency to uphold established values.

3.2.1. Masculinity in Western and Neo-Western Films

According to John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, the Western genre has historically played a crucial role in articulating masculine values within communities grappling with negative influences during the development of the American mythos (2002, 89). In these narratives, the archetypal Western man is often portrayed as an "educator," imparting lessons of heroism to society. Lawrence and Jewett argue that this conception of masculinity is rooted in patriarchy, which exercises control over women (2002, 91). Figures like John Wayne emerge as notable representations of a post-war male archetype, showcasing a variety of resilient characters that embody hegemonic forms of American masculinity (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 91). In his 2019 book, *Contemporary Westerns: An American Genre Post-9/11*, John White argues that the period following the September 11 attacks prompted a critical reassessment of the traditional Western male figures. His study of numerous Western films produced after 9/11 illustrates how these films serve as ideological artifacts during a national crisis (2019, 5). White suggests that the remakes of John Wayne's films in 2004, alongside classics like *The Alamo* (1960), served as reminders for "conservative America […] to be vigilant and, if necessary, fight" (2019, 4). The Western genre, thus, symbolizes the steadfast heroism that Americans sought to confront in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. By portraying the archetype of the

Western hero, these films reinforce the notion of resilience and strength inherent in the American spirit.

In *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1996), Lee Clark Mitchell posits that "the cowboy became the instrument-body upon which Westerns practiced their favorite tune- the construction of masculinity, the making of men, a process never straightforward or consistent" (1996, 27). This observation underscores the cowboy's role as a genuine barometer for the changing concepts of masculinity within American society. Mitchell (1996) further suggests that both American men and women identify with the pursuit of acquiring more masculine traits, captivated by the cowboy as an enduring symbol of strong, manly American identity (1996, 187). The quest to embody the cowboy aligns closely with individualism and the idea of the self-made man, inspiring both men and women on their journeys to empowerment. Mitchell notes that "it is the Western hero–unlike the leading men in any other genre–who is placed before us precisely to be looked at. […] we watch men still at work in the unfinished process of making themselves, even as we are encouraged to believe that manhood doesn't need to be made" (1996, 187). For example, what makes John Wayne's figure unique is his embodiment of symbolic independence and detachment from others. This portrayal gives his character a distinct individualist perspective on his opinions and decisions, rooted in the patriarchal tradition from which he originated (Bordin 2014, 32).

While I do not see the Joker as a representation of conventional Western cowboy individualism, his persona, isolated from others and devoid of personal connections, appears to satirize that individualistic lifestyle. The portrayal of individualistic masculinity, in reality, is intricately linked to hegemonic masculinity depicted in films, which closely correlates with heroism and presents a unique manifestation of masculinity. Connell asserts that recognizing a specific form of masculinity as hegemonic signifies its cultural dominance, thereby reinforcing the larger gender hierarchy: "to be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes" (2000, 84). Whitehead (2002) similarly asserts a strong link between heroic and hegemonic masculinity. The portrayal of heroes in popular culture, depicted as protectors of women and children, helps to uphold patriarchal family ideals, which are central to hegemonic masculinity (2002, 68). Additionally, he argues that heroic masculinity not only reinforces gender hierarchies but also facilitates the domination of one group of men by another, more powerful group, establishing what Demetriou (2001) terms internal hegemony. He states, "[t]he production of such cohesion is a pre-condition to the operation of the secondary function of patriarchy, which is that of subordinating men to women" (Demetriou 2001, 69).

The acknowledgment of the considerable public appreciation for heroic masculinity suggests a broad consensus and acceptance among a substantial number of individuals. This admiration is connected to the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity that underpin this consensus. Within this framework, hegemonic masculinity, despite its variations, is viewed as a prevailing force. This concept is essential for my examination of the films, as it delineates which characters are perceived as dominant and investigates how the Joker, in opposition to them, operates in a state of crisis.

3.2.2. Masculinity in Crime Films

In this subsection, I examine the subgenres of crime fiction as they pertain to the Joker films. *The Dark Knight* can be classified as a noir-inspired crime/action film, while *Suicide Squad* falls under the ensemble antihero crime genre. *Joker* (2019), meanwhile, aligns with the psychological thriller category. Despite their distinct stylistic approaches, all three films share a commonality: they exist within the broader realm of crime narratives. To grasp the intertwining genres while retaining the essential structure of crime films, one should consider Rick Altman's concept of "generic maps" for clarity (García-Mainar 2009, 4). These maps act as a framework that allows us to view the crime film as a narrative landscape, intricately exploring the dynamic tension between individual agency and societal control. This investigation usually unfolds through the diverse perspectives of criminals, victims, and law enforcement (García-Mainar 2009, 4).

A key aspect present in all these films is violence, with the violent crime ecosystem serving as a crucial arena for the Joker to display his masculinity. Asbjørn Grønstad explains this in his book *Transfigurations: Violence, Death and Masculinity in American Cinema* (2010), that violence is often associated with masculinity, particularly in film genres that primarily target male audiences, such as war, detective, gangster, science fiction, and Western films (Grønstad 2010, 90-91). He believes that his portrayal allows male protagonists to build a "positive masculine identity" (Grønstad 2010, 91). Protagonists frequently associate violence with masculinity by directly facing the concept of death: "[t]hey fear death, but aren't afraid to die; instead, they are defined by the way they face the threat of death" (Grønstad 2010, 129). Violence in this framework is an "enactment of masculinity" where men are often compelled to participate in more acts of violence or other behaviors to demonstrate or validate their masculinity (Grønstad 2010, 166-167). Grønstad's insights suggest that social expectations require males to conform to traditional masculine norms, which might result in a recurring pattern of violence that cinema depicts through various genres that valorize violence. The Joker

character operates within a constructed universe where acts of violence and physical conflict play a crucial role in the narratives involving him and Batman. This suggests that crime films and literature predominantly reflect narratives centered on males. Gill Plain elaborates on this idea, pointing out that the structures of crime fiction have historically been viewed through a gendered lens, especially during the mid-twentieth century (quoted in Münderlein 2024, 6). At that time, the tough dialogue and urban grit characteristic of the "hardboiled" genre were classified as "masculine" (quoted in Münderlein 2024, 6). This observation underscores how detective fiction has traditionally celebrated virtues aligned with masculinity: rationality, logic, empiricism, and emotional restraint (quoted in Münderlein 2024, 6).

Detective fiction has traditionally been shaped by masculine narratives that reinforce patriarchal structures, though not necessarily hegemonic masculinity. As Steve Neale argues, the detective genre constructs meaning through the presence of an enigma—a mystery that drives the narrative forward (Neale 1980, 27). Within the Joker films, the character represents a central enigma, continually evolving across various narrative versions since his first appearance in Detective Comics. Each story featuring the Joker adheres to the detective fiction model, aiming to reestablish law and order in a clear and literal sense. Neale suggests that the narrative gap left by crime is marked by ambiguity and misdirection, which he terms red herrings (Neale 1980, 43). Although traditional Hollywood crime films have long depicted themes of self-assertion, modern crime films increasingly portray powerless individuals, burdened by challenges originating from societal issues, which they are compelled to confront and resolve on their own (García-Mainar 2009, 10).

In this context, Batman represents the archetype of the "dark detective." He is deeply rooted in a patriarchal society but distinguishes himself from hegemonic masculinity by becoming enmeshed in the chaos and disorder of Gotham as a vigilante. Zoltán Dragon observes that the hard-boiled detective is deeply immersed in the unfolding events, participating in the confrontations, even though they are committed to the ethical mission, they remain somewhat obscured (Dragon 2008, 56). In contrast, the Joker, with his enigmatic nature, disrupts the order, showcasing the detective's fragility and the social order he strives to restore, ultimately embodying the very challenge Batman faces. This interplay is evident in *The Dark Knight* (2008), where both characters challenge dominant ideals while portraying a bleak perspective on masculinity. This connects to the film noir aesthetic in *The Dark Knight*, as the detective genre catalyzed the film noir sub-genre (Neale 1980, 43). *The Dark Knight*'s framework reveals its crime/noir origins. James Naremore argues that Hollywood noir films were produced to encapsulate the modernist atmosphere of the 1940s (Naremore 2019, 32). In his view, American

film noir reflects various facets of modernity, such as an interest in subjectivity and diverse perspectives, unconventional time progression, a departure from genteel rhetoric, critiques of modernity, explicit sexuality, and anxieties surrounding women (Naremore 2019, 32). While these themes seem to concentrate on men's issues, they subtly reveal the social expectations of American masculinity as the noir protagonists confront modern anxieties, which add another layer of complexity to their relationships with women. In film noir, women are key in normalizing men's struggles with identity and moral conflicts (Marzini 2016, 12). For example, *The Dark Knight* embodies film noir characteristics through the portrayal of Rachel Dawes as a lawyer. Although her role does not focus on saving the city from the Joker, her primary responsibility is to choose between Harvey and Bruce, thus reinforcing their masculinity. As a result, crime fiction serves as a valuable narrative space to investigate gender and power dynamics, focusing on the interactions between victims, perpetrators, and detectives; it examines themes of empowerment and disempowerment. Gender significantly shapes the interpersonal hierarchies in crime fiction, highlighting conventional power imbalances associated with race and class (Münderlein 2024, 3).

Furthermore, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, American cinema has markedly produced a plethora of crime films that poignantly depict men wrestling with trauma and emotional vulnerability, often portraying them as national heroes. This thematic exploration is evident in films such as Jim Simpson's *The Guys* (2002), Jules and Gédéon Naudet's *9/11* (2002), Bill Guttentag and Robert D. Port's *Twin Towers* (2003), Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006), and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006). Additionally, notable entries include Mike Binder's *Reign Over Me* (2007), Allen Coulter's *Remember Me* (2010), and Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011). This segment of these films supports Donnar's assertion (2020, 32) that post-9/11 films reflect "uniformed masculinity" as a form of protective masculinity, especially highlighting the positions of police and military within these narratives. Through his analysis of Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006), Donnar elucidates how the film provides a medium for American men to reevaluate their perceptions of masculinity amidst traumas. This cinematic work reinforces conventional ideals of masculinity, primarily those grounded in protection, articulating their value through its narrative structure and formal elements (2020, 45). This relationship between trauma and masculinity within the cinema serves not only to reflect societal values but also challenges men to embrace a more nuanced understanding of their roles in the wake of a national crisis. In a similar vein, Kimmel argues that:

> [t]he rehabilitation of heroic masculinity among the firefighters, police, and other rescue workers was immediate. [. . .] Even those few writers and pundits who managed to notice that there were female firefighters, police, and rescue workers among the heroes of 9-11 trumpeted the revival of traditional masculinity. [. . .] Real men were back— and we were safer for it. Some even proclaimed the crisis of masculinity over. (2006, 249)

Kimmel emphasizes the vital role of males in society, framing them as caretakers and guardians. He underscores the intricate relationship between heroism and hegemonic masculinity, highlighting how the resurgence of protective masculinity—characterized by power and masculine domination—enhances the effectiveness of his thesis. Furthermore, Wheeler Winston Dixon observes that solidarity-themed films briefly emerged in Hollywood in the wake of the attacks; however, studios quickly shifted back to producing lucrative blockbusters that centered on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (2004, 116). This trend aligns with the research by scholars such as Jeffords (1989), who propose a significant correlation between masculinity and warfare, noting that masculinity thrives in male-dominated environments, particularly within the military (Kiliçarslan 2009, 101). Historically, filmmakers have consistently prioritized representations of masculinity in war films, effectively sustaining a social hierarchy based on male supremacy and shaping American cultural ideology (Kiliçarslan 2009, 101). This speaks to the broader concept that soldiers' physical prowess and their capacity for violence are seen as embodiments of prevailing masculinity.

Another aspect of masculinity-related issues arises within a subgenre essential for analyzing *Joker* (2019), a psychological thriller. This subgenre gained traction in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Aguado 2002, 165). I believe Phillips's Joker is undoubtedly a psychological thriller. This type of crime film is characterized by its portrayal of heightened paranoia that strains the family as an institution, alongside the emergence of a "monstrous" (mentally disturbed) figure—a psychokiller who threatens family members within these narratives (Aguado 2002, 165-166). These elements underscore the embodiment of the Joker in this film, reflecting masculine struggles to navigate hegemonic ideals in interpersonal relationships. This subgenre allows the Joker in Phillips's rendition to exemplify masculinity not through control and domination as seen in the prior films, but rather from a marginalized perspective, elucidating how masculinity in crisis is influenced by macro-level factors such as economic and moral decline, as well as micro-level issues surrounding the construction of masculinity within the family. All of this aligns with the thriller genre's aim to uncover human frailties, horrors, and our worst capabilities.

Ultimately, the Joker films delve into various subgenres of the crime genre to depict the multifaceted nature of masculinity in crisis. Whether situated within noir, antihero crime, or psychological thrillers, the Joker consistently emerges as a disruptive force. While he also occupies a space within the superhero genre—an aspect I will elaborate on in the following subsection—he fundamentally represents the destabilizing element that challenges existing orders and norms.

3.2.3. Superhero Masculinity

Fintan Walsh (2010), along with several scholars examining the American masculinity issue, contends that national crises and trauma are invariably followed by stages of remasculinization (9). Stephen J. Ducat extends this idea by suggesting that 9/11 afforded America a chance for cultural remasculinization, revitalizing heroic manhood (2004, 227). Richard Sparks further examines the process of remasculinization, asserting that the reproduction of heroic films facilitates the transmission and perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity (1996, 350). In her book *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Jeffords (1989) contends that 1980s blockbusters such as *Rocky*, the *Terminator* series, and *Rambo* fostered an increase in macho masculinity in the United States. Donnar's examination of post-9/11 movies corresponds with this pattern of thoughts. He asserts that post-9/11 cinema underwent a phase of remasculinization, characterized by increased violence and a focus on the hero's physical suffering as a pathway to redemption (2020, 10). Mark Gallagher, who studied the representation of masculinity in post-9/11 Hollywood action films, agrees with this assessment, noting that these films have "exaggerated, fantasy settings in which issues surrounding masculinity are raised and resolved" (2006, 5). Gallagher argues that the risks to masculinity in both work and home environments are counterbalanced by cinematic representations of "male action" (2006, 3).

In his book, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, Jeffrey Brown states, "Just as *Rambo* questioned whether he was 'allowed to win this time?' when contemplating a return to Vietnam, *The Avengers* illustrate that through superheroes, the nation is permitted to vicariously triumph over 9/11 this time" (2016, 76). Movies such as *Spider-Man* (2002) *The Iron Man* (2008), Christopher Nolan's *Batman* Trilogy consisting of *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), as well as *The Avengers* (2012), made deliberate efforts to restore confidence in American dominant masculinity by portraying heroes with a realistic and achievable form of manliness confronting terrorism in particular. Peabody captures this notion with a succinct summary, stating

Power and violence remain synonymous traits in the superhero genre, as superheroes use their powers to cause violence to their enemies. It is probably no surprise, then, that superheroes who use power (and subsequently violence) to fight those enemies and 'protect the innocent' (presumably 'weak' women, children, and men) might be classified as 'masculine.' (2012, 7)

Hollywood has deliberately aimed to resurrect traditional masculinity in American culture through superhero and action films. This effort seeks to enhance faith in American exceptionalism and greatness while diverting attention from the nation's shortcomings. Furthermore, technological advancements have a significant influence on the representation of masculinity in contemporary superhero films, challenging established norms. Examining masculinity in Marvel and DC superhero films highlights how these heroic characters embody hegemonic masculinity (Panda and Bandyopadhyay, 2024, 119). These superheroes are characterized by traits such as emotional control, physical strength, aggression, moral certainty, and control (Panda and Bandyopadhyay, 2024, 119).

The Joker disrupts superhero narratives, mirroring societal anxieties of the real world. My dissertation emphasizes his significance in post-9/11 anxiety while examining his enduring role as a disruptor and cultural performer. Originating from a 1940 sketch by J. Robinson (Nahtmane 2017, 16), this character resists being confined to a single storyline, much like the function of the card. Metaphorically, he serves as an empty narrative vessel that embodies various crises, making him a captivating figure in popular culture. Unlike traditional heroes who advocate for ideals like justice, order, and protection, the Joker's fluidity precludes a fixed origin, ethical stance, or stable identity. This fluidity enables me to analyze masculinity in crisis as depicted in the films in which he appears in. His designation as the "Crown Prince of Crime" isn't an innate identity but one he develops through his actions that innovatively subvert social order. Throughout various media, the Joker consistently represents moral decay and the deterioration of societal norms. He is not merely a character responding to crises; he embodies the crisis itself. This is why he performs the crisis through his masculinity, internalizes it based on his societal standing, and critiques it through his actions and speech.

In this context of shifting away from merely portraying hegemonic ideals, where significant crises within society demand more attention, Judith Butler's analysis in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* critiques the American social response to crises by developing a new idealized vision of masculinity.

> [a] sovereign and extra-legal subject, violent and self-centered subject; […] that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of multilateral relations, its ties to the international community. Its shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features 'other to' itself. (2004, 41)

In this passage, Butler examines her country's unconventional and unexpected reactions to the injured and traumatized American male. She argues that this recent portrayal of masculinity does not accurately reflect genuine suffering; instead, it serves merely as a superficial layer aimed at improving America's standing on the world stage. Butler posits that the remasculinization of the United States fails to promote national cohesion; instead, it serves to marginalize vulnerable individuals, especially those who are non-hegemonic and female, effectively distancing them from societal norms and the nation at large. While I do not perceive it as a total disregard for the national trauma, as previously discussed regarding cinematic productions that demonstrated empathy toward emotional vulnerabilities following the attacks, I maintain that the remasculinization in this context pertains to the exaggerated representation in cinema and films that underscores the concept of hegemonic or idealized masculinity, especially through the portrayal of superheroes. This remasculinization is fundamentally focused on characteristics including physical strength, endurance, and hypermasculinity. I will examine the evolution of cinema in its approach to representing masculine issues, shifting away from obscuring them behind themes of heroism.

Considering the limitations of remasculinization and the emphasis on hegemonic ideals that frequently glorified violence, Hollywood has entered a post-remasculinization phase in American cinema. This transition moves from conventional heroic franchises towards more nuanced portrayals that feature marginalized individuals as main characters, including criminals and complex figures. It showcases alternative forms of masculinity that demand careful examination, highlighting the realization that the hypermasculine hero does not adequately embody the varied expressions of masculinity found among Americans. Michael Beverland argues that the 21st-century has seen a significant shift in popular culture's fascination with the antihero genre, influenced by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror (2018, 148). Daalmans et al. (2013) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the antihero genre in American literature, focusing on films produced between 1985 and 2012. The examination of their content revealed a steady decline in morally virtuous protagonists, paralleled by a rise in ethically ambiguous characters, peaking around 2010. Tara Perreault (2023) noted a reduction in moral actions from the 1970s to the 2010s, with positive behaviors falling to 56% at the start of the

2020s, reflecting a consistent decline in moral actions over the past 50 years. I support my arguments with these studies to discuss the trend of increased morally ambiguous films in cinema, particularly noting that this trend peaked around 2010.

Amanda Lotz's *Cable Guys* (2014), for instance, examines the same trend regarding television programs as I do. Lotz (2014) examines how these television characters navigate their departure from the conventional masculine norms in contemporary American society. She asserts that a prevalent motif in modern cable dramas is a protagonist who contests conventional definitions of masculinity while grappling with the identity of an ideal man (Lotz 2014, 57). Initially, these males assert that the subjugation of women does not render a man hegemonic nor resolve the issue (Lotz 2014, 58). She refrains from employing the term "masculinity in crisis" in this situation, as the protagonists of male-centric serials frequently receive an opportunity to articulate their apprehensions regarding the societal constraints encountered while navigating their gender roles in contemporary society (Lotz 2014, 60). Given that the literary definition of an antihero is a man "lacking nobility and magnanimity," she opts to designate these central characters as "flawed protagonists" instead, as they do not lack attributes commonly associated with a hero, such as "courage, honesty, or grace" (Lotz 2014, 60). She insists that they be seen as protagonists, as they are central to the series and exhibit considerable courage in their struggle for their cause (Lotz 2014, 60).

However, this premise is not entirely new or limited to the post-9/11 period. It is quite common that following cultural shifts and national crises, Hollywood and national television have sought to illuminate the changes taking place in real life. This trend is not a recent development; as Martin Norden clarifies, from the late 1970s through the 1990s, Hollywood, a key influencer of American popular culture, focused on demonic anti-heroes who exist outside the conventional boundaries of good and evil, evoking both terror and awe in audiences or simply providing entertainment (2007, 89). Antiheroes provide valuable insights into the complexities of social environments, often revealing concealed motivations behind their malevolent actions. As central characters, they typically possess less power or knowledge than the audience or traditional hero archetypes, highlighting themes of subjugation, dissatisfaction, and absurdity (Frye 2006, 151). As Shafer and Raney write, antiheroes are "criminal but redeemable," frequently portrayed as "forces of good" in many narratives despite their malign deeds (2012, 1030). The antihero is frequently characterized in contrast to the conventional hero, who is recognized for performing heroic acts (Curley 2008, 174). They frequently act as disruptors, undermining heroic ideals through unconventional attitudes and actions (Curley 2018, 175).

In her analysis of the representation of American masculinity in crisis within the television series *Breaking Bad*, Annus (2021) associates the damaged American archetype with the post-9/11 era, during which most American characters were perceived as being in crisis following the national trauma inflicted by the attacks. She contends that the protagonist, Walter White, is perceived by numerous scholars not as a hero but rather as an individual who fails to reclaim his hegemonic status, embodying "damaged goods, destined to failure, along with all the other men of his generation" (32). Similarly, Jaspreet K. Nijjaar (2019) coined the term "mutated masculinities" to describe the flawed masculinity of television characters Ray Donovan in *Ray Donovan* and Jax in *Sons of Anarchy.* Nijjaar contends that both shows depict narratives centered on men within social stratifications and hierarchies, offering insights into the imperatives of hegemonic masculinity as masculinity in crisis in North America may not apply to other periods or contexts (2019, 36). All of these characters, despite their moral deficiencies, were seen as hyphenated heroes by the end of the film. They functioned as conventional protagonists, where trauma, difficulties, and heroism intertwined, adding depth to their characterizations and vividly reflecting the complexities of life after 9/11 through their stories. In contrast, in the film *Suicide Squad,* the squad of evil criminals acted as antiheroes. While they contributed to resolving the crisis, they did not transform into traditional heroes. Their participation in Amanda Waller's governmental mission stemmed from promises of personal rewards upon its successful completion, indicating that their motives were still rooted in greed rather than selfless heroism. However, the Joker, within these narratives, escapes from the squad and does not accept participation in the mission. Nevertheless, he acts as a villain, as his pursuit of Harley undermines their mission, illustrating his role in thwarting their efforts, even if he does not assist Enchantress. Nevertheless, the concept of the villain as protagonist warrants further examination, as Mike Alsford (2006) delineates the distinction between hero and villain: the hero endeavors to save the world through extraordinary abilities, whereas the villain seeks power to dominate, manipulate, alter the rules, and coerce (2006, 39-40). The Joker's morals and actions, though profoundly rooted in a destructive persona, nonetheless garnered attention as a protagonist and emerged as a central figure in post-9/11 cinema. This portrayal provides a more nuanced perspective on various issues, which captured my interest.

The villain is viewed as a figure lacking moral integrity, subverting the protagonist's endeavors; however, in the context of masculinity, I contend that their rejection of traditional masculine values goes beyond merely seeking dominance within the current paradigm, instead revealing a profound disillusionment with it. Nicole Rafter (2000, 49) explains that criminality emerges from four distinct domains: 1) criminalistic subcultures or other situational factors, 2)

psychopathy or mental illness, 3) aspirations for a better life, 4) bad biology, "badly born" or inherent biological villains. This observation leads us to conclude that many villains grapple with profound psychological struggles or a diminished acceptance of their true selves. Their troubled masculinity reflects their malevolent characteristics and their inability to embrace those who embody virtue. Perhaps it is due to a perception of inadequacy or an inability to emulate their qualities. Their inability to adhere to standards of virtue or traditional masculine norms merits examination in the context of their fractured sense of masculinity.

Jithin Varghese (2020) suggests that audiences are frequently drawn to liminal antiheroes and villains because of the connection they establish with the era of their initial emergence. She illustrates her point by referencing the Joker, who debuted in the 1940s when gangster films were highly popular. In Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman*, the Joker emerged as a character adapted to consumer culture, recognizing that disruption could lead to chaos. This reimagining of 1980s cinema highlighted the interplay between chaos and commercialism (2020, 145). Varghese observes that the 2019 version encapsulates the anxieties and conflicts arising from the disintegration of societal norms and the skepticism towards emerging alternative structures, contrasting with the 2008 version, which addressed the chaos following 9/11 and elicited a cathartic response (2020, 145). This demonstrates the role of the cinematic Joker as a cultural barometer, representing and mirroring the dominant social issues prevalent during its time of production. The following section will examine his roots in Western culture. The narrative traces his evolution from a European Vice figure—acting as a court jester and ominous clown—to a carnivalesque rebel, culminating in the emergence of an American Joker that embodies chaos and rebellion.

3.3. Becoming a Villain: The Joker's Background and Evolution

The Joker is a ubiquitous character that has been reiterated in several versions, starting from its first appearance in Bill Finger and Bob Kane's "Detective Comics# 27, the comic series" (1939). The Joker is an iconic villain who has evolved over several decades across various media, including comic books, television, and film. His persona is closely linked to malevolence, typically portrayed through madness, aggressive frenzy, and random acts of violence. The Joker is widely recognized in mainstream culture, where he is frequently portrayed as Batman's adversary. He is regarded as an immortal agent of chaos, disrupting the established order. The Joker is described as a mass-murdering clown lacking any empathy, and he is even referred to as a domestic terrorist (Camp et al. 2010, 145-146). Similarly, Miller (1991) states that:

> The Joker is not so much a Doppelgänger as an antithesis, a force for chaos. Batman imposes his order in the world; he is an absolute control freak. The Joker is Batman's most maddening opponent. He represents the chaos Batman despises, the chaos that killed his parents. […] In a way, the Joker is a homophobic nightmare. (Miller in Sharrett, 36)

This statement positions the Joker as not only Batman's narrative opposition but also to the norms that Batman follows. By identifying himself as Batman's antagonist, he is positioning himself as someone who openly opposes figures of authority. The Joker is a deceptive character that combines elements of both "human and animal, man and woman, good and bad" (Hastrup and Ovesen 1976, 13).

The Joker serves as a trickster and social destabilizer, often ridiculing authority and employing theatrical transgression to reveal societal pressures through humor and irony (Richardson 2020, 43). His resistance to capture and his ability to create new possibilities stem from his willingness to break taboos. This characteristic is reflected in various origin stories, where he is depicted stealing the sun, liberating humanity, and granting fire (Richardson 2020, 43). In contrast to the conventional trickster, who typically uses humor to critique social anxieties, the Joker's brand of humor is darker and more detrimental. Consider another iconic trickster, Loki, from the Marvel universe. Unlike the Joker, who embodies chaos without a redemptive goal, Loki hails from a royal Asgardian lineage. He is a fixed character with a well-defined past and clear motivation—namely, the pursuit of power. While Loki's role aligns with his family's aspirations and social position, the Joker exists within a crisis, illustrating social anxieties without any aim for redemption, embodying an environment saturated with turmoil rather than resolution.

Furthermore, and long before the Joker emerged in American comics and films, the rebellious, cunning clown character had its roots in English morality plays, particularly represented by the figure known as the Vice. Zsófia Anna Tóth describes the Vice as the quintessential "humorous Homme Fatal" (2011, 124). Traditionally, the Vice symbolized malevolence, acting as a stand-in for the devil during the Tudor and Renaissance periods. This character epitomized villainy, embodying nearly every form of evil imaginable. A. W. Pollard acknowledged the term's "obvious etymology," while the New Cambridge edition of Richard III refers to it as "Vice, a comic character in the old Morality plays; also termed 'Iniquity'" (as quoted in Mares 1958, 11). The concept of "iniquity" suggests ideas of inequity, unfairness, and disorder, alluding to a breakdown of law and order. This idea closely parallels the Joker's role in the DC universe, where he personifies chaos and societal disruption. His captivating presence

and magnetic charm resonate with the characteristics of the Vice. Ágnes Matuska notes that Vice's comedic aspects make him "appealing, despite being evil" (2011, 2). Similarly, Daniel Wallace attributes the Joker's allure to the performative elements of his character. He argues that "If it is not spectacularly theatrical, it's boring, and the [Joker's] audience might fail to see the humor in the horror" (2011, 105). The spectacle and dark humor blend form a key link between the Joker and his historical precursor, the Vice.

The Vice, frequently seen as the master of ceremonies, is characterized as "a tempter, a mischievous, humorous villain" and serves as a crucial figure in morality plays (Matuska 2005, 1). He presents a multifaceted character that intertwines elements of comedy with a darker, more malevolent essence. On stage, he functions as both an entertainer and a disruptor, dismantling the unseen barrier that separates actors from audiences (Matuska 2005, 1). Similarly, Tóth observes that the Vice frequently embodies a complex and dualistic character, displaying intelligence, cunning, and humor that enhance his allure to audiences (2011). Moreover, Francis Hugh Mares articulates that the Vice "seems to soften to be outside the moral law. He is not evil disguised as good as the conventional morality explanation would lead one to expect, but does both good and evil 'Haphazardly'" (1958, 14). In this context, since the Vice is not inherently evil, he does not inevitably face punishment—a characteristic that aligns with the Joker's narrative, as he often triumphs despite his violent nature. The link is clear in that the Vice reflects the original qualities of the Joker, implying that the Joker can be seen as a contemporary representation of the Vice. Like the Vice, the Joker exhibits traits of both a fool and an outlaw, operating outside the confines of conventional moral frameworks. He is often depicted as a figure who completely ignores moral principles, symbolizing chaos without a definitive allegiance to either good or evil.

The Joker, renowned as the comic's Clown Prince of Crime, first appeared in the 1940s. Throughout the Golden Age, which lasted from the 1940s to the 1950s, he was depicted chiefly as a criminal obsessed with killing Batman, a goal he achieved across the multiverse (Nahtmane 2017, 16). However, during the Silver Age, which unfolded from the 1950s to the 1960s, Batman reemerged in the comics, leading to the Joker's decline as a theatrically violent character due to censorship from the Comic Code Authority (Nahtmane 2017, 17). These restrictions addressed the depiction of explicit content in films, covering themes like vulgarity, adultery, prostitution, seduction, rape, sexual deviations, pornography, homosexuality, slavery, obscenity, incest, illicit sexual activities, interracial relationships, the portrayal of venereal diseases, sexual health, childbirth, violence against children and animals, murder brutality, and explicit depictions of crime and revenge (Cristian and Dragon 2007, 128). This censorship diminished

the Joker's essence as a dark criminal; even though he employs humor, the core of his character revolves around crime and ridicule. However, during the Bronze Age, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the Joker was given his own comic series, offering narratives from his perspective where he battled superheroes (Nahtmane 2017, 17).

Notably, this period also saw the Joker's first cinematic adaptation in Leslie H. Martinson's Batman: *The Movie* (1966), portrayed by Cesar Romero. This film features characters that fit the era's stereotypes, with Batman depicted as the heroic archetype—strong, intelligent, and morally upright—while the Joker serves as the villain, obstructing Batman's noble mission. The 1966 characterization does not reflect serious social issues, instead showcasing a humorous tone and staged performances aimed at a younger audience. Initially created for children, particularly boys, Batman's audience has since expanded (Dantzler 2009, 8). In contrast, Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) presents a more compelling Joker, played by Jack Nicholson, who evolves from comic to quintessential Hollywood villain and leader of Gotham City's underworld. This film prioritizes Batman's portrayal over the Joker's, ultimately highlighting Batman as a representation of the American male's ambivalence—fierce in familial protection yet vulnerable in personal aspirations.

The Joker appears to have several identities and backstories that can be analyzed from different viewpoints. This concept aligns with Henry Jenkins's transmedia storytelling theory. However, rather than adhering to the conventional approach of transmedia storytelling, where all media contribute to a unified storyworld, these products often feature "rebooted" versions of the character, presented in narratively distinct retellings of the story (as cited in Szántó 2024, 48). The Joker is

> [p]erhaps one of the most bizarre and terrifying villains to descend upon the comic book city of Gotham in the last seventy-five years. He has committed robberies in which he escaped via pogo stick, kidnapped cartoonists, poisoned Gotham's water supply threatened city officials with a giant explosive birthday cake, and committed multiple counts of mass murder. Yet despite his offenses, he has become one of the most recognizable and influential characters in pop culture today. A simple search on the website Amazon.com provides testament to his appeal by resulting in over 30,000 different Joker related items including toys, Halloween costumes, Christmas ornaments and articles of clothing for men, women, and children. This number of merchandising opportunities does not include the numerous other online storefronts dedicated strictly to pop-culture apparel and collectibles. (Ewald 2017, 1-2)

This quote highlights the widespread appeal of the Joker, illustrating how he has become a cultural commodity due to the success of both comic books and cinematic films. Bálint Szántó (2024) examined a similar transmedial narrative evolution within the character of Spider-Man,

arguing that this narrative shift, along with the approaches he outlines, suggests a significant level of interactivity between the narrative and its audience (Szántó 2024, 52). Szántó attributes this phenomenon to the norms of commercial filmmaking (2024, 56). Similarly, West establishes a link between this diversity and market demands, acknowledging that the representation of the Joker is shaped by artistic and editorial decisions that resonate with a specific cultural context. The character of the Joker continually evolves, influenced not only by individual creators—writers, designers, and artists—but also by the community and the media through which he is consumed (West 2020, 11).

In this context, Guerric Debona analyzed Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), describing the Joker as an anarchist who threatens the established cultural power structure referred to as the canonical order (1997, 58). Additionally, she argues that Batman embodies Wayne's ideal self, while the Joker represents anarchy, making the cultural versus anarchic allegory particularly clear (Debona 1997, 57). Exploring the Joker's anarchist persona reveals his non-conformist masculinity, highlighting broader societal conflicts regarding modern American masculinity. He appears as a character who challenges and disrupts hegemonic masculinity. Understanding the chaotic nature of his character is crucial for the fourth chapter, where I examine the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008). I analyze how Nolan's portrayal implies that the Joker's masculinity experiences rejection and stigma due to his unwillingness to adhere to unstable governing principles. I refer to his anarchic masculinity, stressing that the Joker embodies the concept of masculinity in crisis as depicted by Nolan. This notion contests established societal norms, authority figures, and economic conditions affecting individuals like him. His masculinity serves as a tool to interrogate, critique, and undermine conventional social norms and expectations of manhood.

In their exploration of the Joker's origins, Anna-Sophie Jürgens, David Tscharke, and Jochen Brocks highlight that the character's iconography—particularly his white, skull-like face, and exaggerated (painted or flesh-colored) mouth—can be traced back to American cinema (2022, 689). They contend that the portrayal of the Joker was influenced by Conrad Veidt's performance as a traveling comedian with a pronounced, unending grin in the 1928 film *The Man Who Laughs*, directed by Paul Leni (2022, 689). Will Brooker notes that the Joker's "cultural background" derives from American culture, establishing him as inherently American (2000, 49). Additionally, the Joker, being a product of American culture, has influenced how his creators represented him, particularly in the context of adhering to stereotypes of distorted, carnivalesque villains like the Penguin or Scarecrow (Jürgens, Tscharke, and Brocks 2022, 689).

My overarching assertion is that the Joker represents a man undergoing a crisis, influenced by his social environment. This perspective considers the multiple interpretations of the character, each showcasing different aspects of American masculinity in turmoil. As West notes, the Joker is defined, not by past experiences, but by the culmination of what has just happened immediately in the ephemeral now (2020, 61). From this, we can see that the Joker embodies a persistently dissociated self, connecting him to both everything and nothing at once. Analyzing the Joker's portrayal in *Suicide Squad* (2016) will reveal how he dismantles his identity in his pursuit of control, especially over Harley Quinn, a concept I label as "dissociative masculinity."

To further analyze his nature, the Joker embodies a clown and jester from an underprivileged background. Bakhtin argues that clowns and fools are intrinsically linked to the essence of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin describes clowns as the "lawless herald[s] of the objectively abstract truth" (1984a, 93). He posits that the clown played a crucial function in the medieval carnival as he carried the concealed truth, expressed through a comical demeanor. The clown's profession was perceived as innocuous amusement, ensuring that it did not disrupt the established social hierarchy or present a danger to those in authority (Bakhtin 1984a, 93). The Joker can be interpreted as a modern representation of medieval clowns and fools, as he upholds the tradition of the carnival ambiance through his actions and personality. However, he is not just any clown but belongs to the category of bad clowns, as defined by Benjamin Radford (2016, 26). These clowns, characterized by their wicked nature, embody a unique blend of horror and humor that may seem contradictory (Radford 2016, 26). Notably, clownish figures like the Joker transform the stereotypical comedic clown into a more frightening entity through their gestures and manipulation, spreading fear instead of laughter with their own unsettling laughter.

The character of the Joker has long been the subject of research to determine whether violence and evil are fundamental traits of his or merely a façade. He is widely recognized for his flamboyant and exaggerated exhibition of his actions as a performer. Daniel Moseley contends that the Joker's acts of violence, consistent with his clown-like nature, are executed with a sense of theatricality and performance (2009, 132). The Joker's rejection of conventional morality and justice is a key component of his carnivalesque persona (Moseley 2009, 132). The Joker endeavors to challenge authority figures only to demonstrate his capability to cause threats without ulterior motives. However, Moseley argues that the Joker cannot be considered "morally ignorant" solely based on his hideous, inherently bad acts. Instead, he claims the following:

The Joker presents a character that one might call a moral monster: moral monsters know that what they are doing is wrong, but they go ahead and do it anyway. Moral monsters knowingly choose to do things that are evil. Moreover, moral monsters are different than sociopaths. Sociopaths have no conception of right and wrong: they have no conscience. By contrast, moral monsters have a corrupt conscience. (2009, 130)

Being characterized as a moral monster with a distinct purpose is similar to the objective of the carnivalesque, which seeks to upset the established order deliberately rather than randomly for the sake of being malevolent. As a carnivalesque character, the Joker exhibits a profound understanding of moral distinctions, and he intentionally defies conventional rules due to his inherently chaotic nature. Moreover, labeling the Joker as a monster and a clown accentuates the intrinsic repulsiveness and imaginative nature of clowns. Noël Carroll observes that "the clown is a monster…. It is a fantastic being […] they [clowns] also possess a physical resiliency conjoined with muscular and cognitive dysfunctionalities that mark them off as imaginary species" (Carroll as cited in Radford 2016, 29). Clowns possess extraordinary physical characteristics, which emphasize their peculiar physicality in contrast to conventional standards. Their deficiencies in both muscular and cognitive functions accentuate their distorted and marginalized expression of masculinity. Combining these elements is essential for characterizing them as hideous beings that challenge the established hierarchy. In analyzing Arthur in *Joker* (2019), one observes his deliberate challenge to and mockery of conventional ideas surrounding masculinity. I choose the typology of carnivalesque masculinity, a notion that stems from Bakhtin's theory of the carnival. Bakhtin delineates the carnival as a domain where social hierarchies are temporarily suspended and established norms are reversed. This thesis explores how the Joker deliberately undermines conventional masculinity by rejecting societal norms and crafting his own warped identity. Arthur Fleck's embodiment of flamboyant masculinity is evident in numerous facets. At first glance, his flamboyant and hyperbolic persona after transforming into the Joker represents a defiance of the conventional and subdued masculinity often expected in societal norms. He embraces a dramatic expression of masculinity that challenges established norms, choosing to partake in laughter and dance in the face of adversity, thereby upending the typical gravity and restraint linked to conventional masculinity. Despite being fictitious, the Joker holds considerable cultural significance in the United States since he represents the changing masculinity in crisis in various periods in which he appears.

After introducing the Joker character through history and laying the groundwork for his role in 21st-century narratives, Chapter 4 will begin my analytical part of the dissertation with

an examination of *The Dark Knight* (2008). In this film, the Joker fiercely opposes order, hegemony, and capitalism, representing the struggle within American masculinity. This chapter aims to illuminate this embodiment of the crisis and explore the underlying issues and critiques that arise from it.

Chapter 4. Anarchic Masculinity in *The Dark Night* (2008)

Christopher Nolan's 2008 representation of the Joker stands out as one of the most exceptional character adaptations from comics to film. In *The Dark Knight*, the stark contrasts of good versus evil, chaos versus order, and justice versus anarchy highlight the disparities between Batman and the Joker, representing two distinctly opposing masculinities. Through his furious behavior towards the social paradigm, the Joker further illustrates traits of masculinity in crisis. I argue that he spread disorder and anarchy as a deliberate form of rebellion against traditional standards, a choice I view as deeply intentional rather than random. His anarchistic viewpoint sheds light on a space where men facing crises reject the limitations of established roles and ideals, perceiving them as burdens instead of affirmations. My approach is grounded in analyzing anarchy as a political concept that denotes disorder and its original meaning. Here, I refer to anarchy as "the condition of society in which there is no ruler" (Barclay 1982, 13) to illustrate the Joker's desire for a lawless city where his philosophy could prevail through violence.

Randall Amster presents a nuanced understanding of anarchy, explaining that the common conceptualization of anarchy leads to the idea of a "rejection of the state" (2018, 18). He claims that anarchy, as an ideology, aims to deconstruct hierarchy in a broader sense, which is a hallmark of the anarchist idea (Amster 2018, 15). As an ideology, anarchism is "a radical political and social philosophy that advocates the elimination of all oppressive hierarchies and authority, particularly those found within the institutions of the state, capitalism, patriarchy, White supremacy, bureaucracy, militarism, and environmental domination" (Williams 2009, 190). This systemic dysfunction aligns with Williams' broad perspective that anarchy and anarchism stem from the government's inability to gain its citizens' trust. However, I contend that this viewpoint is not the most effective method to address social inequalities or opposition to government policies. Nonetheless, The Joker regards himself as a champion of chaos and anarchy, viewing anarchy through a terrorist lens, which he asserts, thus identifying with this role.

I define anarchic masculinity as a form that deconstructs traditional structures such as law and family, while also refuting idealized physical standards. The Joker's anarchic

masculinity sharply contrasts with hegemonic masculinity, both challenging and illustrating its defining characteristics. However, being anarchic is not just about describing actions; it encompasses the collective elements of his identity as a man—his power, dominance, emotions, and body. My goal is not only to examine his behavioral shifts but also to investigate how his masculine identity directly opposes the hegemonic ideals of American masculinity. His anarchic masculinity symbolizes various expressions of masculinity in turmoil. In this film, the Joker exhibits minimal interaction with women and refrains from displaying toxic behavior or exerting control over them. However, as a criminal, he demonstrates no differentiation between genders and is capable of inflicting harm and chaos upon anyone to instigate anarchy in Gotham. Although he is indifferent to morals, his stance towards women appears neutral, indicating his reluctance to participate in the patriarchal system while simultaneously seeking to undermine the external hegemony of males. While I do not contend that the Joker is an advocate of women's rights, it is crucial to examine his engagement with the patriarchal system.

The Joker exemplifies this anarchic masculinity further by embodying an anti-heroic stance against those claiming to be Gotham's heroes, including Batman. Anarchic masculinity disrupts power dynamics, challenging state supremacy through figures like the Joker. Men who hold this masculinity reject justice, viewing order as an illusion and morality as a means to enforce emotional weakness. This view stems from anger towards the government and society, which scapegoats external factors while ignoring personal responsibility. I consider that anarchic masculinity is inherently anti-capitalist, as it rejects the conventional pursuit of wealth and aims to dismantle the entire economic system. This approach seeks to reduce the structure to a baseline, eliminating advantages for the wealthy to promote equality. Unlike traditional views of masculinity linked to power and control, the Joker is motivated not by a desire for dominance but by the thrill of witnessing anarchy in action. Anarchic masculinity challenges established norms of manhood, demonstrating that these norms often impose restrictions, while anarchy represents true freedom.

This chapter focuses on three points: the Joker's rejection and reaction to hegemonic traits of masculinity, the capitalist critique inherent in Gotham's socioeconomic structure, and the Joker's representation of anarchic masculinity as an identity shaped by chaos. In the initial section, I examine how the Joker symbolizes American masculinity in crisis, marked by aggression and emotional instability arising from deficiencies in familial relationships and stability. In this film, it remains ambiguous whether the Joker truly lost his status as a middle-class man who was once hegemonic, as his character's origins are neither fully emphasized nor explained. Nevertheless, I maintain that he embodies a critique of masculinity, as he

consistently rejects societal norms and seeks to expose the flaws inherent in social conventionalities. I also emphasize the inherent contrast in the film between the character of Joker and the personas of Bruce Wayne and his alter ego, Batman. This contrast highlights the differences between the hegemonic masculinity represented by Bruce Wayne, Gotham's affluent entrepreneur, and the chaotic masculinity of the Joker. The Joker seeks to explore the behavior of a wounded American and the role of a terrorist in the post-9/11 context. This is significant because hegemonic masculinity exists only in contrast to other subordinated masculinities and femininities. Through this depiction, the Joker reveals to both the authorities and Batman, who represents the hero, the emotions of individuals who see themselves as threatened by social anxiety. This serves as a direct critique and rejection of the strategies employed by authorities to address public concerns while also anticipating appropriate responses from citizens during crises. The Joker is a character who rejects the principles of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasize strength, and virility. He capitalizes on his vulnerability, transforming disorder and chaos into instruments of resistance. Unlike traditional male heroes, the Joker does not seek power or dominance; instead, he critically examines moral frameworks, suggesting that ethics and cultural norms are constructs. He critiques the heroic masculinity of both Batman and the police by revealing vulnerabilities while expressing his own turmoil through his appearance, emotional detachment, and anarchic behavior.

The second section explores *The Dark Knight*'s portrayal of Gotham as a hyper-capitalist dystopia, reflecting a fractured New York City in the wake of 9/11. In this context, Gotham embodies the essence of capitalism, highlighting the economic disparities that burden its residents. The Joker's ideology underscores the stark contrasts between social classes, illuminating the wealth of the privileged few while the marginalized endure hardship and destitution. Meanwhile, the wealthy remain largely unscathed, a fact he exploits to reveal the troubling truths inherent in the capitalist system.

In this chapter's closing section, I examine the Joker as a figure of anarchic masculinity, intent on dismantling all authority and championing chaos, seeing himself as an agent of disruption. His rebellion directly challenges the moral foundation of Batman's heroism and, consequently, the prevailing masculine norms in society. This form of anarchy signifies a deliberate upheaval of the social order, showcasing masculinity in crisis that struggles to attain dominant traits while resisting societal norms and expectations. This chapter analyzes the Joker's role in *The Dark Knight* and investigates the changing dynamics of American masculinity. The Joker critiques the rigid expectations of American masculinity and illustrates that heroic masculinities do not necessarily represent the ideal standard. The chapter presents

the notion of anarchic masculinity, which characterizes the Joker's distorted masculinity as it opposes conventional masculine hierarchies in post-9/11 America. The masculinity in crisis is exemplified by the Joker's numerous failures and performance deficiencies that hinder his attainment of hegemony.

4.1. Breaking Away from American Hegemonic Masculinity

The Joker directly challenges the ideals of American hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes control and conformity, through his erratic behavior and contempt for authority. This creates a stark contrast with hegemonic masculinity and underscores the rigidity of social expectations. In the film, Batman represents heroism, striving to restore order by acting against a domestic terrorist who threatens the city. In contrast to Batman's commitment to Gotham's values, the Joker remains apathetic, perceiving the quest for justice and order as hypocritical. He positions himself as a challenger to both Batman's authority and the Gotham Police Department, revealing their shortcomings.

In contrast to other villains motivated by financial gain, the Joker did not concentrate on Bruce Wayne, the city's wealthiest individual, as a potential symbol of wealth; rather, he directed his efforts towards lawmaking figures, including the commissioner, the judge, and the mayor. His assaults are intentionally directed at public institutions, such as "Gotham General Hospital," a governmental entity, and a state bank, rather than private organizations. This decision signifies his intention to confront Gotham's public authority leaders rather than those in private power. In doing so, he aims to reveal the vulnerabilities and deficiencies of the city's social framework. He contests the notion of hegemonic masculinity, depicting it as unstable, delicate, and occasionally belligerent. The Joker intends to emphasize that those in authority must acknowledge the inherent flaws of individuals and themselves.

In the film, the Joker critiques and mocks authority figures while highlighting the masculinity in crisis experienced by those in power. I claim that the Joker ridicules heroic masculinity while revealing shortcomings in governance and security systems. For instance, in their attempt to assassinate the Mayor of Gotham at city hall, the Joker and his accomplices abduct several officers to join a parade disguised in police uniforms. This moment is striking, as Batman discovers the police officers, stripped of their uniforms, visibly unsettled and distressed, revealing their profound sense of loss over the absence of their emblematic attire. Donnar asserts that "police and military uniforms connote collective strength, social status, authority, reliability, self-control, and commitment," but fundamentally, they relate to "the idea of identity sustained" (2020, 33). He highlights the crucial role of military and police uniforms

in reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity of their wearers, especially in contrasting the dominant American male with the non-uniformed terror-Other, through the lens of 9/11 and the war on terror. I completely concur with Donnar's perspective; in this scene, the police transform from figures of authority to anxious individuals as soon as their uniforms are off. The Joker takes masculinity in a new direction by appropriating uniformed masculinity. It is intriguing how the uniform granted him a protective layer, an adopted hegemonic identity that enabled him to blend in despite the entire city awaiting his arrival. His scars and true self mattered little to those around him; they perceived only his outfit. Simply wearing the uniform conferred upon him an enhanced stature of power. This exemplifies the role of police officers, firemen, and the military in the post-9/11 era, where gender and class were irrelevant; what mattered was their collective recognition as heroes during attacks and the subsequent accolades they received. The uniform functions as a notable enhancement of masculinity in the post-9/11 era.

The Joker continues to expose the vulnerabilities of the security infrastructure, illustrating that the authorities must recognize their dominion is precarious. Marc DiPaolo argues that the Joker serves as a satire of Middle Eastern conflicts and governmental corruption, paralleling the manifesto of a terrorist that targets a contemporary American culture the villains find morally abhorrent (2011, 60). I align my view with DiPaolo's argument, as the film explicitly critiques the security system that led to the national crisis due to the government's failure to protect its population during the 2001 attacks. This analysis highlights how the Joker challenges the inherent flaws within Gotham's—and, by extension, America's—masculinity in crisis. The film provides a critical examination of a security apparatus that fails to protect its populace, reflecting the national weaknesses exposed during the September 11 attacks, when the government's confident assurances of safety were revealed to be tenuous. The film dramatizes this critique by depicting a schism between the police and military forces, with reports indicating that the National Guard had only been dispatched to safeguard Gotham after the hospital explosion (Nolan 2008, 01:54:44). The military's delayed response in the film highlights apprehensions about national security inadequacies, as intelligence agencies like the CIA and military intelligence were unable to safeguard against or foresee the attacks—despite their unpredictability—resulting in diminished public confidence in protective symbols and masculinity.

The Joker's deadly rampage in Gotham instills fear among the populace and the media. He openly menaces the city, compelling Batman and law enforcement to protect prominent figures and prevent further chaos. During an interrogation, the Joker questions a man named Brian, who models himself after Batman in the fight against crime. Brian argues that Batman

symbolizes bravery in the face of vile individuals like the Joker. When the Joker asks why Brian imitates him, Brian replies, "Batman is a symbol that we don't have to be afraid of scum like [the Joker]." The Joker chillingly responds, "Yeah. You do, Brian. You really do" (Nolan 2008, 00:42:47-00:42:54). He emphasizes that Gotham society cannot depend on symbolic heroism alone to eliminate fear or establish true order. He then turns the camera on himself, addressing Gotham directly: "You see, this is how crazy Batman's made Gotham. You want order in Gotham, Batman must take off his mask and turn himself in. Oh, and every day he doesn't, people will die. Starting tonight. I'm a man of my word" (Nolan 2008, 00:43:10-00:43:51). Through this, the Joker positions himself as a force that disrupts Gotham's reliance on a masked hero, demanding that the city confront the underlying instability of its ideals (Nolan 2008, 00:43:10-00:43:51).

Furthermore, Bruce Wayne's transformation into Batman highlights the inadequacy of Gotham's law enforcement. His alter ego suggests that hegemonic masculinity, defined by authority, wealth, and aggression as Connell (2005) argues, may not be enough to truly protect society or its values during national crises. Matthew Gallagher (2022) contends that the emergence of Batman stems from a need to create heroic masculinity in the United States during challenging times. He asserts that superhero masculinities are rooted in stereotypes of strong, aggressive males who employ redemptive violence to tackle social issues in their communities (2022, 7). Bruce Wayne's wealth, social status, and influence are not enough to save Gotham. He feels compelled to develop a more sinister, confrontational persona, wearing the mask to confront chaos head-on. This notion is reinforced when Lau, a crime lord under Gotham's alleged protection, confronts District Attorney Harvey Dent, stating, "You can't protect me. You can't even protect yourselves" (Nolan 2008, 00:53:41-00:53:43). Lau's statement reveals the vulnerability of Gotham's justice system, eroding any belief that traditional institutions of power can offer genuine security.

In his analysis, Chris Richardson (2021) discusses Batman and cites Craig Owens' research on James Bond as a symbol of popular culture (2005). Since both protagonists embody the dominant masculine values of their time, Richardson draws parallels between them. Owen argues that Bond becomes indistinguishable from the markers of his era as he adopts the stereotypically masculine traits of each period (as cited in Richardson 2021, 16). According to Richardson, James Bond represents "the emblem of dominant ideals of masculinity in each era"; however, Bruce Wayne is merely a simulacrum (2021, 16). He asserts that "the billionaire becomes a dead ringer for a real man based on meticulous study and deft mimicry" (Richardson 2021, 17). In this context, the distinction between hegemonic masculinity and heroic

masculinity emerges. Fearlessness and a commitment to justice are undoubtedly ideal traits of manhood that characterize heroic masculinity, exemplified by Batman. However, Batman's vigilantism raises questions about the viability of this ideal. In contrast, hegemonic masculinity relies on society's approval and consent, as explained by R.W. Connell (2005, 77). According to Damien Picariello, Gotham's citizens always doubted Batman as their hero; he explains that

> [i]n Batman Begins, maddened by drugs, they attack him; in *The Dark Knight*, they turn on him and reject his vigilantism, goaded by the Joker's threats; in *The Dark Knight Rises*, they collaborate with Bane in his faux-revolutionary project. But this is part and parcel of striving to better a flawed community. Batman does not let the fact that Gotham's citizens are sometimes bad stop him from trying to make the city good. (2019, 54-55)

Batman and Bruce Wayne illustrate different aspects of masculinity within this framework. Batman stands out as a remarkable hero, yet he does not necessarily represent hegemonic masculinity, which aims for social recognition and control. Conversely, Bruce Wayne, the man behind the mask, displays hegemonic qualities, aligning with cultural norms and expectations of masculinity. The character of Batman evolves, representing the fluid nature of masculinity and the ongoing transformation of ideals. This inherent flexibility allows for multiple interpretations, contributing to Batman's lasting appeal; writers can modify his character to suit various stories. Despite his efforts, Batman recognizes he is not the quintessential hero. Bruce confided in Rachel that he discovered the hero Gotham truly needs: "It's happening now. Harvey is that hero. He locked up half of the city's criminals, and he did it without wearing a mask. Gotham needs a hero with a face" (Nolan 2008, 00:45:55-00:46:05). Bruce asserts that Harvey Dent, Gotham's district attorney, embodies the authentic heroism the city requires, standing resolutely and openly without obscuring his identity or undermining the law. Bruce's faith in Harvey sharply contrasts with the Joker's denunciation of masked vigilantes. In this vein, William Berger states, "Batman is not obviously on the same side as law enforcement, let alone an officer of it. [...] Whereas Batman sees himself as an exemplar of the citizenry, the Joker casts him as aberrant and outside" (2019, 60-61). Bruce acknowledges the limitations of Batman as a symbol and views Harvey as an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. In a dinner scene, a Russian ballerina questions Bruce's upbringing in a city that idealizes masked vigilantes. Conversely, Dent believes Gotham values ordinary citizens standing up for what is right, famously stating that one can either die a hero or live long enough to see themselves become a villain (Nolan 2008, 00:20:25). I argue that this is exactly why the Joker wanted Gotham to see Batman's face; he aimed to prevent the citizens from being misled about the realities of their city. In the interrogation room, Batman asks the Joker if he wants to kill him.

The Joker responds that he does not want to, stating, "What would I do without you? […] You complete me" (Nolan 2008, 01:28:05-01:28:12). The Joker insinuates that Batman, who rigidly follows moral rules in Gotham and strives to maintain societal stability and security, is fundamentally opposed to the Joker's anarchic worldview. He suggests that his own existence is intrinsically linked to Batman's role as a rival.

Dent embodies the ideal hero that Gotham needs, a paragon who effectively captures Rachel's attention over Bruce. In the film, Rachel serves as a legitimizer of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005, Schippers 2007). The film illustrates that whichever Rachel ultimately chooses will experience a complete sense of masculinity. Bruce lacked the requisite strength as Batman, despite its capacity for control; he awaited the moment to abandon his mask and reunite with Rachel. Her femininity, characterized by a lack of rebellion and a little need for protection, elicited a sense of dominant manhood in both Bruce and Dent in her presence. Consequently, upon her demise, Alfred covered the truth that Rachel chose Dent over Bruce to save him from experiencing sadness and self-doubt over his masculinity. However, I maintain that Rachel lacked complete assurance with Bruce, as she recognized he would always be a man on a mission and consistently exposed to peril.

Dent represents a form of hegemonic masculinity that contrasts Batman's hypermasculine vigilantism or with Bruce's masculinity. Although Bruce doubts his authentic identity and masculinity, he chooses to construct a hyperbolic version of himself; in contrast, Harvey possesses a clear, legitimate, and reliable confidence in his own manhood. Nevertheless, the fact that half of Dent's face is severely disfigured illustrates that there is no such thing as monolithic masculinity, which is exactly what the Joker was trying to convey:

> Don't talk like one of them; you're not! Even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak, like me. They need you right now. But when they don't, they'll cast you out like a leper. You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these… civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve. (Nolan 2008, 01:28:12-01:29:02)

The Joker's statement reveals his cynicism towards social structures and the navigation of morals. He argues that people do not genuinely believe in the morals they uphold; they merely adhere to them out of necessity. Those who establish these morals do so to achieve personal interests rather than for virtuous reasons. This viewpoint encompasses hegemonic masculinity, suggesting that society acknowledges adaptable masculine ideals while simultaneously endorsing Batman as a hero, despite his status as a vigilante and outlaw. Nevertheless,

individuals continue to regard Batman as an exemplar of masculinity due to their reliance on him, irrespective of their sentiments towards the individual beneath the mask. Nolan's Joker starkly contrasts with Batman and the traditional white hero by intentionally avoiding the mask as a symbol of authority, instead emphasizing his own rebellious nature. The Joker is introduced through the dialogue between two robbers; when one asks the other, "so why do they call him the Joker?" the response is that it is because of his makeup. However, he adds that his makeup is "to scare people. You know, war paint" (Nolan 2008, 02:03). Annette Schimmelpfennig argues that the Joker's makeup was never intended to effeminize him, challenging the stereotype that makeup is exclusively for women. By referring to it as "war paint," the robbers place the Joker within masculine norms as "a typical masculine gadget used to intimidate the opponent" (2017, 11). The Joker presents himself unmasked; his face is painted white not as a disguise but to highlight his uniqueness and aberrance. The film juxtaposes makeup and a mask, revealing Batman's true identity upon removal. Sorcha Ní Fhlainn argues, "If one removes Batman's mask, one would discover his true identity. The Joker's makeup does not hide his true identity, but instead, attests to the absence of one [...] This is why he never seems to worry about his makeup when it starts to come off" (2022, 126). Bruce's mask obscures the constraints of his identity as a wealthy hegemonic figure in Gotham, influencing his reaction to urban issues. I also see his decision to wear the mask as an aspect of what Traister (2000) describes as anxious masculinity. Bruce's hegemonic masculinity is constrained by a series of traits he is anticipated to exemplify, which frequently limits his engagements with criminals, particularly the Joker. He recognizes the necessity to adopt a more aggressive stance and embrace an outlaw persona to navigate the anarchic strategies employed by the Joker. Utilizing Bruce's visage would increase his anxiety due to his awareness of the shortcomings in his approach, characterized by hypermasculinity and emotional instability, as well as his desire for vengeance for his parents. Bruce acknowledges that he is neither a police officer nor affiliated with any security agency, and he must avoid addressing these issues independently. Moreover, adopting Bruce's identity would make him a target for the Joker, thereby jeopardizing his reputation as a businessman, which he aims to protect. To cope with his anxiousness and reinforce his hegemonic masculinity, Bruce developed Batman—a fearless figure who defies conformity yet reflects his fears about legal transgressions. In contrast, the Joker seeks public visibility, aiming to showcase his anarchic philosophy and instill fear. His undefined identity symbolizes the archetype of men in crisis, representing violent masculinity. His unkempt hair, scars, and rudimentary makeup signify a defiance of conventional masculinity norms, highlighting his evident carelessness.

The film prominently showcases Bruce's muscular body, contrasting sharply with the Joker's unmuscular and distinctly unpleasant appearance. This serves to express masculine agency through physical appearance and the body. Bruce's physique epitomizes the archetypal hegemonic representation of masculine power, while the Joker's emaciated, disheveled look conveys a clear message of non-conformity. However, the Joker not only repudiates the hegemonic politics of the body but also the moral values associated with hegemonic masculinity, which both Bruce and Batman strive to uphold—a topic I will explore further in the third section of this chapter. Jamey Heit notes that the Joker's dismissal of both physical and ethical codes is a calculated choice

> [t]o adhere to a moral code is to cede one's freedom by submitting oneself to standards that essentially determine a priori whether one falls within the good or the bad category; the result of the supposed choice is to believe in the name of good the virtues that society understands to be good. (2011, 181)

Jamey Heit's insights closely align with the Joker's intentional repudiation of dominant masculine norms. The significance of Heit's statement lies in the initial sequence during the bank heist when the Joker says, "I believe that whatever doesn't kill you, simply makes you... stranger" (Nolan 2008, 00:05:43). This suggests his ultimate rejection of shared norms. He replaces "stronger" with "stranger," which better represents his unorthodox disposition. The Joker's aim is not to reject the idea of strength or masculinity; rather, he embodies a form of masculinity that is both exaggerated and radically different from the conventional model. His masculinity exaggerates and contravenes conventional norms instead of conforming to them. In contrast to the police and Batman, all of whom adhere to a defined set of norms that govern their authority and maintain order, the Joker operates beyond these frameworks. He seeks to reveal "the futility of their attempts at control" (Nolan 2008, 01:44:24), asserting authority not through power or conformity, but through unrestrained anarchic masculinity.

Moreover, throughout the film, the Joker consistently exhibits no tenderness in his actions; nonetheless, recounting his horrific experiences suggests the existence of a concealed vulnerability that has been marred by the mistreatment of others. An apt representation of his wounded masculinity is the modifications that affect the narrative of his facial scars whenever he recounts it to a new listener. In a confrontation between the Joker and the mafia leader Gambol, the Joker reflects on his history

> Wanna 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. He doesn't like that. Not one bit. So—me watching—he takes the knife to her, laughing

> while he does it! He turns to me and says, "Why so serious, son?" Comes at me with the knife... "Why so serious?" He sticks the blade in my mouth... Let's put a smile on that face! (Nolan 2008, 00:30:10-00:31:04)

The Joker murders two of Gambol's guards and then stabs the boss in the throat. He goes on to explain to the thug that his deranged and inebriated father is accountable for his distinctive Glasgow smile. The killing of Gambol suggests that the Joker had a difficult upbringing. Nonetheless, if his father possessed a traditionally masculine identity, he may suitably fulfill the paternal role of his son. The scars symbolize the damaged relationships he has with those in his circle, whether family or society. The Joker tries to convey that he, too, is an injured man and was once an ordinary person like others. In this scene, he shows that his father did not represent protective and paternal masculinity; instead, he instilled fear. He aims to illustrate that his violent and aggressive father undermined his masculinity, critiquing this chaotic form of masculinity that is itself in crisis. As a result, he becomes a victim of his father's harsh masculinity. Lee Baxter argues that "the Joker's reiteration of his wound with different explanations of how he received his scars re-creates a repetitive loop of wounding and violence without critically engaging with the trauma" (2020, 92). Indeed, the Joker offers an alternative interpretation of his scars to Rachel

> You look nervous... is it the scars? Wanna know how I got them? Come here... look at me. So, I had a wife, beautiful like you, who tells me I worry too much. Who tells me, I oughta smile more. Who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks. One day they carve her face, and we had no money for surgeries, and 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. Now I see the funny side, now I'm always smiling. (Nolan 2008, 00:50:55- 00-51:52)

In this account, he recounts the misery of his marriage, having intentionally disfigured his face to symbolize his acceptance of his wife's flaws. Ultimately, she left him because of the ongoing imbalance in recognizing egalitarian masculinity. Nolan's Joker has less interaction with women and patriarchy as a consequence. His interaction with Rachel prompted him to discuss his purported wife and his exemplary qualities as a spouse. Nonetheless, seizing her face while brandishing a knife implied a menacing possibility that he may inflict such harm upon her, prompting inquiries on his potential to cause such disfigurement on his wife's visage. By seizing her face and observing the terror in her eyes, he asserted his dominance as a violent man, stating, "who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks" since she emerged from the audience to react to the Joker's actions, ultimately landing in grave peril. In this scene, Rachel establishes or strengthened the patriarchal aspect of the Joker. Her accentuated femininity, as elucidated by

Schippers (2007), reinforces the Joker's supremacy and her final salvation by Batman. Femininity plays a crucial role in sustaining dominating forms of masculinity, which are currently experiencing a crisis characterized by violence (Messerschmidt 2018). This relationship underscores the complex dynamics between gender and power in contemporary society.

Through the amalgamation of emotional turmoil and severe violence, the Joker epitomizes an individual facing an existential dilemma, caught between rejecting conventional norms and seeking affirmation. His persona serves as a troubling representation of a crisis in masculinity, ranging from overt defiance to urgent pleas for compassion. His violent and erratic behavior illustrates how a man in crisis may react destructively, suggesting that deep societal and personal fractures motivate his actions. The Joker exemplifies this critique by forcing individuals to make ethically ambiguous choices, revealing the fragility and hypocrisy inherent in even the most revered masculine values. He presents a pessimistic view of heroism, implying that those conventional masculine archetypes—those esteemed for their strength, virtue, and resilience—are vulnerable to moral decline when faced with intense hardship. This approach allows the Joker to argue that the shortcoming lies not with individuals who fail to adhere to masculine expectations but with a capitalist system he sees as fundamentally corrupt and detrimental. The following section further clarifies the Joker's rejection of dominant notions related to financial success and prosperity. Here, I contend that the Joker aims to highlight the intrinsic flaws of hegemonic masculinity, positing that societal expectations, particularly the demand for men to be steadfast providers, are unattainable within a profoundly dysfunctional system. Nolan's Joker shows that these ideals are not simply difficult but are designed to fail, exposing how the system undermines the values it professes to support.

4.2. Disrupting Power Structures: Anti-Capitalist Masculinity

Scott Doidge and Adrian Rosenfeldt argue that Nolan's Joker is "apolitical and impossible to categorize," depicting him as a character who undermines Batman's faith in logic by embracing nihilism and rejecting rationality and societal norms (2022, 71). While their assessment captures the Joker's unconventional methods, it overlooks the distinct political undercurrents in his actions. Nonetheless, I challenge their assertion that the Joker is apolitical. Even if the character was not originally intended to critique politics or reflect it, people have politicized him in one way or another. In 2009, a poster depicting Obama as the Joker, along with the word "socialism," surfaced across the United States. The original context from Time magazine was digitally erased, leaving only the altered image of Obama created by Firas Alkhateeb, a Chicago art

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student (Canavan 2010, 7). This image was later used to protest the policies of the Obama administration, embraced by members of the Tea Party movement, and displayed at related protests during the summer (Canavan 2010, 7). This phenomenon occurred just one year after the release of *The Dark Knight*, highlighting the Joker's significant cultural and political impact on public consciousness. From my perspective, I see that his actions openly undermine state power and challenge its policies. I might view the Joker's violent and unsolicited intrusion at Wayne's Harvey Dent fundraiser as the climax of his battle against money and capitalism. The setting highlights the exclusivity of Gotham's elite and class hierarchies, with the celebration occurring in Bruce Wayne's lavish penthouse—a venue unattainable even for individuals like Commissioner Gordon, who was not present at the event. This highlights class hierarchies based on the division of labor, illustrating the relationship between those who own their work and those who labor for the benefit of the owners. The Joker's unexpected intrusion shatters this bourgeois gathering, transforming the soirée into a scene of fear and control. The rationale for his presence remains ambiguous, as he merely appeared and, following Batman's pursuit, there is a lack of consistency regarding subsequent events. This may serve as a demonstration of his perception that class hierarchies are trivial and superficial, as he can instill anxiety among the attendees and compel Rachel to leave, symbolically confronting the elite class while underscoring his disdain for their complacency and their role in perpetuating systemic injustice.

Alfred subsequently elucidates the Joker's motivations by narrating a tale from his past. He tells Bruce the story of an English mercenary in Burma who faced a criminal hoarding gems but ultimately burned them along with the forest. This narrative illuminates the Joker's anarchic ideology, positing that riches and material acquisition hold no significance for him. Bruce initially attempts to interpret the Joker's motivations, claiming, "criminals aren't complicated. We just have to understand what he's after." Alfred's reply encapsulates the nature of the philosophical criminal: "some men aren't looking for anything logical like money. They can't be bullied, reasoned with, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn" (Nolan 2008, 00:55:00–00:55:12). The Joker's philosophy is vividly depicted when he incinerates billions of dollars belonging to the mob to demonstrate his opposition to their actions. Alfred's assertion underscores the Joker's profound opposition to hegemonic masculinity, which, as Mary Holmes (2007) noted, is founded on attributes such as logic, control, and self-interest (58). The Joker perceives disorder as a declaration, viewing it as an equalizing force, asserting that "the thing about chaos [is] it's fair" (Nolan 2008, 1:50:38-1:50:46). As a man in crisis, the Joker confronts the economic conventions of Gotham's upper class, framing his activities as an ideological rebellion against institutional wealth and power.

He deconstructs all elements to bolster his argument, denouncing socioeconomic disparities as a rejection of the capitalist framework. His violent actions represent a repudiation of capitalist values that cause suffering and inequality rather than mere wanton destruction.

Siobhan Fitzgerald's study (2004) portrays Gotham as "a thinly veiled New York," reflecting the fears rooted in contemporary urban existence and resonating with ideas expressed by Grover Whalen, the prominent politician and president of the 1939 New York World's Fair. Whalen's depiction of New York's towering skyline and its dimly lit streets conjures an image of a city where "fortunes are daily won and lost," and individuals are "[i]mprisoned in the offices of midtown Manhattan's masses of cubes and towering shafts men and women work and scheme and telephone..." (as quoted in Fitzgerald 2004, 70). Nolan's Gotham is depicted as a city steeped in crime and corruption; driven largely by the wealthy elite whose private factories worsen pollution. This environment mirrors the existential anxieties of modern society, emphasizing stark class disparities and the consequences of unregulated power and wealth. The Joker takes advantage of this rift, broadening his rebellion against authority into the public domain to challenge the capitalist systems he loathes.

In the film, Bruce explains to Alfred that the mob has crossed lines; however, Alfred responds, "You crossed the line first. You squeezed them, you hammered them to the point of desperation. And in that desperation, they turned to a man they didn't fully understand" (Nolan 2008, 00:53:57-00:54:06). Alfred argues that the mob's and the Joker's actions emerge as manifestations of the inequalities they perceive. Choosing Batman as a symbol of authority who crossed the line first elucidates the unequal power dynamics that instigate rebellion in the public arena. This orchestrated insurgency aligns with Deeksha Yadav's observation that political authority and the market economy dominate the public sphere, where class hierarchies are prominent. In contrast, the private sphere allows individuals to express themselves freely (Yadav 2022, 17). The mob established its realm of anarchy to operate inside it; but, the Joker is indifferent to the sphere he occupies, as his anarchy transcends the logic of spheres. he uses a bleak setting to highlight societal deficiencies. The film keeps his wealth ambiguous, but his actions suggest an intent to subvert capitalism, starting with a bank heist. His goals are political: he robs banks and uses school buses for escape, without explaining how he acquires these resources. He targets high-profile individuals, showing an awareness that society favors the influential. The masks worn by the criminals during the heist are not cheerful but somber and menacing, reflecting their latent rage and intentionality, suggesting their aims go beyond insanity. Although a criminal, the Joker seeks to expose societal corruption, targeting individuals and the systemic structures that sustain it. He blames those who may not be fully

responsible yet are complicit in the corrupt system he seeks to dismantle. In contrast, Batman fights criminals directly instead of addressing the root causes of their behavior. This suggests Gotham's crime deeply stems from capitalism, where profit pursuit and power dynamics foster inequality and moral decay

Bruce Wayne, a prosperous advocate of capitalism due to the demands of his work, benefits from the system that upholds the inequalities and injustices he seeks to address as his alter ego, Batman. His wealth allows him to operate outside societal norms, making him both a product and a supporter of the capitalist framework. Batman employs sophisticated technology to augment his heroic efforts, including his military-style vehicle, reminiscent of an armored tank, and his carefully designed armor made of hardened Kevlar plates layered over titanium-dipped tri-weave fibers for optimal flexibility, advanced innovation, and tactical accuracy. Batman strategically employs technology, as evidenced by the sonar-like device he installs in Lau's office, functioning similarly to submarine sonar (Nolan 2008, 00:33:47-00:33:55). This device, along with his surveillance cameras, scanners, and weapons, illustrates Bruce's capability to leverage both technology and wealth to achieve his objectives. The contrast between high and low technology is a significant theme in the film, demonstrating that only wealth grants access to such technology and privilege, which Batman exploits through weapons and technology developed by the CIA. This juxtaposition highlights the fusion of Batman's advanced technology with the Joker's primitive brutality, as the Joker relies on the economical use of gunpowder, dynamite, and gasoline—basic yet powerful explosives.

While the police associate the Joker with criminal organizations, he consistently demonstrates that he is fundamentally distinct from the mob. He manipulates them merely to highlight the underlying flaws in society. I contend that Nolan's Joker is an insightful outsider who scrutinized Gotham's structure before acting. He is set apart from Maroni, Gotham's mob boss. If his goal was wealth, he would reflect a more polished appearance and an opulent lifestyle, as those after financial success often seek to elevate their circumstances. However, his unrefined look indicates that he embodies social inequalities, whether by embodying them himself or by attempting to communicate them through his actions and aggression. He continually engages in philosophical inquiries to confront the status quo. The 2008 financial crisis may have influenced the anger displayed in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), while *The Dark Knight* (2008) conveys socio-political skepticism through the Joker's intense opposition to authority and hierarchy (Ní Fhlainn 2022, 124). His goal goes beyond mere violence; it seeks to deliver a message against the established order. This stance asserts that his rejection of order is not insanity; rather, as he states, "It's all about the message" (Nolan 2008, 1:50:38-1:50:46).

The underlying message may be that the Joker seeks to illuminate the deficiencies within the social structure and enhance public awareness of these shortcomings. However, this does not resemble a social protest but an anarchic dogma aiming to ignite a revolution or social revolt among the populace. Consequently, his masculinity is not a protest as Connell explained (2005) but an exaggerated expression of rage aimed at the entire societal structure. I do not believe the comment was deliberately aimed at Batman, since he would react similarly to any person who contests his philosophy. The manner in which he communicates this message is problematic and radical; whereas certain problems in the economic system or societal hierarchies may genuinely be detrimental to individuals, he cannot just harm all people to substantiate his argument. One example is his "social experiment" with the two explosives-laden boats, whereby I find two principal alternatives that exemplify his perverse criticism of society.

The first perspective is grounded in a survival-of-the-fittest ethos, emphasizing the self-interest that often drives capitalist society. In this scenario, the Joker exploits the passengers' concerns, compelling them to choose between self-preservation and the sacrifice of others, serving as a stark illustration of the self-interest philosophy. This aligns with the Joker's objective to highlight the vulnerability of idealized masculinity and the hierarchy it establishes: who deserves to exist, those who adhere to societal conventions or those ostracized for failing to comply? The Joker's scheme forces the civilian passengers, who have historically upheld law and order, to consider whether the captives should perish merely due to their label as "wrongdoers." By presenting this dilemma, he challenges people to recognize and confront the societal hierarchies that dictate worth. Importantly, when a marginalized African American prisoner declines to activate the detonator, it represents a rejection of conformity and emphasizes the neglected humanity inherent in marginalized masculinity, which is often suppressed or undervalued by the very systems that seek to maintain hegemonic power ideals.

The alternative scenario involves the Joker conducting a moral experiment to juxtapose good and evil, thereby justifying his actions and the rationale behind his killings. Positioning people against inmates illustrates that anyone can succumb to malevolence when motivated by self-interest and the imperative of self-preservation, influenced by contextual factors and survival instincts. The Joker states, "Their morals, their code, it's a bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble. ... I'll show ya when the chips are down, these, uh, civilized people; they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster – I'm just ahead of the curve" (Nolan, 2008). He suggests that in times of crisis, the state of hegemonic and idealized conduct disintegrates, leaving no trace of virtuous masculinity. This implies that morals and behaviors are merely performative or superficially adhered to, while the underlying reality is one of chaos. However, he fails to

substantiate his argument; his anarchic masculinity exhibits greater disorder than that of others, as he believes individuals are inherently similar or possess identical behaviors to his own. Furthermore, he repeatedly articulates his perception of Gotham's powerful individuals as "schemers," asserting that they prioritize self-interest over the city's welfare, thus rendering them untrustworthy. Each time he references this; he positions himself against the notion of being a schemer. During his dialogue with Dent in the hospital following Rachel's death, he attempts to attribute responsibility for her death to others, asserting that he was in police custody at the time of her passing and that it was not his intention, since he does not engage in planning, stating:

> The mob has plans, Maroni has plans. Gordon's got plans. You know, they are schemers, schemers trying to control their little worlds. I'm not a schemer, I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are. So, when I say that you and your girlfriend was nothing personal, you know I 'm telling the truth. (Nolan 2008, 01:48:25- 01:48:58)

His idea is difficult to grasp; however, in this context, having plans provides calculated advantages for the Joker, allowing him to gain benefits while he takes no action, as he merely acts according to his statements. No scene in the movie shows the Joker planning the next operation, unlike the police and Batman (Saidi 2020, 6). Paradoxically, he does have a plan; he informs Dent that his activities aim to dismantle what he sees as a corrupt system, including the mob, Gordon, and Maroni. Although Maroni is an outlaw like him, the Joker categorizes him as one of the schemers due to his pursuit of financial gain. He is a master manipulator who killed Rachel to make his point and shifted the blame onto others, including Dent; similarly, the Joker is also a schemer. Heath Ledger captured the Joker's empty stare, demonstrating that his actions are all that matter.

Randolph Lewis views the Joker not just as a villain but as "a postmodern messiah who inveighs against the discreetly authoritarian order of late consumer capitalism in which brands and regulations have eclipsed the soul" (as quoted in Ní Fhlainn 2011, 83-84). The Joker's refusal to engage with societal systems extends to consumer culture. He does not buy clothes or items; his wardrobe is custom-made, reflecting his detachment from traditional economic participation. His actions, such as robbing, are not grounded in greed but in his belief that he has the right to disrupt the societal order. This is demonstrated when the Gotham City Mayor asks, "What we got?" to which Commissioner Gordon replies, "Nothing. No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom. No labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name. No other alias" (Nolan 2008, 01:23:57-01:24:13). His very existence defies the structures that govern modern society, including systems of surveillance and identification. Viewed

through this lens, the Joker acts as a reactionary force against society, and his crisis is merely a consequence of the circumstances he and others face. Nonetheless, despite these philosophical implications, viewing the Joker as a liberator or positive cultural symbol is challenging. In the subsequent section, I explain further how the Joker is unequivocally an agent of disorder, aptly characterizing his anarchic masculinity that resists conformity by any means. This positions him as a critic of dominant masculinity and capitalist ideals, yet not as a symbol of justice or redemption.

4.3. Agent of Chaos

The Joker undermines the authoritative status of Batman or anyone in a position of power, embodying his rebellious nature. DeBona characterized the Joker in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) as an anarchist and as "a threat to the traditional cultural power bloc of canonical order" (1997, 58). DeBona asserts that "if Wayne's Batman is the personification of Wayne's best self, the Joker is the expression of anarchy in high relief, and here is where the allegory of culture versus anarchy becomes most overt" (1997, 57). Examining the Joker's anarchic character showcases the societal struggles surrounding modern American masculinity. Nolan's depiction of the Joker subverts conventional masculinity stereotypes by absorbing culture and reconstructing his identity. He views himself as aimless, similar to a dog pursuing a vehicle; should he succeed in capturing one, he would be uncertain of how to advance. His stated aim is to provoke disorder, rooted in a defiant expression of masculinity. He appears to adhere to Kimmel's (1996) premise that hegemonic masculinity encompasses men's dominance over women, as well as some men's authority over other men. Nolan's Joker appears indifferent to exterior hegemony and to reinforce patriarchy, recognizing that the system he opposes is governed by individuals. Consequently, his focus is on dismantling the internal hegemony of the powerful and positioning himself above them.

The sadism he displayed throughout the film identified him as a fatalistic individual driven by anarchic impulses. For instance, in the scene where Detective Gerard Stephens interrogates the Joker, he explains his preference for knives over guns, stating, "guns are too quick. You can't savor all the... little emotions... you see, in their last moments, people show you who they really are" (Nolan 2008, 01:33:06-01:33:30). The Joker disregards the concepts of gender and age when choosing his victims, showing no preference for women, children, or the elderly. The Joker instigated terror, made threats, and killed civilians, plunging Gotham City into the chaos he desired.

This section serves as the backdrop for one of the most iconic lines in the Batman franchise: "Why so serious?" The gravity of the situation may suggest considerations of reason, ethics, or apprehension regarding malevolence. However, his persona lacks all of these traits. In this context, Nolan's Joker can undoubtedly be characterized as a complex individual whose motivations remain ambiguous and elusive. No malevolent force influences him. It is intriguing that, despite his lack of understanding regarding the motivations behind his actions and his repeated assertions of having no goals or plans, he recognizes that inflicting harm on others for mere amusement brings no positive outcome for himself. Nonetheless, his inclination toward malevolence and his perspective on disorder stem from a self-serving assessment and avarice, albeit without a conscious awareness of the broader ethical standards that should be upheld (McDaniel, 2003, 543). The Joker takes pleasure in challenging established norms, operating outside the boundaries of law and order, and embodying the spirit of disruption.

While Dent was being transferred to the central prison, Batman chased the Joker, who awaited him with clear eagerness rather than trying to escape, constantly urging, "come on, I want you to do it, come on, hit me" (Nolan 2008, 01:22:05-01:22:11). He stood motionless as Batman's vehicle drew near, not just because he lacked fear of death, but also because he aimed to challenge Batman's moral code that forbids him from harming others. The greater the chaos instigated by the Joker and the more fatalities he causes, the more he reveals the vulnerabilities in Batman's approach, as the only way to eliminate the Joker is through his death, a course of action Batman cannot bring himself to take. This strategy makes him dangerous; he thoroughly analyzes his adversaries' psyches and seeks to undermine their ethical beliefs. The series of dilemmas he created affected not only Batman but also Dent and several other characters. The Joker successfully lures Dent to embrace the dark side after Rachel's death, convincing him that the only way forward is to establish his own justice rather than simply waiting for an opportunity. Furthermore, Officer Ramirez betrays Harvey Dent to cover her mother's medical expenses after being manipulated by the Joker. As a result, the Joker's anarchy is reflected not only in the physical destruction of buildings but also in the disturbance of people's morals and beliefs, fostering a state of distrust among them. Ní Fhlainn argues that

> Like Burton's Joker, he hijacks television but not for his own image to be adored like Nicholson, but rather to terrorize and create havoc – a form of terrorist tape we have become so familiar with in an age of filmed and broadcast murders of civilians. His face, when viewed through this medium is not of control but of mania, frighteningly revealing the pleasure he feels at his depraved actions. His face is often in extreme close-up during these scenes filmed on handheld cameras; out of focus, over-zoomed and domineering, it is the ultimate version of reality TV: 'The revolution will be televised after all, with

> the Joker hosting the final reality program of a culture in extremis. In the film we see snippets of him in this role, almost literally, as he tortures wannabe Batmen for a TV audience. (2011, 87)

Ní Fhlainn's comparison of Burton's and Nolan's Jokers reveals that *The Dark Knight* emphasizes chaos as a vehicle of horror, particularly in the context of its release following the 9/11 attacks. I observe that the Joker manipulates the media as a weapon by producing what Ní Fhlainn compares to "terrorist tapes," a phenomenon reminiscent of those employed by the radical terrorists of Al Qaeda before and after the attacks. Ní Fhlainn's assertion that this show represents "the ultimate version of reality TV" is notably perceptive. The Joker could communicate solely with those he claims to oppose and their ideas, yet he was eager to broadcast his threat to the entire public via television. Once again, he is emulating terrorists and seeking to propagate fear and terror, which are the initial steps to engendering anarchy in any society.

The Joker character adheres to no moral principles. He only supports James McDaniel's assertion that this type of person "stands outside the realm of reason and against democracy" (2003, 543). Nolan's Joker is indisputably malevolent and lacking a definitive purpose. He is neither influenced by another's malevolence nor completely aware of his actions. Despite his ignorance of the motivations behind his criminal behavior, he recognizes that inflicting harm on others for mere amusement holds no value for him. The Joker revels in instigating anarchy, subverting law and order, and embodying the epitome of chaos. The Joker in *The Dark Knight* is undeniably a multifaceted character. The film provides insufficient tangible evidence to validate his complete insanity or rationality. His behavior arises from faulty logic, yet his statements reflect profound insight. In this light, I choose not to view this Joker as mad, as that diminishes the claim that he is in turmoil and intentionally reacts to societal issues. Labeling their actions as madness implies a deficiency in agency and conscious decision-making. According to Jay Ewald (2017), if madness is defined as a disconnection from reality marked by hallucinations and delusions, the Joker does not fit this characterization. The Joker is consistently depicted in films and comics without engaging in self-talk or displaying traits commonly associated with psychosis. Ewald contends that the Joker's cold demeanor and unorthodox logic render him distinct and easily classified as insane (2017, 76). Ewald favors the term "psychopath" instead of "psychotic," emphasizing the Joker's methodical nature and reinforcing the assertion that he may not be genuinely insane or psychologically unhinged (Ewald 2017, 76). I completely agree with Ewald's perspectives, as they support my interpretation. A man in crisis is not always insane. The Joker invites a broad range of

interpretations of his character, contributing to his artistic expression allure. Building on what Peter Coogan (Director of the Institute for Comics Studies) stated at the 2009 Comic-Con panel, "Is the Joker a Psychopath? You Decide" (Chavez and McCracken 2021, 67), I see Nolan's Joker as a symbolic creation, distinctly separate from a mere madman lacking any message to convey. This contrast highlights the Joker's deliberate and methodical actions rather than attributing them to erratic madness.

Nolan portrays his Joker as someone who lacks known familial connections, origins, or a stable and coherent past. His unrestrained existence and ambiguous masculinity, which resist precise definition, align seamlessly with his anarchic and chaotic ideas. It would be easier to ascertain the reasons for his profound masculinity in crisis if we understood the factors, such as trauma or other influences, that transformed him into a criminal. Vilja Olivia Johnson, in her essay "'It's What You Do that Defines You:' Christopher Nolan's Batman as Moral Philosopher," cites Randolph Dreyer's thoughts that "if we can learn more about him [the Joker], maybe we can understand or even care about him" (2011, 955). She elaborates on the position we hold as ordinary individuals and spectators.

> an instinct to produce a history for violent individuals that would allow society to locate and isolate the causes of apparently senseless violence […] If the Joker's actions could be found to cleanly stem from a history of personal trauma, then audience members could understand, label and contain his brand of moral chaos. (Johnson 2011, 955-956).

However, I see that even when we attempt to find reasons for his chaos, he consciously prefers to exist outside the norms. Evidently, his ever-changing explanations for his outcast status or scars serve as a means to articulate his rejection of stability while embracing a fluid identity, distancing himself from hegemonic models of masculinity. This subversion is not merely about challenging authority; it also asserts that no idealized version of manhood exists.

The Joker's confrontation with Batman atop the skyscraper showcases his chaotic mindset and desire to undermine order, leading to a dramatic conclusion. He orchestrates a tumultuous game using two skyscrapers. He traps his abducted hostages in one building, disguising them as his henchmen by outfitting them with clown masks and taping guns to their hands. In the neighboring structure, he dresses his actual henchmen as ordinary civilians while tying them up and portraying them as victims. This tactic clearly aims to lure Batman into either killing innocent people or harming them unlawfully. When Batman arrives with the SWAT team to rescue the supposed hostages, the team falls for the ruse and is poised to shoot the real

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captives. Meanwhile, the Joker's associates in the adjacent building taunt their captors, intensifying the tension.

The Joker attempts to illustrate a manipulative notion that appearances are deceptive, compelling both Batman and the authorities to scrutinize their actions. He sets up a chaotic minefield that he cannot control, leaving it to others to find their escape. In each operation he orchestrates, a simultaneous chaotic scenario unfolds elsewhere, showing that neither the police nor Batman can save the city. He forces the security troops to scatter, making them seem omnipresent yet elusive, which creates a mood of anxiety among them. He follows the same strategy he used before Rachel's murder to prove that he is not to blame, as he gives them the location; however, it was their disorganization and lack of preparedness that thwarted the rescue effort. The Joker stated this when speaking to Batman

> Oh, you. You just couldn't let me go, could you? This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you. Huh? You won't kill me… out of some misplaced sense of righteousness. And I won't kill you because you're just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever. [Batman: You'll be in a padded cell forever]. Maybe we could share one. You know, they'll be doubling up, the rate of the city's inhabitants is losing their minds. Batman said that "the city had showed you that it's full of people ready to believe in good. The Joker responded "until their spirit breaks completely. 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 Gotham's soul in a fistfight with you? You need an ace in the hole. Mine's Harvey […] I took Gotham's white knight, and I brought him down to our level. (Nolan 2008, 02:13:23-02:15:00)

The Joker's awareness that Batman will never kill him empowers him to manipulate and incite mayhem, as he understands that moral convictions hold greater significance for Batman and the citizens of Gotham than anything else, thereby enhancing his motivation to escalate his actions. His masculinity is founded on the absence of regulations, particularly during crises when he enjoys greater freedom, as societal conventions dissolve, allowing him to act on any impulse, regardless of its harmful potential. Although he was aware that Batman was never viewed as the ideal figure by Gotham's citizenry, he also corrupted Dent, who had the trust of his constituents. In doing so, he caused individuals to once again lose faith in the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, which the Joker shows is also vulnerable to corruption

This chapter examined how Nolan's Joker personifies anarchistic thought, with his masculinity mirroring that ideology. I perceived him as someone intent on revealing the corruption inside societal processes, harboring a negative perspective on people that implies a deficiency of fundamental goodness among humans. His vehement dismantling of conventional

masculinity sharply contrasts with the concept of heroic manhood. I argued that he perceives the eradication of Batman, or any hero, as both unavoidable and essential. My approach characterized anarchic masculinity as an extreme variant of protest masculinity or radical one, as articulated by Connell (2005) and Kimmel (2005). The Joker undermines conventional frameworks, exhibiting a flagrant contempt for ethical standards and cultural norms. I concentrated on three principal aspects: his repudiation of hegemonic masculinity through mockery of heroism and attack of governmental bodies, physical weakness, and conscious reckless look in addition to his unstable emotional conduct as he tried to show that he is an emotional man each time. While he appeared neutral toward patriarchy, the film emphasizes its presence through the love triangle involving Rachel, Dent, and Bruce. In this dynamic, Rachel serves as a feminine legitimizer, reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity exhibited by both Dent and Bruce. I argued that he serves as an anti- capitalist agent, portraying anarchy as a vital expression of identity. I maintained that the Joker epitomizes a fractured American masculinity, marked by emotional volatility and hostility. His persona questions the heroic masculinity of Batman and the cultural conventions that underpin it. Ultimately, I maintained the Joker as a multifaceted character symbolizing a crisis in masculinity, exposing the deficiencies in conventional norms, and illustrating the capacity for defiance via disorder.

The following chapter will examine David Ayer's portrayal of the Joker in *Suicide Squad* (2016), emphasizing the unique nature of his masculinity. Ayer's Joker does not aim to incapacitate all of Gotham; in this iteration, he is ultimately the prince of Gotham alongside his lover, Harley Quinn. The focus will shift to a more romanticized form of masculinity that also warrants further examination, as it presents its own inherent problems. Ayer's Joker, in contrast to Nolan's, does not seek to sustain internal hegemony; instead, his depiction embodies a comprehension of toxic and destructive patriarchy. Ayer's Joker demonstrates a tailored, destructive masculinity only associated with his connection with Harley. The film mostly focuses on his role as Harley's violent lover, neglecting to highlight his other crimes.

Chapter 5. Dissociative Masculinity in *Suicide Squad* (2016)

David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* (2016) significantly deviates from conventional superhero movies; it neither extols superhuman masculinity nor venerates heroic values. Nicole Maruo-Schröder (2018, 2) notes that the film illustrates the substantial transformations in American policies and ideology following 9/11, epitomized by the expression "necessity knows no law." This concept is essential for understanding Warner Bros' use of multi-protagonist antiheros that followed the original DC comics of the same name. The inaugural iteration of the *Suicide Squad* premiered

in The Brave and the Bold #25 (1959), while the contemporary version, "Send for... the Suicide Squad!" by John Ostrander, appeared in Legends #3 (1987). Amanda Waller's establishment of Task Force X illustrates the government's tolerance of using dangerous criminals to support national interests. This initiative marks a shift toward employing criminal violence as a disciplinary measure, where individuals are sent to face threats like Enchantress. According to Nicole Maruo-Schröder (2018), this tactic signifies a retreat from the protective ideals historically upheld by traditional security entities, including the police and military. By forming her own army of villains, Waller underscores the limitations of those who once exemplified dominant masculine ideals. Her approach is a form of crisis management: she recognizes the crisis at hand and enlists individuals with unique abilities to safeguard the state's interests. This reflects both historical and modern instances where government agencies utilize incarcerated individuals for perilous or labor-intensive roles, thereby reinforcing the entrenched power hierarchy within gender politics. While the physical prowess of these criminals is pivotal, it is ultimately subordinate to the authority wielded by those in control, even when a woman like Waller represents that authority.

Superman's death in the film signifies the downfall of conventional law enforcement and a type of masculinity once associated with moral integrity. This symbolic defeat clears the path for alternative, morally ambiguous masculinities to arise. For example, the conflict between deviant and dominant masculinity is highlighted when Batman captures Deadshot (Ayer 2016, 00:08:14). While Deadshot, a skilled assassin, showcases a tender, paternal aspect in front of his daughter, Batman's intervention reestablishes the dominant order, if only temporarily. This scene also prompts a reevaluation of the moral authority linked to hegemonic masculinity, which, as previously noted, is increasingly precarious in a post-Superman world.

Suicide Squad reveals a different aspect of justice and noble defenders, showcasing an alternative form of heroism and various elements of antihero characterization. Maruo-Schröder (2018, 2) notes that heroic characters in post-9/11 cinema overtly challenge the American judicial system, particularly in the aftermath of Superman's death, who represented the quintessential enforcer of justice. The protagonists of the film are humanized to varying degrees, offering spectators insights into their vulnerabilities and historical traumas. For example, Deadshot (Will Smith), a contract assassin renowned for his deadly precision, is deeply attached to his daughter, altering his character's perception. His portrayal is also highlighted through his empathy and unlikely friendship, along with a protective bond with Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie). Likewise, El Diablo (Jay Hernandez), a former gang leader who can summon fire at will, is portrayed as a tragic figure. Unlike others, his villainy does not

arise from malice but from an uncontrollable ability that unintentionally caused the loss of his family. El Diablo's remorse and desire to avoid harming others stem from his yearning for the ordinary life he once knew, further humanizing him. Nonetheless, the film presents a notable exception in the Joker, played by Jared Leto. In contrast to the other characters, whose villainy is explained by pain or personal loss, the Joker's malevolence is neither justified nor redeemed. Ayer's film depicts him as a character devoid of empathy, mainly characterized by his destructive and abusive relationship with Harley Quinn. Unlike other characters who are given opportunities for atonement or understanding, the Joker remains an unrepentant agent of chaos. The theatrical cut's romanticized portrayal obscures the abusive interactions between the two, offering a more sanitized representation of their connection. Conversely, the director's cut includes more scenes that delve into their relationship's destructive and controlling dynamics (Isaacs 2022, 4-5). Despite these additional elements, the longer version also idealizes the couple, presenting a favorable view of their relationship that conflicts with the Joker's typical depiction as a chaotic and sadistic character. The limited scenes featuring the Joker in the film will make my chapter somewhat shorter due to the reduced number of situations to analyze; nevertheless, his masculinity merits further examination.

This version shifts the Joker's objective from conquering Gotham to possessing Harley, unlike in *The Dark Knight*. Ayer reimagines the Joker not as an anarchist but as toxic and possessive, with his masculinity influenced by his relationship with Harley, illustrating a patriarchal model of masculinity. His masculinity does not follow a single pattern with Harley; he shows neither complete animosity nor genuine respect as a partner. In this context, I analyze his masculinity through the lenses of dissociative identity disorder and Donna Peberdy's notion of bipolar masculinity (2010) to convey the masculine dualism shown in the film. Despite suffering harm multiple times, Harley chooses to remain with the Joker, enduring his toxic masculinity. Her acceptance of his abuse can be interpreted as a manifestation of *amour fou*, a concept I will delve deeper into in the analysis of her character.

Donna Peberdy introduces bipolar masculinity to describe instances where men exhibit both hypermasculine (hard) and soft traits concurrently, instead of alternating these traits in response to shifting social norms. In her research, Peberdy contends that men can embody both harsh and soft forms of masculinity without any societal changes or crises necessitating such a switch. She perceives masculinity as inherently bipolar, shifting between rigid dominant behaviors and more adaptable, vulnerable traits as required. Furthermore, she highlights that this bipolarity resembles the medical condition of the same name, marked by episodes of mania and depression with distinctly observable fluctuations (Peberdy 2010, 237). However, she

neglects the manic aspects of bipolarity in masculinity, regarding it as dynamic and ever-adapting; individuals feel compelled to adjust as cultural and societal contexts evolve. In my analysis of the Joker, I will utilize Peberdy's notion of bipolar masculinity to investigate how his identity vacillates between hypermasculine dominance and vulnerability, especially in his interactions with Harley Quinn. Nonetheless, the issues surrounding Ayer's Joker extend beyond his oscillation between these extremes; they also encompass the negative ramifications this dynamic has on his relationship due to his obsessive preoccupation with her. He showcases hypermasculinity through his authoritarian and oppressive behavior toward Harley while also revealing vulnerability when he perceives a loss of control over her.

However, this paradigm cannot fully encapsulate the Joker's intricate and disjointed masculinity. His identity cannot be exclusively defined as bipolar. His persona exemplifies the instability and volatility of modern masculinity, along with elements of psychological disintegration. I characterize his masculinity as dissociative masculinity stemming from dissociative identity disorder. Bethany L. Brand, Richard J. Loewenstein, and Ruth A. Lanius define dissociative identity disorder as the presence of two or more distinct personality states, with the patient suffering from alterations in behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, and cognition, which challenge rational conduct and thinking (2014, 496). Yuchun Zhu (2023, 196) argues that a significant outcome of dissociative identity disorder is closely linked to attachment problems in relationships, as dysfunctional attachment styles may facilitate the development of diverse mental representations of oneself and primary caregivers. Although I do not rely on dissociative identity disorder as a theoretical framework for examining the Joker's masculinity, I find it essential to explain my rationale for this typology. While Peberdy's notion of bipolar masculinity is relevant, it inadequately captures the Joker's tumultuous and detrimental romantic involvement with Harley Quinn. Although categorizing his behavior as toxic masculinity may be somewhat applicable, it does not adequately reflect the profoundly disturbing and unpredictable dynamics that characterize his treatment of Harley. Therefore, I propose the term dissociative masculinity, which I see as a toxic and bipolar masculinity that encompasses both the destructive and disconcerting elements of the Joker's persona, offering a more nuanced understanding of his unstable personality that oscillates between affection and aggression.

I define dissociative masculinity as a dissociated enactment of masculinity characterized by fluctuations among diverse and often conflicting masculine models. This concept illustrates a complex interplay of differing masculinities within a single individual, with each identity emerging at various moments. Ayer's Joker exemplifies this complexity through his relationship

with Harley Quinn and his pervasive aggressive masculinity as portrayed in the film, providing a framework to examine the broader issues surrounding contemporary masculine identities. What makes his masculinity dissociative is not just behavior shifts; it's the internal conflict between competing masculine expectations. He feels disconnected from a coherent expectation of his masculinity, embodying the dominant gangster and patriarch of Gotham while expecting others to follow his rules. However, Harley's presence challenges this patriarchal image. He grapples with wanting to be with her while fearing the loss of his hardened persona, oscillating between lover, abuser, savior, and quintessential gangster. He articulates insincere feelings, trying to embody dominant masculinity.

Initially, he constructs his identity as a gangster and patriarch, but Harley reshapes him, intertwining their existences. His masculinity becomes dissociative as he shifts between societal expectations and his own desires without a clear identity. He exists between the archetypal toxic patriarch and a nurturing partner. Joker's masculinity can't solely be categorized as toxic, as his emotional dependency on Harley impacts his identity. He often dismantles one aspect of himself for another, navigating the internal struggle over which masculinity to embody.

This chapter consists of three sections, each exploring distinct aspects of the Joker's relationship with Harley Quinn and its implications for his masculinity. In the first section, I analyze the Joker's hostile behavior towards Harley as a manifestation of his ingrained patriarchy. His treatment of her is not only abusive but also reinforced by his implicit endorsement of others' contempt and occasional physical violence against her. This interaction illustrates the patriarchal advantage revealed by the Joker's dominance over Harley. Furthermore, the second section explores the Joker's dehumanization of Harley, which I interpret as a reflection of his misogyny. To the Joker, Harley is akin to a pet or possession, an entity to control rather than an equal partner. Nevertheless, Harley seems unaffected by this abuse, remaining captivated by him despite his mistreatment. This analysis briefly examines Harley's character through the lens of *amour fou*, or mad love, to explore how her obsession with the Joker influences the narrative. This part highlights the contradictory nature of their relationship, shaped by his erratic actions and turbulent emotions. Finally, in the third and final section, I examine the Joker's professed affection for Harley, seeking to determine whether his love is inherently abusive and controlling or if it stems from a deep fear of intimacy linked to his dissociative masculinity.

5.1. Dissecting Aggressive Masculinity Traits

Dr. Harleen Quinzel is introduced as a psychiatrist at Arkham Asylum, where she is assigned to treat the Joker. In the film, Agent Amanda Waller mentions that Harley believed she was effecting a cure, even though she was actually developing strong romantic feelings for him. This shift in their relationship suggests that the Joker initially approached her with friendliness and warmth, which sharply contrasts with his later hostility. Harley's shock the first time he displayed aggressive behavior indicates that his treatment of her was quite different at the start of their relationship. Hypothetically, the Joker may have shown tenderness and affection to win her heart and, more importantly, her trust, thus enabling his gaslighting. This dynamic is depicted in a flashback scene that showcases their initial interactions, where the Joker kindly addresses her, saying, "Dr. Quinzel. I live for these moments with you. What do you got?" Harley responds with a gift, saying, "I got your kitty," to which he replies, "So thoughtful" (Ayer 2016, 00:09:13-00:09:42).

Dr. Quinzel's gift of a kitten toy to the Joker symbolizes her perception of him as capable of tenderness and softness. By calling it "your kitty," it is clear that she truly recognizes his gentle nature, suggesting that he has previously shown a preference for similar toys, contrasting sharply with his violent and unpredictable behavior. The Joker used Harleen to evoke her affection or, at the very least, to secure her trust for assistance in his escape from Arkham Asylum. He made his intentions clear when he asked Harley, "There's something you could do for me, doctor." Upon her emotionally naïve reply, "Anything, I mean, yeah," he said: "I need a machine gun" (Ayer 2016, 00:09:47-00:09:53). For Harleen, this was the first occasion she encountered the true visage of the criminal she was attending to. She ultimately recognizes his violent intentions, which lead to the manifestation of his hostile comportment toward her. In the following scene, he employed a machine gun against her while dragging her onto the table, as she trembled and uttered, "I did everything you said. I helped you." However, the Joker was indifferent to her emotions and desires for his attention; he believed she was merely attempting to alter his aggressive and violent masculinity by stating, "You helped me by erasing my mind. What few faded memories I had. You left me in a black hole of rage and confusion. Is that the medicine you practice, Dr. Quinzel?" She responded with a blend of fear and acceptance of the Joker's aggression, asking, "What are you gonna do? Are you gonna kill me, Mr. J?" The Joker replied, "What? Oh, I'm not gonna kill you. I'm just gonna hurt you. Really, really bad." She reacted, saying, "You think so? Well, I can take it" (Ayer 2016, 00:10:22-00:11:11). This scenario illustrates the dynamic between Harley and the Joker, characterized by submission

amid aggressive treatment and abuse without resistance. The Joker embodies a dual masculinity defined by violence yet capable of tenderness to fulfill his desires.

Ayer's Joker was depicted as a significantly more muscular character compared to Nolan's version. In the *Suicide Squad* script, Ayer illustrated the initial encounter between the Joker and Harley Quinn, before her transformation into Dr. Quinzel, as follows: "A tall, muscular figure in a prison uniform looms over her. This is THE JOKER... Ripped like an MMA fighter. His skin is shock white. The cunning eyes of this grinning devil burn with malice toward all we hold dear" (2016, 2). The film's direction clearly emphasizes the Joker's aggressiveness by referring to him as an "MMA fighter," where all forms of martial arts are permitted in a brutal combat scenario until one participant becomes incapacitated. This description underscores the Joker's cruelty, which was not prominently showcased in the film due to several omitted sequences. Anastasia Salter (2020) characterizes Jared Leto's Joker as a macabre, unbridled, and physically imposing figure. She argues that the film's theatrical version reveals the extent of his cruelty, with unedited clips illustrating his cathartic nature (143). Salter (2020) asserts that extending the torture sequences would have encroached upon the territory of Hannibal Lecter, emphasizing the brutal and predatory aspects of his masculinity (143). In this chapter, I will focus solely on the scenes that appeared in the film, rather than the deleted scenes. This approach will limit my analysis to what is shown on screen, ensuring a more concise examination of the film's content.

A further connection to the Joker's anger and brutality against Harleen is found in the intertextual reference to Belle Rêve prison, where Dr. Quinzel is captured following her transformation. Belle Rêve serves as a prison for Gotham's most dangerous criminals and supervillains in Suicide Squad, while its name references Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), where Belle Rêve represents the estate of the DuBois family. This intertextual reference, included in both the film and the original comics, mirrors the abusive dynamics in romantic relationships depicted in Williams' play, particularly between Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski as well as Stella and Stanley. The toxic masculinity displayed by Stanley and the Joker is linked to the prevalence of intimate partner violence in the United States. Claire Hebenstreit's 2015 study shows that more than 1.3 million women are assaulted by romantic partners annually, with between 25% and 33% of women facing such violence at some point in their lives (122). However, for these statistics to exist, women must acknowledge their abuse. Renáta Zsámba argues (2024, 116) that understanding these victims' agency arises from their unwillingness and ability to escape the abusive atmosphere; a woman is perceived as a victim when she cannot escape her circumstances, while she is seen as a heroic agent when

she liberates herself. In this context, Harley does not see herself as a victim since she can easily escape the Joker but chooses to stay with him.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Belle Rêve aptly embodies its meaning, "beautiful dream," symbolizing the wonderful life the two sisters enjoyed before their encounter with their abuser. Conversely, for Harley Quinn, her metaphorical "Belle Rêve" was not a refuge but a prison, as she chose to stay with and love her abuser, the Joker, despite the suffering he inflicted upon her. The contrast highlights the different masculinities portrayed by Stanley and the Joker. On the one hand, Stanley embodies a toxic and aggressive masculinity, displaying no pretenses or hidden facets—his harsh demeanor is straightforward and unyielding. On the other hand, the Joker's masculinity is complex. He isolates his violence when around Harley, persuading her that she could change him through her actions. Harley believed her true "Belle Rêve" lay with the Joker, even as both represented forms of imprisonment—her life with him and the confines of the facility—triggering memories of the abuse she suffered from her partner and the guards.

In these narratives, the Joker exhibits malevolence driven by his anguish over the fear of losing her. After Harley jumps into the chemical toxins, she engages in a dialogue with the Joker, who asks if she would sacrifice her life for him. She replies, "No, that's too easy." Would you live for me? (Ayer, 2016, 01:15:33-01:15:46). While it seems that Harleen acts with full awareness, the Joker recognizes his influence on her, understanding that his aggression would not push her away. Still, his plunge after Harley into the chemicals suggests that his mental state is also unclear. In this context, McDaniel asserts that such situations represent a Kairos of suspended animation, an eternalization of the moment of indecision during which all possibilities appear feasible (McDaniel 2003, 545; Saidi 2022, 8). This notion aligns with Ayer's Joker dissociative masculinity, characterized by unpredictability and instability. His behavior undergoes a stark transformation, shifting from a willingness to torture and possibly kill the woman who loves him to diving into the chemical toxins to be with her.

Harley endured abuse at the hands of the Joker and faced mistreatment during her prison time, where male guards objectified and assaulted her. Unlike other supervillains, her humiliation and exploitation came solely from men, underscoring her vulnerability to misogyny. The way the Joker treated her reveals his misogynistic mindset, as he claimed ownership of her and undermined her sense of autonomy. His patriarchal behavior positioned her as both his partner and a contributor to his masculinity, a relationship that will be examined in the next section.

5.2. Joker's Misogyny

Ayer sought to illustrate Joker's obsession with Harley Quinn while also revealing misogynistic traits as a cinematic critique of toxic masculinity. In a significant scene, the Joker's disregard for Harley emphasizes his ignorance of her strengths and weaknesses, contrasting with a conventional couple's dynamic. As Batman chased them, Harley and the Joker escaped, culminating in the Joker driving the Lamborghini into a lake. He acted without realizing that Harley was unable to swim, despite her screams of, "Puddin, I can't swim!" just before the Joker broke through the water's surface (Ayer 2016, 00:13:58). The Joker, the car, and Harley plunged into the lake, leading Batman to dive in to rescue Harley. This moment lacks any depiction of the Joker's escape, and he expresses no concern for her well-being. Although this might appear selfish, I think the Joker sees his car as equal to Harley; both are merely objects to him. He aims to protect himself, perceiving others as entirely replaceable. Salter (2020) points out that the film transitions to a more romantic narrative after the Joker's tireless day-and-night search for her following her abduction, reinforcing the love story. Aside from the near-drowning event, the Joker's violence is largely absent from the theatrical version (2020, 142).

In another flashback, set in a private nightclub in Gotham, Harley recalls her meeting with Monster T, who visited the Joker while she danced with the other performers. The Joker noticed Monster T gazing at Harley as she danced, which led him to inquire if Monster T had feelings for her. Monster T replied, "You're a lucky man. You got a bad bitch." The Joker emphasized, "Oh that she is, the fire in my loins, the itch in my crotch. The one and only. The infamous Harley Quinn" (Ayer 2016, 00:12:01-00:12:21). The Joker whistled to Harley as if calling a pet, and she even barked when he introduced her to Monster T. This interaction highlights Harley's indoctrination, demonstrating how the Joker conditioned her to exhibit submissive and objectified behavior. He began her humiliation in front of Monster T, later killing the mobster in a fit of rage. At the start of the film, Amanda Waller remarks, "God help anyone who disrespects the Queen," highlighting the Joker's possessive patriarchal nature towards Harley. However, it remains unclear whether he killed Monster T in her defense after the insult or to assert his ownership, as suggested by the "Property of the Joker" tattoo on her back and her blouse that reads, "Daddy's Little Monster."

Her tattoo, fashion choices, and her self-description as "infamous" highlight his misogyny. Waller pointed out that Harley is more intelligent than the Joker. Additionally, she exhibits more bravery than he can manage. He knows this. Yet, he chose to dominate her. Before she fell into the chemical vats, Harley was a doctor, known for her intelligence and

independence; however, the Joker reduced her to a foolish, submissive figure. This change is crucial, as she evolved from a supporting character to a mere punchline, with her depth and capabilities overshadowed by the Joker's control (Farago, 2017, 108). The film shows Harley wearing a golden collar-like necklace inscribed with "Puddin," reducing her status from that of a partner to that of the Joker's pet (Salter 2020, 142). Salter argues that Harley's collar has been marketed to female fans, highlighting the Joker's enticing authority and control in a misogynistic patriarchal society (2020, 142). I completely regard Salter's worries regarding the collar that strips Harley of her humanity, reflecting the Joker's goal in placing it on her. Nonetheless, it is she who ultimately consented to this situation. I associate her inclination to unreasonably adore her abuser with the concept of *amour fou*—an unreasonable attachment that endures humiliation and, in this case, sexism. This elucidates how dominant masculinities frequently coexist with various submissive forms. Nonetheless, it might be said that her pronounced femininity bolstered his patriarchal dominance over her. He would be unable to manifest his misogyny without her approval.

The concept of *amour fou* was first introduced and analyzed by André Breton, the leading figure of surrealism. In his significant works, *Les Vases Communicants* (1932) and *L'Amour Fou* (1937), Breton delves into the nature of surrealist love, emphasizing its lack of inherent rationality (Mitchell 2020, 92). He claims that *amour fou* transcends traditional logic, operating under its unique principles and reasoning. This irrationality influences how one perceives their beloved, shaped by desire, and renders this perception susceptible to the harms of societal realities (Breton 1987, 7). Michael Richardson refers to this irrational love as a "moment of rupture," where an individual's identity becomes unstable due to an encounter with another person capable of inspiring transformation (as quoted in Mitchell 2020, 92). Yet, this change is fraught with danger. Markus Schleich (2014, 200) indicates that losing one's rationality in love can be viewed as an affliction, where the desired person acts as the cure. This "sickness" infiltrates the lover's essence like a parasite, ultimately jeopardizing the host's survival.

In his research on the concept of *amour fou*, Anthony Faramelli (2015) provides examples of women's infatuation with serial killers. He cites Ted Bundy, the notorious American serial killer of the 1970s, who was admired by numerous women who considered him their trusted friend and confidant. An elderly woman he befriended described him as a 'lovable rascal.' Another woman, a former police officer who would become America's leading true-crime writer and coincidentally knew him, described him as having 'old-world gallantry" (209). These women were oblivious to the man's necrophilic tendencies while he abducted,

murdered, raped, and mutilated twenty college-aged women over a span of 16 months. He retained four of their heads in his flat and incinerated another in his girlfriend's fireplace (Faramelli 2015, 209-210). Another instance is Ramirez, an infamous night stalker who garnered fame as a cinematic figure, enticing ladies who want to visit him. This unusual phenomenon left jail guards unable to fathom the man's motives, as he was nearly a movie star rather than a man accused of tearing people's lives apart (Faramelli 2015, 211).

Harley Quinn's origin story was introduced in the 1993 comic "Mad Love," which I view as more than merely symptomatic of her mental state. Author Paul Dini depicts Harley's beginnings as those of an educated woman who descends into madness, thus diminishing her autonomy and implying her desperation (as quoted in Salter 2020, 139). From this viewpoint, Harley serves as a parody of post-feminism. When Amanda Waller first introduces Harley at the onset of Suicide Squad, she seems to fit the profile of the "New Woman." Though incarcerated, she intimidates several guards. One guard states, "You put five of my guards in the hospital, honey. No one is going to play with you" (Ayer 2016, 00:02:40–00:02:50). This statement places Harley as a character who combines a conventionally feminine look with violence, thereby challenging traditional femininity and aligning her with postfeminist ideals of empowered womanhood. However, her femininity is constrained, imprisoned and further abused. However, this concept is swiftly complicated by Amanda Waller's entrance. Waller confidently strides into her office, determined to restore order in Gotham, strikingly contrasting with Harley. Unlike Harley, Waller exemplifies authentic empowerment, not through physical strength, but via her ability to exert control in a male-dominated environment. She holds authority over the most formidable supervillains and successfully commands their submission. In this respect, Waller more genuinely represents the essence of the "New Woman," who effectively challenges male authority and operates as an equal within the structure. During a meeting with high-ranking security officials, Waller is cautioned, "You're playing with fire, Amanda." Her response, "I'm fighting fire with fire," calmly underscores her position. When another man attempts to undermine her proposal, stating, "You're not going to pitch us that," she assertively counters, "But this time you're going to listen to me" (Ayer 2016, 00:05:02–00:05:15). Waller exhibits true power, not only through her words, but through the confidence and authority she wields in a setting usually dominated by men.

In Harley's situation, despite her strong traits, she remains a follower of the Joker. The story highlights the complex relationship between love and desperation in Harley Quinn's world (Salter 2020, 139). In this context, Harley mirrors other women drawn to the allure of intense obsession. As the Joker's psychiatrist, she had a unique understanding of his psyche, more

profound than anyone else's. With access to his extensive criminal records, she likely examined them in depth. Nevertheless, she formed an irrational infatuation with him. Overriding her doubts and pushing aside her professional ethics, Harley left everything behind and fully committed to him. But what is the Joker's position? Is he truly in love, which accounts for his confusion towards her? Or does he want her close? In the subsequent section, I will examine the Joker's feelings for Harley and their effects on his dissociative masculinity. I contend that his difficulty in managing his emotions shows a complex dynamic: his love for Harley is obsessive, while his dissociated masculinity inhibits him from expressing it in conventional or healthy ways.

5.3. Fear of Intimacy: Joker's Inner Turmoil with Love and Patriarchy

A pivotal scene showcasing the Joker's bond with Harley occurs when he goes to find her. Located in a private Gotham club, the Joker is depicted sitting behind a wall of bottles, visibly drunk and sorrowful. Encircled by his typical arsenal of knives and various crime gadgets that usually satisfy him, he surprisingly finds no joy in their presence. Instead, he seems deeply troubled, with his environment underscoring the profound emptiness he experiences. Something crucial is absent. The Joker exhibits an unusual display of grief for the loss of his partner. Frost arrives, and the Joker's only question is, "Where is she?" Frost responds, "It's complex. It's not just her. Everyone is disappearing. There's a new law. If you're a bad enough bad guy, they stamp terrorists on your jacket and send you to this swamp in Louisiana. A black site. That's where she is so? What are we doing?" The Joker, momentarily taken aback, eventually lifts his gaze. His eyes shine with a deep, urgent hope to find her (Ayer 2016, 00:31:16-00:31:45).

The romantic narrative, often portrayed as the ultimate dream for women in fairy tales—finding their prince charming and enjoying endless happiness, irrespective of his flaws (Heilman and Jackson 2001, 306)—is inverted in the relationship between the Joker and Harley. Their romance strays from the traditional fairy tale, yet the Joker's love story involves a spectrum of emotions, including rejection, desire, love, obsession, domestic violence, and eventual acceptance. This intricacy is highlighted in a flashback scene during a heated dispute between Harley and the Joker, where Harley, frustrated by his lack of affection, confronts him. In a rush of anger, he orders her to exit the vehicle. However, she follows him on a motorcycle, pleading, "I have done everything you said: every test, every trial, every initiation. I have proven that I loved you. Just accept it" (Ayer 2016, 01:05:55-01:06:10). The Joker's response reveals his view of love: "I am not someone who is loved. I'm an idea. A state of mind. I execute my

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will according to my plan, and you, Doctor, are not part of my plan," which supports his intended evil but is not fully illustrated in supplementary film segments (Ayer, 2016, 01:06:11-01:06:30). His statement reflects his dissociative masculinity. His self-image sharply conflicts with his actions as he tries to harmonize his self-view with the idea that love requires vulnerability. Therefore, I see that he is making an effort to remain stoic. In reaction to his severe words, Harley aimed her gun at him; nonetheless, he displayed no fear and defiantly urged her to pull the trigger. She replied with desperation, which I completely understand: "my heart scares you, and a gun doesn't" (Ayer 2016, 01:06:58-01:07:02). I contend that the Joker struggles with a fear of intimacy in his relationship with Harley. In this context, intimacy is not about physical or sexual closeness but rather about emotional connection, as outlined by Anita Vangelisti and Gary Beck (2007). The deeper connections many dread involve forming significant emotional bonds, necessitating nurturing a loving relationship (Vangelisti and Beck 2007, 396). Typically, romantic partners or those seeking stable relationships aim to cultivate support and an increased desire for intimacy. Conversely, individuals who fear closeness or seek to limit intimacy experience greater anxiety about building deep connections and expressing their emotions (Vangelisti and Beck 2007, 396-397). This fear of intimacy reveals itself as an aversion to romantic or profound emotional ties with different people. Constance Pilkington and Deborah Richardson examined a related concept: the risk of intimacy. They assert that some individuals impede the growth of romantic and substantial personal relationships because they perceive assertiveness and trust as risky, fearing betrayal and their desires being dismissed or mocked (1988, 507). The Joker's aversion to conventional emotional dynamics reflects a crisis in masculinity, marked by a fear of losing control, dominance, and emotional restraint. His emotional detachment acts as a defense mechanism, shielding him from vulnerability. Additionally, his manipulative behaviors hinder his capacity to sustain meaningful, equitable relationships, while his lack of self-confidence in romantic matters undermines his ability to trust others.

The Joker makes a comeback with a plan to disarm Harley's neck bomb by using one of his hired technicians in an effort to save her. His relationship with Harley is thus twofold. His urge to reconnect with her might suggest he sees her as the perfect companion and wants to claim her. Whether viewing her as a possession or a romantic partner, the Joker claims to care for Harley, which inherently contradicts his abusive behavior. This subplot highlights his skill in manipulating and outsmarting authorities. At one point, he successfully brings in a helicopter to rescue her during an attack. He takes significant risks to execute this plan, notably appearing dressed as a groom in a black tuxedo adorned with white flowers. Harley tells him, "You got

all dressed up for me. Oh, you know I'd do anything for you" (Ayer 2016, 01:24:22-01:24:27). This choice of attire evokes imagery of a wedding and suggests a final acceptance of traditional dynamics. For Harley, it represents another step in nurturing her delusion about the Joker's love for her. In this dramatic moment, the rescue takes a turn for the worse as the helicopter comes under fire, leading to Harley's fall. Following his passing, her first action is to detach the chain. I interpret her action as a reclamation of power and autonomy. She finally finds the strength to challenge herself, though she has been bound to him until she learns of his passing. She embraces her strength when she seizes the opportunity to eliminate the witch, all while contemplating the chance to reclaim the Joker, as the witch had revealed. Understanding her tumultuous state of mind, she has the option to select him, yet she opts against it. Instead, she claims that the witch "interfered with her friends" and ultimately took her life.

Deadshot turned his gaze toward Harley as the witch lay lifeless, stating that he had a mission to fulfill in Gotham. She responded, "I'm going to hotwire a car. Need a ride?" Deadshot replied, "You're […] not driving." She pressed again, asking, "Why not?" (Ayer 2016, 01:48:30). However, her question went unanswered, indicating that he was either providing her with necessary care or, once again, trying to assert dominance in a continual cycle of control. Harley and Deadshot had a profound connection; he originally declined to inflict violence upon her, and she ultimately acknowledged the toxic treatment she received from the Joker.

She took command during every squad assault and helped Deadshot obtain the weapon, ultimately saving everyone. Partially escaping patriarchy, she faces the Joker's return to rescue her from prison disguised as a SWAT member, declaring, "Let's go home." This choice to offer redemption instead of killing her abuser illustrates patriarchy's deep roots. The Joker often saves Harley himself, avoiding delegation while embodying the lover, abuser, and owner.

This chapter discusses how Ayer's Joker portrays dissociative masculinity marked by violence and obsession, reflecting a masculinity in crisis. Ayer's Joker's toxic masculinity raises questions about whether it is inherent in him or learned. However, this film shows that toxic masculinity is not inherent in all men, as the character of Rick Flag, for example, demonstrates how true love can manifest in a very sane way. Harley legitimized the Joker's abusive masculinity because she accepted what he was doing to her and how he objectified her. Her femininity, in one way or another, did not condemn his control over her. She legitimizes his domination, which is why there is a scene at the end where he comes back to rescue her from prison and take her with him. In this sense, the cycle of abuse and patriarchy will continue unless she rejects it to challenge his domination, which is a theme we did not see in the film but reflects the ongoing dialogue of the #MeToo movement to expose abusers and not be afraid to

talk about it. The following chapter will discuss another form of abuse that directly harms the Joker character, this time portraying him as the one who experiences abuse from almost everyone in his embodiment of the character of Arthur Fleck. Arthur works as a clown who adopts a carnivalesque masculinity to transcend his crisis, arising from various issues including poverty, parental trauma, personal insecurities, and intimacy issues. His carnivalesque masculinity allows him to claim temporary dominance through social rebellion and theatricality.

Chapter 6. Carnivalesque Masculinity in *Joker* (2019)

Joker (2019) has attracted considerable interest across various fields, with a plethora of scholarly articles, blogs, and magazines analyzing its unique storyline. This fresh take on the Joker reshapes our perception of the character, showcasing a stark departure from previous portrayals in comics and films. The story delves into the challenging factors that shaped Arthur Fleck's transformation, including his struggles with poverty, severe mental health issues, and social alienation, which ultimately led to his evolution into a radical insurrectionist.

The film presents a distinct carnivalesque tone, highlighted by Arthur's reflections during a session with his social worker. He recalls listening to a song by an artist called "Carnival," which represents his change following his first crime. Arthur expresses, "which is crazy because that's my clown's name at work. Until recently, it felt like nobody saw me. Even I didn't know if I really existed […] But I do. And people are starting to notice" (Phillips 2019, 00:41:07-00:41:37). This moment captures Arthur's evolution from an unnoticed worker to a rebellious individual who confronts established norms and power. The name "Carnival" is a potent metaphor for his significant transformation, shaped by the crises he endures. The surrounding societal chaos sets the stage for his rise as a carnivalesque character. By the film's conclusion, this transformation empowers him to challenge existing power structures and gain recognition as a hero among those who identify with his defiance.

This chapter examines Arthur's character from a carnivalesque viewpoint, highlighting how his masculinity reflects these themes. I introduced the term "carnivalesque masculinity" to illustrate the Joker's transition from a defeated clown facing challenges to a fearless proponent of social movements. This concept captures subversive qualities amid social unrest, including transformations that threaten established norms, behaviors, family ties, romantic relationships, and overall power dynamics. In doing so, it challenges conventional standards, fostering new expressions and behaviors—albeit exaggerated and criminalized, as seen with the Joker—while revealing the strictness of these norms. While linked to the masculinity in crisis, carnivalesque masculinity does not encompass all facets of this crisis; rather, it highlights the fluidity of these

complex forms, and I argue that it represents a conscious rejection within a temporary phase, similar to the transitional roles and unrestrained nature of the carnivalesque norms.

Arthur's masculinity takes on a carnivalesque quality as he transforms strikingly. He transitions from being Arthur, the invisible man often ridiculed for his emasculated body and lack of masculine dominance, to the Joker, who at least embodies the traditional expectations of manhood. This embodiment blends with his theatrical violence, overt displays of emotion in his quest for revenge, and flamboyance. In this context, the carnivalesque serves not merely as a metaphor but as a lens to elucidate the process through which the Joker navigates and transforms these masculine expectations. Additionally, his performance grants him a temporary agency, allowing him to evade the constraints of grotesque performance by the end.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and scholar, introduced the concept of carnival in his writings, notably in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965). He examined the power dynamics within folk culture and how rituals influence human freedoms, particularly during carnivals and medieval celebrations. In *Rabelais and His World,* Bakhtin presents the idea of the carnivalesque as a subversive literary approach aimed at critiquing social hierarchies. This notion, initially addressed in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, illustrates the carnivalization of literature and serves as a form of resistance against prevailing power structures (Marais 2018, 1). Bakhtin differentiates between carnival as a ritual and as a perspective, providing a richer understanding that encompasses three aspects: the carnival itself, its worldview, and its effect on literary forms.

The Carnival, a ceremonial practice, centers on performative activities that temporarily invert social structures. It is a "syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort" (Bakhtin 1984b, 122), complex and varied, reflecting diverse cultural nuances. Bakhtin highlights the carnival's power to merge cultural, religious, and social elements into a cohesive whole. This syncretism allows disturbances guided by its own principles of liberation (Bakhtin 1984a, 39-40), providing a sense of freedom, amusement, and disorder, enabling an entirely inverted reality (Bakhtin 1984a, 39-40).

The Bakhtinian perspective on carnival evaluation involves a detailed comparison of official feasts and the unofficial, popular nature of carnivals. Official feasts were rooted in religious traditions and closely linked to religious observance. Bakhtin contends that these celebrations "asserted that all was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions" (1984a, 10). On the one hand, such feasts operated under strict regulations and needed to be conducted with reverence as a demonstration of faith or in honor of the saints celebrated. They emphasized adherence to

sacred rituals rather than promoting liberation. On the other hand, carnival culture represents a purposeful act of rebellion against the rigidity of official celebrations. Although carnivals may be brief, they allow participants to express themselves and partake in uninhibited behavior freely. Bakhtin notes that carnivals "marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (1984a, 10). Terras reinforces Bakhtin's theory, emphasizing that carnival encapsulates a fundamental human tendency to challenge and overturn entrenched values (1991, 519). This highlights the contrast between the dynamic essence of the carnival and the rigid, unchanging aspects of civilization.

Differentiating between official and carnival cultures is crucial to my idea, highlighting Arthur's challenge of fitting into bourgeois society as a clown. His sincere efforts ultimately result in rejection, driving him to embrace a carnivalesque rebellion instead. Mohammadreza Hassanzadeh Javanian and Farzan Rahmani (2021) analyze the Joker from a carnivalesque viewpoint, noting that the film unfolds in two stages: first, Arthur's struggle to assimilate into the official culture and his eventual failure, followed by his transformation that arises from deconstructing that culture (2021, 51). Official culture embodies the dominant hegemonic masculinity that Arthur seeks to achieve, yet he faces both structural and personal barriers. In contrast, the carnival offers marginalized individuals fleeting power and recognition. As the Joker, Arthur maneuvers through this dimension to assert control and momentarily attain the public affirmation he desires.

The carnival sense of the world, in contrast, embodies a more expansive philosophical viewpoint of the world. Bakhtin asserts

> This sense of the world, liberating one from fear, bringing the world maximally close to a person and bringing one person maximally close to another (everything is drawn into the zone of free familiar contact), with its joy at change and its joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order. (1984b,160)

Having this carnival sense of the world would instill a sense of rebellion in an individual's mindset. This viewpoint goes beyond the literal festival and includes a worldview of freedom, closeness, and change. It "possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality. […] The sensitive ear will always catch even the most distant echoes of a carnival sense of the world" (Bakhtin 1984b, 107). Bakhtin argues that individuals might embrace the carnival sense of the world as a means of challenging authority, even without an

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actual festival. Some individuals may adopt a philosophical perspective to criticize strict and authoritarian societal structures.

The idea of "carnivalized literature" originates from Bakhtin's broader concept of the carnival as a sense of the world, highlighting this pervasive spirit's significant and transformative influence on literary works. He first introduced this idea in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984b), arguing that literature reflecting various forms of carnivalistic folklore, whether from ancient or medieval times, qualifies as carnivalized literature (1984b, 107). Later, in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin referred to the term "carnivalesque" as a theoretical framework to explain the essence of carnivals. Robert Stam notes that "the carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions" (1989, 86). Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque draws from François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532) and his analysis of medieval carnivals. In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a society characterized by excessive behavior, frank discussions about bodily functions, lavish feasts, infidelity, folly, sexuality, cannibalism, and immorality are depicted, challenging traditional moral and social norms (Edwards and Graulund 2013, 23-24).

This chapter highlights a key aspect of Bakhtin's theory: the carnivalesque perspective on reality. The Joker film exemplifies this idea through Arthur's character, whose life undergoes a complete transformation. Serving as a jester, he defies the prevailing norms of physical strength with his unconventional appearance and fails to show emotional resilience, marked by his uncontrollable laughter. Despite his aspirations and having a romantic partner, he cannot impose his patriarchal views on any woman. Rather than being a stand-up comedian for the wealthy, he seeks only to provoke laughter from his audience.

Furthermore, by navigating his circumstances with exaggerated actions, Arthur ultimately succumbs to a life of crime, illustrating a distinctive vision of carnivalesque masculinity within carnivalesque cinema—a concept rooted in carnivalesque literature. Patrick Fuery's examination in "The Carnivalesque: Film and Social Order" (2000) offers a lens for comprehending how films mirror and influence social order by connecting fictional realms to their socio-historical backgrounds (2000, 110). Fuery posits that films construct a particular social order within their diegetic worlds that often reflect historical and ideological frameworks (2000, 110). This duality defines carnivalesque cinema, which utilizes various techniques to transform cinematic language and overturn traditional discourse (Fuery 2000, 123). This interplay links dialogic and polyphonic processes, establishing cinema as a force for social disruption (Fuery 2000, 123). In reimagining real-life events, cinema may adopt an exaggerated

artistic approach that both mimics and critiques established norms. Such an approach becomes carnivalesque when it illustrates bodily excess and skewed views on life, encompassing aspects like eating, drinking, and sexuality (Fuery 2000, 118).

Nonetheless, Fuery identifies difficulties in determining if all cinematic works exhibit carnivalesque qualities, akin to my hesitation in categorizing every masculinity crisis as carnivalesque. To identify something as carnivalesque, it must highlight disruptive elements— events or challenges to the norm through excessive and grotesque factors (Fuery 2000, 118). By applying Fuery's theory, we can observe how the Joker's identity and actions challenge established societal norms and moral values, ultimately shedding light on broader issues related to masculinity. The use of subversion here functions as a cinematic strategy and a platform for offering critical insights into real societal issues concerning the masculinity crisis. However, it must be emphasized that not all crises of masculinity can be classified as carnivalesque; only those displaying comparable disruptive and subversive qualities fit this classification.

Arthur's carnivalesque masculinity transitions from a marginalized individual to a bold symbol of resistance. This chapter contains four sections that elaborate on his carnivalesque depiction of masculinity. The first section analyzes Arthur's grotesque appearance alongside the Joker's transformation, highlighting their deviation from conventional male body standards. The discussion also shifts to the Joker's flamboyant behavior and emotional vulnerability. Arthur rejects the emotional restraint typical of hegemonic masculinity and openly expresses his feelings. His expressive dance challenges traditional masculine norms, embracing authenticity and strongly defying toxic masculinity. The second section delves into Arthur's disillusioned romantic relationship with Sophie, emphasizing his struggle to embody traditional patriarchal ideals. The third section assesses his social connections and the role of parental figures in shaping his masculinity, stressing the effects of an absent father and his obligations to his mother. His traumatic background has distorted his identity. The final section investigates Arthur's acceptance of an alternate identity that celebrates the grotesque and subversive, revealing the liberatory potential of the carnival. His ascent to heroism ultimately transforms him into a mock-king archetype, challenging societal norms and hegemonic masculinity.

6.1. The Grotesque Body

In the context of a carnivalesque atmosphere, perceptions of the body undergo a significant transformation, closely tied to grotesque imagery. The corporeality found within the carnivalesque presents a distinct system, markedly different from idealized physicality. I associate this bizarre and grotesque corporeality with how an individual's physical body fails to

conform to masculine ideals, placing the same masculine body in crisis. From this perspective, the carnival serves as a platform where traditional notions of the masculine body experience a transformation, highlighting a clear link between the carnival and the notion of masculinity in crisis.

Bakhtin terms the grotesque as central to the carnivalesque, featuring bizarre representations that highlight bodily flaws. He states that "a body is the act of becoming" (Bakhtin 1984a, 317). Changes in body image influence identity perception. The grotesque body's fluidity challenges traditional notions of physicality, fostering acceptance and freedom. Bakhtin defines the grotesque body as:

> […] ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed […] They are contrary to the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development. (1984a, 25)

The grotesque body facilitates the rise of carnivalesque masculinity, which is defined by its fluidity and unconformity. This type of masculinity directly contrasts with the idea of a completed and purified man. The grotesque body showcases features that reject traditional muscularity and hegemony while accepting the imperfections and vulnerabilities inherent in the human form. Bakhtin's perspective challenges the standard depiction of dominant masculinity by discarding the concept of an entirely masculine or authoritative figure. Instead, he celebrates the distorted, describing it as "ugly, monstrous, hideous" (1984a, 24-25).

In the film, Arthur is portrayed as a remarkably gaunt man, agonizingly thin, with a hunched posture, who frequently reveals his chest to show the bruises he has incurred from his job and interactions with young thugs in the opening scene. This starkly contrasts with the ideals of masculinity prevalent in his era, which celebrates a more traditional body type. Set in Gotham City in 1981, Arthur emerges as a man grappling with a crisis, defying the growing social preoccupations with body image and masculinity prevalent in the 1980s. Even though it was issued in 2019, the film is deeply influenced by the 1980s. I will examine the two intertwined timelines, demonstrating that American social norms have consistently faced similar challenges over time, with political patterns remaining unchanged. Within this framework, Aylin Kuryel (2022, 80) analyzes Phillips's Joker, stating that the film crafts "an alternate universe" potentially connecting the Reagan and Trump eras. Similarly, Ana Aitana Fernández-Moreno and Alan Salvadó-Romero (2022) argue that Phillips, originally from Brooklyn, experienced the real Gotham. They characterize the film as a deliberate contemplation of both past and

present, highlighting their interconnectedness while showcasing the height of crime in earlier times and the persistent challenges faced in the 21st-century. In an interview, Phillips stated, "In my mind, it was always New York City, 1981; what did that look like and feel like from my memory of it" (as quoted in Fernández-Moreno and Salvadó-Romero 2022, 24). The film reflects contemporary issues, particularly in the opening scene where the Joker applies his makeup while the news discusses the garbage crisis. Notably, the Mobro garbage barge, which left New York City in 1988 carrying three thousand tons of waste, serves as a reference point. Phillips aims to illustrate how these societal problems have profoundly affected individuals in both the 1980s and 2010s. I concur with the view that the film underscores broader social issues that extend beyond its time of release. It echoes wider uncertainties related to politics and social norms, especially those surrounding body image politics.

While the thugs attacked him, attention remained on Arthur's frail and grotesque clown persona. Lucile Charles (1945) clearly articulated a metonymic explanation for identifying a clown in the passage below:

> Here then is the reason for the clown's many names and guises and close psychological cousins. He is Devil and Vice, as well as Demon, Goblin, and Knave. He often merges into a Churl, Boor, Rustic, Dupe, Dolt, Booby, Simpleton, Noodle, or Nut. He may function as a Fool, Jester, Buffoon, Comic, or Harlequin or Pierrot with a more romantic touch. He may be a Parasite, Scape-goat, Old Man or Old Woman; or an animal; or he may be the "Fool of Nature," and so complete the cycle back again to the Holy Grail and man's perennial quest. I see no reason for sharp lines of classification: humorous story, folktale, literature, joking relationship, cartoon, clown, all stem from the same basic human need; and the clown ritual function moves among these many forms with their infinite number of variations, taking shape and impetus from particular human beings, in a particular culture, with their particular expression of the universal need. (1945, 34)

Charles' definition of a clown highlights their ability to express a wide range of emotions, emphasizing that clowns are performers who cannot be stoic. Whether as the Vice, jester, or Joker, these ambivalent figures evoke laughter, catharsis, and fear. We can argue that Arthur, while donning the Joker's mask, should embody these excessive emotional portrayals, and he does so effectively. However, his intense displays of laughter and fear burden him with traits that are not hegemonic, ultimately placing him in crisis. This aligns with his opening scene, which fluctuates between these emotions, showcasing children's laughter, his loud cries of pain, and the chilling image of a clown intended to inspire dread, now rendered fearful instead. Bakhtin's interpretation of the grotesque carnivalesque body describes it as an individualized, undying body of the people, comically debased to allow for festive rebirth. He suggests that ridicule and abuse exist alongside praise and celebration, with death intrinsically linked to birth

(as cited in Morris 1994, 194-195). This explains why Arthur's body attracted scorn and derision, particularly during the moments when people beat him, insisting he deserved more punishment due to his perceived weakness and inability to defend himself.

Bakhtin's ideas of rebirth and revival arise from grotesque alienation, emphasizing a desire to regain control in the chaos of a carnivalesque environment. This is illustrated by the transformation of the comedic clown into a grotesque criminal. Importantly, it should be noted that the young individuals involved were not exclusively white; they represented various ethnic backgrounds, including Latinos and African Americans. They challenged Arthur's racial privilege and age through their aggression and his physical frailty. Arthur's inability to defend himself highlights a deeper truth: he is incapable of protecting anyone, given his own vulnerabilities. In this context, the children prioritized class over race, as class distinctions were more apparent, especially illustrated by Arthur's sign proclaiming, "Going out of Business." This advertisement reflects the dire economic situation of a struggling store, revealing how capitalism's intrinsic economic challenges impact workers. Portraying a clown carrying this sign further reinforces the metaphor, indicating that Arthur personifies the message rather than merely depicting it. He represents the struggles and inequities faced by workers, embodying this reality. The children cultivated their sense of superiority by envisioning entitlement through violence, failing to view Arthur merely as a middle-aged white man who might pose a risk if they confronted him. They believed that by forming an alliance and resorting to violence, they could assert their dominance over Arthur. Despite neither child belonging to a privileged class, they recognized that Arthur, as a clown struggling financially, occupied an even lower socioeconomic position, thus perceiving him as belonging to an underprivileged social class. Consequently, Arthur's role as a clown, combined with his physical frailty, made him comparable to the disadvantaged youth.

The conflicting narratives surrounding clowns serve only as introductory elements that lead to his role as the villainous clown. Numerous scholars describe clowns as "liminal or threshold" figures (Turner, as cited in Kerman 1992, 9). In a similar context, Stefanova commented on the irony of clowns being "intelligent, humorous, and poetic, yet overlooked and marginalized in real society" (as cited in Meyer 2019, 240). Arthur's clown costume significantly contributes to depicting him as grotesque and socially rejected, amplifying his already grotesque body. Together, these elements cause him to stand as a *persona non grata* within the social structure, defined by their unique appearance and the behavior that complements it.

The quirky appearance of Arthur is closely tied to the absurd laughter accompanying it. He experiences "sudden frequent and uncontrollable laughter" as a symptom of his neurological disorder, which elicits no empathy from others. For instance, even a black woman on the bus with her son, who recognizes him as a person, dismisses his mental struggles, perceiving him as a bother to her child as he attempts to elicit laughter. His card explains, "it's a medical condition causing sudden, frequent and uncontrollable laughter that doesn't align with your feelings. It can occur in individuals with brain injuries or certain neurological disorders" (Phillips 2019, 00:08:44-00:08:57). Bakhtin (1984a) connects the carnival-like disruption of social norms to the creation of humorous experiences, aiming to challenge prevailing standards and sacred rules. Through his unrestrained laughter, Arthur subverts societal expectations by finding humor in situations where it is deemed inappropriate. His laughter as a physical manifestation also distorts his body, amplifying his grotesque image. This uncontrollable laughter indicates his lack of bodily control, marking him as physically othered in a culture that prizes composure and regulation. Indeed, those deemed mad are viewed as gentle beasts, yet they face the burden of social alienation. Bakhtin argues that laughter signifies not just bizarre bodily performances but also an act of defiance against authority. He states that laughter is "directed toward something higher, toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders" (Bakhtin 1984a, 127). In this context, laughter serves as a critique of official culture. The film illustrates this when Arthur laughs during serious encounters with someone he perceives as socially superior. His laughter reflects his feelings about class and authority disparities. Perhaps his laughter is also fueled by a fear of further rejection.

Arthur sought to integrate into society by becoming a more respected comedian rather than merely a clown; as Mohammed Zaid argues, "Arthur was making an effort to integrate into Gramsci's society, always striving to achieve fame in stand-up comedy" (2023, 86). However, his efforts ended up being unsuccessful, leading to poor stand-up performances. His jokes were excessively carnival-themed and did not align with the official environment in which he performed. He feels burdened by his impoverished existence and is striving to escape it. His mental anguish, alongside his financial hardships, has caused him to doubt his self-worth. Arthur's loss of a job that was not initially a secure job embodies the economic struggle inherent in the capitalist systems of the 1980s and 1990s (Lehtinen, Chistyakova, and Kanasheva 2022, 206). This is clear from his notes, which state, "Why did the old... [blocked] insomneea? I... [blocked] Why are poor... [blocked] confused? because... [blocked] any cents" (Zaid 2023, 88). The reduction in medication funding underscores broader social issues, reflecting the government's scaling back of social welfare programs and approving corporate tax cuts—key

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aspects of Reaganism (Lehtinen, Chistyakova, and Kanasheva 2022, 207). This situation also highlights a crisis within the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) due to drug shortage and the decrease in budget, which has been a persistent issue since 2017 and heightened in 2019 (McGeeney, McAden, and Sertkaya 2025, 1). Arthur navigates social and economic crises as an American who needs government support. However, the very government that should assist him complicates his struggle, ultimately deepening class divides and reinforcing existing hierarchies.

Arthur struggled to recognize these hierarchies and, most notably, the difference between the unofficial culture he created from his challenging experiences, which others often mocked, and the official culture he tried to impress with his performances. The profane jokes he delivered startled the audiences, especially during Murray's show, emphasizing the subversive aspect of his humor when he joked about the child who got hit by a car and the woman replied, "Oh, no, no, no. No, you cannot joke about that" (Phillips 2019, 01:41:17). However, it is clear that he pursued a defiant way to convey his rejection of past adversaries while asserting "All of you, the system that claims to know so much. You dictate what is right or wrong. Just as you determine what is funny or not!" (Phillips 2019, 01:42:27- 01:42:39).

Furthermore, Arthur's grotesque performance is linked to his laughter and reflected in his dance. His dance is frequently associated with feelings of culpability rather than joy, mirroring his laughter, which is both carnivalesque and contradictory. This is paradoxical since Arthur recognized that murdering or insulting is immoral, as seen by several situations in which he encouraged individuals to exhibit kindness and refrain from harming others. Nonetheless, his celebration of each victim's death illustrates his new perspective on homicide. Arthur believes that every individual he killed warranted death as revenge for his actions. The rationale for rejoicing is closely linked to his internal justification of vengeance.

This scene appears immediately after he commits his subway crime; Arthur retreats to a bathroom, where he begins a slow, celebratory dance reminiscent of ballet, set to cello music. His slender frame and freeform movements evoke an Asian martial art style, enhancing the grotesque quality of his aesthetic. The carnivalesque dance is often accompanied by "every despicable act, every murder, every form of excess that licentiousness and lunacy have dared to dream" (quoted in Javanian and Rahmani 2021, 44). Consequently, Arthur's dance is frequently showcased following each crime or act of violence, either as a precursor or as a follow-up (Javanian and Rahmani 2021, 44). This is further illustrated in the hospital scene where the Joker dances, causing a gun to slip out of his pants, resulting in his job loss. After losing his job, Arthur's coworkers were questioning why he had a gun there. While one asked,

"Is that part of your new act, Arthur? If your dancing doesn't do the trick, you're just gonna shoot yourself" (Phillips 2019, 00:37:18-00:37:23). The metaphor of the gun, representing crime, is connected to his dance, reinforcing Arthur's loss of employment as the catalyst for his initial crime, driven by the feeling that he had nothing left to lose.

The manner in which he murdered Randal was a horrific spectacle. He inserted the scissors into his neck and their eye, resulting in a profuse discharge of blood that disseminated throughout the area, referencing the abject bodily fluids. He continued to strike his head against the wall to ensure his demise, indifferent to the blood on his hands. All these aspects reflect the film's carnivalesque tone and illustrate how Arthur's masculinity represents an exaggerated form of masculinity in crisis. He resorts to violence in response to failing to conform. Although this violent exaggeration might occur in real life, it remains part of the carnivalesque cinematic representation, which I rely on here as part of my analysis.

Furthermore, dancing signified Arthur's evolution into an anarchistic carnival jester ready to defy the city's norms. He painted his face white and dyed his hair green, all while enjoying Frank Sinatra's rendition of "That's Life" on the radio.

> Fleck moves in response to the intonations and emotion of Sinatra's vocals, which play at high volume in his mind. These only resolve into the sound of diegetic radio when this musical reverie is interrupted by a doorbell. But before this happens, in the audiovisual synthesis of the bodies heard and seen, a new iteration of Fleck's identity emerges as he dances and paints his face in the mirror. (as quoted in Redmond 2022, 44)

The song illustrates his evolution into a rebel carnival jester, encouraging self-expression after experiencing alienation. Jeff Preston and Lindsay Rath-Paillé (2023, 5) point out that Arthur's striking appearance distinguishes him, linking him to a legacy of intricate characters. For instance, he was starkly contrasted with Gary and Randal, making Arthur part of the freak show in his workplace. A powerful scene depicts desolate Arthur crawling into an empty fridge. This scene exemplifies the exaggerated grotesque imagery. Although Arthur desired solitude to distance himself from those who had harmed him, he also wished to escape his whole world. His residence no longer evoked a sense of belonging. Arthur did not confine himself to his room or even the bathroom for privacy; instead, he opted for the fridge, presumably since he had never been there before. His mind was seeking a fresh refuge, apart from the several locations that repudiated his existence. The fridge symbolizes Arthur's desire to return to his mother's womb, suggesting a metaphorical rebirth, which is further underlined in the carnivalesque rituals of death and rebirth. Although Arthur made no attempts to take his own life, he

effectively annihilated his former personality as Arthur and proclaimed the emergence of the Joker as an alternative identity.

In contrast to previous portrayals of the Joker, Joaquin Phoenix delivers a gaunt and fragile interpretation, with his mother urging him to eat due to his alarming thinness. Arthur's scenery reveals his grotesque nature. Anna Kérchy argues that "self-freaking" identities, like Arthur's, are often pathologized, hyper-sexualized, objectified, and stripped of subjectivity—to reinforce societal norms (2008, 44). Individuals like Arthur, who significantly diverge from social standards, are sometimes categorized as eccentric and inhuman. This may not necessarily categorize them as experiencing masculinity in crisis, since labeling them as freaks is a form of dehumanization. Arthur's grotesque physique represents an exaggerated cinematic manifestation of body standards within hegemonic masculinity. This finding corresponds with the designation of Arthur as a freak on several occasions throughout the movie, emphasizing the severe treatment he has endured.

The Joker embraced a flamboyant perspective on life, adopting a vibrant and hopeful outlook. Despite the strict standards imposed on him, he maintained this optimistic view, showcasing his unique approach to navigating the world around him. He consistently clung to the hope of fitting in, believing that securing a job would allow him to emulate Murray Franklin, whom he regarded as a successful archetype of hegemonic masculinity. However, this flamboyance that initially rejected the toxicity in people and their treatment of one another while advocating for kindness turned toxic after Arthur transformed into the Joker. His flamboyant behaviors, including his dancing and theatrical preparations for attending Murray's show, further illustrate his complete rejection of hegemonic ideals and his decision to cease pursuing participation in the dominant social narrative. This intentional dismissal of social norms will be further examined in the next section, emphasizing its reasons and inherent causes related to the absence of parental figures in guiding Arthur's understanding of his masculinity.

6.2. Impact of Parental Figures on Masculine Identity

The influence of parental figures is critical in shaping manhood. Pleck (2010) suggests that a father's gender plays a vital role in a child's perception of parenting, forming expectations of masculinity. A father serves as the primary educator of masculinity for boys; thus, his absence results in a lack of accurate knowledge that society cannot adequately replace.

Arthur's relationship with Murray is significant, especially because he lacks a father. He sees Murray as a father figure. Excited to attend the Murray Show with his mother, Arthur daydreams about being in the audience. In his fantasy, Murray selects him to speak, possibly

drawn by his loud laugh. He introduces himself, stating, "I live right in the city with my mother," using a childlike voice (Phillips 2019, 00:13:30-00:13:35). This scene resembles shows where children are invited to share about themselves, allowing the audience to laugh without intimidating them like *Little Big Shots* by Steve Harvey. At first, Arthur displays juvenile masculinity, uncertain about how to be a man due to the absence of a father figure. He hopes Murray will understand this reality, prompting him to reassure the audience that growing up with a mother is normal. Arthur imagined the hope he felt when Murray said, "I lived with my mother before I made it. Just me and her. I'm that kid whose father went out for a pack of cigarettes and never came back." In response, Arthur shared, "I know what that's like, Murray. I've been the man of the house for as long as I can remember. I take good care of my mother" (Phillips 2019, 00:13:46-00:13:54). As Arthur pondered, the applause and cheers from an enthusiastic audience played in his mind, representing the idealized masculinity he imagined that equated being kind with being dominant—though this is not necessarily the true meaning of hegemony. Arthur seemed unaware of the cultural dynamics at play and the norms he was expected to adhere to. He was merely attempting to emulate individuals with social privilege, like Murray, whom people adored.

In the film, Arthur reverses roles with his sick mother by becoming her caregiver. A significant scene illustrating this dynamic is the bathing scene, which parallels a mother bathing her child. Furthermore, Arthur is pictured taking care of his mother as if he were her mother, not his. He even cuts the pieces of food for her, saying, "Here, don't get all worked up. Eat. You need to eat" (Phillips 2019, 00:11:21-00:11:20). Lehtinen, Chistyakova, and Kanasheva analyze the bond between Arthur and Penny through the lens of the Oedipus complex, highlighting an unhealthy dependency. They argue that Arthur must separate from his mother to become a fully realized man (2022, 189). Although his mother is not presented as a sexual object, they contend that his situation is still abnormal and exacerbated by a capitalist and patriarchal society that perpetuates abuse and poverty (Lehtinen, Chistyakova, and Kanasheva 2022, 189). While I do not fully endorse the Oedipus complex interpretation, I acknowledge Arthur's naivety regarding the typical mother-son relationship. This reflects how children should learn about interpersonal dynamics. Contrary to the belief that Arthur depends on Penny, it is Penny who exploits his vulnerabilities, knowing his adoption history and past abuses. From a nuanced perspective, Penny views Arthur as a provider, which is why she conceals the truth from him.

Arthur discovers a letter from his mother to Thomas Wayne, unveiling secrets that instill in him not anger but a fresh hope in his quest to find his father. He is hopeful about encountering the epitome of patriarchy and wealth that could elevate his status. It was a deeply intimate

encounter when he first met Bruce Wayne, hinting at Arthur's craving for connection and belonging. Arthur dreamed of reuniting with his family and sought answers to his problems. Lacking clarity, he took matters into his own hands and boldly approached Thomas Wayne at the Opera House for a talk. There, Wayne revealed the truth: Arthur is neither a Wayne by blood nor Penny Fleck's son, as he was adopted. Arthur's denial was evident as he began stating,

> I don't need you to tell me lies. I know it seems strange. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I don't know why everyone is so rude. I don't know why you are. I don't want anything from you. Maybe a little bit of warmth or maybe a hug, dad! How about of a little of fucking decency? What is it with you people …dad it's me come on. (Phillips 2019, 01:06: 24-01:07:00)

Arthur yearned for affection, clearly shown through his interactions and his personal view of ideal masculinity, which included gentleness and warmth. He stressed the significance of emotional openness in everyone he met, contrasting sharply with the common expectation of emotional resilience linked to traditional notions of masculinity. Unlike others, Arthur contended that such resilience is not a prerequisite for manhood. His emotional pain peaked when he learned that, as a child, he had suffered physical abuse from the various boyfriends of Penny. The account describes him as "he was [found] tied in a radiator in her apartment, malnourished with multiple bruises across his body and severe trauma to his head." She said that "she never heard him crying" (Phillips 01:15:01-01:15:12). This led him to feel that she was unworthy of the protection and sacrifices he made for her. Moreover, his amnesia regarding the abuse he endured indicates a profound issue. Aside from his mental illness—poorly defined in the film—this narrative illustrates a man whose masculinity is scarred by circumstances beyond his control. Arthur began to see his illness not as an inherent flaw but as a consequence of the abuse he suffered from others. He believed the blame did not rest on him, and thus, his crisis in masculinity was not his fault. Ultimately, he accepted his fate and transformed into the Joker, symbolizing the fractured masculine identity he had long carried.

Yadav attributes responsibility to the American state, viewing it as a parental figure for its citizens (2022, 18). She argues that the film highlights a lack of funding for social services, which leads to neglect and discipline through ideological means, such as media, and by force via police intervention (2022, 18). This critique emphasizes the film's central theme: the consequences of governmental neglect as a crucial element in the construction of masculinity. Yadav points out the contradiction between social expectations for men to succeed and the government's unwillingness to support them. Financial failure highlights a masculinity crisis, further complicated by the government's financial challenges, which echo the late 2007

Recession. This raises questions about the government's need to maintain a hegemonic stance when the official culture is also in crisis.

The issue of parental absence in the Joker figure extends beyond Phillips's portrayal. Jeff Preston and Lindsay Rath-Paillé argue that the Joker is often depicted as a "dysfunctional son in need of discipline from an appropriate father figure" (2023, 8). This representation underscores how the Joker's masculinity and criminality are linked to a lack of guidance during his upbringing.

> out in the relationship between Jack and Carl Grissom, Gotham City's famous crime lord. Grissom appears as father-figure, not only due to their age difference but also because Jack is seen as a second-in-command and heir apparent. When Grissom discovers Jack is having an affair with his wife, he arranges for Jack to be arrested. So is Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008), which is based on an abusive father's actions, which are said to have resulted in his iconic facial deformity. In symmetry with the castration anxiety, both Jokers pay a corporeal price for their transgression. Like the stereotype rooted in childhood trauma as inevitably leading to violent future acts, these moments of castration are suggested to result in a man being reborn as a disfigured, murderous monster who desires revenge not just against those responsible but against the society that does not reciprocate his love. (Preston and Rath-Paillé 2023, 8)

Preston and Rath-Paillé's study underscores that the destiny of the Jokers acts as retribution for their reprehensible deeds. Conversely, Phillips' Joker embodies an alternative story; his actions arise from the abuse he suffered, giving him a fascinating subject for the exploration of masculinity in turmoil. This figure not only underscores many difficulties but also critiques them. This transcends mere depiction, offering a cinematic critique that directly addresses the complexities and historical context of masculinity. Phillips Joker's considerable difficulty with interpersonal interactions transcends his familial connections, impacting his sexual relationships as well. I shall examine this argument in further detail in the subsequent section.

6.3. Confronting Intimacy Challenges and Incompleteness

The concepts of carnivalesque and masculinity in crisis share themes of chaos and upheaval. Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman (2002, 1) assert that the masculinity crisis involves anxieties surrounding social roles, identity, and relationships, often resulting in aggressive or abusive behavior. The carnival challenges conventional symbols of masculinity, including authority, power, and patriarchy. For Arthur to fully embody hegemonic masculinity, he needed to forego certain privileges, such as having a woman in his life to fulfill that role. Although he had the opportunity to care for his mother and take on the roles of provider and protector, he struggled to fully accept his patriarchal responsibilities and manly duties.

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However, upon seeing his neighbor in the elevator, Arthur realized he had found what he had missed. A woman truly acknowledged him for the first time, igniting an instant obsession with her. He even stalked her to her daughter's school, convinced that she was someone he needed to protect and care for. A study by Rachel Tal-Hadar, Ayelet Prior, and Einat Peled further explores the need for romantic partners to validate masculinity. They argue that 'a girlfriend experience' may affirm men's masculinity, even in relationships involving payment. The rise of the paid sex phenomenon reflects men's need for intimacy, which plays a crucial role in their sense of masculinity (2024, 1017). This illustrates how men's perception and satisfaction with their masculinity are closely linked to their ability to fulfill intimacy needs and receive gratitude and admiration from women. Before introducing Arthur as the Joker, Murray spoke with Dr. Sally about sexual issues, suggesting to her, "You need to meet our next guest. I'm certain this guy could benefit from a doctor." When Dr. Sally asks about Arthur's sexual problems, Murray answers, "he looks like he got a lot of problems" (Phillips 2019, 01:37:12-01:37:22). Upon entering, Arthur immediately kisses Dr. Sally, suggesting he overheard their conversation. Due to Dr. Sally's age, reminiscent of his mother, this action merges maternal affection with romantic intimacy. Additionally, it reflects Arthur's carnivalesque sense of the world, which embraces such actions without reservation. Sexual themes are not overtly depicted in the film; they relate to how men view each other in romantic and sexual contexts—either diminishing or respecting one another. Lacking that respect, Arthur begins fantasizing about a woman, believing she attends his stand-up performances. For him, making her laugh is intrinsically tied to his sense of masculinity. The supportive atmosphere of the stand-up comedy scene and the mainstream culture's acceptance further solidify his belief that he can embody a complete man.

Furthermore, Arthur's first murder in the subway, which catalyzed his transformation into the Joker, was not an act of heroism. Although a woman needing protection looked at him, he turned away instead of helping. This act is not one of bravery or masculinity. Conversely, the Wall Street workers displayed a toxic form of patriarchal masculinity through their rude behavior towards the subway woman. The confrontation between Arthur and these men illustrates the contrast between patriarchal authority and Arthur's fragile state, as he feared confronting them. His fragility abruptly escalated into a severe act of violence, as Arthur did not simply react in self-defense or out of instinct; he persisted in firing until his weapon was depleted, even chasing down an individual attempting to escape and shooting him multiple times until he was lifeless. After the murder, Arthur feels a renewed sense of superiority over elitist workers. He fantasizes about visiting Sophie's house for an intimate encounter, believing

he has finally become a complete man. The love he thinks she had for him validates his authority over her for the first time after he persistently pursued and fantasized about her. His sudden hasty kiss led him to believe that he could, for the first time, assert dominance. All of this aligns with the reality that he exerted a violent dominance over the Wall Street guys. This moment signifies a pivotal transformation in his self-conception, as he anticipates exerting his patriarchal identity via her.

Arthur's delusions intensified as he envisioned Sophie supporting him during his mother's stroke. He craved support, imagining her character rubbing his back and bringing him coffee. However, the reality of being an adopted orphan shattered his dreams and illusions of acceptance. Killing Penny Fleck further deteriorated his emotional relationships; the only person he trusted, his mother, had transformed from a loving parent into an abusive figure. This act stemmed from his belief that he had a mother, even though he longed for a strong, supportive father. Arthur's inability to form any intimate connection—whether with family, romantic partners, or coworkers—led him to choose emotional detachment and violence against those who mocked him. Arthur did not fear emotional fragility; instead, he sought it, believing emotions to be a source of strength. However, in creating the Joker, he fashioned a being devoid of weak or empathetic emotions, instead, he developed anger, revenge, and a desire to disrupt the very rules that once accepted him.

In Arthur's journey of becoming a villain, he adopts the image of the Joker, which represents his "idealized vision of self" (Lehtinen, Chistyakova, and Kanasheva 2022, 195). This transformation allows him to construct a form of masculinity that is carnivalesque, performing a grotesque masculinity that subverts hegemonic norms of emotional and physical toughness, challenges class hierarchies, and rejects patriarchy. This identity flourishes during a time of social crisis, becoming an idealized and temporary image of dominance.

6.4. From Margin to Center: Mock-King Figure

Bakhtin defines what he calls "carnivalistic acts" as the rituals found in all carnival festivities. He explains that

> [c]rowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position…from the very beginning, a decrowning glimmers through the crowning. And all carnivalistic symbols are of such a sort: they always include within themselves a perspective of negation (death) or vice versa. Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth. (1984b, 124)

Bakhtin argues that during carnivals, the king, symbolizing hegemony, is dethroned during carnivals, and a satirical monarch is selected from among the attendees. Anyone, including slaves and jesters, can become this mock king (1984b, 124). This shift elevates the slave or jester from the periphery to the center while displacing the king to the periphery. During this process, the deposed monarch loses his regal attire and crown, alongside other symbols of authority, and becomes a target of ridicule and physical abuse (Bakhtin 1984b, 125). In such a system, "the king is the clown [who has been] elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned even in our time" (Bakhtin 1984a, 197). Bakhtin's concept of the clown-king metamorphosis suggests that power dynamics, including gender, can experience substantial changes. The idea of the people choosing the carnival king corresponds to Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony. According to Gramsci (1971, 12), hegemony is established through the voluntary agreement of the majority of the population to the overall control exerted by the dominant group over social life. This inherent agreement is what regulates masculine hierarchies as well. In this section, I analyze Arthur's rise as a mock-king figure through his transformation into the Joker. This represents the peak of his carnivalesque masculinity, challenging the official hegemonic culture through grotesque physical expression, overt emotional displays like laughter, and a failure to conform to patriarchal norms, all of which highlight his crisis. Arthur's carnivalesque masculinity experiences temporary changes, evolving from a marginalized individual due to his struggles to a media sensation. This transformation turns him into a symbol of rebellion through his actions. Bakhtin explains that during the Carnival,

> The usual order and way of life, and especially the social hierarchy were suspended at the wedding feast. Rules of politeness among equals and of respect for the hierarchy among inferiors were canceled for that short period. Conventions vanished, the distance between men disappeared, and all this was symbolically expressed by the right to strike one's important and esteemed neighbor. During the short time of the wedding feast all participants entered, as it were, the utopian kingdom of absolute equality and freedom. (1984a, 264)

In this passage, Bakhtin emphasizes that a new type of masculine behavior emerges during the carnival that challenges social hierarchies. Individuals no longer regard notions of respect; the division between superiority and inferiority fades, leading to a sense of equality. Thus, carnivalesque masculinity is characterized by its challenge to traditional gender norms and the temporary subversion of societal hierarchies. We can identify two distinct forms of masculinity

related to carnivals. In the carnival, the monarch, who has momentarily lost his dominant masculinity, experiences a marginalized carnivalesque masculinity. Conversely, the peasant, soon to be crowned king, embodies a dominant carnivalesque masculinity. While the marginalized version may not epitomize ideal masculinity, it actively questions social norms by rejecting conformity. Carnivalesque masculinity does not solely arise from psychological wounds due to unmet masculine standards or external pressures; instead, it stems from a conscious choice to confront the conventional ideals of masculinity and embrace alternative gender identities.

Arthur's journey to assume the role of a mock-king in the film unfolded progressively. Arthur underwent a significant transformation as a result of being beaten by kids, mocked by coworkers, manipulated by Randal, lied to by his mother, and humiliated by Wayne. His subway murder of Wall Street workers inadvertently contributed to the establishment of a distinctly carnivalesque atmosphere in the city. He provoked a disturbance, urging violence against the wealthy. This illustrates the challenges associated with Reagan's economic policies and the emergence of oligarchs in 1989 as a result of tax cuts, alongside persistently high unemployment at both the beginning and conclusion of his first term, shaped by the recession and the high-interest-rate strategy (Komlos 2019, 5-6).

However, Kuryel (2022, 81) observes that the riots instigated by Arthur's crime mirror the actions of Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army members. This protest movement arose within the anti-capitalist movement in the 2000s. From her perspective, similar to the film, the clown figure emerged as the emblematic representation of the rebellion led by the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. She posits that the Bakhtinian concept inspired these riots, characterized by the carnival mask that disorients authorities and presents a menacing smile within the protesting crowds (2022, 81). Mark Truesdale's examination of the carnivalesque offers a deep insight into how festive gatherings can disrupt social structures and serve as a critical lens for analyzing the concept of masculinity. In this context, protests may be viewed as a form of festive gathering. Truesdale argues that these carnivalesque feasts commemorate extravagant behavior, pushing boundaries and blending individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds (2018, 15). Like a carnival gathering, the protests lack class hierarchies, as the principles governing the protests focus solely on the issues at hand and the targets of dissent. In contrast, the demands of the protests maintain an equal standing. Truesdale elaborates that festive gatherings are ideal for commoners to articulate their dissatisfaction with the ruling authority by voicing "anti-noble" sentiments (2018, 15). To this end, I harmonize my point of view with Kuryel's assertion that Arthur's masked criminal activities incited the "Kill

the Rich!" protests. Arthur observed the "Kill the Rich" movement with a sense of satisfaction as he watched the news. He noted the enthusiasm of the protestors, particularly their fervor for targeting Thomas Wayne. Individuals were holding signs that read "We are all clowns" (Phillips 2019, 01:02:20), and some protestors donned a mock king figure mask styled as a clown while demonstrating in front of Wayne Enterprises. The interpretation of the clown mask has evolved from representing lower social class and weakness to serving as a powerful metaphor for social revolt. The protestors constructed a vibrant representation of their reality and employed the metaphor of the carnivalesque to provoke decision-making.

Phillips *Joker* transcends time by reflecting on various social settings and historical events with cinematic bravura. The film, released in 2019 during a pivotal presidential election, highlighted widespread opposition to Donald Trump's re-election. Trump controversially asserted that mental illness, rather than guns, was the primary cause of mass shootings (Grapă 2022, 69). This statement emerged amid a notable rise in such incidents in California, Texas, and Ohio, coinciding with increasing anti-Trump protests (Grapă 2022, 69), which he linked to his advocacy for gun ownership. Gun ownership is not the sole reason for the protests; rather, they stem from various issues within the economy, employment, and the overall decline in living conditions. Arthur's character embodies a victim of capitalism—an innocent individual who, by choice, turns into a criminal, thereby sacrificing his innocence. Indeed, the Joker faced challenges with gun ownership, losing his job as a result. Furthermore, his mental instability makes it clear he should not have possessed a firearm in the first place. This emphasizes that Arthur embodies the crisis of his era. He belongs to the dangerous class, devoid of rights and benefits from the government. This has been further highlighted by Janine Little (2022), who refers to Arthur's masculinity as "monstrous masculinity." Arthur symbolizes multiplicity, inviting various interpretations, and possesses a "chameleonic nature" (Little 2022, 176). According to Little, he embodies the violent consequences of gender distress, regardless of the triggers (2022, 182). Ultimately, Arthur represents the myriad issues stemming from being a victim of neoliberal capitalism, media consumption, and abusive personal relationships, culminating in what I prefer to call carnivalesque masculinity that blends all exaggerated deformities.

Arthur's appearance on Murray Franklin's talk show following his transformation into the Joker represented his initial step toward becoming a publicly elected mock-king figure. He recognized that the riots outside were shouting his name, believing that he was responsible for the deaths of the Wall Street workers due to his alignment with the same demands being voiced. This act shifts his position from being the individual previously shamed within Murray's show

to the one employing the same shameful humor to convey that he did not adhere to the dictates of their dominant system. His actions were driven by a desire for retribution following the experience of humiliation.

> Have you seen what it's like out there, Murray? Do you ever actually leave the studio? Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody's civil anymore. Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy. Do you think men like Thomas Wayne ever think what it's like to be someone like me? To be somebody but themselves? They don't. They think that we'll just sit there and take it like good little boys! That we won't be a werewolf and go wild! (Phillips 2019, 01:43:33- 01:44:05)

Following his articulation of feelings regarding capitalist selfishness, Arthur kills Murray, who embodies the official culture, the capitalist media, the absent father figure he lacked, and the hegemonic self he never attained. Arthur is invited to appear on the Murray Franklin Show. Initially, the stage transforms into a domain that questions societal norms, a trend now prevalent due to the abundance of social media content. Despite being aware that the Joker had faced mockery for his previous jokes, Murray opted to interview him again solely for the viewership. This decision suggests that Arthur's situation serves as a critique of a society that glorifies extreme individualism and prioritizes personal gain over the welfare of others. These narrative critiques target platform capitalism and examine how these platforms impact consumers, ultimately benefiting their rulers the most, as detailed by Rathje et al. (2021). They argue that understanding virality is crucial since the social media ecosystem functions as an attention economy, where users, politicians, and brands compete for attention (Rathje et al. 2021, 7). Murray Franklin would not care about Arthur if his video had not gone viral and garnered attention. Despite the 1980s backdrop, the number of viewers significantly influenced the management of on-screen content. This critiques the moral decay and the folly of chasing viewership to boost revenues, businesses, or political campaigns, leading individuals to create viral content, as Murray did by humiliating Arthur (Rathje et al. 2021, 7). Conversely, Sasa Miletic (2020) discusses the competition within capitalism, where economic aspirations overshadow the well-being of others. Miletic contends that individualism is to blame, as it operates in relation to all essential aspects of our lives aligned with democracy and the film industry (2020, para 10). The neoliberal mantra further summarizes this concept, "anyone can make it, only if they try hard enough" (Miletic 2020, para 10). Arthur believed in this notion, which is why he persistently attempted to become a stand-up comedian. However, through all the humiliation, he realized that societal contradictions do not support individualism; rather, communities impact one another. In this way, Arthur represents the crisis stemming from an excessive individualist approach. Additionally, his impulsive response to these incidents

highlights how broadcasting and social media drive engagement through sensational content (Rathje et al. 2021, 7). This is evident in the live coverage of the murder, where both the cameraman and the entire production team kept filming even before the act, as Arthur confessed to killing the Wall Street men in the subway, prioritizing sensationalism over ethical responsibilities. This decision reveals a troubling reality of social media, where violent acts and scandals are commodified as entertainment.

The live broadcast of Arthur's killing exacerbated the riots, as individuals observed the city burning in flames while laughing during their arrests by the police. The driver was startled by Arthur's laughter, which felt entirely absurd for someone who had just killed a prominent celebrity on live TV and was now in custody yet still found amusement. The police officer states: "Stop laughing, you freak! This isn't funny. The whole fucking city is on fire because of what you did" (Phillips 2019, 01:47:37). Later, a protester in an ambulance crashed into the police car containing Arthur, saving him. The Joker was put on top of the police car, symbolizing his superiority over authority and established power structures. The film further amplifies grotesque imagery as the wounded Joker acknowledges the applause aimed at his carnivalesque masculinity. He concludes with a distinctive dance, demonstrating his triumph in exerting authority and control. His dance embodies the carnivalesque spirit of revelry and inversion. Throughout the film, Arthur is subjected to ridicule, which connects him to the notion of the abject. However, his bodily performance is far from abject; instead, it celebrates inversion and subversion in every essence through his facial expressions, dance, and unique physicality. I do not view his character as an abject hero. Let's delve deeper into this categorization to identify his nature within this film. Isra Daraiseh and M. Keith Booker analyzed the Joker as a postmodern interpretation of Michael André Bernstein's concept of the "abject hero." They first describe the abject hero as a

> contradictory figure whose grandiose sense of his own worth is balanced by an equally powerful sense of self-doubt and self-loathing. With a genealogy that dates back to traditional figures such as the wise fool and the holy fool, the abject hero is also tormented by an intense awareness that his character is derivative and potentially ridiculous (2020, para 23).

From this quote, it is clear that Arthur lacked full self-awareness or self-loathing at the film's start, which explains his repeated questions about why others neglect or disrespect him. This seems to stem from his naiveté regarding the structure of his own society, a reality he eventually realizes. However, he does not hate himself; instead, he seeks revenge out of a desire for a better

life born from self-love. This distinction is essential as it demonstrates that self-ridicule and self-doubt alone do not create an abject hero; one must also recognize and act upon that ridicule. Even after killing Murray and knowing the entire nation is aware of his crime, he does not view himself as a tragic hero destined for jail; instead, he dances, suggesting that self-hatred is absent from his mind. He embraces the sense of carnivalesque revelry and celebration, which I see as the opposite of abjection.

At this moment, Arthur believes he has achieved the life he desired, envisioning himself as the hero and ideal figure he has always aspired to be. This perception of a rule-free existence is transient and fundamentally lacks the characteristics of a utopia. Bakhtin's insights in his writings ignited the interest of other scholars, leading them to investigate further aspects of the carnival that it connected to what Arthur perceives as utopian. For Bakhtin,

> […] a free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts phenomena…. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a non-carnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the in significant, the wise with the stupid. (1984b, 123)

While the carnivalesque environment seems to offer freedom, it is bound by underlying constraints that require a return to the original order once the ceremony is over. Umberto Eco argues that "comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgression: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule" (Eco, Ivanov, Rector, and Sebeok 1984, 6). In essence, the carnivalesque operates within a defined structure of rules and standards, where temporary deviation from these regulations actually serves to emphasize their importance and validity. Although carnivalesque masculinity may challenge traditional notions of gender and identity, it is still a form of masculinity that exists within the confines of established laws and societal expectations. Rather than rejecting cultural norms outright, carnivalesque masculinity partakes in a playful and fleeting departure from the conventional framework of gender roles and expectations. Bakhtin may have exaggerated when he described the carnivalesque atmosphere as utopic. Both masculinities in crisis and the carnivalesque are characterized by subversion: rules are overturned, and many forms of violence can occur. His perception of the carnivalesque as a place of freedom, equality, and subversion that starkly contrasted the rigid and oppressive society around him may have been shaped by the oppressive political environment he experienced. Michael D. Bristol highlights the carnivalesque role as a reaction to social limitations and subjugation:

> [i]n its reduced form, the theory that festivity promotes social cohesion explains festive form and its customary violation as a catharsis or 'safety valve'. In this view, people who are oppressed, expropriated or in some way constrained by an unwelcome social discipline are permitted to release their accumulated resentment at regular intervals so that they may then be reincorporated within the repressive regime. (2014, 27)

Although it has subversive potential, the carnivalesque environment can also reinforce male dominance. By temporarily suspending societal norms, it offers marginalized men a chance to assert authority, providing a controlled means to challenge dominant males. However, this often leads to a reinforcement of the existing social order after the carnival concludes. The brief role reversals do not produce a lasting change in the social hierarchy; instead, they function as a safety valve, allowing latent tensions to surface and return to the dominant framework. This viewpoint suggests that the carnivalesque unites individuals in marginalized positions. Terry Eagleton contends that the carnivalesque is "a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art" (1981, 46). It allows participants to engage in a lawful rebellion against authoritative figures and seek justice for their long-standing mistreatment.

Protests and riots act as acceptable breaches of authority, yet they largely elude control by those in power. This fosters an illusion of disrupted norms, leading protestors to believe they can change power structures while authorities merely manage their frustration. For instance, when they killed Thomas and Martha Wayne, they thought they had eliminated the patriarchal figure infringing upon their rights. However, there are always multiple rulers, and this highlights that dismantling patriarchy, and hierarchy cannot be achieved merely by eliminating those who represent it. Such ideals are deeply embedded in many minds and are vital to hegemony, making them difficult to eradicate.

Phillips' Joker reflects a multifaceted view of American masculinity in crisis. Although he represents efforts to challenge and redefine societal norms, he ultimately fails; the final scene reveals Arthur captured in Arkham Asylum, reflecting the fleeting nature of his rebellious persona as a carnivalesque figure. This illustrates how institutional governance seeks to discipline masculinity during times of crisis. Since Arthur embodies this crisis, his narrative serves as a means for authorities and institutions to regain control over it.

I did not see how the film's ending could address the crisis embodied by Arthur or suggest the potential for regeneration in this situation. When his therapist inquired about his laughter, he declined to respond and remarked, "you wouldn't get it" (Phillips 2019, 01:53:19-01:53:53). This suggests he recognizes that institutional norms will never comprehend his needs

or issues because, to them, he epitomizes the crisis. Perhaps Phillips, the film's director, illustrates that resolving the economic, social, and political crisis in society requires effort from both sides, affecting the construction of masculinity, one aspect I analyzed in this dissertation.

The Joker is once again under the administrative control of the hospital. The ephemeral carnivalesque liberation he experienced has diminished. This last scene highlighted a compelling interaction between the carnivalesque subversion of standards and Arthur's vindictive disposition. He was seen strolling and dancing in the hospital corridor, leaving behind bloody footsteps, indicative of having murdered his doctor as well. Through his laughter, he asserted that he would perpetually seek a means to confront the system or anybody attempting to impose upon him. Although he was captured, he does not express a desire for freedom; rather, he ultimately acknowledges that his performance of masculinity is merely a reflection of social norms. He appears indifferent, having lost faith in the dominant structures of his environment, rendering his location inconsequential.

This chapter examines Phillips's portrayal of American masculinity in crisis through Arthur in *Joker*. Employing Bakhtin's theory of the Carnival, I describe his masculinity as carnivalesque, marked by eccentric conduct and grotesque appearance, culminating in a temporary revolt at the film's finale. I analyze how Arthur's grotesque physique contributes to his marginalization and dehumanization, leading to challenges in his career. The absence of his father significantly influences his masculine development, compelling him to adopt his mother's role. Lacking a paternal figure deprives him of direction, compounded by his inability to establish patriarchal dominance and the absence of a romantic partner. His struggles with employment, family dynamics, and societal rejection ultimately drive him to embrace nonconformity. In a desperate bid to assert authority, he manifests an aggressive, violent masculinity, yet this is met with swift apprehension by the police, returning him to the mental health facility.

Conclusion

In his work "Games People Play: The Collapse of 'Masculinities' and the Rise of Masculinity as Spectacle" (2019, 12), Damien Ridge argues that scholars are already pursuing a post-hegemonic world. However, this substitute remains perplexing, as masculinity seems to be subjective. This notion prompted me to consider the need for an exploratory analysis of existing norms' challenges and highlight various alternative masculinities. I refer to the recent focus on crisis-driven masculinities, where certain marginal behaviors and characteristics are incorporated as the new normal within specific communities during identifiable periods.

This dissertation explored the varied embodiments of American masculinity in crisis after 9/11, concentrating on three notable cinematic portrayals of the Joker: Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* (2016), and Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019). These representations highlight forms of masculinity that challenge the dominant model and subvert established hierarchies among white Western men. This was effectively represented and analyzed through the lens of villains, antiheroes, or antagonists who represent marginalized and unresolved social figures that require deeper representation and study. They reflect the reality of many troubled men who may resort to crime or violence as a defense mechanism. In this framework, the Joker exemplifies the apex of the crisis surrounding American masculinity through his acts of terrorism, thirst for power, and various disturbances.

My examination began with studying masculinity studies as a framework guiding my research methodology. I concluded that masculinity studies recognize the range of masculine expression and the adaptability of manhood expectations. Nonetheless, the discourse surrounding masculinity in crisis is a global phenomenon, not limited to the U.S. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity offers an insightful framework for examining how masculinities are shaped by historical and cultural contexts. This allows for a culture-centered analysis that exposes moments of rupture and identifies crises in masculinity.

I focused primarily on three key criteria—patriarchy, class hierarchies, and physical and emotional toughness—as indicators of hegemonic masculinity in crisis. This narrow focus, however, limits my study despite the numerous elements that could be explored in relation to how individuals either cannot enact American hegemonic manhood or demonstrate their rejection of it. Throughout my research, I observed how various elements interrogate the tensions within traditional models of masculinity and articulate these crises through cinematic representations of the Joker. Additionally, my dissertation contextualizes American masculinity by tracing its evolution from the 20th to the 21st-century, shaped by cultural shifts, including those triggered by 9/11, various political conflicts, and the repercussions of the Great Recession.

Overall, I argue that American manhood is profoundly influenced by the nation's political climate and collective trauma, evident in how various presidencies have shaped the construction of masculine leadership, particularly how male protectors are expected to serve as ultimate saviors during times of crisis. Furthermore, by emphasizing how deeply ingrained patriarchy is in discussions of masculinity, this work problematizes the concept of hegemonic manhood, fostering a debate about the distinctions between positive and negative forms of hegemonic masculinity portrayed in films.

This dissertation examined the crucial role of class relations and hegemony in social and cultural domination. It has been identified as a catalyst for rejection stemming from the unequal power dynamics it fosters between employers and employees. This, in turn, fosters class divisions that celebrate the wealthy while marginalizing the working class. By viewing the Joker as an emblem of the working class throughout the various films, I highlighted several aspects that elicited anger towards masculine expectations and the relentless pursuit of economic dominance, which largely neglects the impoverished. I discussed how these portrayals of the Joker serve as a critique of capitalism and neoliberal policies that continue to shrink the middle class, thereby diminishing the chances for the majority of people to be recognized as hegemonic.

Furthermore, the Joker's physique signifies disabilities and deliberately disengages from traditional masculinity, making the embodiment of masculinity a crucial component of visual culture and film portrayals. I selected this aspect because it clearly demonstrates how American culture is intrinsically visual, shaped by Hollywood's productions and standards. However, this relationship is reciprocal; cinema responds to social changes while Hollywood films endeavor to address and reflect the prevailing challenges. This interaction is evident in several films discussed in this dissertation to argue how gender performance confronts social norms.

I argued that the Joker embodies various roles associated with his criminal identity, challenging prevailing norms of masculinity while simultaneously representing those in crisis. His rebellious behavior redefines manhood and unveils different expressions of masculinity in turmoil. I interpret his performances as rejections of traditional norms, presenting a kind of anarchic masculinity portrayed in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), alongside another form characterized by toxic, emotionally unstable traits, which I term dissociative masculinity depicted in the persona of David Ayer's Joker in *Suicide Squad* (2016). Furthermore, I introduced the concept of carnivalesque masculinity to discuss the intriguing persona of Arthur Fleck in Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019), who defies established norms and

breaks Gotham's rules as a criminal hailed as a hero. This discourse sheds light on significant cultural transformations and events occurring in the U.S. that need addressing and potential reactions.

First, I argued that Nolan's Joker embodies an anarchic masculinity linked to the national trauma and fear following 9/11. As a domestic terrorist, he seeks to reveal governmental corruption and the absence of intrinsic virtue. He represents a cinematic reaction to a crisis in masculinity, deconstructing hegemonic masculinity and standing in opposition to Batman's heroic masculinity. Nolan's Joker rejects dominant masculinity through physical frailty and impulsive, erratic behavior. The film highlights patriarchy through the love triangle of Rachel, Dent, and Bruce, with Rachel acting as a legitimizer of their hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, Nolan's Joker serves as an anti-capitalist figure, illustrating chaos as a vital expression of individuality. He exemplifies anarchic American masculinity, characterized by emotional instability and aggression, revealing the limitations of traditional conventions and the potential for rebellion.

Second, I explored how Ayer's Joker exemplifies dissociative masculinity, particularly through his romantic involvement with Harley and his violent behavior towards her. Although Ayer's Joker exhibits limited traits associated with masculinity in crisis, I focus on his character as a representation of toxic, aggressive masculinity. I contend that his portrayal throughout the crisis focuses on examining social issues concerning toxic masculinity. I interpreted how Harley validates the Joker's toxic masculinity by complying with his acts and being silent to his objectification, thereby maintaining his dominance throughout the film. Her femininity, in some respect, does not negate his control over her. I observe that this abuse and patriarchy endure until she rejects it to challenge his power, a topic pertinent to the ongoing discourse of the #MeToo movement focused on revealing abusers and fostering open dialogue.

In examining Phillips's Joker, I showed how Arthur is portrayed as carnivalesque through his eccentric, rebellious behavior and grotesque corporeality. His masculinity in crisis is depicted not only through his physicality and performance but also through external factors that challenge his identity as a white heterosexual man. These influences collectively illustrate the complexity of his experience. His longing for a father and his mother's neglect and lies contribute to his societal ostracism, resulting in his marginalization and dehumanization. The forced class hierarchies he faces as a clown, coupled with a lack of romantic intimacy, compel him to adopt nonconformity in reaction to his crisis. Rather than striving for self-improvement, he revolts against the very systems that enforce these norms. To assert dominance over

hegemonic structures, Arthur exhibits aggressive, violent masculinity; however, he is ultimately apprehended by police and committed to a mental health facility.

Each Joker symbolized a unique societal concern embedded in 21st-century American culture. The examined films provided characters that, on one hand, depicted mankind in crisis through the Joker, a figure lacking a distinctive narrative. I contend that he serves as an exemplary figure for examining broader societal concerns, including critiques of patriarchy, the undue glorification of masculinity, and the amplification of the challenges faced by individuals within the hierarchical economic class system. This contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges confronting American hegemonic masculinity in the 21st-century.

I perceive masculinity in crisis through the Joker character as both harmful and transformative. My theoretical approach reveals the shortcomings of hegemonic masculinity, suggesting that a crisis can be beneficial, similar to the dismantling of patriarchy and a broader interpretation of what constitutes hegemonic toughness. Conversely, this crisis allows for greater openness to emotional considerations, which I believe is a valuable aspect to embrace or soften. Nevertheless, based on my analysis of the films, I conclude that this crisis remains unresolved. The Joker's sole purpose is to represent the crisis without offering clarity or hints towards possible resolutions. However, this can inspire real-life discussions aimed at finding solutions, and I truly believe there is always hope for regeneration.

This doctoral dissertation discussed hegemony and the variety of masculinities, focusing on how this variety is often perceived as being in crisis and deviating from established norms. While masculinities encompass diverse expressions, the hegemonic system, viewed as rigid, typically excludes many of these forms. Although hegemony is a dynamic concept, recognizing its changes can be difficult, as these shifts are often tied to inflexible and unrealistic ideals. This context compels both myself and other scholars to investigate the evolving structural facets of hegemonic masculinity, pinpointing flaws in its dynamics and examining how its rigidity might be less impactful on those who resist conformity. It raises the question of whether we truly need a hegemonic model or if we should instead embrace a fluid and inclusive model better to explore the diversity of masculinities in contemporary society.

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