

THE SYMPATHETIC SOCIOPATH: GIVING TRAUMATIC BACKSTORIES TO MARVEL DC VILLAINS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, Marvel and DC movies and series have begun to provide traumatic backstories to their villains and antiheroes to partially justify their actions and make them appear more empathetic. While this may further engage the audience and evoke their sympathy, these media representations are sensationalizing and perpetuating misinformation for entertainment about mental illness, conflating schizophrenia and antisocial personality disorder, fueling the misnomer that the mentally ill are prone to violence, and suggesting childhood trauma leads to more serious psychiatric conditions. These popular superhero stories dangerously further stigmatize mental illness by perpetuating existing myths rather than debunking pervasive stereotypes.

KEY WORDS

Antisocial Personality Disorder, Sociopathy, Psychopath, Supervillains, DC Series and Films, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Marvel Films, Trauma

The timeworn cliché of the deranged villain has long been perpetuated in popular culture by criminal procedurals, psychiatric and spy thrillers, and the Marvel and DC comic universes. Media representations can perpetuate very damaging myths about mental illness (Wahl, Charney). The most significant, in relation to this discussion, is that people suffering from mental illness are more prone to violence. Many popular criminal procedural dramas, such as *Criminal Minds*, the *CSIs*, and *FBI*s, conflate antisocial personality disorder and schizophrenia in the sketches of their unsubs or suspects (Parrott and Parrot). *Fandom's Villains with Mental Illness* currently lists over 190 movie villains. In a study by Patricia Owen, who reviewed forty-one movies between 1990-2010 with characters exhibiting symptoms of schizophrenia, a majority displayed violence and one-third engaged in homicidal behavior. However, in reality, people suffering from mental illness are ten times more likely than others to be the victims of violence (Teplin et al). Data shows that less than 3% of people suffering from severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder engage in violent activities. When violence does occur, it is most often either self-inflicted or domestic and involves drugs or alcohol or occurs when an institutionally confined individual becomes frightened and excited, while being ordered to comply (Hammond). In other words, people with mental illness are not responsible for the upsurge in mass murders and violent crimes. Popular media, however, fuels this misconception.

Over the past decade, there has been an evolution of the characterization of superhero genre media villains. Once one-dimensional, immoral, and simply driven by evil harkening back to their comic book or folktale origins, villains are now provided motives—often perceived injustices that fuel beliefs that they are justified in seeking revenge. This has given rise to full-blown cinematic treatments providing villains with sympathetic backstories suggesting that unresolved trauma is the root of their violent proclivities. Arguably, it

began with the redemptive stories of some of our most well-known villains, from Elphaba in *Wicked* (2003), bullied, ostracized, abused by family and society to *Maleficent* (2014), betrayed, disabled and symbolically raped by her lover (Donnelly). Both villains emerge as heroes once the “whole story” is told as in the recent versions of the traditional stories. The addition of a trauma backstory has now seeped into some of the most popular media empires both on the big and small screen in the Marvel and DC universes. Perceptions of intolerable acts of violence have so altered that, despite the savagery and anarchy, many walked out of *The Batman* (2022) sympathetic to the Riddler and his goals as intended by director Matt Reeves (Polo). These backstories are explored to make the villains more sympathetic but consider the impact this has on society’s real understanding of mental illness and the relationship between mental illness and violence. Given Marvel Phases 1-4 projects and DC films such as *Joker* (2019) and *The Batman* (2022) are among the most popular and successful mass media releases and superhero shows such as *Gotham* (2014-2019) capture large audiences, their problematic depictions of mental illness and their influence on culture demand closer scrutiny.

Two fallacies are fueled by popular culture: the equation of schizophrenia and associated psychoses with Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) and an assertion that childhood trauma causes ASPD. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Association on Mental Illness (NAMI) record the incidence of schizophrenia at 1 in 300 people worldwide; these people do not suffer from an antisocial personality disorder, and a vast majority are never violent. Personality disorders differ from other mental health conditions, such as mood disorders and psychosis, in that a personality disorder manifests as thoughts and actions that deviate from social norms causing long-term problems in interpersonal, professional, and social relationships. In contrast to most mental illnesses, many of those diagnosed with ASPD require incarceration or supervision to deter their violent and illicit behaviors. The American Psychiatric Association has specified that ASPD does not present as comorbid with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Psychopathy and sociopathy are popular vernacular terms, even employed by professionals in lay discourse; however, they are not diagnostic terms included in the *DSM-5* which only delineates ASPD. Forensic psychologist J. Reid Meloy identifies ASPD psychopathy as consisting of non-attachment, under-arousal or hypo-reactivity, and lack of anxiety in dangerous circumstances (*Mark of Cain*, 3). Psychologist Aaron Kipnis and L Michael Tompkins (Tatera) attest that both sociopaths and psychopaths are narcissistic and lack empathy. The terms tend to be used interchangeably in the vernacular; however, while ASPD is the clinical diagnosis, experts do note a few distinctions. A sociopath is described as having no conscience, while a psychopath has a weak conscience that does not inhibit their behavior. The sociopath is often described as volatile, incapable of collaboration, and not able to control their emotions, while the psychopath is often described as intelligent, charming, calculating, and able to mimic others’ emotions and expressions. Sociopaths engage in risky behavior without fear of consequences which positions them to become the perfect media villains.

Not only has the media dangerously conflated Antisocial Personality Disorder with schizophrenia for our entertainment, in the past decade, it has egregiously adapted the dangerous misnomer that trauma, particularly childhood trauma, is a primary cause for ASPD. Subsequently, the trauma becomes a catalyst, if not an excuse, problematically eliciting sympathy from the audience for villains with socially destructive and homicidal tendencies while perpetuating myths about mental illness by spreading misrepresentation and misinforming. Trauma, particularly severe childhood trauma, can be reported by those suffering from Antisocial Personality Disorder but has not been found to be a determinative factor in developing ASPD. A correlation between ASPD and a higher adverse childhood experience (ACE) score has been observed; however, conduct disorder was most strongly linked to ASPD (Delisi, Drury, and Elbert). Most significantly, the vast majority who experience severe childhood and other trauma never develop ASPD. The risk for developing mental disorders associated with childhood trauma is highest for depression, PTSD, substance abuse, and borderline personality disorder (Herzog and Schmah).

The creative minds behind the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) projects seem interested in creating more empathetic characters, especially villains and antiheroes (Baysinger). While it may be tempting to commend these well-intentioned efforts to provide trauma backstories that evoke audience sympathy, by sensationalizing and perpetuating misinformation for entertainment, as a majority of these characterizations tend to do, they perpetuate existing myths and stigma about mental illness rather than debunking the pervasive stereotypes.

The MCU Villains

Avengers projects reimagined the conventional, one-dimensional pure evil villains of comics and superhero-based movies prior to the development of the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe). Over the past decade, MCU Phases 1-4 (McEwan and Longridge), there has been a move to present villains more sympathetically, as “turned” by trauma, avenging perceived wrongs against self or loved ones:

Seeking revenge for perceived wrongs against self:

Loki, *The Avengers* (2012), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), presented as the misunderstood, marginalized child, pained by his own illegitimacy, also witnesses his mother’s death
 Killian, *Iron Man 3* (2013), desires to be rid of crippling disability
 Electro, *Amazing Spider Man 2* (2014), feels taken for granted and betrayed
 Harry Osborne/Green Goblin, *Amazing Spider Man 2* (2014), loss of father
 Yellowjacket, *Ant-Man* (2015), project discontinued
 Nebula, *Guardians of the Galaxy 2* (2017), paternal physical abuse
 Ghost, *Ant-Man and Wasp* (2017), pain (phasing out) and loss of parents
 Vulture, *Spiderman Homecoming* (2017), driven out of business
 Mysterio, *Spiderman: Far from Home* (2019), fired

Many are at first motivated by their desire to exact revenge against an Avenger, especially Tony Stark/Iron Man, blaming him for their lost position or creating and unleashing Ultron. Their vengeful, violent acts are clearly inordinate given the wrongs they perceive that they have endured. What is also interesting is that, as Darren Mooney observes, the MCU is contemptuous of holding its superheroes culpable for their actions, and they usually escape consequences; arguably though, one consequence they do face is unleashing supervillains. For example, as Alan Orange records, in *The Avengers* (2012), there were \$18.8 billion in damages and 74 bystanders died, and in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the Avengers cause \$487 billion in damages with 177 citizens became collateral damage. Scarlet Witch clearly has some justification for calling out the hypocrisy of the Avengers as she attacks Kamar-Taj in *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness*.

A second group of supervillains seek to avenge their loved ones including:

Seeking revenge for wronged loved ones:

Whiplash, *Iron Man 2* (2010), disgrace of father
 Harry Osborne/Green Goblin, *Amazing Spider Man 2* (2014), loss of father
 Zemo, *Captain American: Civil War* (2016), loss of family
 Kilmonger, *Black Panther* (2018), loss of father, fears his society will be annihilated
 Wenwu, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), assassination of wife
 Scarlet Witch/Wanda, *WandaVision* 2021, *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), witnesses “death” of android spouse, loss of “children”
 Dr. Octopus, *Spider-man 2* (2004), *No Way Home* (2021), loss of wife and own reputation
 Thanos, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), witnesses his people wiped out by starvation
 Sylvie Laufeydottir (Loki variant), *Loki* (2021), loss of another variant

Overwhelming personal grief often erupts at the perceived infractions against self and family, loss of the love, and emotional isolation. Grief at the loss of loved ones becomes a common trigger in MCU which is then used to attempt to justify the villain’s violent, destructive behavior. In giving villains palatable motives by providing origin stories, MCU works to create more sympathetic villains in which the audience becomes invested.

The audience is provided with the backstories of a number of villains—backstories exploring these losses as trauma triggers for their antisocial behavior. Consider two of the most powerful supervillains, Thanos and Scarlet Witch. Thanos tries to justify his sociopathic behavior by articulating his concern over the extinction of the people of Titan who faced starvation. Thanos, suffering from a God complex, proclaims that he is the hand of fate and is destined to choose who is to survive in a universe of limited resources. While

clearly a madman, Thanos is presented as ethically concerned with the survival of his home world: being driven deeper into sociopathy by despair proves an unconvincing rationale for his sociopathic behavior yet remains overshadowed by his persistent megalomania.

Scarlet Witch is among the most interesting of the supervillains—an Avenger who tried to help save the universe from Thanos by destroying a Mind Stone and, unfortunately, Vision along with it. She is also retraumatized by watching Vision’s dismantling in the laboratory. Grief turns her from superhero to supervillain. The audience witnesses Scarlet Witch/Wanda devolution. She begins by constructively attempting to deal with her grief, creating West View in *WandaVision* but, soon faced the impossibility of maintaining her isolated oasis, works to destroy the impending invaders. She further descends into becoming a narcissistic sociopath in *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) and vows she will not let anyone get in the way of her attempt to find happiness by reuniting with “her children” that she lost when her 1950s utopian West View disappeared. She believes she can find them in another universe and rekindle their familial ties. As with Thanos, self-absorbed megalomania is present virtually from the start of her story, considering the people of West View are actually hostages and the children she seemed to create (Vision is, after all, an android) are not her children but abducted from their biological mother. Facing that reality and destroying herself in *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness*, Scarlet Witch appears to make the loving, altruistic act of returning the children to their true mother to raise. Undercutting that act is her imprisonment their mother, and the fact she makes this gesture only after seeing the boys reject “mother” Wanda when her true persona, Scarlet Witch, is revealed. That seeming, momentarily selfless act in which she recognizes what she has become and the need to destroy Wundagore Castle may be satisfying to the moviegoer, particularly those who sympathize with her grief and witnessed her protective tendencies in *WandaVision*, but does not bear up under scrutiny when one considers her many previous ruthless, self-serving acts.

While many characters are emboldened to seek vindication for the wrongs they perceived they have had to endure, only Nebula actually experiences trauma, ordered by her abusive father, Thanos, and suffered at both his and her sister’s, Gamora’s, hands. Nebula is arguably the only villain who actually undergoes the growth necessary to achieve a redemptive arc, healing her relationship with her sister and rejecting being an assassin by choosing to join the Guardians of the Galaxy and later the Avengers to champion the victimized and oppressed rather than undoing her past through the magical multiverse time manipulation made available in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) and *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). She confronts her former self and, despite the cyborg existence she is forced to endure due to her father’s abuse, she grows more human. Instead of taking out her anger on innocents, she joins with the heroes to pursue her abuser and protect others from her murderous, sociopathic father (M. Surrey).

In fact, one of the leitmotifs of *Spiderman: No Way Home* is to offer a redemptive arc to the villains, who are now being portrayed as more sympathetic characters (Pedersen). The supervillains are miraculously “cured” and sent back to their respective universes (Stone). This actually trivializes the trauma that the moviegoers have been asked to invest in: the cure manifests via magical thinking, through the fantastical power to bend time in the multiverse, suggesting that not only their egregious acts, but their perceived trauma, no longer exists and, therefore, is inconsequential. They are neither healed or rehabilitated, rather their stories have simply been recast in the latest MCU installment; their actions erased and pardoned without introspection or atonement. This perspective is reinforced by *Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* where multiple versions of self are now possible, and Dr. Strange is “being turned” and not changing through his own volition, thereby setting him up for having no culpability for the future bad acts that are hinted at for a sequel. In shifting blame for massively destructive, violent acts to an amorphous source and exploring other fantastical means of denying culpability, Marvel delivers a dangerous message, excusing villains’ sociopathic behavior as entertainment.

While we recognize superheroes and supervillains are imaginary, the MCU is situated in our contemporary world, premised on our fundamental shared reality, and dependent on recognizable aspects of human behavior; however, in the multiple timelines and universes, that shared reality devolves, and with it, personal culpability. While having attempted to flesh out comic book villains as more psychologically complex characters; erasing their pasts actually renders them one-dimensional once again while also allowing them to avoid consequences for their actions. Moreover, the destruction and loss of life caused by the superhero Avengers that has been justified and excused as sacrifices necessary to defeat supervillains cannot be ignored. Moviegoers may find the happy endings satisfying, but significant ramifications in attempting to

flesh out comic book villains as more psychologically complex characters have unfortunately been overlooked. For the supervillain, trauma and grief are being used in an attempt to partially justify massively destructive, murderous, revenge seeking behavior. In conjunction with their superpowers, their grief and perceive trauma appears to catalyze and exasperate the most severe sociopathy. What is too often suggested in MCU is that ASPD is the result of trauma; this is simply not the case. While Marvel employs this to create more engaging and sympathetic villains, in the moviegoers' real world, it dangerously perpetuates the myth that the mentally ill are prone to violence, erroneously suggests that trauma leads to severe personality disorders, and confuses and conflates personality disorders with treatable mental illnesses. Otto Wahl warns that the public knowledge of mental illness comes primarily from mass media, with Americans identifying popular culture as their primary source for information on mental illness (3). Mental illness myths and misrepresentation are being dangerously exploited and continually reinforced for entertainment which can be difficult to redress through the often more limited venues delivering factual information.

DC Villains

While most of the villains and heroes of the DC universe are not augmented by superpowers, the equation of mental illness and violent criminality is even more damning than in the Marvel universe.

Gotham (2014-2019)

Gotham uses derogatory mental illness labels—lunatics, maniacs, freaks, insane. DC also perpetuates the myth that people with mental illness “look different” (Boyles). Mental illness is paired with visible disability, from Penguin's limp (earlier in DC's history Penguin was grotesquely fat and gluttonous) to Jerome's stapled-on face (the result of the release of the gas his brother left for him) disfigurement is used to visibly signal villains' malevolence. Mental illness as the source of Gotham's raging crime and anarchy is baked into the city physical and social landscape itself. We rarely see criminals sent to Blackgate prison, rather they are sent to Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane which looms as an ominous gothic structure. Drawing on the common horror film trope of the escaped homicidal lunatic, while not all *Gotham* villains who seek to destroy the city and exert megalomaniac control escape the asylum, all are sent to Arkham upon capture. Their larger-than-life alter egos, Penguin, Riddler, Joker, reinforce the idea of the deranged sociopaths, volatile and lacking self-control, and unlike their comic book precursors or the campy villains of the 1960s television *Batman*, are presented in *Gotham* and the films of the last decade as often suffering from ASPD.

The DC universe not only damagingly equates criminality and mental illness, it also demeans psychiatry by having the director of the asylum be both a sociopath and a trauma survivor himself. In *Gotham*, Hugo Strange's father beat his mother every night and tells Hugo that he was the biggest mistake of his life, and his mother, a victim of domestic abuse, eventually kills her husband. As director of the asylum, he experiments on inmates and used them to avenge himself against the elites of Gotham, his perceived enemies, for shutting down his unethical human experimentation. Bruce Wayne, who experiences childhood trauma witnessing the murder of his parents is then instructed by his father surrogate, Alfred Pennyworth, that the physical and mental training he will give him to become a soldier/hero is the healthy way to deal with trauma. Alfred tells Jim Gordon that Bruce cannot seek counselling to deal with his trauma, as that would not have been counter to his father's wishes (season 1, episode 2). Bruce Wayne is shown as seeming to successfully repress his childhood trauma and to channel it into his vigilante heroism, sending the dangerous message that men should just “man up” and suppress their trauma rather than seek therapeutic help.

Gotham is about origins and not just Batman's. Villains in *Gotham* do not respond in the same way to childhood trauma as Bruce Wayne. *Gotham* implies they were not born villains but become so primarily in response to the defining childhood trauma they experience. The Scarecrow's mother dies when he is eight, and his father abuses him by both forcing his son to help murder others and injecting him with a fear serum he has created. Ivy Pepper, aka Poison Ivy, and her mother are both abused by her criminal father, Mario. Mario is killed by Gotham detectives Gordon and Bullock, and her mother commits suicide after that, leaving Ivy an orphan. Oswald Cobblepot, Penguin, was abandoned by his father and bullied as a child, and a persistent, unhealthy Oedipal attachment to his mother demonstrably shapes his character, similar to Arthur Fleck's of *Joker*. Born into the circus, a product of one of his mother's many affairs, Jerome Valeska, is abused by his mother, uncle, and her many lovers. *Gotham* implies that the Joker alias is taken on by his twin Jeremiah who survives him after the conclusion of the series. (The writers were not able to call Jeremiah the Joker due to

licensing issues (McCreesh).) His father, whom he discovers later and who was in the circus as well, never intervenes. Jeremiah's backstory is less developed, though twins arguably share much of the same early childhood experience. He is presented as a more skilled psychopath, manipulating the sympathies of others, changing the stories of his childhood depending on who he is speaking to, including telling Gordon that Jerome tried to kill him many times which he claims compelled him to flee and disappear. Upon opening the jack-in-the-box left by Jerome that releases a gaseous toxin, his face turns white, his lips ruby red, and he laughs manically and clutches his hair, while taunted by the voice of his dead brother. Viewers argue whether the gas pushes Jeremiah into insanity; however, Jeremiah's own claim that the gas only set him free to come out of hiding and reveal that he shares his twin's sociopathy is more credible and consistent with his past behavior. Rather than driving him insane, what the gas appears to do is alter the characteristics of his ASPD; unrealistically, he transforms from the more controlled, manipulative psychopath to an over-the-top sociopath who cannot control his impulses and who enjoys the attention he now commands. The release of the gas does evoke the disfigurement signifies malevolent, madness trope. Like Penguin, he believes in his mental superiority; both believe getting away with their villainous acts prove that. Like Thanos in MCU, Jeremiah suffers from delusions of grandeur, planning on making a new Gotham in his image (season 4, episode 21).

Gotham also portrays psychologically disturbed female villains. Barbara Kean is a new villain in the DC world, and one without an alter ego. Barbara is portrayed as mentally unstable; having had a strained relationship with her parents, she allows the serial killer Jason to force her to kill them. She is shown smoking marijuana, which is treated in *Gotham* as a substance disorder, erroneously linked to ASPD, and an addiction into which she seriously relapses. She is also represented as stalking and kidnapping Jim, having a lesbian affair with Tabitha, and by continuing to be attracted to both, characterized as bisexual. Using her capacity to seduce men with her fragrances, Poison Ivy's delusion is that that after killing those who have wronged her, as well as everyone else in Gotham, she will return the city to the plants. Both women are stereotypically presented as hypersexualized, femme fatales who are also psychologically aberrant. Poison Ivy's instability is also blamed on childhood trauma; she is another one of the *Gotham* orphans. Quite awkwardly, Barbara is transformed into a doting mother and successful businesswoman by the birth of her daughter fathered by Jim Gordon. To be clear, becoming a mother does not cure psychopathy. Let us not forget that along with running a criminal enterprise, she colluded in murdering her parents, brutally murders the men who killed Tabitha to avenge her, and stalks and kidnaps Gordon. This fuels the presumption that women who are sexually assertive, engage with multiple partners, and/or in lesbian activity are mentally disturbed. *Gotham* perpetuates dangerous oppressive social expectations about female sexuality while adding that deviating from those norms is symptomatic of ASPD.

Perceived sexual deviance is a symptom of many of the mentally unstable villains of *Gotham*. Penguin falls in love with Riddler, who does not reciprocate, and *Gotham* suggests Cobblepot's social maladaptation and inability to emotionally bond to anyone other than his mother drives his homoeroticism. In addition to Barbara and Penguin, Jeremiah professes Bruce Wayne is the one and only thing he could love. Homosexuality is portrayed as a mental aberration found among and symptomatic of villains.

Gotham plays further with the idea of disturbed psychological childhood development as fueling the villain. Many are orphaned or abused. Penguin is also portrayed as suffering from an unresolved Oedipal Complex fueled both by his social isolation as a child which fed his dependency on his mother and Gertrud's determination to keep his father's identity secret. Gertrud tells Oswald his father is dead, and, in the face of the bullying he receives, fans Oswald ego by telling him he is better than all the other children and will achieve greatness and, to their dismay, surpass them all. Gertrud is disappointed to learn of her son's criminal exploits from Maroni, who calls him a cold-blooded psychopath, and Gertrud confronts Oswald who denies the accusations (season 1, episode 21). While acknowledging that she knows about his transgressions, at her death, Gertrud still calls him a "good boy" (season 2, episode 7). Witnessing her murder at Tabitha's hands, Oswald believes his only potential vulnerability, his mother, has been eliminated and now he can be bolder and more ruthless. While *Gotham* provides many origin stories for its villains, many also mired in longstanding, negative stereotypes, whether their traumatic origin stories make them more sympathetic is debatable, the DC depiction of a sympathetic sociopath is adopted for film as well.

Joker (2019)

Central to *Joker* is whether Arthur Fleck's illness and his mother's lies and abuse are enough to elicit sympathy from the audience. Arthur Fleck suffers from an unnamed neurological condition, which makes him dependent on social services for medication, and when budget cuts mean he no longer has access to his medication, he spirals further. His condition causes him to laugh uncontrollably at inappropriate times. (Pseudobulbar affect manifest in this manner but does not account for Arthur's inability to function in society.) There is an irony to Arthur aspiring to be a stand-up comedian while being employed part-time as a party clown, whether that be despite his condition or because of it is left ambiguous. Arthur is attacked by young thugs and is beaten by a group of three drunk businessmen from Wayne Investments, establishing a true external basis for his paranoia and deepening depression. However, he also suffers from delusions: when Sophie treats him like a stranger after he has entered her apartment unannounced, it is revealed that he has imagined both Sophie's returned interest in him and her attending one of his routines. Arthur is presented as suffering from mental illness and descending into sociopathic madness, erroneously suggesting that treatable mental illness can evolve into sociopathy.

Not only do both the childhood stories of Penguin from *Gotham* and Joker use the idea of the unresolved Oedipal Complex, they also evoke the late twentieth-century trend of mother blaming as an explanation for a child's aberrant behavior and abnormal development (Azzopardi et al). Both men's obsessive relationships with their mothers continue into adulthood. Arthur is the caretaker for his physically and mentally infirm mother. Arthur intercepts a letter from his mother, Penny, to Thomas Wayne where she claims Thomas is Arthur's father; however, on confronting Thomas, Arthur learns that not only is he not his father, but Penny is not his biological mother; rather, she adopted the boy while working as the Wayne's housekeeper and raised him with an abusive boyfriend. This means the viewing audience does not know if Arthur has inherited a genetic propensity for mental illness but can be certain he doesn't inherit such a propensity from Penny. Penny was sent to Arkham Asylum for a time for allowing the abuse, implying mental illness is a determinant in perpetrating child abuse. Her mental instability and the abuse he experiences as a child is evoked to fallaciously suggest childhood trauma contributes not just to mental illness but that adverse childhood experiences, in concert with unnaturally close bonds with overbearing mothers that persist into adulthood, induce sociopathy.

Arthur commits matricide to exact his revenge; whether the act of matricide, murdering the only mother he has known, is meant to signal a final break or is just furtherance in his descent into sociopathy is ambiguous. Up to this point, Arthur has only killed the two men in the subway in self-defense and the third accomplice who harassed a woman as the man fled. After Penny's death, he murders an ex-colleague he judges has treated him poorly, assassinates Murray on air, inspires the rioters who murder Thomas Wayne and his wife, and later, in escaping Arkham, he leaves bloodied footprints behind, implying he has killed again.

Arguably, the Joker becomes so nihilistic that the sympathy built for him in the early part of the movie should be dispelled by the end. The Joker of the *Dark Knight* (2008) has been read as a terrorist and the movie as a response to 9/11 and the politics of counterterrorism (Ip). That iteration of Joker presents as an irredeemable, immoral megalomaniac seeking to achieve his anarchic goals with no regard, and arguably glee, in the death or destruction he manufactures. By providing a personal traumatic backstory in *Joker*, many critics claim the film becomes a cautionary tale about austerity and the ignoring mental illness (Uetricht, Kent) to which Arthur Fleck succumbs. While disenfranchisement and inequity are serious socio-political problems, that may fuel illicit action by some individuals, these are not psychological conditions, and the socio-political and psychological should not be conflated. While perhaps well-intentioned, such naively irresponsible narratives in widely distributed, commercially successful movies, suggesting mental illness leads to homicidal rage and that infer that childhood trauma triggers sociopathy imperil society's understanding of treatable mental conditions and perpetuates mental illness stigma. Those suffering mental illness and/or experiencing trauma do not evolve into mass murders or sociopaths (Taylor), and it is dangerous for popular media to reinforce this assertion through false representations to captivate the viewing audience.

The Batman (2022)

Vigilantism has always underscored Batman's activities, but *The Batman* movie takes it on as theme. Here, childhood trauma, grief, and a sense of being wronged engenders adult vigilantism, for both villain and hero. Riddler develops ASPD; Batman escapes the negative trope and becomes the hero. Being orphaned

plays strongly into this latest iteration, and with Riddler and Batman in *The Batman*, Riddler teases the mirroring of the two orphaned characters, asserting that their socioeconomic status makes the difference in the paths they have taken: “Living in some tower over the park isn't being an orphan. . . You know what being an orphan is? Thirty kids to a room . . . you wake up screaming with rats chewing your fingers.” Edward Naston, the Riddler, like Arthur Fleck, the Joker, are both presented as victims suffering from childhood trauma that leads to ASPD and their vengeful, nihilistic rage.

Bruce Wayne is a brooding character who prefers isolation; he is presented as moody, as having PTSD from the murder of his parents, but his vigilantism is portrayed as opposing the ASPD homicidal and sociopathic rage driving Riddler and other villains. While they run amok and create chaos, he mercifully turns these sociopaths over to the proper authorities who then incarcerate them, sending them not in prison, but in Arkham Asylum and the control of Hugo Strange. While the sociopaths in DC are presented as emotionally volatile and attention seeking, Batman is presented as pent up and containing himself, channeling that rage into fighting the villains who he doesn't eliminate but thwarts and captures. Riddler had ineffectively tried to tantalize Batman into joining him, but as they face each other in Arkham upon Riddler's incarceration, it is Riddler who draws the audience's attention to how they are doppelgangers, both orphans suffering from childhood trauma, both masked vigilantes, but ultimately, one good, one evil (Ghosh). Both work outside the legitimacy of the law. However, Batman, is presented as an instrument for justice; Commissioner Gordon and the legal system sanction his actions. In his delusions, Riddler notes their similarity but fails to see their difference, and he does offer Batman an important warning in terms of what he can become in seeking vengeance by claiming, “we're such a good team” and telling him, “you showed me what was possible -- you showed me all it takes is fear and a little focused violence. You inspired me.” Hence one of the Batman's last lines is extremely poignant; as he is helping pull citizens to safety, he says, “vengeance won't change the past, mine or anyone else's. People need hope.” A circumspect Batman muses that enlightenment and self-reflection can save him from turning to the dark side. Hopeful messaging indeed, but ignoring the covert, pervasive messaging of the DC cinematic world that perpetuates a false equivalency between mental illness and ASPD and erroneously depicting trauma as leading to sociopathy, while failing to responsibly consider the inherent danger of this messaging.

The past decade has seen the rise in revenge motivated by childhood trauma and grief for megalomaniac supervillains, giving the false impression that trauma and loss engender ASPD. Marvel Entertainment has pledged to create a more DEI conscious universe and is increasing the racial diversity of its heroes and claims it will invest in positive portrayals of those surviving trauma and dealing with mental illness beginning with heroes in the *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* and *Moon Knight* (Herd). Marvel executives and its creative committee should be advised to be reflective and look not only at how realistically they are portraying the mental illness and trauma of their heroes but also at the manner in which their villains are portrayed. Many of their depictions further stigmatize real mental illness and perpetuate misinformation. Moreover, this has led to dismissing inexcusable behavior, blaming parents and caretakers for anarchistic, lethal behaviors, rather than holding characters accountable and requiring they acknowledge their own culpability. In the MCU, this is true of heroes as well as villains. DC as well dangerously perpetuates stereotypes for entertainment, attempting to create sympathetic sociopaths through traumatic backstories while fueling stigma against those with mental illness. While MCU and DC present highly entertaining, blockbuster fan fiction, it is important to consider the role wide-reaching popular media and to hold the industry accountable when it reinforces stereotypes, stigma, and spreads misinformation on mental health for entertainment.

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