

Joker Movie: Stockholm Syndrome or Society's Wake-Up Call?

Debates are raging over the issue of gun control, and with voluntary manslaughter charges being brought on middle school students after the recent death of Moreno Valley, California student Diego, there is a sense of despair and desperation over the current violence and mental health crisis in the United States. It is interesting timing for the release of the movie *Joker*. Known as the villain of the Batman franchise, the movie is a psychological study of the character of Arthur Fleck before he becomes the anti-hero that we have always known as Joker. The movie poses an interesting question: are there truly bad people, or are there people who the system has failed?

Critics of the movie warn that it is dangerous to search for humanity in those who commit despicable crimes, especially those who seek to harm others. They are often labeled as psychopaths or sociopaths and spoken of as if they were destined to live a life of crime and harm to others. These critics fear the finding of humanity in these traditionally 'baddie' characters are a type of Stockholm Syndrome, as we want to like them, and a dangerous step towards allowing this type of behavior to continue or get worse, when it should be shunned and punished more strongly. The other side counters that, in looking at these fictional accounts of what has led an otherwise non-violent person to a life of violent crime, we may be able to understand those that occur in reality, and in the understanding of them, solve the root issue.

This poses the question: what is the root issue? It is important to note here that psychopaths and sociopaths *do* exist, and there are those who will commit violent crime no matter their upbringing or life experience, whether society helps them or not. However, this essay will focus on the character of Joker as a case study and as such will not represent all people who commit such crimes. This essay posits the thesis that Joker would not have committed violent crime without the failure of the mental health system, one which very closely resembles that of our reality.

It is clear very early in the movie that Arthur has a mental illness. It is not ever stated what this illness is, but we know that he sees a therapist, takes several medications, and at least has one disorder that causes uncontrollable laughter in inappropriate situations. While some critics claim he is a psychopath, this essay assumes he is not. Definitions of psychopaths and sociopaths are somewhat of a gray area, but most agree that the psychopath or sociopath does not tend to feel empathy or guilt. Arthur shows both strongly in the daily caretaking of his mother, the shame of making others uncomfortable with his inappropriate laughter, and his deep desire to make others happy and the world a better place. The possibility of schizophrenia seems most likely, with evidence of delusions, inappropriate perceptions, emotions, and actions, and a progressive withdrawal from reality.

Working with the assumption that Arthur has schizophrenia, and with the effects of this being obvious to the audience, it is devastating to the viewer when he is told that he will no longer be able to see a therapist or be prescribed medication. He is clearly barely functional even with these tools, but is working hard to create the best life possible with the help that he has. The society of the movie closely resembles our own current society in many ways, and this helps us to empathize with his situation. As Arthur asks, “Is it just me or are things getting crazier out there?” and “Why can’t people just be good to each other?” the audience can’t help but feel that we are witnessing something similar to our own current societal distress and upheaval.

It is just at the point that things in society are “getting crazier” that Arthur is removed from access to therapy and medication. Being well aware that these things are necessary for his mental wellness, he hyper-focuses on the things he knows are coping mechanisms – comedy and dance. It is worth noting that in the United States, many citizens in a similar position are not allowed access to these same resources due to issues with medical insurance or finances.

Having been told repeatedly by his mother, who seems to be the only person he has ever had a genuine connection with, that his purpose is “to bring joy and laughter to the world,” Arthur begins to write jokes with the aim of becoming a stand-up comedian. This tells us that he wants to make a positive contribution to the world. However, in his being extremely removed from reality by this point, the audience is painfully aware of the lack of comedic value to his jokes. An example is: “Knock knock. Who’s there? It’s the police, ma’am. Your son has been hit by a drunk driver and is dead.” He is unaware of the lack of humor until berated for its lack of sensitivity.

His frustration mounts as he is unable to relate to others, and he despairs, “I just want to feel good.” This sentence might be heard by many in our current society who are either unable to receive the help needed for mental illness or are simply having a hard time coping with the anger of the media and politics of our time. We see in this fictional society one that in many ways resembles our own, and this is one of the reasons that the viewer feels bad for the character of Arthur. Not for the Stockholm Syndrome reason of wanting to like somebody who should not be liked, but for the reason that the average person can see him or herself in his character. While the majority of our population is not living with schizophrenia, many live with depression, anxiety, and daily stresses that are compounded by the intensity of the messages of our media and other uncaring members of society. Most people have felt this sense of, “I just want to feel good” and the frustration of not knowing how to achieve it.

This begs the question of how Arthur, an arguably likeable person, becomes a violent character and ultimately a serial killer. It is important to keep in mind his progressive removal from reality, as we witness an increasing number of delusions that he is experiencing. There is no doubt that he should be taking medication and seeing a therapist, if not hospitalized. However, he has been abandoned by the system. Funding has been removed from those who were able to help him, and his only support system – his mother – is old and sick.

As he discovers that his biological father is 'the most powerful man in the city' and that his biological brother is being raised with every luxury while he is disowned, he is finding himself less and less able to "put on a happy face" (literally words that he writes on a mirror.)

While Arthur is trying, at every turn, to bring the happiness he desires to society, the viewer watches as his choices are taken away or he is put at risk of violent behavior against his will. A gun is literally put into his hands and he is scared of it. It is clear that he would not have sought out a gun independently. He is repeatedly beaten by strangers for his inappropriate though harmless behavior. The turning point comes when he is again being beaten and in self-defense, he uses the gun to shoot his assailants. We see that suddenly he is aware that he can control his situation and protect himself from the violent and mocking society that he experiences every day. However, as the viewer watches him immediately after this violent act use his coping skill of dance, we are aware that this event, though in protection of himself, has been deeply disturbing and was not desired but one that felt necessary for survival.

It is here that we must tie the character of Joker to the current violent individual in our own society. The similarities are impossible to ignore. The current medical system of the United States makes it difficult or impossible for many mentally ill people to be treated correctly. Our citizens are not educated on the signs of mental illness and what to look out for as warning signals. The average person is not equipped to handle the untreated mentally ill individual and in many cases, the mentally ill have no support system or have one that is insufficient for the needs of the individual. Our media manipulates its citizens to feel anger and stress daily, and the mental wellness of the average citizen is compromised as a result. We must look to this movie not as an acceptance of violence but as a warning of what can cause an individual to turn violent. The answer may not be as simple as 'ban guns' or 'install metal detectors,' but instead may require an all-hands-on-deck response to repair the root of the problem.

The movie Joker has been sold out since its release. It is a good movie in its own right, but this essay theorizes that a large part of its popularity is the viewer seeing him or herself in the character of Joker, and his or her society in the society of Gotham. It hits close to home, how isolated and scared many of our citizens are. This should not worry us. It should excite us. We have been given a mirror and a way to fix the problem of the growing violence in our society. In Joker we have been given both a wake-up call and the gift of solutions. It is time to take care of our medical system, take care of our citizens, take care of our mentally ill, take care of ourselves, and rebuild a sense of community. We must not be overwhelmed by the epidemic of violent actions but instead look for ways to fix the problem.