

## Movie review: Joker

I did not enjoy the critically acclaimed and – in some people’s book – controversial *Joker*. This was not because I think it glorified evil, nor because Joaquin Phoenix’s Joker was played to encourage sympathy for, or to excuse, his actions. I do not believe he does so and I find this interpretation – offered by Greg Morse at *Desiring God*<sup>1</sup> – as superficial and mistaken. *Joker* no more lionizes villains, glorifies evil, or excuses sin than do many graphic passages of Scripture (too many to choose from, but Judges is a standout).

No, I did not enjoy Director Todd Phillips’ movie; I found it too realistic, too plausible even. Beautifully shot and masterfully acted, it painstakingly chronicles the external influences, personally and socially, that shape the gradual descent of a troubled individual – and a city – into total anarchy.

### A crying clown in mental chaos

*Smile,  
Though your heart is achin’  
Smile,  
Even though it’s breakin’  
When there are clouds in the sky  
You’ll get by...<sup>2</sup>*

*Joker* opens by introducing us to Arthur Fleck, part of a company of clowns for hire. Introverted and softly spoken, Arthur has a history of mental health problems and has spent time in Gotham’s Arkham Asylum. He is very much an outcast and is routinely bullied, ignored, made fun of and, in one of the opening scenes, brutally beaten up by a group of teenagers. He weeps as he simultaneously laughs uncontrollably (a medical condition) and goes home to take care of his ailing mother whom he clearly loves, though some elements of their closeness are disturbing.

In the aftermath of Arthur’s beating he visits his social worker. Her body language is tense, her speech terse; her questions are banal and her listening skills poor. Arthur acknowledges in exasperation that all he has are negative thoughts and that he felt better when he was in hospital. No solutions are suggested and trying to smile and put a brave face is no longer working. The mental anguish he experiences is reflected in his journal, doubling – at least in Arthur’s mind – as a joke book where he writes such one-liners as, “*I just hope my death makes more cents than my life.*” At this point, one really does sympathise with Arthur. He muses in his journal, “*The worst part of having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don’t.*”

Little by little we see Arthur’s hope chipped away at until he enters free-fall. But while the actions and inactions of others don’t help, there is no question that Arthur himself is responsible for his behaviour.

### A cognisant criminal who murders compulsively

Arthur’s difficult life is not unfamiliar to many. The reality of personal adversities that serve as opportunities to make life-defining decisions for good or ill is very clearly portrayed in *Joker*. Arthur loses his job through his naivety and betrayal by a colleague. He is angry and starts carrying a gun. When he is again mocked – this time by some businessmen on a train, Arthur, still dressed in his clown costume, seems to accidentally shoot one dead before deliberately killing the other two.

It is at this point that *Joker* takes us down some confusing paths, relating events which Arthur thinks to be real but that are merely conjured up by his paranoia and narcissism. These scenes, mingled with other real events, require of the viewer intelligent engagement.

The “clown murders” are now making headlines across Gotham, giving Arthur a sense of importance. At the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/when-the-jokes-on-us>

<sup>2</sup> *Smile*, songwriters: Geoffrey Parson, John Turner, Charlie Chaplin, © S.I.A.E. Direzione Generale, Universal Music Publishing Ltd.

same time he loses his main source of accountability and support when social care budget cuts bring an end to his counselling sessions. Meanwhile his respect for various people he loved and admired collapses and he makes a conscious decision to embark upon a string of murders.

The crying clown is now a cognisant murderer, targeting anyone who has abused, ignored, lied to or betrayed him or, yes, even failed to find his jokes funny. We may see others as culpable for the harm that makes Arthur snap, but he is fully aware of, responsible for and proud of his heinous crimes. Psychological confusion may not have helped, but it is not responsible for the evil he now inflicts.

### **A counterfeit Christ for the mob's cause**

*I started a joke which started the whole world crying  
But I didn't see that the joke was on me, oh no  
I started to cry which started the whole world laughing  
Oh, If I'd only seen that the joke was on me.<sup>3</sup>*

Joker is not without his fans; many in Gotham see the murderous clown as a hero and he develops a cult following, clown masks being worn in solidarity against those who are better off in difficult times. Authority figures are beaten up in displays of wanton violence. Upon revealing himself as Joker live on TV he is arrested, only to be rescued by a mob in clown masks who hold him aloft as their anointed saviour. The crying clown is now the clown prince. Joker's actions spark a popular revolt against social ills but in so doing plunge Gotham into even greater darkness.

### **A conscientious critique of mankind's crisis**

*But where are the clowns, send in the clowns  
Don't bother, they're here.<sup>4</sup>*

Many, perhaps most, who view the film, will join me in seeing *Joker* as uncomfortably plausible, reflective of our own culture. Mental health problems and loneliness abound across the UK. In pastoring an inner-city London church, scarcely a week goes by when I do not deal with people struggling with depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. In helping lead a new charity, Pregnancy Crisis Helpline, I routinely listen to women who have been lied to and misdirected into having an abortion who now suffer extreme mental anguish that tempts them to react in harmful ways. Many who struggle with mental health issues are bullied and mocked; I have seen it happen. I have watched groups of young people provoke mentally unstable people who then react in kind.

*Joker* is a critique of all of us and that is why it so uncomfortable. Some will, like the mob, justify their violence in their rage against injustice. The Joker is the hero that so many want but no one needs – the hero who is no hero at all. But in the mess of it all there is hope. As *Joker* ends and as the crowd venerate their murderous hero, a boy weeps over the bodies of his parents, shot dead by a clown. Bruce Wayne will grow up to become the Batman and put an end to Joker's reign of evil. He is the hero Gotham needs.

Are we that different from Joker and the mob? Evil takes many forms. It is all around us; it is in us. And there are many Counterfeit Christs too. But a child has been born who lived, died and rose again to put an end to our evil madness. Jesus Christ is the ultimate cure to our crisis – the hero we need.

**Note: *Joker* is not a typical comic-book film and viewer discretion is advised. It is not suitable for children or those struggling with mental health problems. *Joker* also contains violence and some swearing.**

Regan King.

*(This article was originally published in the Affinity Social Issues Bulletin for November 2019. The whole edition can be found at [www.affinity.org.uk](http://www.affinity.org.uk))*

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<sup>3</sup> *I started a joke*, songwriters: Barry Gibb, Maurice Gibb, Robin Gibb, © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Ltd.

<sup>4</sup> *Send in the clowns*, songwriter: Stephen Sondheim, © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Ltd.