Comparison of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Joker
EXTERNAL

The novella, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886), and the movie, *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019), come from two very different eras. The romantic novella, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* was first published during the Victorian era, and Stevenson uses different writing techniques to share insightful ideas on the social conventions of this time to his adult, and predominantly male readers. The psychological thriller *Joker,* on the other hand, reached the cinemas 133 years later in 2019. The Joker is a 80’s-set feature film which humanises the malicious and sadistic comic book supervillain ‘The Joker,’ whilst raising awareness for mental health and social injustice. In doing this, it addresses a predominantly adult audience, and unveils the commonly overlooked consequences of a hierarchical modern society, challenging its viewers to treat everybody with equality and kindness. Despite the fact that they were produced more than one hundred years apart, the works share a number of themes including: the morality and danger of a social hierarchy, people’s freedom to change their character based on personal desires in defiance of objective morality, and the deterioration of better judgement through bad decision making. Yet there are also significant differences between the two stories. In *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the main character longs for unrighteous pleasures, and chooses to rebel against the weight of social expectations in a separate identity. In *Joker,* however*,* society is indifferent to the feelings of the main character. Once an external catalyst enables him to impose his existence on society, he leaves behind his failing attempts at being a positive influence and embraces criminal violence. Both stories thoughtfully utilise stylistic features, language features, and conventions, to follow the deterioration of their main characters, contrasting their apparently unfulfilling compliance with social expectations, with their later selves, who in an attempt to escape their social trap, pursue evil to satisfy their inner needs.

Both the creators of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Joker* use narrative structures driven by existentialism to follow the evil transformations of their main characters. In *Joker*, Arthur says, “For my whole life I didn't know if I even really existed.” This concept of existentialism is conventional to psychological thrillers, and Phillips uses it to state starkly the vacuum of Arthur’s ‘individual existence’ and initiate a character arc by which he develops into the comic-book supervillain, Joker. Earlier in the film, Arthur imagines himself in the crowd of popular TV host Murray Franklin’s show *Live!* He daydreams of a scenario in which he is singled out by Murray after cheering, “I love you!” and explains that his mother always taught him that his purpose was to “bring laughter and joy to the world.” This fantasy reflects Arthur’s initially uplifting values and purpose. Nevertheless, as the story continues, his will to fulfil this purpose withers after he is mugged, deprived of his medication and counselling services, disrespected, sacked from the clown job that he values, and discovers that his mother, whom he has cared for all his life, has been lying to him about her complicity in the abuse he suffered throughout his childhood. Finally he snaps and kills three drunk and violent Wall Street high-flyers on a subway train. This event could perhaps be written off as an isolated yet extreme lapse in character or judgement; unjustifiable, but provoked. However, as the film progresses his transition is finalised after he kills first his mother, Penny, then his hero, Murray, arguably the two people he had cared about most. This irreversible lurch into anti-values is underlined near the end of the movie when he is being taken away in a police car and the officer chastises him saying, “the whole f\*\*\*ing city's on fire ‘cause of what you did,” to which Arthur replies “I know. Isn’t it beautiful?” Phillips expertly shapes Arthur’s transition using a progressive structure that allows the audience to initially feel compassion towards Arthur, but eventually repulsion from him. He is no longer the one-dimensional psychopath presented in comics and Batman films, but rather an underprivileged, mistreated and mentally ill human being whose goodwill is gradually eroded, and who is finally stretched too far, causing him to reinvent and express himself through acts of extreme violence. Stevenson uses a similarly progressive structure in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to follow the deterioration of Dr Jekyll. Like Arthur, Jekyll begins the story with good intentions, serving other people as a “respectable doctor,” who didn’t “shirk from his responsibilities and only ever sought to do good.” Over time, however, his values change, not from a series of challenging events or the deterioration of mental health as seen in *Joker*, but rather a longing for a more free existence, initiating his experimentation with a potion *he* created, resulting in a physical change in identity. As Jekyll consumes the potion that transforms him into the ape-like, malicious Hyde, glimpses of his final form are revealed, similarly to Arthur’s initial shift in behaviour. In the form of the doctor, he prioritised the wellbeing of others. But as Hyde he “tramples calmly over the child’s body, leaving her screaming on the ground.” Reverting to Jekyll, he then has to write a cheque to the family of the girl. This pattern of causing trouble as Hyde and attempting to conceal or compensate for such actions as the respectable Jekyll escalates across the story arc. Arthur didn’t have this opportunity to redeem himself in *Joker*, although between acts of violence, the audience is able to see glimpses of the good-willed man he once was. Just as the evidence of Arthur’s positive intentions faded, Jekyll also begins losing control over Hyde: the “pangs of transformation were daily less marked.” His deterioration is inevitably finalised as the book ends, when Jekyll “shall again and forever reindue that hated personality.” Stevenson uses the novella insightfully to explore the way in which yielding to temptation and an initial dalliance with evil or negative behaviours can overcome a person, distancing them irreversibly from the person they could have been. The story acts as a powerful caution for its readers, warning them to be uncompromising and resilient in their fight for good. When the main characters of both narratives are introduced, they appear to have the best intentions. However, the use of existentialism lays the foundation for the plot as it follows the deterioration of their identities until they are wholly evil, showing to the audience that there is a right way and wrong way to find fulfilment, and how bad decisions can change a persons path.

The two stories *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Joker* use different stylistic and language features to express ideas about social hierarchy and individual discontent to their respective audiences. Near the beginning of *Joker,* Arthur is seen checking his mother’s letterbox. It is then revealed that his mother, Penny, is expecting a response from her wealthy ex-lover, when she says, “Thomas Wayne is a good man. If he knew how I was living, if he saw this place, it would make him sick.” This use of dialogue, combined with the general dark, dingy setting, clearly shows to the audience the social trap that the mother-son duo have found themselves in, while encouraging them to feel sympathy for him and justifying Arthur’s longing to take back control of his life. This understanding of their social position becomes especially important later on in the film when Arthur accepts the gun offered to him by his seemingly good-willed buddy Randall who says, “Take it. You gotta protect yourself out there.” This is a pivotal scene in the movie, acting as the catalyst for Arthur’s villainous character transformation. He is no longer helpless and reliant on the kindness of others. He can now dictate the direction of his own life, and impact the lives of those who would typically hold social dominance over him. Although the movie is set in Gotham, an imaginary modern city, the challenge of social injustice translates into our society, and the movie raises awareness for these societal issues. If nothing else, it shows that no matter what social stratum we come from, our lives are interlinked. People need to take care of each other, for social stability if not altruistic reasons. Perhaps if Wayne had taken responsibility and offered Arthur, allegedly his son, the aid he needed, the narrative would have ended on a positive note. The social outlook of Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is also characteristic of its era, and its angle on individual discontent forces the audience to assess their typical view on what makes a person happy. Hyde describes Jekyll as “surrounded by friends, and cherishing honest hopes.” In contrast to *Joker*, Jekyll is embedded in the upper middle class of his society, and appears to be a quintessential example of privilege and success; someone the reader would generally assume to be satisfied with their life, and likely even respect. However, this description is jarringly matched with “discontented” and “unhappy,” surprising the audience and showing them that there is something going on behind his façade. Jekyll has a yearning for “liberty” and “secret pleasures,” two things that would be difficult to experience while maintaining his Jekyll persona. Stevenson has Jekyll expose his thinking to the reader: “If each [good and evil], I told myself, could be housed in separate identities, life would be so much easier.” Jekyll begins to search for a way to test his theory. He continues, “It chanced that my scientific studies suggested that such a miracle was possible… until one accursed night I added to a prepared compound a large quantity of a particular salt… and I drank the potion.” The discovery of the potion, like the gift of the gun in *Joker*, acts as a catalyst, setting in motion Jekyll’s escape from a situation he viewed as a dull, restrictive, social trap. But the process enabled by the potion becomes irreversible, and Jekyll ends up trapped in an objectively worse situation than previously, although the feeling of self-fulfilment would be greater. An interesting distinction between the two stories, is that in this example the catalyst is actively sought in response to an internal drive, as Jekyll was in a position of privilege so much that he was able to do this. Meanwhile in *Joker*, Arthur didn’t have the resources to escape his situation, and was presented an out externally, through the influence of Randall. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Joker* both thoughtfully oppose the standard view of individual fulfilment, showing that it is different for everyone, possibly causing the reader to evaluate what it means to them personally. They provoke this realisation in their main characters with the use of catalysts, which also help to show the undesirable tendencies or weaknesses present in everyone, and finally showing that sometimes the things humans desire most should not be pursued, in favour of objective morality.

The movie *Joker* (2019) directed by Todd Phillips and the novella *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (*1886) written by Robert Louis Stevenson both contain timeless and powerful messages for their audiences. *Joker* on one hand focuses heavily on mental health issues, and the unjust ‘gap’ between the rich and the poor that the less fortunate often struggle to climb out of. *Dr Jekyll* on the other hand shows that even those who one might typically view as successful and socially dominant, can be discontent, and have their own shameful impulses. Although there are distinct differences, they share many key ideas about the dangers of social hierarchy, people’s ability to reinvent themselves, and the caution they should take when doing so, and finally the negative snowballing effect of bad decision making in a person’s character development. Both works approach these ideas in a somewhat direct way, providing their respective viewers with two different perspectives.

Word Count: 1967