

# “THAT’S NOT FUNNY”: PAGES ON HOW THE DEMON CLOWN OF GOTHAM CITY LEARNED (NOT) TO LOVE AND WHAT THAT HAS TO DO WITH ANYTHING, LIKE MAYBE THE AMERICAN ZEITGEIST

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“In hindsight, there were signs...” is the line that begin Scott Snyder’s (2013) Batman story, *Death of the Family*. Indeed, there always seem to be little foreshadowings regarding which life paths – which stories – people will act out. The signs are always clearer in retrospect, but they are usually there – hiding in plain sight. Humans refer to their past experiences in order to imagine viable options for future action. Acknowledging education from experience is neither a new concept nor a particularly difficult task (e.g., Dewey, 1938). Learning to locate and attend to memory experience as a tool for imagining future action is the tricky part for academics and educators.

Signs, albeit not necessarily “predictors,” and symbols are the stuff that excites communication studies scholars. And, as a student of communication[s], my readings of certain fictional stories – interpretation of the signs and symbols in popular culture – have begun to feature searches for the meaning of narratives that are proliferated among particular groups. Specifically, in recent times, my attention has turned to comic book fandom. Sometimes, as in this case, those groups are communities in which I also feel that I

belong. I empathize with communication scholar and Batman historian, Will Brooker (2005), and his statement of disclosure at the start of his book *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*: “I feel the cultural experience which has woven me into Batman fandom is a benefit to my work, offering me a subject to examine intimately; but this requires a degree of honesty and self-interrogation here and throughout.” (p. 5)

Of course, I hope to use my subjectivity and sense of belonging in Batman fandom to provide special insight in my following interpretation of Snyder and Capullo’s *Death of the Family*, even though such interpretations may not represent an objective attempt to identify, categorize, or measure how diverse groups may respond (or be responding) to the subject matter. With such a new story as *Death of the Family*, assessing the effects or categorizing patterns of interpretations of the story may prove difficult if not impossible anyway. The newness of Snyder’s work, relative to other Batman stories, places readers in a phase where the “canon” meaning of the text is still being negotiated, rather than historically identified. This essay attempts to participate in such negotiation of meaning

and excavate possible pedagogical potentials of the text, especially as related to the subject of belonging.

The topic of belonging is incredibly significant to contemporary communication studies scholars – as will be further discussed later in this paper. “Belonging” is associated with the topics of identity, culture, and a veritable vichyssoise of subjects intimately related to these communicative areas. The afore-mentioned Batman piece, *Death of the Family*, stood out to me as both a comic reader / fan and a communication studies student largely because of Snyder and Capullo’s themes related to belonging, even though they were not consciously clear to me upon my first reading of the narrative. This project – the essay you are now reading – was inspired by my curiosity about *why* the *Death of the Family* story caught my attention and affected me in a way that felt so intimate.

A number of methods could be employed to understand this story and each method could lead one toward a different [set of] end[s]. However, in satisfying my curiosity, I have turned to Walter R. Fisher’s (1985) assertion that “poetry is composed of ‘pseudo-statements’ whose function it is to give order to attitudes and experience” (p. 81). Argument is embedded in the selection and arrangement of what is told in a given narrative. That is to say, in using *logos* – in story-telling – there is no clear separation between discursive forms: poetry/myth, rhetoric, and technical/philosophical discourse are all present in stories. Fisher argued that “human communication in all of its forms is imbued with *mythos*” (87). Therefore, the story I read must have been

interesting to me because it argued with what I believed were, to use Fisher’s (1978) terms, “good reasons.” What follows in this essay will be a surfacing of possible arguments to be drawn from Snyder and Cappullo’s (2013) *Death of the Family*, including a theoretical assessment of these arguments, primarily featuring Lee’s (1973) love styles and Carrillo-Rowe’s (2005) “differential belonging,” with a discussion of why Snyder’s story argues with what constitute “good reasons” for me and maybe for others as well. I will attempt to reach my objectives by providing summary from *Death of the Family* and commenting on story sections as I go along.

Before delving more thoroughly into *Death of the Family*, though, it is pertinent to give some context for the story. Professor of psychology and superherologist, Travis Langley (2012), argued in his book *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* that, before investigating any Batman story, it is important to ask “which Batman?” is being addressed. For Langley and his project, the core elements of Batman from virtually the entire character cannon were useful. However, for the purposes of this essay, there is a particular Batman being considered – the Scott Snyder-written version from DC’s “New 52.” Though Batman has been around since the late 30s (Finger, 1939 / 2014; Brooker, 2005, p. 34), stories about the Dark Knight have been revamped and rebooted on a number of occasions. The most recent reboot was the result of DC Comics’ decision in 2011 to cancel all of its existing titles in favor of releasing 52 new titles, all of which were released simultaneously and featured

previously popular characters (Hyde, 2011). The “New 52” contained several titles that included the Batman character (all taking place within the same fictional universe), but only one book was simply titled *Batman* and served to follow the through-line of the character’s adventures. *Batman* (2011 – 2016) is written by Scott Snyder, who has created the version of the character being written about in this essay. Noting the recent occurrence of the reboot is significant because awareness of this character’s newness 1) clarifies that this Batman is not necessarily related to other iterations of the character that may come to mind or familiar histories and 2) recognizes the possibilities for the character and his fictional universe to be re-constructed in various ways that may reflect new cultural values and interests. The entirety of the present narrative analysis will refer to stories presented in the recently rebooted “New 52” and not to other iterations of Batman stories unless specifically otherwise noted.

### **Signs and Omens: Horror Aesthetics in Gotham City**

The protagonist of *Death of the Family* is Bruce Wayne / Batman – a vengeful vigilante who, inspired by witnessing the senseless murder of his parents, combats evil in Gotham City. Basic elements of “who” the Batman is in this iteration, as with every iteration, remain the same as those of the Batman we met in 1939. Even though “New 52” stories might not always fit well with older Batman narratives, some familiarity is yet important. Brooker (2005) argued,

“... part of the character’s cultural resonance must be attributed to the fact that the societal concerns or audience meanings which the Batman has carried are not merely absorbed by the yielding, malleable figure of a man in a bat-mask, but fitted within a quite rigid and consistent template which specifies not just the character’s appearance but his location, associates, motivation and attributes.” (p. 39)

When assessing new Batman stories, then, it is significant to remember that “the myth [of Batman] lies not in the details of continuity debated by fans, but in the narrative which has entered popular consciousness” (Brooker, 2005, p. 40). My interest in the *Death of the Family* narrative is then less about the changes that have come about for Batman stories – although a few of these that seem culturally important will be noted along the way – than about how the myth and icon[s] of Batman are being used to present new plots to readers: plots which may have pedagogical value and meaning beyond the confines of the comic book[s]. The ethics of any pedagogy should be of concern and interest to those participating in it; however, though much could be said about the ethics of the various iterations of Batman, such an examination be left for other scholars (e.g., White & Arp, 2008; Johnson, 2014) because the line of inquiry would be outside the scope of this essay. Specific areas of ethical concern related to the particular narrative under consideration will be noted in the analysis when specially applicable.

The narrative of *Death of the Family* is introduced in a peculiar way, as Batman is not physically present (drawn into the panels) at the beginning of the story even though he does provide the verbal narration that commences the plot. The opening lines unfold thusly: “In hindsight, there were signs... omens of the terrible things to come.” Images of Gotham City drenched by water and illuminated by lightning accompany the words in the first few comic panels. The aesthetic of horror is clearly present. This aesthetic is appropriate for a story marketed by a company originally called *Detective Comics*, as horror often plays an intricate role in detective stories. In discussing Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, Philip Tallon (2007) observed that horror narratives “arouse in us a deep curiosity” (p. 55). Therefore, detective pieces which naturally incorporate elements of mystery, such as contemporary Batman stories, are conducive to including elements of horror. However, more importantly, there are indications of horror beyond the familiar dark-and-stormy-night imagery: Batman stories feature monsters. In fact, the aesthetic of *Death of the Family* is monstrous in-and-of-itself. Tallon further wrote that “a monster is a being that displays severe disorder or disproportion in fundamental ways” (p. 55). In order for something to be monstrous, there must be “some deep incongruity at the center of... being” (p. 56). In *Death of the Family*, cartoons – comic characters often associated with children and lighthearted camp (Mamatas, 2008) – are blended and/or juxtaposed with torment, murder, and other forms of violence. The “bold, fun, fast,

bright” (Snyder, 2014) Batman stories sometimes employed by Snyder (and other authors) is deformed by images of evil clowns, zombies, and other potentially frightening images. Snyder uses *Death of the Family* to literally play with Batman’s genre and aesthetic, making the narrative itself a sort of grotesque, monstrous parody (dare I say “joke”?) of earlier Batman stories. This aesthetic confusion provides a meta-narrative on the difficulty of selecting stories to live out in the face of crises of belonging and cynicism – themes which will be excavated from *Death of the Family* later in this essay. Cognizance of the aesthetic structure of *Death of the Family* provides framework for understanding the story as part of a distrustful, post-modern world.

Because Batman needed hindsight to see the signs and omens foreshadowing danger, he played out a familiar life role until faced with complications. But what *particularly* should Batman have seen coming? To what omens did he refer in his opening narration? The answer: the return of a terrorist called The Joker whose obsession with Batman always draws him to Gotham City. The Joker is, in this story, an already famous serial murderer who Batman had lost track of after discovering that another killer, the surgically inclined Dollmaker, had cut off the Joker’s face and caused him to retreat from his usual antics (Daniel, 2012). In the first sequence of *Death of the Family*, the Joker comes out of hiding by attacking a police station, making jokes as he kills off officers until he is able to steal back the remains of his face, which the police had confiscated from the Dollmaker. During his investigation of the attack, Batman explains

to Robin – his son, Damien – that the Joker “didn’t let the Dollmaker get the best of him. He allowed his face to be cut off. He left it there for us. Like a message” (Snyder, 2013)... No doubt one of the signs Batman regretted missing earlier. Unfortunately, Batman is unsure what the message means. The Joker clearly reveals later in the book that he sees the use of masks as metaphorical (“You know what, Bats? ... Maybe your true face has changed...”, Snyder, 2013). A new “face” is a new birth, a new life, a new story. The “sign” here was that Joker was seeking to change his narrative trajectory from one of randomness and chaos to one of meaning – a meaning that he could only latch on to through a form of belonging. Although the Joker’s opening act of carnage at the police station may seem like a familiar *Batman* plot tactic at first glance, the reason for Joker’s murders has changed dramatically here. The Joker moves from an uncertain and random narrative trajectory to one in which he targets specific people for specific purposes, all of which are related to his desired connection with Batman.

### **Meet the Bat-Family**

Upon discovering that the Joker has returned, Batman alerts his crime-fighting partners about the resurgent danger. This “Bat-Family” – a term of fandom, not from within the narrative – consists of Robin (Damien, Bruce’s biological son), Red Robin, Nightwing, Red Hood (people who had once been adopted by Bruce), and Batgirl (a police commissioner’s daughter who received combat training from Bruce).

The term “Bat-Family” is a little problematic at this point in the comic arc because the characters convey clear distrust for one another and do not much resemble a family. Most of the children have grown up and left the nest, as it were. The group is drifting apart more than deepening cohesion. An example from the story of escalating distrust may be when Bruce/Batman hides the fact that he had once found a joker playing card, presumably left by the Joker, in the group’s head-quarters (“the Bat-Cave”) from his partners – a sign indicating that their base potentially had been discovered by the villain. He also hides that he knows what is meant by the Joker’s claim at the police station that he had left Batman a calling card (presumably the playing card left in the Bat-Cave) when directly asked by Nightwing. Further, each partner eventually refuses to suspend their crime-fighting activities at Batman’s request (to protect them from the Joker) because they perceive that Batman does not reciprocate trust. In truth, the Partners’ instincts were correct in that Batman’s request becomes very obviously motivated by a fear that they will let their emotions stand in the way of doing good detective work. Batman will learn later in the story to value non-rational types reasoning in addition to solely privileging a rational-world paradigm. This shift is reflective of Fisher’s (1984) narrative rationality – a term implying a search for story consistencies within given value frameworks – which may provide the criteria for both the internal logics of the story and my external analysis. In other words, narratives are typically designed to be internally consistent in both logic and

philosophy – and readers tend to be drawn to narratives that match with their own, personal value frameworks. Within the story, Batman and the Partners use different logics and play different narrative trajectories at the beginning of *Death of the Family*, which proves their initial lack of cohesion as a group. Due to this lack of cohesion, I have (somewhat facetiously) considered referring to the group of partners as a Flock of Robins or a Colony of Bats instead of a “Bat-Family.” However, considering that both Batgirl and a group of Robins are present, I will settle on the title “Partners.” This term is preferable to “side-kicks” because Nightwing and Red Hood frequently operate as crime-fighters autonomously from Batman, as do Batgirl and Red Robin from time to time. This system of relationships is important to the story because one of the major themes is the process of “becoming” family.

### **The Joker’s Ambiguous Identity**

In keeping with expectations, the Joker begins killing civilians and attacking various authorities. Although the violence seems to match the profile of the Joker’s previously lived narrative of creating random chaos, the precise nature of his attacks represent a break from his earlier embodiment of anarchy. Another break from the Joker’s prior lived narrative is manifested when he frightens his [sometimes] side-kick, Harley Quinn, before sending her to trap Batman in a vat to be filled with dangerous, transformative chemicals. She succeeds. These are arguably the chemicals that originally created the Joker, although his

origin is not etched in stone in any iteration of the character. Before Batman escapes the vat, Harley notes that her boss is “not my Mr. J anymore” (Snyder, 2013). She painfully recognizes that the Joker is less infatuated with her than he is with the idea of “belonging” with Batman. The simple fact that Harley was being treated by Joker as a means to the end of engaging Batman (whereas she was previously, frequently addressed as more of a friend or ally) is evidence of the change described by Harley. Attention to the transformative chemicals, the overt mistreatment of Harley, and loss of both metaphoric and literal face all point to a theme of rebirth for the Joker.

After Batman’s encounter with Harley, he realizes that the Joker is re-creating his most famous crimes while putting new twists on each of them. The chemical vat alluded to a previous encounter between the two – and the next crime the Joker would commit would be to destroy an aqueduct and diffuse poison into Gotham’s water supply. In alluding to the aqueduct incident, Snyder re-canonizes the work of Ed Brubaker (2003 / 2008) in the Joker story *The Man Who Laughs* in this iteration of Batman (the “New 52” version). Snyder’s recognition of the events in *The Man Who Laughs* reaffirms the Joker’s previous narrative trajectory and identity as being one of chaos and aimless violence.

Before showing up at Gotham City’s major aqueduct in *Death of the Family*, the Joker manages to incapacitate Batman’s friend, police commissioner Jim Gordon, and kidnap his companion and butler, Alfred Pennyworth. The Joker emphasizes that Batman is not allowed any friends when he

hospitalizes Gordon, and he haphazardly reinforces the message when he takes Alfred. He is jealous of the attention that Batman lends to others. It is in this way that the Joker begins to reveal his new narrative trajectory to Batman – instead of being destructive with ambiguous intent, he hurt others to “talk” with Batman and to reveal how he conceptualized his new sense of “self” in direct relation to Batman... a “jester” to the King of Gotham (Snyder, 2013).

Batman predicts that he will be able to find the Joker at a Gotham aqueduct and indeed finds his man. Unfortunately, this time – unlike in *The Man Who Laughs* – it is too late to stop Joker’s poison from infecting the water supply and killing many Gothamites. (Here Batman refers to the Joker as a “sick maniac,” a term that may prove useful in an unconventional way later.) Batman is subdued by the Joker, who begins to monologue about his evil plans. Once again, the theme of the bad omen presents itself when the Joker offers himself as the jester in Batman’s court. He claims that “it’s the jester’s job to entertain, but he often has another job, too. A deeper job. And that’s to deliver bad news to the king” (Snyder, 2013). The bad news comes in two forms: the Joker asserts that he knows the true identities of Batman and the Partners, and he prophecies that the Partners will all soon die at the hands of Batman. Joker claims that the Partners must die because they are the “true villains” of Gotham for ruining the city’s king – making Batman weaker through his compassion for them. After a minor skirmish, the Joker escapes.

Several things stand out thematically about the Joker’s monologue. First, the Joker conceptualizes real life events in narrative terms, referring to medieval character types (i.e., jesters, kings, etc.) and positioning / casting certain people as “villains.” Regarding the Partners as villains sets up clear protagonists and antagonists in the Joker’s newly conceived lived narrative structure. The Joker sees himself as having an allegiance with Batman – and Batman’s concern for the Partners as somehow acting against Batman himself. In this case, as has been briefly mentioned, the Joker sees the Partners as doing harm to the nature of Batman by influencing him to be more compassionate and soft than in his early years, which increases his vulnerability and weakens his ability to function as a symbol of fear. Secondly, the whole set of lines in the monologue have to do with identity and belonging. In the Joker’s narration, he is a jester; and by enacting the literal role of a jester, he performs an act of redefinition in terms of character – a new narrative configuration in which he exists only in relation with another group of characters (such as a king). He accepts a particular life role and acts out narratives that allow him to retain his particular point of view. The Joker’s self-description is in keeping with Allison’s (1994) concept of “narratization,” in which a person participates in an “ongoing mediation of his/her own physical and/or verbal actions within a temporally configured field in order to achieve an envisioned but, as yet, unrealized end” (p. 109). In other words, humans are future-oriented and pursue goals. Humans learn from experience – prior stories – in order to

determine which structures to act out in order to realize their goals. The end for the Joker in this case would be a revised social order based on an anachronistic, though intelligible plot, in which Batman would respond to the interpellation to become king of Gotham. This action would join the two of them in the same narrative – one in which Batman “longs” for the Joker and the Joker longs for Batman.

### **Identity, Love, and Belonging Conceptualized through *Batman***

A (be)longing theory that I have found helpful in understanding Snyder and Capullo’s story comes from feminist scholar and rhetorician Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2005), who theorized belonging as “differential” – which is to say that humans “belong to and with people here and there” (p. 15). Carrillo Rowe’s use of the word “differential” is in keeping with typical definitions of the term as meaning “related to or based on difference” (Merriam-Webster Online). By saying that humans are “not ‘the same’ here and there,” in terms of belonging, Carrillo Rowe (2005) argued that longings direct being in each given circumstance (p. 15). In other words: different longings, the unique longings that arise in each different relationship one may have, play a role in constituting the nature of those relationship. Therefore, in order for “belonging” to authentically exist, there must be some sense of mutual longing. Reciprocity is a necessary responsibility of belonging because “if we are truly inclined toward each other, when I give, I also receive. When I receive I also give. I get

what I give. Accountability: to you and thus to me” (p. 27). In this case, the Joker, in trying to draw Batman into his desired lived-narrative, expresses longing for him. This longing is not reciprocated until the other longs in return. The Joker denied all others (e.g., Harley Quinn) in order to give full attention to Batman and he intends that Batman will do the same by denying his friends and Partners. Sociologist John Alan Lee (1977) described this longing for one who physically embodies “an image already held in the mind of the lover” as “eros” – a style of passionate love (p. 174). In this case, the Joker’s vision, his object of affection, is a Dark Knight who commits all of his time to challenges with the Joker instead of being side-lined by taking care of the Partners. As will become clear during further analysis, Lee’s research on love styles is incredibly fitting for understanding the Joker as a very specific type of “maniac,” making his work uniquely suited for understanding *Death of the Family*. Though there have been others since Lee who have elaborated on the topic of love styles, the basic parts or categories from Lee’s research are still in popular circulation and germane to understanding Batman and the Joker. Lee’s categories and descriptions for various love styles provide an accessible, flexible, and presently useful entry point for discussing love and belonging.

Although the Joker has historically never explicitly expressed sexual desire – though he has, interestingly, been occasionally interpreted as a queer symbol (Debona, 1997; Winstead, 2015) – there can be no denial of his distorted infatuation for and admiration of Batman. He has traditionally

only been interested in sex as a tactic for combat and/or control and manipulation (Miller, 1986/2002; Moore, 1988/2008). Tactics and games seem to be a part of his *modus operandi*. By enacting game-like tactics, such as leaving clues for Batman (e.g., the “calling card,” symbols of rebirth, following patterns), and carefully controlling interactions with Batman, the Joker also enacts “*ludus*,” the “playful or game love” (p. 174). The combination of these love styles, according to Lee, constitute a form known as “*mania*,” a love style that is “obsessive, jealous, [and] emotionally intense” in addition to being “characterised by preoccupation with the beloved and a need for repeated reassurance of being loved” (p. 175). If the Joker is a “*maniac*” in his enactment of evil, it is because of his unproductive, unreciprocated style of loving. The Joker desires and obsessively pursues without regard for the humanity of others.

While Batman and the Joker converse on the aqueduct, Batman remembers noticing that Joker’s “pupils stay fixed” instead of responding to emotions (Snyder, 2013). This symptom, in combination with the Joker’s tendency to try and live out narratives that indicate perceptual breaks with reality, implies separation from everything outside of his fantasies and may indicate to some that the Joker is a “*maniac*” in more ways than one – such as being a literal sociopath. It is possible that his grotesque attempts to express longing may produce evil in *addition* to acting upon some sort of sociopathy or other psychopathology. Strikingly, *Death of the Family* artist Greg Capullo drew a shadowed image of the

Joker to be visible as the narration from Batman about the Joker’s pupils may be read. Capullo’s penciling choices may be a bit less shadowy (at least metaphorically) in light of writing from popular comics theorist Scott McCloud (1994), though. McCloud theorized that characters drawn with less detail are more iconic and more easily relatable because their vagueness may be filled with meaning from the reader. On the other hand, characters drawn with more detail become less iconic and more like “*other*” as details increase. Capullo’s frame featuring the Joker with narration about his fixed pupils is extremely detailed except where there are shadows. Whereas some artists will draw shadowed characters in such a way as to still convey a character’s frame or form, Capullo worked together with inker Jonathan Glapion to engulf the Joker in blackness. What becomes evident in looking at the image is that the monstrosity of the Joker appears in his lack of iconicity. Everything that we can see of the Joker is otherized and foreign. Anything recognizable, iconic, or enlightening is hidden in darkness. Perhaps the Joker-as-Other is more palatable than one who is more garish and iconic. Audiences likely do not wish to think they can identify with a character capable of such meaningless terror. As will become clear, though, whether we take our actions to the same extremes as the Joker or not, all of us are capable of loving in destructive ways and embodying the mania described by John Alan Lee.

### **Ill or Evil?**

Observations about the Joker's mental health versus his destructive mode of belonging raise questions that may have been best articulated by Bender, Kambam, and Pozios (2011) in their op-ed in the New York Times calling for DC Comics authors to produce mental illness narratives in the "New 52" that would be less harmful and inaccurate than those in previous DC stories. The trio asserted that "comic books have long relied on mental disorders to drive their most memorable villains" and that when "contemporary psychiatric terms or disorders have been used in stories, they have been misapplied to explain villainy" (2011). More pertinent to *Death of the Family*, they go on to mention that "the Joker is often called 'psychotic,' despite a lack of hallucinations or other symptoms of a psychotic disorder" (2011). Little, if any, academic work has assessed whether any DC writers have responded to Bender, Kambam, and Pozios' call.

My argument regarding *Death of the Family* is that Snyder has negotiated having a character traditionally associated with being psychotic and the need for more accurate mental illness narrative in two ways. First, harm is reduced by Snyder's avoidance of terms such as "psychotic" – a word which Bender, Kambam, and Pozios explicitly asked DC writers to escape due to its misrepresentative qualities. Secondly, Snyder works to de-link psychopathology from evil. In Snyder's universe, the Joker does not necessarily harm others because he lacks empathy or experiences a skewed version of reality. Joker's longing for

Batman is what motivates the Joker to act out in ways that harm others. Arguably, even before the Joker met Batman, he was longing for a companion and acted violently out of crisis of belonging and unwillingness to comply with normative ways of resolving this conflict. Though the Joker has had longings for companions besides Batman, such as Harley Quinn, these longings seem to be of convenience rather than those which provide a sense of purpose and offer insightful life plots. In the context of the "New 52," the Joker's crisis of belonging and obsessive nature provide better explanations for his violent behaviors than do mental illness. In connection to the hypothesis of Joker's sociopathy, Batman eventually remembers that he actually *had* seen the Joker's pupils dilate at one time when he finally tells himself to "ignore the fact that what you saw those black points expand with... was love" (Snyder, 2013). Batman's (and our) knowledge of the Joker's eye behavior reinforces that mismatched love styles and crises of belonging are more consistent with Joker's evil than potential sociopathy, as the Joker's lack of responsiveness to emotion is either limited, not non-existent, or it is faked / controlled.

### **Belonging in the Bat-Family**

On the aqueduct, the Joker made certain that Batman's nearby Partners heard his loud proclamation that he knew all their true identities. After retreating from the incident at the aqueduct, Batman comes clean to the Partners about having once discovered a Joker card in the Bat-Cave. Expressions of distrust ensue. The Partners are concerned

that the stoic, but still usually veracious Batman had omitted what they perceived to be important information from them. Batman insists that he did not want the Partners to over-react and let their emotions cloud their judgment – selfishly privileging the form of knowing that he was most comfortable with (rationality; deduction) and excluding the possibility the Partners could make their own decisions on such matters. Once confident longings – perceived reciprocal love styles of friendship and admiration – between the Partners and Batman became uncertain as those longings were revealed to be have been expressed in different ways. Batman attempted to love pragmatically by offering friendship and by enacting game-play by strategically self-disclosing and occasionally manipulating others; meanwhile, the Partners largely attempted to love by acting as companions (Lee, 1977, p. 175). These inconsistent styles of loving do more to obfuscate feelings and put emotional distance between Batman and the Partners than connect them and bring them closer as a family. Ultimately, the Partners, unwilling to leave Bruce to dangerously pursue the Joker alone, reject his seemingly unfeeling commands for them to avoid investigating the Joker. On the other hand, patronizingly and condescendingly rejecting the feelings of the Partners on account of their youth, Bruce enacts destructive overprotection by sneaking away and trying to track down the Joker without help. In their own ways, both Bruce and the Partners are trying to do what they think is best for the other. However, both parties – especially Bruce – disregard the feelings of those attempting to express

love and concern. The Partners love inclusively by trying to increase group cohesion and operating with teamwork. Batman loves exclusively by shutting others out. The tension from these mis-matched love styles leads to a crisis of belonging that moves Batman toward being more like the Joker – denying others in order to pursue a single figure who helps to define his being.

Batman traces the Joker to Arkham Asylum where he is attacked by guards and orderlies who have been blackmailed or coerced by the gruesome jester. He also, rather quickly, fights through a horde of villains from his rogues gallery. After ascending through the building and overcoming various trials, Batman finds the Joker assembled with a “court” of others around a living tapestry – that is, human bodies sewn together and marked upon with some sort of coloring agent even as the people are kept alive. This gross symbol is another expression of love: bodies that become one – an allusion to marriage in Ephesians 5:31. This is perhaps the first of many Biblical allusions in *Death of the Family*. Finding such allusions is not particularly surprising as comic books are a popular source of moral pedagogy. Botzakis (2011) found that reading comic books involve “an array of meaning making activities that are bound in reading popular culture texts”, including “reading practices [that have] critical, moral, literary and dialogic dimensions” (p. 113, abstract). The possibilities for these dimensions as related to *Death of the Family* will be cultivated throughout this essay.

The living tapestry also perpetuates the medieval court theme of the Joker’s new

narratization. Part of Joker's court includes victims dressed as other superheroes who are coerced into trying to pull a chainsaw from an anvil – clearly alluding the Arthurian legend of the sword in the stone. The pseudo-heroes are electrocuted as they grasp the chainsaw. Joker's tactic to torment the innocent is meant by the Joker to manipulate Batman into completing the King's court by taking his place as "King of Gotham" – to join in the Joker's fantasy. The tactic also advances the Joker's fantasy by intimating that there are other potential Kings (the pseudo-superheroes who perhaps represent their actual Justice League superhero counterparts) who are unworthy of ruling Gotham and must act in subjugation. In order to protect Joker's victims, Batman agrees to sit upon a throne provided for him: an electric chair. The Joker straps Batman down, shows him video footage of all of the Partners being subdued and captured, and then electrocutes him until he falls unconscious.

### **A Love That Doesn't Die**

The crises of love and belonging come to a climax when Batman wakes tied to a chair in a cave at a table with the Partners, who are also tied down to chairs. Each Partner has bandages over his or her face and are each served a platter by a zombie Alfred, who had been brainwashed by a toxin employed by the Joker. On each platter is the skinned face of each Partner. The Joker quips about the dinner that he "made it with lots of love" (Snyder, 2013). As the Joker converses with Batman, the subject of love becomes even more explicit. The Joker

articulates a question frequently debated by Batman fans: "Why have you never killed me?" (Snyder, 2013). Despite Batman's protest that killing the Joker would let the villain "win" by allowing him to stoop to the Joker's level, the jester insists, "This *is* how I win, Batssss. I win by living. By keep on keeping on." (Snyder, 2013, emphasis added) He also refers to Batman's failures to keep people safe (with implied references to the death of a Robin) as "little love letters" (Snyder, 2013). The argument being made by the Joker is that Batman must belong with / love the Joker because allowing the Joker to live acts against Batman's greater purpose to protect the people of Gotham. In addition, allowing the Joker to live even after killing a previous Partner (Robin) signifies to the Joker that Batman's allegiance to his partners is weak compared to his drive to exist in the same "world" as the Joker. Joker's longings are reiterated in his further attempts to interpellate Batman by hailing him to longing for an immortalized status that might be achieved by working with him – [Joker:] "It's [the Partner's deaths] what you want to happen. It's what you neeeeed. Because you see, with us [Batman/Joker together] you're more! With us, you transscend! With us, you're always! But them, they make you everything you want to forget you are, everything you're afraid of" (Snyder, 2013). A double-bind is revealed to Batman, in which either Joker starts a spark that will cause the Partners to catch on fire – be lit up as celebratory candles – or Batman will ignite the spark himself by trying to escape his chair. The Joker is unable to recognize that Batman's "choice" would reinforce his

own bias about Batman supposedly reciprocating his love no matter what decision is made. That is, in the Joker's mind, Batman proves his longing for Joker whether he does so by omission or commission. The Joker's actions not only disregard the Batman's feelings and sense of choice, but also the Partners'. Ironically for the Joker, tensions between Batman and the Partners are already threatening their relationship and the Joker's interference makes him a common enemy for Batman and the Partners to unite against, ultimately subverting his own purpose.

Batman opts to escape the chair and is able to save the Partners from fire by using his knowledge of Gotham's caves to break a part of the ceiling that allows water to rush down and douse the flames ignited by Batman's escape. Suddenly the Joker asserts "that's not funny" (Snyder, 2013). The post-modern, ironic seriousness of the Joker is dropped in this moment, indicating the true and somber darkness associated confusion. When the Joker feels Batman slipping out of his control, his personal identity, which has come to be based on his relationship with Batman, is threatened. Joker's expression of discomfort indicates that he had entered a narrative abyss – a "loss of personal identity" resulting from "a dark and looming outer limit of experience characterized by chaos" (Gravley, Richardson, & Allison, 2015, p. 5). Gravley, Richardson, and Allison (2015) argue that:

... When narrative coherence is lost, individuals attempt to restore the original narrative coherence in one of two ways. As individuals strive to regain legitimacy or continuity in

their lives... they may attempt to resituate themselves within a previous narrative structure by continuing to perform 'in character.' However, sometimes the lived narrative itself is called into question; in such cases, the individual may seek an *alternative* narrative—a structure that will allow the individual to find coherence and meaning in his or her experiences by creating a new lived narrative (Carr, 1986)—a new identity. (p. 5)

In this case, the Joker flees – appearing to be superficially trying to adhere to his previous role of a mere chaotic criminal that must cause damage and then leave to fight another day. However, it quickly becomes evident in following scenes that the Joker's sense of identity has been shattered as a result of being rejected by Batman. His narratization is disrupted by lack of reciprocity from Batman and his desired future trajectory suddenly becomes unfeasible. (Later story arcs from Snyder reveal new narratives that the Joker pursues.)

Batman frees the Partners who discover, after removing their bandages, that their actual faces were never removed and that the props served to them were a joke. The climax of the conflict between Batman and the Partners occurs here as Batman finds himself in another dangerous double-bind: he can trust his Partners to deal with remaining problems (in a subplot involving Joker toxin) and pursue the Joker... or he can stay to ensure the safety of the Partners and let the Joker escape. The Partners tell Bruce that they can handle the danger in Joker's lair. In a moment of great trust –

letting go of his condescending bias against youth and accepting the agency of others – Bruce leaves to find his nemesis.

Batman catches up to the Joker and battles him on a cliff dropping off into a deep cavern – a literal abyss. In the midst of their fight, Batman claims that he has deduced Joker’s true identity and will reveal it to his Partners; interpellating the Joker to revert to a previous, undesired narratization: the one in which he had no part in Batman’s life. A narrative where Batman’s attention is free to devote wholly to the Partners. The Joker retorts, “You won’t! They’re not your real family! We are! I am!” (Snyder, 2013). Batman replies, “Well, this is the end of that family, then. Because I choose them” (Snyder, 2013). As the two fight, the Joker falls over the edge of the cliff and is rescued by Batman; however, Joker refuses to be saved if Batman wants to reveal his previous identity. To the Joker, if either he or Batman found out the other’s identity, it would “ruin his fun” (Snyder, 2013). The Joker plunges down the cliff, his recovered face drifting off of his body as he falls. By dropping into the literal and metaphorical abyss, the Joker acknowledges, even chooses, his loss of identity.

In facing the decision of whether to trust his Bat-Family to handle danger while he pursued the Joker, Batman also faced a crisis of belonging in which he had to decide whether he would reciprocate longing, enacting Carrillo Rowe’s statement that “contradictions and crises that arise are most instructive of our becoming” (p. 33). In “choosing them,” Batman resisted the Joker’s interpellation and expressed productive love that recognized the desires

of others. He chooses to love his family with an “agape” style – an altruistic belonging that trusts and does not necessarily require reciprocity (Lee, 1977, p. 175). In other words: Batman and his family realize ways to reciprocally express longings / love for one another in their choices to trust one another and also to consider the wishes of each other. To behave sacrificially out of mutual respect. In this way, the Bat-Family exemplifies productive expressions of love and longing by realizing the agency of one another and avoiding acts of oppression. For example, consider that Batman previously constrained the Partners by withholding information relevant, perhaps ethically owed, to them in an attempt to manipulate their behaviors (keep them away from the Joker). Likewise, the Partners resisted manipulation by trying to force Batman to include them. Only by Batman and the Partners’ mutual acknowledgement of the value and agency of the other in the final conflict in Joker’s lair resulted in productive expressions of love and a true sense of belonging.

### **Pedagogy from the Joker’s Lair**

So, what’s the moral of the story? Why should anyone care about the content of this book? The answers may differ from reader to reader, but the narrative certainly makes some compelling arguments about how the concepts of love and belonging might work together and how they might be considered as readers develop plots for their own narratizations. I, myself, find the story helpful as I consider my own struggles with answering “Who am I?” and how I am to

reconcile both the productive and the problematic that comes with every identity category in my own personal narrative. *Death of the Family* – no doubt metaphorically referring to the death of traditional conceptions of family as merely biological – articulates the value of a differential belonging and suggests that longings might be negotiated through styles of love. This type of longing / love is achieved through desire, choice, reciprocity.

Also, *Death of the Family* is set in a world affected by post-modern cynicism, much like the world I live in. Batman's distrustfulness and the frequent, various crises of belonging in the story reflect Klypchak's (2009) description of the contemporary (non-fictitious) human age wherein "as postmodern societies destabilize metanarratives, the utility of referencing one's cultural history and the historical significance to such identity also becomes challenged" (p. 21). The question "Who am I?" has never been harder to answer because doubt of what may be known about the self or others problematizes our ability to place ourselves in stable identity categories. To be clear: I am not arguing that we cannot find any sense of consistency in ourselves – rather, that the post-modern society is in need of new theoretical tools for conceptualizing the self in ways that account for the differential nature of love and belonging. As Klypchak (2012) again, in setting up a discussion on a post-modern influenced stage play, articulated: because "Post-Boomer generations have been socialized within the post-modern world... those raised in such circumstances are forced into a position of constant

renegotiation of self and of the aspirations of what life is to represent" (p. 3). Another way to explain Klypchak's argument may be terms of narrative theory: confusion about the role[s] that one plays may cause difficulty in determining what plots should be enacted. *Death of the Family* is appropriate to post-modern audiences because it acknowledges the personal narrative crises of belonging that flourish in the present age and by providing examples of ways to negotiate such crises through cognizance and enactment of various love styles tailored to the style[s] of the longed for other. Comic books seem ideal for addressing these crises as they are a popular and accessible literary form that provide tools for praxis. Botzakis (2011) found that at least one adult comic reader that he interviewed spoke of "receiving 'kind of instructions' from what he read, as Spider-Man's adventures held moral messages for him" (p. 118). Further, these messages "provided [the interviewee] with 'organizational fantasies' (Jones, 2002) that helped him make sense of life events... The interrelated stories and characters created contexts that helped [the interviewee] reflect on his own social world" (p. 119). Essentially, comic books hold powerful pedagogical potential that may often be easily accessed by readers. Therefore, comics are useful for teaching about contemporary philosophical subjects – in this case, post-modern crises of love and belonging. While there is much academic writing on the potential classroom value of graphic narrative as a medium, few recognize the medium's function as a relatively new literary form that generates

mythos which is clearly instructive to many in the present culture.

Not only does Snyder suggest ways to develop positive strategies for navigating crises of belonging, but he also provides examples in his work of unproductive ways to negotiate these issues; namely, through pursuing one's desire without regard for the other. Klypchak (2009) explained sociologist Emile Durkheim's findings on post-modern anomie as "stemming from a cyclical pattern of an individual's unrealistic expectations coupled with one's desperate attempts to achieve such unattainable aims" (p. 20). The Joker is a clear example of a character who developed into a state of anomie due to an unstable identity paired with unchecked longings. His pursuit of chaos and then of Batman was relentless and destructive because he loved without regard for the other.

The Joker's desperation in his vehement pursuit of an exclusive relationship with Batman was no doubt also fueled by need to escape the post-modern predicament. His desire to separate Batman from the Partners was motivated by nostalgia, which, when "read in terms of post-modernism... can be understood as eschewing the complexities of post-modernity itself in an attempt to reclaim the meta-narratives of modernism" (Klypchak, 2012, p. 4). Joker's narratization was doomed to collapse because his enplotment largely relied on revitalizing the past instead moving forward. In his attempt to be "reborn," the Joker sought to change the present situation in which Batman shared his attention with others (usually the Partners) to be more like a past situation in which Batman devoted all of his attention to

the Joker. After the presence of the Partners complicated their exclusive relationship, the Joker tried to reclaim a metanarrative that no longer existed – specifically, the plot that he and Batman enabled with one another and must co-exist together in order to continue. This plot was, of course, challenged by the notion that Batman could exist to combat other villains and / or cease to exist in order for Bruce to attend to his family. In short, because Joker began to see his identity only as related to Batman, his notion of self is challenged by the presence of others in Batman's life. His unrealistic expectations, then, also contributed to his desperate acts of evil.

The post-modern superhero story carries implications beyond the mere recognition of cultural identity instability, though. Contemporary post-modern American superheroes also exist as part of a "post-9/11 superhero zeitgeist" (Treat, 2009, p. 105). Treat (2009) argued, among other things, in his discussion of the current superhero zeitgeist that the recent boom in the popularity of superheroes – particularly characters such as Superman and Batman – may in part be a response to "our troubling enjoyment of 9/11, a trauma facilitating attractions to violent messiahs and crusading vigilantes" (p. 106). In the case of *Death of the Family*, Batman plays the paradoxical roles of both beneficent messiah and vengeful vigilante. Superheroes always exist in relationship to a threat, usually a supervillain. Batman, in every iteration, exists out of a need to save others. The Joker, then, necessarily exists – at least in relation to Batman – in order to put others in a position where they are in need of saving.

In the case of Snyder and Capullo's (2013) story, the Joker realizes that Batman may exist independently of him by acting solely as a vigilante – his quest to take revenge on criminals for their evils may go on as long as crime persists. However, the Joker only fits in with the monumental story of the Batman by turning Batman into a savior. If Batman needs to save someone from the Joker, then the Joker will always have a place in Batman's story.

Interpellating Batman back into the role of savior is another way that the Joker may have enplotted his twisted narratization. He enacted traditional Biblical messianic stories by walking as a “roaring lion” and seeking whom he could devour (1 Peter 5:8) by drawing the sons away from the father. By endangering the sons, the lion creates a persisting emotional presence in the life of the father. The Joker-as-devil, as with many Biblical metaphors, cannot defeat the father by confronting him head-on, but tries to divide and afflict his followers. These followers can either bow to persecution and “fall away” or *act* by becoming agents of the father's justice (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4). Hopefully the metaphor is not too far stretched – Batman is often far from a Christian God-figure, but he does personify certain aspects of a messianic plot just as the Joker clearly personifies features often attributed to the devil or devil-like characters. As Christian film critic Paul Asay (2012) wrote, even though it is not always an exact parallel, “we can still concentrate on those aspects within [Gotham] city's gritty confines and perhaps uncover a spark of the divine in superherodom's gloomiest character” (p.

xvii). The point is that *Death of the Family* responds to Treat's (2009) observation that we, as “terrorized subjects” in a post-9/11 world, are “forced to decide between becoming outlaws or victims for the necessary fictions we live” (p. 108). In a state of post-modern crisis and post-9/11 cynicism, we can either stand by and let others act for us to resolve our crises or we can realize agency for ourselves and with others. We can engage in solidarity and dialogue with others (Freire, 1968 / 2000) or cynically, passively yield to a hegemon and hope that those who we are empowering are more Batmen than Jokers.

Batman's original attempt to express love and belonging in *Death of the Family* with the Partners through information omission, overprotectiveness, and control provide an example of how Snyder's version of the character could act without regard for the other. In this way, Batman became an oppressor by insisting that others participate in his own norms of love and belonging. Snyder plots his story in such a way that Batman redeems himself and reconciles with his Partners/family by trusting and acknowledging the legitimacy of their styles of love and belonging. Snyder's argument must be, then, that navigating crises of belonging productively requires 1) recognition of the unique expressions of love in a given relationship / the differential nature of each relationship and 2) acknowledging and respecting the desires of others. Such tactics allow for responses to crises of belonging that both engage in personal agency and avoid becoming an oppressor.

In short, Snyder (2013) and the rest of the current *Batman* crew tackled a range of issues related to identity crisis in the *Death of the Family* story, including navigation of post-modern crises of the self through love styles and the surfacing of current cynical passivity that risks denying the other. My appreciation of this story stems not only from my admiration of its narrative complexity and Snyder's skillful writing, but the fact that – even without vocabulary such as “love styles” or “differential belonging” – the concepts relating to each issue analyzed in this essay (and more!) may be understood simply by engaging the narrative. Snyder's story reflects newly formed conceptualizations of love and belonging in Western culture and presents these concepts in a way that enable them as legitimate narrative plots. Fictional narratives provide ideas for true-life narratizations. In short, my is not that readers will (necessarily) read this story and decide that becoming a vengeful vigilante or demon-like clown is a legitimate life pathway. However, readers may understand that Batman solved his problems by working toward solidarity with those who longed for him (in a productive way). They might also understand that the Joker's attempts at love were misplaced and his disregard for others is what makes him truly evil. Snyder's *Death of the Family* is valuable because some comic book readers may never be exposed to academic theorizing about love or belonging, but in their exposure to popular culture, they may still learn about these academic conversations implicitly – sometimes even explicitly – because of Batman. Further, even those within the academic community

may use Snyder's story to develop their own understandings or to teach others. The performance of *Death of the Family* as a cultural artifact is one that has great possibility to reach and be appreciated by many. The story provides potential plots for navigating post-modern and cynical culture that may assist readers in avoiding, or responding productively to, the narrative abyss.

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