

**THE KILLING JOKE: Batman, James Gordon, Joker, and the Hero's Journey.**

Thomas English – IADT Animation, Year 4

Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art, and Creative Technologies in candidacy for the BA (hons)  
Degree in (Animation DL832)

Submitted March 2024

## Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (Animation DL832). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

---

Thomas English

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my biggest thanks to everyone who helped me get this far with my thesis. I would like to thank many of those from the IADT Animation department that guided me through this paper.

I would like to firstly thank my thesis tutor, Thomas Kennedy, who help me settle on my final topic and was able to share his wisdom and guidance to me, which really helped focus and complete my thesis. I would like to extend my thanks to many other lecturers from IADT who really helped me with my 4 years of studying animation. I would like to thank, Dr Michael Connerty, Dr Sherra Murphy, Keith Foran, Gary Blatchford, Laura Venables, Jack O'Shea, and Niall Doherty.

Next, I would like to extend my thanks to my family, firstly my Mom and Dad, Eilish and Darren. My brothers and sisters, Laura, Liam, Darren Jr, Sinead, Jessica, and Jennifer.

Next, I would like to thank my friends who have helped me get through my thesis and my time in college. Firstly, I would like to thank Liam Rodgers, who has been by my side since playschool and has been a brilliant guide for me. The people in college who have been able to make it a memorable experience, Jordon Morris, Zach Drew, Keelin Kusch, Michelle Higgins, Yvonne McElroy, Alicia Mc Manus, and Laura Mahon. Lastly all the friends who have been there for me and encouraged me through out the whole process, Luke O'Shea Scanlan, Jack O'Shea Scanlan, Conor McGreevy, Antoni Bielazik, David O'Leary, Karlo Bozic, Sean Fleming, Hannah Lynch, and Lauren Clerkin.

## **ABSTRACT**

Within this discussion, I will be looking into the structure of the Hero's Journey based on Joseph Campbell's book "Hero with a thousand faces" and look at how this character structure works and how it can be seen within the stories of many different medias through the years.

I will be specifically looking into Alan Moore's "Batman: The Killing Joke" and see how the working of Joseph Campbell can be seen as an influence for the story and the characters found within the comic. I will be looking over the story of Batman and how he keeps his moral ethics and no kill rule in line, Commissioner Gordon and how he has the great resilience of not hero, but a good man and The Joker and how he displays the opposite traits in his journey compared to Batman and how this lead him down the path of villainy and how this chaos corrupts him and eventually shows what was created the Joker. I will also be discussing the themes of resistance, good vs evil, trauma, and heroism and how these themes are relevant in all three journeys and that work as a guide on further understanding the use of the hero's journey with Alan Moore's "Batman: The Killing Joke."

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	7
<b>Chapter 1: The Hero's Journey.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Batman: Morality and Ethics.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Commissioner Gordon: Beacon of Resilience.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The Joker: One Bad Day.....</b>	<b>22</b>
Conclusion.....	26
Citations.....	2

## **List of figures**

**Fig. 1:** Movie still of Peter B. Parker and Miles Morales, Spider Man: Into the Spider-Verse, Peter Ramsey pp. 9

**Fig. 2:** Movie still of Sam and Frodo, The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, Peter Jackson pp. 10

**Fig. 3:** Movie still of Bruce Wayne, The Dark Knight Rises, Christopher Nolan pp. 12

**Fig. 4:** Video still of the 12 steps of the hero's, Myths & Monsters: Episode 1: Heroes and Villains journey pp. 14

**Fig. 5:** Comic Book Panel of The Joker, A Death in the Family, Jim Starlin pp. 15

**Fig. 6:** Comic Book Panel, The Joker shoots Barbra Gordon, The Killing Joke, Alan Moore pp. 18

**Fig. 7:** Comic Book Panel, The Joker torture James Gordon, The Killing Joke, Alan Moore pp. 21

**Fig. 8:** Comic Book Panel, The Joker talks about the chaotic world, The Killing Joke, Alan Moore pp. 21

**Fig. 9:** Comic Book Panel, The Joker finds out his wife died, The Killing Joke, Alan Moore pp. 23

**Fig. 10:** Comic Book Panel, The men get shot at Ace Chemicals, The Killing Joke, Alan Moore pp. 23

## INTRODUCTION

The Hero's Journey is a common writing guide used throughout media. This layout of the hero's journey was something established by philosopher Joseph Campbell who took a deep look into mythology and created a way of understanding for everyone how to establish a character as a hero. There are many examples of a hero throughout the years with ancient mythology with characters such as Perseus of Greek mythology, and plenty of modern characters such as Superman, Spider-Man, Frodo Baggins, Ellen Ripley, and the list can go on and on. What is established for these characters is that they will go through many different steps from the known to the unknown that will help them on their path to becoming a hero.

After looking into the Hero's Journey, we can investigate specific stories that do a good display of the Hero's Journey and how it is still well used in modern media. In this text we will be looking into Alan Moore's famous graphic novel, "Batman: The Killing Joke" released in 1988, which follows gave us an insight into the backstory of famous psychotic clown, The Joker and see how he had fallen into madness and how he became the notorious villain that he is still known for to this day. Within this story we will be following many different characters and how the events they go through work as a fitting example for different approaches to the hero's journey. This is the first time ever; this was done in the world of DC comics.

Firstly, there is Batman who has a long history of trauma and has helped shape him into the man he is today. Batman has already gone through a hero's journey before in his past with the death of his parents and how he had responded to that trauma and survivors' guilt and how he used it to help shape the person he becomes in the future. We see how this trauma response helps shape one of his most important moral codes, which is his no-killing rule that he uses not only to stay within the lines and trust of the Gotham City Police Department (GCPD) and his partner commissioner James Gordon, but also how he uses it as a way to keep up a certain image of himself. We see how Batman uses these to help shape this ideology into other people such as Azreal from the Knightfall storyline written by Dennis O'Neil. When it comes to "The Killing Joke," we follow Batman as he begins to question his time with the Joker and how much longer their rivalry can go on for. We see him starting to question his own morals and begin to wonder whether he should keep the Joker around and if it is time to end this rivalry. All of this helps us shape our understanding of The Dark Knight and his hero's journey as he questions his own morals and ethics. This also brings us with a very prevalent theme seen throughout the book, which is them of resistance, some also seen with both Commissioner Gordon's and Joker's journey within the story.

Commissioner Gordon also takes on a hero's journey in "The Killing Joke" and what we see with this is what it takes to be human. With Batman we get a story of good and heroism, with the Joker, he takes the opposite path of evil and villainy. Gordon, however, even though still comes out a hero, takes a different path than to Batman, which is the path of a human. We see how Commissioner Gordon sticks

with his morals even after being tortured by the Joker in a way to make him go insane just like him. Gordon is an example of someone who is not a hero but is instead a good man.

Finally, we will be looking at the Joker and how he has the beginning of what a hero's journey would usually look like, however, Alan Moore uses the standard layout for a hero's journey, and flips it upside down to give us a new approach to it. What we can look at is how the troubled past of The Joker's life and his journey starts off quite similar to the Batman, but ends up being one that starts to take the opposite direction and that shows how someone who starts to make the wrong choices and give in to their demons, will start to descend into madness and will fall from the path of a hero's journey and fall down the route of evil. We see this as Joker has the opposite ideology to the Batman, where Batman would prefer to not have people suffer and go through the exact same as to what he did, whereas the Joker is more fond of the idea that people must go through what he did in his past that drove him insane in order to understand why he is the way that he is, and this brings him on to his "one bad day" belief.

All these points give us a greater insight to the Hero's Journey and how it helps shape the characters within Alan Moore's "Batman: The Killing Joke."



## Chapter 1: The Hero's Journey

No one is ever born a hero; a hero is a person who takes part in a journey that they will discover what will make them a hero. There are many notable examples that will show this, through many ancient mythologies, leading all the way up to the modern hero with characters such as Batman from DC Comics. There is a journey there they will take. This is according to American writer, Joseph Campbell, who, with an analysis of old mythology and religion, there is a set journey required to becoming a hero. There are twelve steps to doing this. You start off with the “status quo,” this is what the life the character is used to before the adventure officially takes off, such as Miles Morales is an artistic student before becoming Spider Man in “Spider Man: Into the Spider Verse.” then it is the “call to adventure” which would be after Miles gets bitten by the spider that gives him powers and he starts the journey of becoming Spider Man and then the “supernatural aid” which would be the arrival of Peter B. Parker who becomes a guide for Miles and help him fulfil his journey. (Fig. 1)



*Fig 1: Still from Spider Man: Into the Spider-Verse, 2018*

These are on the first section of the journey where the character would be in the “ordinary world” as it is described in the documentary, “Myths and Monsters” directed by Daniel Kontur and written by William Simpson. This part of the journey is where they will be established as a character and where they are in their lives to which they will be called upon for adventure. This is the start of Batman's journey, his Parents die, he grows with the grief, and he sets out to bring justice to those who may be going through the same as he did, but he helps to prevent them ending up like himself. Although not supernatural, Batman receives mentoring from his English butler, Alfred Pennyworth, Batman's journey has begun. Regarding the Joker if we look at the origin story provided to us in “The Killing Joke” by Alan Moore, the Joker's status quo is a poor man trying to provide for his wife, his “call to adventure” was to make money for his wife, and his mentors were the men going to help him do that. This is the beginning of the Hero's Journey.

There may be some doubt or a “Refusal to the call” that the hero goes through uncertainty of what lies ahead of them and what may happen to them, not just physically but also it may take a massive toll on their world views, their mentality etc... In his book “The Church of the Serpent: the Philosophy of the Snake and Attaining Transcendent Knowledge” David Sinclair States “The hero always undergoes a metamorphosis from ordinary to extraordinary.” A great example of this can be seen in the film adaptation of J.R.R Tolkien’s, “The Lord of the Rings” in the first film “The Fellowship of the Ring”, where when Sam and Frodo begin their journey, Sam becomes a bit hesitant to travel any further after he realises he is about to be furthest away from the Shire than he ever has been in his entire life. He knows his life will never be the same again and is unsure if he is willing to accept that it will all be different from here on out. This is an important part of the Hero’s Journey as it is the ending of one chapter and the beginning of a new chapter that will really begin to change the character into the hero. Once the hero has accepted what has come upon them this is a stage known as “Crossing the threshold.” (Fig. 2)



Fig 2: Still from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001

Now at this point the hero will be on a “Road of Trials”. A hero and their journey will be defined by the choices and actions they take during this time. A traumatic event does not define a hero, it is a person's choices in life which define if they are good or evil. They need to learn what it takes to be a hero. As Joseph Campbell stated in “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”, “It is only when a man tames his own demons that he becomes the king of himself, if not of the world.” A hero must find conflict within themselves and must take it upon themselves to fight it and to overcome it and only then will they be able to become a true hero. Batman does this by trying to tackle the grief and sometimes survivor's guilt he suffered after the death of his parents. As he got older, he must deal with the balancing of being Batman and playboy billionaire, Bruce Wayne. A hero will learn that there are consequences to their actions, and they must be able to take responsibility when it comes to that. “Suffering transforms us,

awakens our selfless impulses...” is a quote by Elizabeth Svoboda from her book “What makes a hero? The Surprising Science of Selflessness.” We see that Batman follows this ideology in his hero's journey to protect the innocent and to be more understanding of the trauma that can happen within Gotham city and how he uses this heroism to ensure no one will end up like him.

The hero will hit a bump in their journey that may have a big effect on them. This can be the death of a close one or the loss of something close to their heart. This is the stage known as the “ordeal.” Batman loses someone on his journey, Jason Todd, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Robin. This takes a massive toll on him and challenges him on being able to commit to his no killing rule and see if he is finally willing to take down the Joker for the last time for his crimes. It is not until his superhero ally, Superman, steps in to help guide Batman back on his path of being a hero. No hero can escape this as each of their journey's come with a risk. There is no guaranteed safety as a hero. “Perhaps some of us have to go through dark and devious ways before we can find the river of peace...” as Joseph Campbell excellently states in “The Hero of 1000 faces”. For the hero to reach the light, they must go through the darkness before they can get to the light. If they are always in the light, then there is no journey to take and there is no reason to be a hero. This can be applied to Commissioner Gordon during the events of “The Killing Joke.” He is made to go through hell in the book being tortured by the Joker, however in the end he remains as a good guy who does not fall for the Joker's corruption.

After continuing their journey, the hero will receive some kind of “reward.” This reward will not be just some kind of trophy, the rewards can be some kind of knowledge or wisdom that could help them along their journey. This is a way for the story to progress as usually the knowledge passed on to our hero to help achieve their goals and it will help them defeat the evil that they come across and help them to complete their journey. This is a device that can be used as a symbolism for why their hero set out on this mission and can tell a lot about their character. Their beliefs, philosophy and what they are hoping to achieve in this story. It is used not only to help us understand the character themselves but the importance of the journey and why it was necessary for the character to go through it in the first place.

The character would be on the “road back” after receiving their gift. This is the third act of the story where the character would be brought back to the ordinary world to face their final task in this journey. The situation they must face could be the consequences of their actions, a return of the villain, believed to have been defeated. Whatever it is, this is a pivotal point for the hero as we get to see them use everything they have learned and put into use to overcome the situation. This all leads into “resurrection,” the moment where we get to see if their hero has really finished their journey and is able to defeat the evil and stand as a hero. This can usually be displayed as a “death” that the hero suffers through, to be brought back more powerful. It could be the final realisation on what needs to be done

to achieve their goals. A splendid example of this would be in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. Luke Skywalker has been driven to be filled with so much anger and to let that anger consume him and begin his journey to the dark side. Luke nearly falls to the dark side but can overcome the anger after seeing his father is just like him. He stands down and continues down his path as a Jedi. Fulfilling his journey as a hero and being able to defeat evil.

In the conclusion the character has met their “resolution.” The evil is defeated, they fulfilled their journey to becoming a hero. They keep their reward from earlier and they can head back home and show how they have been able to grow as a person during this time. An example of this is in Christopher Nolan’s “*The Dark Knight Rises*,” where Batman saves Gotham from the nuke planted by Talia Al Ghul and can now rest and live out the rest of his life in peace while letting Alfred aware that he is safe and happy. (See Fig. 3) Sometimes this is the definitive end of a story and that is it. Sometimes the character can be put back onto step number 1 and they will go through the journey again.



*Fig 3: Still from The Dark Knight Rises, 2012*

These are the twelve steps set out by Joseph Campbell and on the hero’s journey. (See Fig. 4) This is still a technique that can be seen in many modern stories and their key characters. Many examples include the likes of Ellen Ripley from *Alien*, Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*, and the likes of comic book characters such as Batman and The Joker. Alan Moore explores through the Hero’s Journey in the comic “*The Killing Joke*” that was released in March 1988. However, he is not just following one character’s journey but gives us an idea of this journey through the eyes of three different characters, Batman, The Joker and Commissioner James Gordon. All of them have their philosophies and ideologies explored throughout the comic to give us a look at how one character goes down one path of the Hero’s Journey while the others take another path and may end up with a different journey altogether. This is all explored through the Joker’s “*One bad day*” ideology. The character believes that all it takes is for someone to have one horrible and traumatic day and anyone can become the Joker and anyone can become just like him. Although this is like Batman who had been put on his path of becoming The Dark Knight after the death of his family, Joker tries to use his theory on Gordon instead. Taking a more

stable mind and trying to twist it so much. However, it is revealed in the end that the Joker's plan is flawed as Gordon can remain as the good man that he has always been. "Tragedy is an unfinished comedy" as stated by Joseph Campbell. In this case that "tragedy" is Joker. He has been driven insane and believes everyone is just like him and it is comedic to think that anyone could end up like him, but the theme of comedy and tragedy is what the Joker is. Everything to the Joker is just one big joke and "The Killing Joke" really displays this theme well.



Fig 4: The 12 steps of the hero's journey

## Chapter 2: Batman: Morality and Ethics

In Alan Moore's "Batman: The Killing Joke," the character Batman is put in a scenario that has him questioning all the Journey he has gone through to get to this moment and now he is set out on a new journey. One of the themes explored in this comic is "morals and ethics." Batman has been established since 1940 with one key rule about his vigilantism. He cannot kill anyone, and it is not because Batman does not think this is what people deserve, as he established in the story "Under the Red Hood" written by Judd Winick. However, he does feel that he cannot be the person to kill these criminals. This "no killing rule" is what Batman uses to keep himself on track and on the side of the good guys. However, it can also be explored as an insight to more of Batman's beliefs and views of the state of Gotham City. There is so much corruption to be found within the city, it is constantly getting harder to find people who can be trusted within the likes of the police force. This drives Batman to go on with his no kill rule as the acts of those who are corrupted have cost the lives of many innocent people and Batman does not want to end up as those people he fights. This no-kill rule becomes a defining feature of the character and helps establish him as the hero. Regarding Batman's no killing rule, in an essay from Vilija Olivia Johnson titled "'It's What You Do The Defines You': Batman as Moral Philosopher," they state, "if Batman kills the Joker and breaks his one guiding rule, then he has lost his ability to stand as a figure of incorruptible." The image of being just another one of Gotham's evil goons, such as the Joker, is what drives Batman to keep his no-kill rule. Batman even has had the same attitude with some of the people who have worked close with him. A notable example of this is with the character Azreal, who was taken in by Batman after the torture they had suffered from the Order of Saint Dumas. After sustaining a massive injury from Bane in the storyline "Knightfall," Bruce steps away from crime fighting to recover. As a result of this, he leaves the responsibilities to Azreal and gets him to accept the cowl and watch over Gotham. However, wanting to go his own ways, Azreal starts to kill people while he is the Batman and tries to permanently remain as the Dark Knight of Gotham. This brings Bruce back to Gotham to take back the mantle and to further solidify the main rule that he has been following for so long himself, it causes him to become more careful to pick who has what it takes to become Batman and to not break his most important rule. This further shows how his rule is a response to the chaos and corruption that can occur in Gotham and how he feels he needs a way to counter it.

Batman's no-killing rule comes into question in "The Killing Joke" as he now must come face to face with the Joker once again and this time he must question if this will be the last time, they face each other. This would not be the first time however where Batman has had his rule be seriously assessed by the Joker. He has been taunting him and trying to break his code to make Batman snap for years and so that he will one day finally break his code and start killing people and end the rivalry of these two. Joker has gone as far as to kill those who are close to him, such as Jason Todd, the second Robin, who was



beaten to near death by The Joker with a crowbar in the story “Batman: A Death in the Family” written by Jim Starlin, (see Fig. 5) and then was left in a room full of explosives that Batman was too slow to stop. This is one of the closest moments where Batman does break his code and try to end the Clown Prince of Crime’s reign of terror that he has brought in. This plays with the themes of “Morality and Ethics,” a standout theme throughout the comic “The Killing Joker” that not only does Batman himself has to go through, but we also see two other key characters going through a journey of morality and ethics, those characters being Commissioner Gordon and The Joker himself.

Batman has gone through years of trauma, starting with the death of his parents, beginning his hero’s journey. Batman's response to trauma, as well as other characters such as James Gordon and The Joker, is a crucial part of “The Killing Joke” and understanding how the Hero's Journey is an influence on the story telling by Alan Moore. Going back to Batman's origin, his ordeal is being in a billionaire family and having a normal childhood, until the murder of his parents that start his call to adventure. He must deal with a lot of grief growing up and not knowing where to go in life, this is his “refusal to call.” Meeting with his mentor, development and training while growing up, shows his response to this trauma and shows how he is starting to become a superhero. Bruce Wayne feels that Gotham is riddled with too much crime and feels no one should have to go through what he went through growing up, especially as evident through many stories, he is shown to comfort kids who he felt are as traumatised as him, even the way he eventually took on his sidekick, Robin, he trained him and raised him in a way that they won't end up like him. With many years of training now done, Bruce Wayne officially “crosses the threshold” and goes on to becoming the Batman and acts as a vigilante for Gotham city. Fighting crime and trying to protect the innocents, his ongoing battle only further him on his journey of being a hero, just so long as he can stay on the right path.



Fig 5: Panel from A Death in the Family, 1988

The morals and ethics have always been a big part of the character and mantle of the Batman through many comics, this is where his “no kill rule” stands out as a key part of his character as it keeps him on the path of being a hero and makes sure he doesn't cross a line that he can't come back from and ruining the trust he has built up over the years. As mentioned in the collection of essays “Batman and Philosophy”, edited by Mark D. White and Robert Arp, Mark D. White explains in his essay “Why doesn't Batman Kill the Joker?”, in relation to Batman's “no kill rule”, “...the problem that Batman faces when he balances his personal moral code against the countless lives he could save.” Batman's no kill rule does not mean he has not wanted to end the lives of certain criminals to help prevent the deaths of hundreds of innocent people. Killing the likes of the Joker has been something he has thought of doing but just feels he has no right to do so. He feels he needs to remain on his path of being the hero for the city and to do so he cannot cross that line. He must face this challenge in a big way within the story of “The Killing Joke.” Up until this point, the Joker has continuously tortured Batman and the people close to him. Many people have questioned him for a long time on why he does not just end it all and potentially save the lives of loads of citizens of Gotham. This has been something that Batman never questioned and that he knew he would not have what it takes to kill the Joker. However, during the events of “The Killing Joke” Batman must question how his rivalry against Joker will end, who will kill who and thinking that he is going to have to end the Joker finally.

Batman has a new Hero's Journey during “The Killing Joke.” He must re-evaluate his philosophy and if it is worth keeping his foes alive and to consider whether he can take the life of someone. During the events of The Killing Joke, some of the people close to Batman are heavily targeted by the Joker. Commissioner James Gordon and his daughter Barbara (a.k.a Batgirl) are having a fine evening at home, until the Joker shows up. He proceeds to shoot and paralyze Barbara, strips her of her clothes and takes photos of her in her horrible, bloody state. (See Fig. 6) He then kidnaps the Commissioner and takes him to his fairground base and tortures him to try and prove a point. This sets up Batman's big challenge in his journey of this comic. After so much confusion about his relationship with the Joker and how he may need to end it all, Batman must pursue the clown and save Gordon. Batman becomes aggressive and upset. He is not sure what to do, but internally would rather do everything “by the books.” This brings Batman's hero's journey back to his moral compass and ideology on killing people. As I mentioned before, this is a continuous scenario that the Joker puts Batman through and something that happens especially during the events of “The Killing Joke.” This becomes a crucial part of Batman's journey as we come to deal with the theme of resilience within the story and how Batman must fight to stay on the right path of his hero's journey. Batman is out on the hunt for the Joker now after kidnapping Commissioner Gordon and must hunt down anyone who may be able to give him any kind of information on the whereabouts of the clown prince of crime. It has become clear now that the Batman is filled with so much rage, aggression, and hatred right now, but he knows he must continue, for the sake of his moral code. He cannot let the Joker win this time and let him ruin the lives of not just his,



but also Barbra and James Gordon as well. He must fight on forward to maintain his symbol of heroism that he feels has brought safety to Gotham and helped destroy those who try to bring chaos and pain to the innocent people of his city. He lets his moral views not get scrambled up due to the events of this horrific instances, he resistance to any kind of urge to break his code and make sure he has everything done “by the books” shows how he has managed to keep himself on the path of a hero. This further exemplifies his resilience to the Joker and his torture and how he keeps his no-kill rule. By the end of “The Killing Joke”, from what we can see is that by the end of the graphic novel, Batman has stuck to the books and has spared Joker once again, not letting the Joker win this time and to keep fighting the good fight for not just Gotham, but this moral image he cast upon himself to remain the hero the Gotham deserves.

Batman has always tried to be a guide for many people throughout the comics, he tries to put those who are seeking revenge in any shape or form that they must be seeking justice, not vengeance, because if one seeks vengeance for something that someone has been done to them, they will end up just like the person they seek revenge against. This is the moral’s that Batman follows to maintain his identity as a hero, not with the GCPD, his allies or even Commissioner Gordon, but also how he does it for himself. This plays a crucial part in his relationship between himself and the Joker and is especially relevant within the story of Alan Moore's “The Killing Joke.” Despite that, Batman is still a human being with such strong emotions and trauma that he still deals with to this day, and even though his response to this trauma has made him want to become a better person and seek out justice for those who have suffered, he can still have some instances of nearly crossing that line. As Mark D. White explains in his book “Batman and Ethics,”

It is Natural for Batman to want to mete out punishment and vengeance himself, and he comes close to doing so on occasion – he is only human, after all, - but he usually stops short of crossing that line, realizing in the end that punishment is not his to hand out.

Batman is a good hero who knows his morals and his limits and can usually tell when he is about to cross a line that he should not, and not even the acts of the Joker can cause him to do such horrible acts. He is human however, and sometimes humans need guidance, and Batman has this guidance, especially within “The Killing Joke”, with that guidance being Commissioner Gordon, who also after many years of torture from the Joker, Gordon also knows that Batman can't kill the Joker, and he also knows that it is for the reason of what will happen to Batman if he stoops as low as the Joker and becomes a killer. Gordon helps Batman stay within his morals and to stay as the hero he wants to be.



Fig 6: Panel from *The Killing Joke*, 1988

### **Chapter 3: Commissioner Gordon: Beacon of Resilience**

The story of Alan Moore's "Batman: The Killing Joke," has us following the hero's journey of famous superhero Batman and his resilience to the antics of the Joker over the years and the torture he has endured. However, he has had a lot of people by his side to ensure that he will not cross the line, but there was one man to help him stay on the hero's path in Alan Moore's story and that is Commissioner James Gordon of the GCPD. James is targeted by The Joker and uses him to try and prove his point that all it takes is "one bad day" for someone to go as insane as himself and this creates a hero's journey for Gordon to go through himself. He has now an "adventure" to go on to ensure that he also can keep himself on the good side and remain not a hero, but a good man, in the eyes of Batman, the main person he can trust. James Gordon is kidnapped by The Joker, immediately after he had shot and paralysed his daughter, Barbra. For the next portion of the comic, we see Gordon going through Joker's fairground after being stripped of his clothes and being shown multiple images of his paralysed daughter in the nude. (see Fig. 7) Hoping to destroy him in this moment, The Joker is trying to prove his point of "one bad day." With this story comes a continuation of the theme of resilience as seen before with Batman and his hero's journey. However, when we look over the story that commissioner Gordon goes through in this comic, we see that his hero's journey is not the same path that the Batman takes to become a hero.

In Batman's hero journey, we see his response to his childhood trauma and how it resulted in his path of becoming The Dark Knight and protector of Gotham City. However, Gordon's trauma does not come into his story until long after he has met Batman and has had many encounters with the Joker. It is not until "The Killing Joke" that Gordon has gone through a hero journey of his own. Let us take an extended look at the events that Gordon goes through during the events of "The Killing Joke." It all starts off as the standard to Joseph Campbell's exploration of a hero. He starts in his "status quo" which is being the commissioner of the GCPD and the close ally of Batman. Everything within his life is quite normal (as close to normal as a life working with a man dressed as a bat and fight clowns, penguins and a man made from clay can be). The Joker shows up and ruins it all for him. As explained before, Barbra, his daughter, is shot and paralysed and Gordon is then kidnapped. Gordon is then brought to the Joker's fairground, full with a bunch of characters that start to strip Gordon down to the nude trying to humiliate him, attacking him and tasing him and trying to begin his mental downfall of this "one bad day" scenario that The Joker has set up for him. However, Gordon is very resistant to this initial attempt to break his mind. Gordon gives a greater exploration of the themes of "Good and Evil" within this story that is not the standard as it would have been seen with Batman vs Joker. All of this comes from Joker's "one bad day" plot against Gordon, however the writing of Alan Moore shows us more of an adventure that can be defined by the choices made by these characters and how they react to the trauma that they go

through. Gordon's response shows us an individual who is resistant to the acts of the Joker and his evil outlook on life. In an essay titled "Having a Bad Day: Explorations of Good and Evil in Alan Moore's 'The Killing Joke'" by Joel West, they state that, "In a sense, though, Moore's human being, represented by James Gordon, is greater than Good and evil." When it comes to Gordon vs Joker in this story, we are not looking towards good and evil between those two characters, that can be save for Batman and Joker, what we are looking at between Gordon and Joker is human vs evil. Commissioner James Gordon is the symbol of what a hero can be, but more so what it means to be human, and in this case with "The Killing Joke", James Gordon being human is his resistance to Joker's torture and to not fall down a path that leads to destruction and corruption, but also not following the one that ends up leading you down the same path as the Batman. At the end of it all he is left in a cage to be once again taunted by Joker and his minions as he explains to them all, including Gordon, which becoming insane makes sense and that "any other response would be crazy!" (see Fig. 8) Joker is determined that at this point that his plot has worked, and he has now destroyed the commissioner. Despite all of that, he forgot one strong aspect about James Gordon, he is a good man.

His journey has come far now here as he has been tested, but there is a strong theme of resilience here where Gordon does not fall for Joker's torture. Gordon has always been someone with high moral values and is always regarded as one of the good ones by Batman, both are aware of the corruption filling both the powerful people of Gotham and some of the others filling GCPD. However, James Gordon is not a man like Batman, even though they are on the same side. Their reaction to trauma is what makes them stand out from each other in this world of good and evil. As I explained before in this story, Gordon is not good nor evil, he is the human of the story, he is greater than good and evil. It all comes down to the themes of resistance that make Gordon human. He is dragged down through these horrible scenarios, just like both Batman and Joker however he comes out on top as human. Completing his hero journey. Travis Langley says in his book "Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Night," "A healthy man does not torture others – generally it is the tortured who turn into torturers." In this case, Gordon is the healthy man compared to Batman and Joker who haven't drastic approaches to taking these matters into their own hands and instead he is here not to keep up his personal image in the eyes of the innocent and to take matters into his own hand, James Gordon is written to be like this in his journey, because he is written to be human of this story. A good man.





Fig 7: Panel From The Killing Joke, 1988



Fig 8: Panel From The Killing Joke, 1988

## **Chapter 4: The Joker: One Bad Day**

So far, we have looked at the hero's journey and how philosopher, Joseph Campbell, breaks down the stages of the becoming a hero and how the actions, and reactions can help shape this journey and help someone on their way to becoming a hero. We were able to establish for Batman and for Gordon how they both were going down this journey to help keep them on the right path to be a hero. They do end up on two different paths, but they remain to be a hero and a good man. What happens within the story of Alan Moore's "The Killing Joke," is that there is a third journey we follow, however it does not follow a similar result as Batman or Gordon. We have established the theme of "Good vs Evil" within Alan Moore's comic, the evil obviously being the Joker within this story. What we see happen within this story is that the Joker himself has his own form of a "hero journey" but what will happen is that the response to trauma that the Joker has sends him down a path that is quite the opposite to the likes of Batman and Gordon. For the first time within the DC comics universe, we get an insight to the origins of The Joker and the life he had before becoming the clown prince of crime. This story helps us understand Joker's belief behind his "one bad day" ideology and why he is trying to test it out, but that later in the story we find that the Joker's plan is extremely flawed. This gives a journey into the psychology of The Joker and how his journey helped him shape his identity that he has taken up in "The Killing Joke."

The Joker tries to prove that all it takes is "one bad day" for anyone to end up as insane as he is. He explains in the comic about how he believes it is the easy way of life, to be insane especially with the state of the world. This is a look into his psychology, and we will continue to gain a further insight to his ideology and views. However, we can investigate the character's journey he goes through based on the back story Alan Moore wrote in "The Killing Joke." Many years before becoming the clown prince of crime, The Joker was formerly a minor engineer in ACE Chemicals who had quit his job to pursue a career as a stand-up comedian. This path is not really working out for him, and it carries a burden on him as he is trying to provide for his wife who is currently pregnant with their first child. This is the beginning of The Joker's journey as we see his "status quo" as the failed comedian. Some sketchy friends of his offer him a way to earn some money and help provide to his family, this would be his "call to adventure." After receiving this opportunity, he is hit with the most heart-breaking news he would ever expect to receive. His wife has been killed in a freak accident, which also result in the loss of his unborn child. (See Fig. 9) However, this does not stop his friends from dragging him along to their opportunity they have for him, which is to steal from ACE Chemicals, the Joker's former place

of employment. This continues his journey with the “call to adventure” and “supernatural aid” steps here.

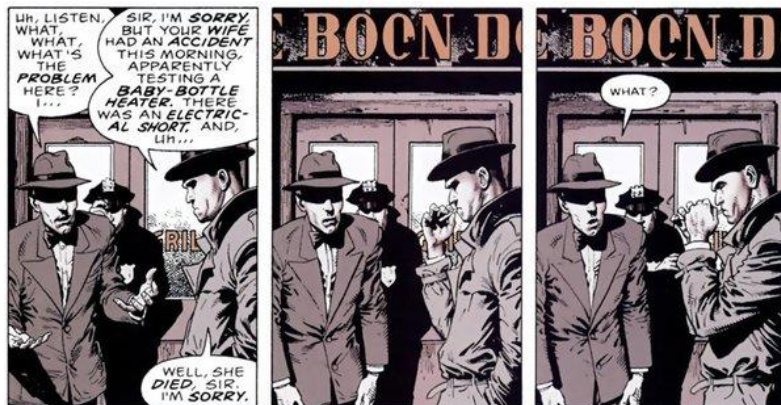


Fig 9: Panel From *The Killing Joke*, 1988

However, it is the death of his wife and kid that begins his downfall into insanity. The mission does not go according to plan and the other two men are gunned down by the GCPD leaving behind pre-Joker who ends up getting chased down by the Batman. (See Fig. 10) The pre-Joker trips and falls into a vat of acid and is presumed dead. However, unknown to Batman and the GCPD, he survives that fall and comes out changed. This is seen as the birth of the Joker and where he starts to take a new path of his journey, but no longer the path of a hero and this is where we start to see the Joker take the opposite route of the hero’s journey, especially compared to Batman.



Fig 10: Panel From *The Killing Joke*, 1988

Both Batman and Joker relate to their past being filled with trauma, but the similarities stop there as they are opposites of each other. Trauma plays a big part of what builds their character but also how they respond to the trauma contributes to it as well. The resulting responses give us our “good and evil.” Batman has responded to this trauma to try and help people, to keep them safe and hopefully make sure no one ends up like him. Whereas Joker responds to this trauma he has endured he feels he needs to

make sure everyone needs to go through what he has experienced, so that people can understand him and what he stands for. This brings a lot of chaos to Gotham and its people, and especially to the Gordon family during the events of “The Killing Joke” as the Joker tries to prove his “one bad day” belief, which is that everyone is just like him, all it takes is the “average man” to have a rough day and they will fall down the same path of insanity that the Joker did. In the book “The Joker Psychology: Evil Clowns and the Women Who Love Them,” edited by Travis Langley, it is stated in it,

...experiencing trauma has the potential for both negative and positive outcomes...These differential outcomes are most apparent between Batman and Joker, one turning his grief into motivation to help others, while the other works to bring others to his tragic state.

This is very evident within the story of “The Killing Joke,” and it is all tied back to the theme of resilience, where we saw both Batman and Gordon resist the trauma they have been dealing with for years and the new trauma brought upon them. Joker, however, does not resist the trauma and it lets it sink in to him, letting it drive him insane. All of this brings us to the choice within a hero's journey. Joker had the choice to take on a career as a comedian, he had the choice to take on the job with his friends of breaking into ACE chemicals, and he had the choice to whether he believes that people should have the same experience that he goes through.

The Joker's journey stands as a portrayal as to what would happen if someone were to have an opposite reaction to the traditional hero's journey by Joseph Campbell. The “reward” we see here is not the usual gift of knowledge or special item that usually helps the hero finish their journey, instead in “The Killing Joke” the Joker's reward is his final transformation into the Joker and continue his path downwards into chaos and insanity. This shows the lack of positive reactions and outcomes, plays a heavy toll on a character's hero's journey, and like I mentioned before, The Joker's choices had led to this, and even though his initial beginning of his journey, the choices were small and had no intent of harm. However, as his journey continued, more choices came up in his way, and his response to this, especially the trauma he endures is what shapes him to finally end up as the Joker. His “one bad day” plan he brings against Gordon, is another response to his trauma and how he believes that for everyone to understand him, he needs to make people suffer, the same way that he suffered. This all comes back to the themes of “Good vs Evil,” especially where we reach the end of the comic and witness the final confrontation of Batman and the Joker in the book. Instead of a big fight though, they talk, and the Batman offers to bring help to the Joker and to try and get him on a track to being a better man. The Joker simply refuses, believing he is too far gone. This is represented by his final joke that he tells Batman about the two insane asylum patients escaping the asylum and trying to get away across a roof. Only one makes it across whereas the other is scared to jump, the one who made it across tells the other that he'd shine a light that he can then walk across, and the other insane individual won't do that because he believes he'll just turn the light off when he gets halfway across. This final joke can explain a lot to us about how the



Joker's views work and how it links him back to Batman. In the article titled, "The "joke" of THE KILLING JOKE" written by Monica Friedman, "Batman laughs because this joke illustrates his life, his struggle with the joker...they both believe in the bridge of light, but Joker doesn't believe in redemption, and inexplicably, Batman does." The joke perfectly capsulate the relationship of the characters, but also how they see the world and its through this we see that a confirmation of how the Joker's hero's journey is an opposite to Batman and the traditional hero's journey and that his choices lead him down this path. As Julian Darius puts it in their book "And the Universe So Big: Understanding Batman: The Killing Joke," "...the joke is simply the Joker saying that he is crazy and cannot accept help because of it." We can see the joke as the end of Joker's journey and how he will remain as the villain in this story, due to the choices he made and his lack of desire to face his demons and take on the hero's journey.

## Conclusion

In this thesis we look at the Hero's Journey, based on the works of Joseph Campbell and his insight into the hero found within his book "Hero with a Thousand Faces" and help us get a better understanding of many characters within mythology, both ancient and modern. We got ourselves familiarised with how the journey works and the twelve different steps that a character would take on their journey and how they go from the known to the unknown and must challenge and face their demons and must face challenging choices to overcome these demons and must resist the path down to villainy. The Hero's Journey can be applied to many different characters in many ways and a splendid example of this was found within Alan Moore's, "Batman: The Killing Joke," and how its complex story gave us a better understanding of heroism displayed through Batman, Commissioner Gordon, and The Joker. We explored how Alan Moore managed to challenge this usual method of exploring the Hero's Journey by looking at it from many different angles with its different characters and its exploration of the themes such as morality, ethics, and trauma. Especially at the theme of trauma we looked at how the characters' resistance to the trauma and the mental toll it would take on them gave us a greater understanding of the characters' hero journeys. The character Batman has had a journey in his past, with the death of his family and growing into the hero of Gotham city. We see how his morals and response to trauma directly impact his hero's journey by keeping up his "no-kill" rule that he uses to guide him on the path of heroism. Then there is Commissioner James Gordon, the best of the three, who is struck with a lot of trauma during "The Killing Joke" and still comes out on the right path of his hero journey with his strong resistance to the Joker's plan to turn him crazy and to prove his plan of "one bad day", and keeping up a strong hold of his heroism. Finally, there was the Joker who is the opposite of the other two characters, especially with Batman. The Joker's backstory is shown in "The Killing Joke" shows us how a character who lacks the resistance and responds terribly to the trauma they have been dealt in their life can lead a character down the opposite path of the hero and instead is on their way to villainy.

These themes of trauma, resistance and heroism displayed within Alan Moore's "The Killing Joke" help us get a better understanding of how the structure of the hero's journey works, especially within the stories of modern fiction.

## Citations - Bibliography

- 1 - Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Press, 1949, *Internet Archive*, [archive.org/details/the-hero-with-a-thousand-faces-by-joseph-campbell](https://archive.org/details/the-hero-with-a-thousand-faces-by-joseph-campbell), Accessed 2023.
- 2 - Darius, Julian. *And the Universe so Big Understanding Batman - the Killing Joke*. Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2012.
- 3 - Friedman, Monica. *The "Joke" of the KILLING JOKE*, 2016, [bookriot.com/joke-of-the-killing-joke](https://bookriot.com/joke-of-the-killing-joke).
- 4 - Johnson, Vilja Olivia. *"It's What You Do That Defines You": Batman as Moral Philosopher*, 2011, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/).
- 5 - Langley, Travis, editor. *The Joker Psychology: Evil Clowns and the Women Who Love Them*. Sterling, 2019.
- 6 - Langley, Travis. *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight*. Turner Publishing, 2012.
- 7 - Moore, Alan. *Batman: The Killing Joke*. DC Comics, 1988.
- 8 - O'Neil, Dennis, et al. *Batman: Knightfall*. DC Comics, 1993.
- 9 - Sinclair, David. *The Church of the Serpent: The Philosophy of the Snake and Attaining Transcendent Knowledge*. Lulu Press, 2022.
- 10 - Starlin, Jim. *Batman: A Death in the Family*. DC Comics, 1988.
- 11 - Svoboda, Elizabeth. *What Makes a Hero? The Surprising Science of Selflessness*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2013.
- 12 - West, Joel. *Having a Bad Day: Explorations of Good and Evil in Alan Moore's the Killing Joke*, 2020, [www.hillpublisher.com/ArticleDetails/364](https://www.hillpublisher.com/ArticleDetails/364).
- 13 - White, Mark D. *Batman and Ethics*. Wiley, 2019.
- 14 - White, Mark D. *Batman and Philosophy*. Wiley, 2009.
- 15 - Winnick, Judd. *Batman: Under the Red Hood*. DC Comics, 2005.

## **Filmography**

- 1 - Jackson, Peter, director. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. New Line Entertainment, 2001.
- 2 - Kontur, Daniel, director. "Myths & Monsters: Episode 1: Heroes and Villains: Free Documentary Paranormal." *YouTube*, 20 May 2022, [youtu.be/vwytQRXTZZQ?si=myj2VWJlrm8f6OxL](https://youtu.be/vwytQRXTZZQ?si=myj2VWJlrm8f6OxL). Accessed 2023.
- 3 - Marquand, Richard, director. *Star Wars Episode 6: Return of the Jedi*. 20th Century Fox, 1983.
- 4 - Nolan, Christopher, director. *The Dark Knight Rises*. Warner Bros, 2012.
- 5 - Ramsey, Peter, et al., directors. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. Sony Pictures, 2018.
- 6 - Scott, Ridley, director. *Alien*. 20th Century Fox, 1979.